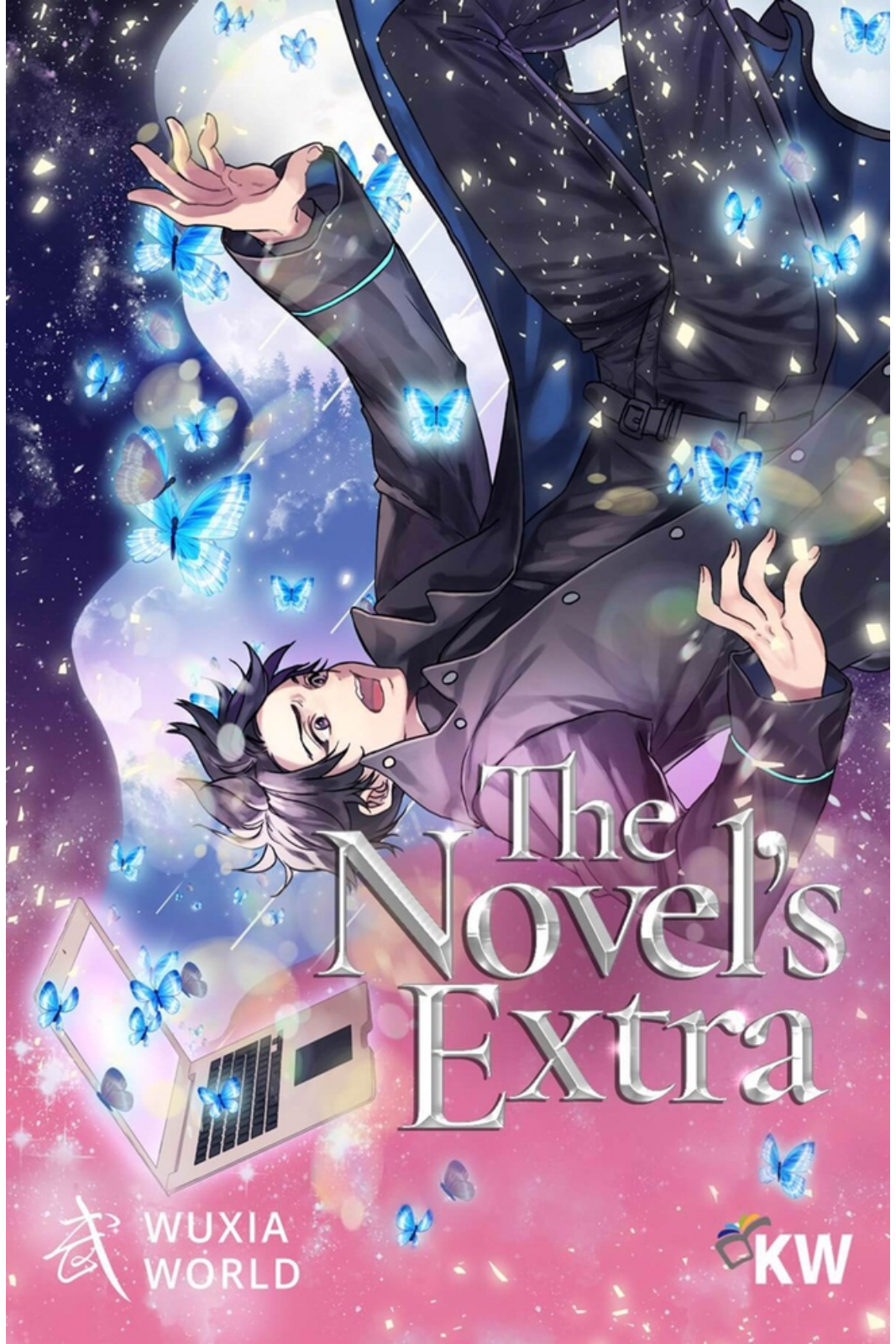


A man with dark hair and a surprised expression is floating in a vibrant, magical space. He is wearing a dark, long-sleeved coat with a high collar and a belt. His arms are outstretched, and his hands are open. The background is a mix of purple, pink, and blue, with a large, glowing moon or planet in the upper left. Numerous glowing blue butterflies are flying around him, and there are many small, sparkling light effects. In the lower left, a laptop is open, and several butterflies are flying out of its screen. The overall atmosphere is dreamlike and fantastical.

The Novel's Extra



WUXIA
WORLD





The Novel's Extra

WUXIA
WORLD

KW

The Novel's Extra

- 소설 속 엑스트라 -

- VOLUME 1 -

**-AUTHOR-
Ji-gab-song**

[Wuxiaworld]

– STORY –

Waking up, Kim Hajin finds himself in a familiar world but an unfamiliar body.

A world he created himself and a story he wrote, yet never finished.

He had become his novel's extra, a filler character with no importance to the story.

The only clue to escaping is to stay close to the main storyline.

However, he soon finds out the world isn't exactly identical to his creation.

– GENRE –

Action Adventure Drama Fantasy School Life
Shounen

지갑송 장편소설

소설 속 엑스트라



큐브편 1

「김하진」

5년 차 웹소설 '이제 귀환 예정'의 작가.

지도한 슬라임으로 인해 추방.

주제 속에 이해당사로 리베이트 제의가 와서

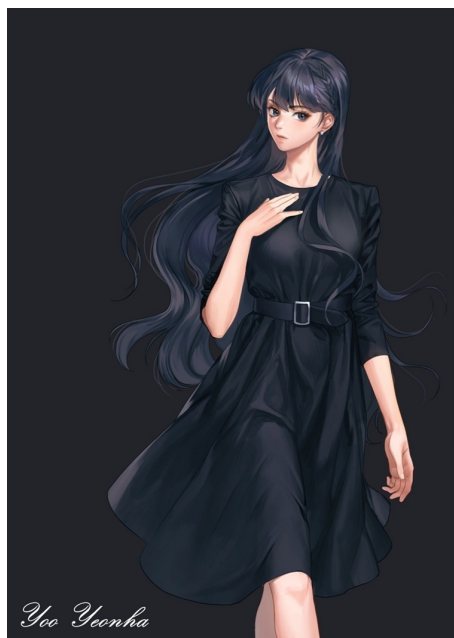
회라한다는 담을 넘 보낸 후

자신의 소설 속 엑스트라가 되어 눈물 뜨게 된다.



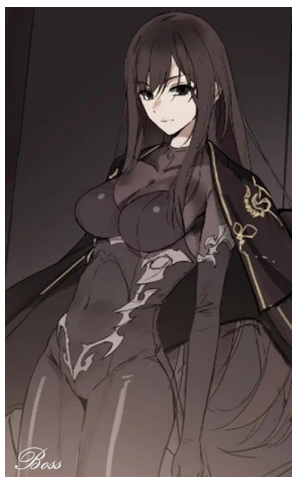


Chae Nayun



Yoo Yeonha







Chapter 0

The Story Within the Novel

[Kim Suho] 17 – 27 years old

A righteous, honest, and hard-working man from a commoner background. He possesses extraordinary character and talent and is a well-known genius from the military academy. He carries a strong sense of justice befitting a hero, but harbors a special secret.

[Shin Jonghak] 17 – 27 years old

The fourth generation heir to Jinsung Corp, a chaebol that contends for the number one spot. ^[1] He is narcissistic and elitist as the spoiled child of a chaebol family and later becomes a villain because of his inferiority complex towards Kim Suho. *I have to be the best. I can't tolerate anyone above me.* He confronts Kim Suho with such stubbornness.

Those two were the main characters of my novel. The novel had many more characters, but writing them all down was impossible. It contained billions of characters, and unless they had important roles like the heroine or sidekick, giving them a name was unnecessary. *Why was I saying all this?*

“Hero Association’s Military Agent Academy, Seoul Branch, Class of 2024, Rank 1 Cadet, Kim Suho.”

The story in my novel was happening in front of my eyes. Kim Suho nervously walked up as he was called to the stage. We were in a huge auditorium filled with 3000 cadets and thousands of more spectators. Their gazes all focused on Kim Suho.

“He’s Kim Suho? Wow.”

“He’s so handsome!”

Several girls swooned at the sight of him.

“This is why they say your gift is the only thing that matters. Who cares if you work hard? People like him always take first place.”

“That guy completely lucked out with his gift.”

Naturally, every young teenager envied him.

“They say he’s got the best grades in the last 10 years.”

“Yeah, I’ve heard of him. They announced his gift too, right? What was it again... Sword Saint?”

Guild associates eagerly watched the best cadet in recent history from the highest seats. They had to be at least a kilometer away, but I could clearly hear them as long as I looked in their direction. Not only their words, but I could even see their faces, almost as if I was right in front of them. Perhaps this was my gift.

“Yeah, they said he receives the world’s protection in regards to swords.”

“That’s pretty vague, but information from the academy is always like that.”

“We called dibs on that kid, so don’t touch him.”

I recognized one of the whisperers. Yun Seung-Ah, an important assistant to the main character and one of the heroines who almost becomes his lover. Just when the two of them were hitting it off — actually, the main character was hitting it off with multiple heroines — I suspended my novel. Thus, the two never became lovers.

“Dibs? What dibs. There’s no such thing when it comes to cadets.”

Yun Seung-Ah smiled and rebutted another guild associate’s provocation.

“Is that why Essence of the Strait can’t escape second place?”

I knew Yun Seung-Ah’s face. Surprisingly, she looked like my first love from college. Probably because I imagined her when I created Yun Seung-Ah.

“Can I take that as a challenge?”

“I’m kidding, of course. We still have 3 years before we can scout any of them.”

“Two years.”

“You know scouting them before they graduate is illegal, right?”

“That’s only if you get caught.”

Yun Seung-Ah and the man glared at each other. The VIP section began to heat up from their staring contest. And so, the fight for Kim Suho began.

“Class of 2024, Rank 2 Cadet, Shin Jonghak.”

Meanwhile, the other main character stood up too. The heir to the Jinsung clan commanded the audience’s attention just like Kim Suho. But unlike Kim Suho, there was no envy towards him, only admiration and adoration. With Kim Suho they thought, *How is he better than me?*, but with Shin Jonghak it was, *He was better than me from birth*. Like a true noble, Shin Jonghak confidently ascended the stage.

Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak stood side by side and glared at each other. Electricity seemed to crackle between them.

Without a doubt, they were characters from my novel.

Then where was I?

I wasn’t on stage, but in the farthest back seat of the auditorium. I wasn’t anyone special out of the 3000 cadets, but merely one of the

many thousands. No guild associates would bother to look my way.

“Chundong, what rank are you? I’m 2900.”

A chubby boy next to me asked. His nametag read, *Kim Ho Sup*. This meant he would eventually play a role. Although he couldn’t be a hero because of his nonexistent physical abilities, his gift was outstanding for gathering information.

“Chundong?”

“...I don’t know.”

I didn’t know who I was. I didn’t even know my name was Chundong. *Shouldn’t I have been one of the two on stage?*

“Hey c’mon, if you don’t know that...”

“I don’t know.”

Once again, I didn’t know. This world was the novel I wrote, but I was in the body of a character I had never written. Other than being a cadet in the Military Agent Academy, I was the most ordinary and connectionless character whose name didn’t even exist in the novel. In other words... I was an extra. [2]

...No, I was a speck of dust.

1. A chaebol is a powerful conglomerate in South Korea usually run by a single family. 🤔

2. In English, an extra usually refers to a background actor/performer/cast/etc. 🤔

Chapter 1

Cube (1)

One day, I received an email. The sender asked if he could remake my novel. I was dumbfounded at the time. I might've been on a short hiatus, but to ask to remake a novel in paid serialization... of course I refused. In fact, I didn't reply at all. Partly because that would go against copyright laws and also because I felt ashamed.

My webnovel was called, *The Returnee Hero*. It wasn't sensational, but fairly popular and my best hit in 5 years. I had been on hiatus for 3 months when I received the email.

The reason was simple. The words wouldn't come.

At first, I poured my passion into writing. My description of the world was almost 50,000 Korean characters, and I poured my heart into each chapter. However, I fell into an awful slump after a year even though the novel continued for 6 more months until the story reached its mid-late stage. It was full of plot holes because I forcefully wrote and the characters' personalities all collapsed. Unsurprisingly, the number of readers significantly dropped. I was too afraid to even read the comments by then and ultimately went on hiatus. However, I couldn't continue a single sentence no matter how long I rested. Then I received another email to remake my novel as I wallowed in misery from my lack of writing skills.

[from: homosapiens@neighbor.com]

[Please. This is only for my personal satisfaction. I won't reveal the remake to anyone. It'll only be between me and you. Who knows? Maybe you'll find some inspiration to continue the story...]

It was a fairly long, but simple email. He wanted to remake my novel for his own gratification. *How much did he like my novel to send an email like this?* I agreed since I wasn't particularly proud of my work,

feeling somewhat thankful and ashamed.

Was that the cause of this situation? The chance of winning the lottery was 1 in 8,145,060. What was happening to me had to be 1 in 7 billion.

I found myself in an ordinary home, but it wasn't my world and I wasn't me. That might've sounded philosophical, but it wasn't. That was literally the case. I had become an extra in my novel. An extra I didn't remember creating.

Kim Chundong. Chundong lived in an ordinary apartment, but he didn't have any parents or relatives. Of course, I didn't know why. At 9 years old, Chundong was admitted to the Military Agent Academy, a place that trained elites to fight against monsters and djinns, but what abilities did Chundong even possess to pass the entrance exam? I had no clue. I didn't know anything else about him. I didn't even know how he looked. Not even joking. I didn't.

When I looked in the mirror...

(?)

That's all I saw. An oval with a question mark.

I found this crazy body possession transmigration completely unreasonable! I went to bed like usual, but found myself on the last day of the semester at Military Agent Academy when I woke up.

I had 2 suspicions. First was that I was being pranked, but then I quickly ruled that out. I couldn't even bother to explain why. Second was that I was still dreaming, but I naturally dismissed that because the thought of being in a dream would never occur to the dreamer. More importantly, no dream would continue for 2 weeks with such clarity.

I spent the past 2 weeks pondering whether the world inside the novel should be treated as my new reality.

Ding Ding—

I laid in bed and blankly stared at the ceiling until my smartphone rang. I glanced over and saw that it was time to go to school.

“Why the hell do I need to go to school?”

The Military Agent Academy held its graduation 13 days ago, but that graduating class only consisted of non-combatant cadets. Non-combatant cadets couldn't be called heroes. Combat class cadets had to attend school for 3 more years. These 3 years would be spent at Cube, the Hero Academy. Unfortunately, this damned Chundong guy was a combat cadet. Again, I had no clue who he was.

“Ah... how frustrating.”

I barely did anything the past 2 weeks. I spent most of my time on the internet, ate food when I got hungry, went online to search for a solution, laughed at the surprisingly funny variety shows on TV, ate some more food... Anyways, the only noteworthy event was going to Seoul 2 days ago for the 3 hour long Cube Entrance Ceremony. I didn't want to go, but I had no choice since I would be expelled if I didn't attend.

“I do think I need to go, but...”

I couldn't figure out who put me here, for what reason, and with what power. I reluctantly accepted my fate after living idly for 2 weeks. It seemed I would live like this for a while, so I might as well make a living. In my novel, being a hero was everyone's dream job. Things would become dangerous midway because of villains, but the hiatus would be close. I just needed to survive until then. I was sure I'd figure something out when the time came.

7:33 A.M.

School would begin in 57 minutes. I got up and trudged to the bathroom. The question mark greeted me in the mirror.

“Screw this question mark. Is it ever going to go away?”

My face was literally a question mark and I didn't know why. It wasn't because I didn't describe this face. If that were the case, billions of

other people in this world wouldn't have faces. So why was only Chundong's face a question mark?

"I don't get it."

I washed my face after murmuring begrudgingly. I could feel my skin and hair, which made everything even creepier.

After washing up, I changed into the Cube uniform I received at the entrance ceremony. Other than that, I had no other luggage. Anyone who saw this uniform would undoubtedly envy me, but I had no idea what I was doing. My face was a freaking question mark. How was I supposed to figure anything out?

As I opened the door, I glanced back at my home for the past 2 weeks — the apartment I barely found thanks to the address on my cadet card. It seemed I got attached in this short period and I felt like I would miss it.

Cube floated on an island in the middle of the East Sea. Once I left, I probably wouldn't come back.

"Haaah."

I left the comfortable apartment and stepped into a dark and unfamiliar world.

Chapter 2

Cube (2)

Cube was the world's greatest training institute that boasted state-of-the-art magic, science, and engineering. It was located in the East Sea on a huge artificial island twice the size of Yeouido. ^[1] This huge area contained 5000 hero cadets, of which 1300 were first years. Although 2000 non-combatants graduated 2 weeks ago, elite cadets from all over the world would replace them and further increase the competition. In a sense, this place could be considered too harsh to be a proper home for 17-19 year olds. Starting from the second year, magicians who wanted to become heroes would also transfer from the National Magic University, adding another 200-300 cadets.

Furthermore, Cube also included training instructors, cafeteria ladies, store workers, cleaners, recruiters, government associates, engineers, security, doctors, and researchers who all took care of the cadets. All these individuals added up to a total population of around 50,000.

Naturally, investors highly regarded this place. Korea was a world power rivaling the United States according to my novel's setting. I listed several reasons, but the most obvious one was that I was Korean.

Chundong could be considered an elite as a Cube cadet. His destiny should be detached from the main storyline since I didn't write any story for him. He wouldn't have to live the burdening life of a main character and would probably live a carefree life. I wanted that kind of life too. I sighed in front of the classroom door.

[Novice – Veritas]

Novice referred to first year cadets, while Veritas was our class name. Simply put, I was in year 1 class 1. I knew that Shin Jonghak and Kim Suho were also in the same class. Cliques would form around them and Shin Jonghak would instigate many schemes that turned the class into a mess. Most likely, I would get swept up regardless of my will.

“Huuu.”

I carefully opened the door after collecting my breath.

The interior looked sleek and clean. White with no sign of dust and three long desks cascading up. *Where should I sit?* I looked around and found Shin Jonghak in the farthest back seat. He seemed imposing with his closed eyes and hands in his pockets. His childhood friend, Yoo Yeonha, chattered next to him. The 2 of them didn't pay any attention to me. *Thank God.*

I sat at the edge of the middle row. I looked straight ahead like a proper extra. A screen projected holograms instead of a chalkboard. I couldn't help but sigh as I looked at it. I couldn't believe I was back in school after having already done my mandatory military service. There couldn't be a worse calamity.

“...Yaaawn.”

Cube's semester began in February. It was cold outside and the warm room made me sleepy. Currently, it was 8 A.M and class would begin at 8:30. Honestly, I didn't plan to arrive this early. Traveling from Seoul to Cube took less time than I thought with a portal, and I also expected to get lost. Fortunately, something called the Cube bus ran every 10 minutes around campus, which didn't exist in my original setting. Now that I think about it, it was an oversight to always have the main character walk around the huge campus. Since the novel became real, it seemed to be fixing plot holes on its own.

Anyways, let's sleep a little. I don't want to think anymore. I closed my eyes and dropped my head on the desk.

“Now!”

A thunderous shout woke me up. The instructor stood behind the podium when I opened my eyes.

“Today's the first day, so there won't be any special training. But I hope all of you did your morning training. You can never go wrong with training in the morning when mana is most dense.”

Morning training? Oh, right. There was something like that. A training ground opened up from 5 A.M. to 8 A.M. I stuffed it into the story so the leading characters could meet.

“Now, let’s start with self-introductions. I’m Kim Soohyuk, the instructor in charge of all of you for the year.”

I vaguely recalled his name.

“My national rank is 3850. World rank 9737. By the association’s classification, I am a high-intermediate rank, grade 5 hero.”

The students’ eyes lit up. That was understandable. Only around 2 million heroes existed in the world, so rank 9737 meant he was quite skilled.

“That’s enough for my introduction.”

Kim Soohyuk grinned at the students’ reactions.

“The first day always feels special. You might not have slept due to excitement and worry, or maybe you’re already looking forward to improving yourselves. *Heh*, maybe you’re just happy to see your crush again.”

The cadets broke out into small laughter, but the instructor kept a stern expression.

“Cube isn’t the same as before. I promise you will have no time for relationships. In Cube, you will experience real combat scenarios. Look forward to experiencing true fear.”

His mischievous smile sent a chill down my back. *Combat training? I had to take part in that too?*

“Cube is objective. The only indicator of success will be your grade. That’ll be the only thing that guilds look at, so we will grade you accurately and strictly. You will be held back if you underperform. Statistically, less than half of Cube cadets graduate without repeating a semester. Even then, you can only be held back up to 2 years. Any

more than that and you will be expelled. If you can't become a hero, you can become an agent or a mercenary. I take it that's not what you want."

The instructor scanned the students' faces after giving them a scare.

"I see a few familiar faces."

I did too. Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yoo Yeonha, Chae Nayun, Rachel, and Yi Yeonghan. These 6 were the important characters I spotted. Shin Jonghak sat with Yoo Yeonha. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun sat apart since they considered each other rivals. Princess Rachel sat alone while Yi Yeonghan sat behind Kim Suho.

"I repeat. At Cube, you will confirm what you've learned until now and hone your skills in battle. There will be no easy training here. Remember that."

With that, Kim Soohyuk announced the day's activity.

"Prepare yourselves. Our schedule today won't take long. The first task is to select your main weapon."

* * *

"Any weapon you can think of should be here."

A main weapon was exactly what it sounded like. High ranking heroes used treasured weapons, while those above the unique grade were called armaments.

I had no idea what weapon to choose since I knew nothing about Chundong.

"Stand in front of your chosen weapon. We'll supply you with the training weapons, but don't underestimate them. Their market prices go for 5 million won each."

There were all sorts of weapons, more than I could've ever imagined. Sword, spear, saber, dagger, rapier, halberd, greatsword, zweihander,

bow, gun, whip, gauntlet, etc. The 100 students of Veritas each stood in front of their chosen weapon.

“Choose carefully. You won’t be able to switch for at least 6 months once you pick your main weapon.”

Swords and spears were the most popular. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak stood in front of a sword and a spear respectively. Seventy percent chose one of the so-called holy trinity of weapons: the sword, the spear, and the saber. On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha chose the whip, Chae Nayun chose the bow, and Rachel chose the rapier. However, I simply stood there.

“Kim Chundong, what are you standing still for?” Kim Soohyuk asked.

I stared blankly at the one weapon no one paid attention to. The weapon of choice in the modern world, one that didn’t require an instruction manual and anyone could use with a click. However, every hero avoided this weapon and considered it a useless lump of metal. Most likely, it was only here for the sake of having every weapon.

This was my only choice. I couldn’t use any close ranged weapons. Even if Chundong had talent, I didn’t want to participate where blood splattered everywhere.

“Kim Chundong.”

The instructor’s voice deepened as all the other students looked at me, including Shin Jonghak and Kim Suho. I didn’t like being the center of attention, so I quickly walked up and grabbed the weapon. I could feel the metal weight in my hand as the smell of rust tickled my nose. More eyes continued to stare.

I had chosen a handgun.

1. Yeouido is a large island in Seoul, 8.4 square kilometers in size and home to 31,000 people. 📍

Chapter 3

Cube (3)

Guns were still excellent weapons in this world, but only ordinary soldiers who couldn't wield mana used them.

Instead of traditional bullets, this world used magic bullets that contained compressed mana capable of killing low-intermediate rank, grade 8 monsters. In comparison, the training saber that cost 5 million won could only kill low rank monsters, so the gun was a stronger weapon on its own.

However, heroes and mercenaries who could wield magic power would never choose a gun because magic power couldn't be applied to it. A gun would be inherently limited in power no matter how strong the user.

The most important aspect in choosing a main weapon was its origin — the greater its origin, the higher the weapon's grade. For instance, guns could be categorized into three grades: mass-produced, custom-made, or masterpiece. Swords, on the other hand, varied a great deal from artifact, armament, treasured, mythical, legendary, etc. This was because myths and legends manifested in this world.

The sword held a long and deep history. Many swords descended from myths and legends like the sword of Freyr, demon blade Muramasa, magic sword Tyrfin, holy sword Durendal, king's sword Excalibur, etc. In this world, many legendary swords remained undiscovered in dungeons and towers. Each of them was a priceless treasure. Of course, these treasures could only be used by those proficient with swords. Heroes sought after such ancient weapons because a high grade weapon could help them break through bottlenecks.

“...Kim Chundong.”

Kim Soohyuk called my name once more before activating his

smartwatch. For some reason, I could see the information hidden by the security feature. It contained information about me, cadet Kim Chundong.

“Didn’t you use a sword?”

As expected of an extra, Kim Chundong was an ordinary swordsman.

“I decided to change my weapon.”

“After coming to Cube?”

“Yes.”

Kim Soohyuk didn’t look happy, but nodded with a slight frown.

“That’s fine. Cadets can make their own choices. Instructors won’t interfere, but that also means the responsibility falls on you.”

Kim Soohyuk moved on, but students continued to whisper. They should’ve been too quiet for me to hear, but I could clearly hear them. It seemed this was Chundong’s gift. *How useless.*

“A gun? Is that guy insane?”

“Why did he even come to Cube if he wanted to be a mercenary?”

Before entering Cube, cadets experimented with all sorts of weapons to find what best suited their gift. However, guns didn’t require a gift. Anyone could place their finger on the trigger and pull.

“You can easily change the main weapon you chose today. You will all go through the same tests and training regardless of what you chose. That means a weapon’s weaknesses are your responsibility.”

Kim Soohyuk announced while looking my way. *I get it. Damn it. I just didn’t have any other choice!* The cadets here attended military academies from the ages of 7 or 8. In other words, they had practiced with their respective weapons for 10 years.

I was different. I didn't inherit Chundong's memories and I was far from a swordsman in my world. Heck, I wasn't even into sports. I wasn't much of a thrill-seeker either. In the end, I could only choose a long ranged weapon like a bow or a gun. I was at least familiar with guns thanks to Korea's mandatory military service.

"Now, we'll assign rooms and your personal belongings will be sent there. You're free afterward. Classes will begin in 4 days. That's next Monday."

Kim Soohyuk spoke as he pitifully looked at me. The main weapon selection came to an end.

* * *

"Yo gunner, are you for real?"

"I just don't understand. Are you one of those attention seekers? This is the first time I've heard of someone choosing a gun at Cube."

A group of boys struck up a conversation on the way to the dorm. I simply ignored their sarcastic remarks. They left snickering after seeing me unbothered. As expected of teenage boys, they were more interested in female students. Even I looked their way. Chae Nayun, Rachel, and Yoo Yeonha. These 3 beauties far surpassed my settings. We arrived at the dorm as I observed them from the side.

"Here are the dorms for the first years."

Six extravagant skyscrapers stood in front of us. According to Kim Soohyuk, each building contained 100 floors consisting of 5 rooms each. They distributed the rooms according to grades, but you still received your own room even if you ranked last. The Military Agent Academy's top 3 male and female cadets received their own penthouses. Kim Suho was the only one who gave it up, saying it was too big for him.

"Boys to the right, girls to the left. The key to your rooms will be stored in the smartwatches I'll be handing out now."

Other first year classes arrived while Kim Soohyuk explained. If I

remembered correctly, the first year classes consisted of Veritas, Acceptance, Intelligence, Wisdom, Cultivation, Honor, Virtue, Friendship, Potential, and World — a total of 10 classes. *Should I try looking for other major characters?* Some of them should be antagonists.

“Chundong, Kim Chundong!”

“*Huh*, me? Why?”

“...Why?”

Kim Soohyuk was calling me. I was distracted for a moment and his eyes narrowed like a hawk. His fierce gaze froze me. Kim Soohyuk closed his eyes in disappointment and sighed.

“Your smartwatch, come take it.”

“*Ah*, yes.”

I almost tripped over my shaking legs. I could hear everyone laughing behind me. *You dare laugh at your creator?* They briefly angered me, but I generously forgave them. I didn’t have a choice since I couldn’t get back at them.

* * *

My room was bigger than Chundong’s apartment. It came with a couch, bed, rice cooker, TV, computer, and even magic tools.

“I still can’t get used to it.”

I pondered while slouching on the comfy couch. The weight of the handgun didn’t feel real in my hand. It might’ve been better to leave Cube if I was going to choose a gun. Having been a cadet at the Military Agent Academy should’ve been enough to let me live without starving.

However, my problem didn’t end there. *Why was I sent to this world and how could I return?* I felt I needed to stay close to the main storyline to find out. Although, I doubted I could get too close with

just a gun. *Should I try shooting it to see its power?*

“Mmm...”

I just thought of something good. I jumped up from the couch and aimed at the wall. Then I closed my left eye. When I almost pulled the trigger...

— *Ding Dong*

The bell rang and an electronic voice sounded from outside.

“Rank 934, Kim. Chun. Dong. Take. Your. Luggage.”

It was a robot. I tossed the gun on the couch and opened the door to a fairly big box. It seemed Chundong sent his belongings ahead of time. I brought in the box.

[Military Agent Academy Rank 1543, Military Hero Academy Rank 934, Kim Chundong. Personal belongings.]

Rank 934, wasn't that too average? I pulled off the tape with a smirk.

“Huh?”

The big box only contained a single item, but I recognized it. This wasn't Chundong's, but mine. This was from my previous life, although it felt weird to call it that.

Anyways, this was the laptop I used on Earth to write my novel.

Chapter 4

Synchronization (1)

Eight students gathered in a large room on the highest floor of Dorm 1. They all sat in a delinquent-like manner, laughing loudly at the smallest things. Occasionally, they stole glances at the person who called them over, but he remained silent as though he couldn't care less.

“Oh right, Jonghak. Isn't there a gun user in your class?”

A generic handsome guy with an amiable smile asked. Shin Jonghak narrowly opened his eyes and stared.

“Um, I just heard it from somewhere. Did I hear wrong?”

“I don't know. I'm not interested in trash.”

“R-Right. I'm not interested either. I was just curious who the fool was, *haha*.”

“Hanjun, you sure are curious about the strangest things.”

A charming voice spoke. Jin Hanjun turned and saw the long-haired girl who smiled. It was Yoo Yeonha. Jin Hanjun felt his heart beating faster and blurted.

“O-Oh, Yeonha. Y-You know, I was always like that.”

“What was his name? Chundong? Chunbun? It was a pretty old-fashioned name. Anyways, don't pay too much attention to him.”

“But he sure was pathetic. Why did that son of a bitch come to Cube if he was going to choose a gun?”

The foul language came from Kim Horak, a boy with a large muscular physique and an intimidating expression. With just a glance, it was obvious he specialized in close ranged combat.

Jin Hanjun asked Kim Horak, “You know him?”

“I’m in Jonghak’s class, idiot. I’m going to destroy him in combat training. I’ll disable him and chase him out.”

Everyone knew Cube’s schedule. They attended classes 5 days a week and combat training 3 days a week.

Classes consisted of comprehensive magic power training and physical training while combat training referred to battles, monster hunts, rescue missions, and more.

“I’ll destroy that son of a...”

“Don’t waste your time.”

Shin Jonghak shut down the coarse locker room talk with a single sentence. Kim Horak, who growled just a moment ago, fell silent.

“You’ll only be losing points if you beat someone that low rank. It’s better to challenge higher ranked cadets. For example...”

“Chae Nayun, try fighting her. I’m sure you’ll win.”

Yoo Yeonha interjected. Shin Jonghak glared at her, but she continued unfazed.

“Fists against bow. It’ll be easy.”

“*Huh? Ah*, yeah, of course I would win. But...”

Challenging her was difficult. However, he swallowed his words to look good in front of Yoo Yeonha.

“But?”

“It would be a pity. You know, my opponents often end up half-dead.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that.”

“Huh?”

“Stop.”

Shin Jonghak cut off their conversation. Yoo Yeonha felt displeased, but feigned indifference and suppressed the feeling in her heart. *Shin Jonghak likes Chae Nayun. I’m not so stupid as to be jealous. I just find it funny.* Yoo Yeonha consoled herself.

“I’m leaving. It’s almost 10.”

At Cube, male and female students could only interact until 22:00. Yoo Yeonha stood up with a smile to mask her hurt feelings.

“Oh, good night.”

“Good night, Yeonha!”

“See you later!”

All the male cadets other than Shin Jonghak saw her off to the door.

* * *

A training facility called the Novice Fitness Center was located 5 minutes away from Dorm 1. It was a 1000 square meter facility filled with magical devices and exercise equipment. The facility cost well over 100 million won, but hardly anyone was currently using it. However, the empty training facility didn’t mean the future of heroes was bleak.

Cadets were potential hero candidates that would receive the admiration and envy of billions, but they were still teenagers. Simply put, many high schoolers wouldn’t train on the first day.

“I knew you’d be here.”

However, exceptions always existed. Even Hero Academy had weirdos that always enjoyed training. Kim Suho, drenched in sweat and wrestling with an exercise equipment, widened his eyes at the sudden voice.

“Chae Nayun? You’re also training?”

“Yeah, but I’m not as barbaric as you.”

Chae Nayun pointed to the gravity room with a wry smile. Kim Suho frowned at the terrifying cylindrical room.

“That’s a tough one. I can never last long in there.”

Kim Suho wiped his sweat with a towel.

“It’s not like you can’t. You just don’t need to. I’m an archer, so I need to train in there. Plus, it’s not that hard. I’ve been doing it since I was 8.”

“8 years old?”

“Yep. I have one at my house.”

“Ah.”

A gravity room cost several 100 million won at least. That meant she came from a very wealthy family.

Just like Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun was a fourth generation chaebol. However, she carried a righteous sense of rivalry instead of a twisted superiority complex. She believed she could surpass her rivals through hard work and self-cultivation, but the monster in front of her made her waver.

“Oh, right. There’s another sharpshooter in our class now.”

Chae Nayun tilted her head at Kim Suho's words.

"Sharpshooter? Oh, that Chudong or whatever guy?"

"*Uh*, yeah, him. What's up with that look? Do you not like him?"

Chae Nayun's face darkened as Kim Suho spoke.

"He's not a sharpshooter. Guns can only shoot up to a kilometer at best. I still don't understand why that Dongchu guy picked a gun."

His name had unknowingly changed from Chudong to Dongchu, but Kim Suho wasn't foolish enough to correct her.

"He probably gave up. Maybe there was trouble at home or something. He's probably just going to stay for a while since being a Cube cadet won't stay on your records if you leave early."

Chae Naeyun proposed a sympathetic explanation.

"Gave up? Don't say something like that so easily."

Kim Suho remained optimistic even for others.

"Who are you to tell me what to do?"

For a moment, slight anger appeared in Chae Nayun's eyes. Kim Suho's patronizing tone didn't sit well with her since she saw him as her rival.

"*Cough*. Sorry," he quickly apologized.

"Anyways, keep working hard if you don't want to lose. I'm going."

"Yeah, see you later."

"Please, I'm right next door."

Chae Nayun smirked and entered the gravity room. It multiplied normal gravity by a certain factor, increasing the pressure on one's bloodstream. Training in this cylindrical room required one to operate magic power under heavy gravity, and it was one of the most painful training methods.

Just looking at the room made Kim Suho shudder. He could only shake his head as Chae Nayun nonchalantly walked in.

* * *

I held my breath in Kim Chundong's room as I looked at the laptop screen. I still couldn't understand what I was seeing. I saw it, but my brain refused to process it. It just seemed too absurd.

"What is this?"

I blurted in a shaky voice after a long silence.

[Synchronizing... 70% Complete]

1. Kim Chundong [Current SP: 54]

▷Stats: Variable Stats [Strength 4] [Stamina 4.3] [Speed 4] [Perception 5] [Vitality 4] [Magic power 3.5]

Invariable Stats [Intelligence – 4/10] [Perseverance – 4/10] [Luck – 4/10] [Charm – 4/10]

▷Gift...??? ▷Arts...???...???...???..... Supplement... Setting Chart...

[Synchronizing... 70% Complete]

"What is this?"

I recognized the window on the monitor and this format. It was the format of my settings book, but I had never written or even thought of a setting like this. This incomprehensible phenomenon made me sweat. My hands and legs shook, and my heart palpitated. *Just who*

sent me this strange object? For what purpose and reason?

The laptop screen suddenly turned off and a face reflected from the black screen. It wasn't Kim Chundong's question mark, but my face, Kim Hajin. Then the laptop switched back on and words began to appear.

[Kim Chundong, synchronization with Kim Hajin has been completed.] [All status has been reset.] [Unique Authority, Setting Intervention, acquired.]

Chapter 5

Synchronization (2)

An awakening phenomenon called enlightenment existed in this world. Often considered the first qualification to becoming a hero, this form of personal insight occurred when a person surpassed their limits.

Active-duty heroes had all experienced enlightenment, but most cadets hadn't because it required years of experience and training. Of course, exceptions like Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak already went through it at the ages of 15 and 17 respectively.

An enlightened person could view their gift, skills, and abilities to train more efficiently. Furthermore, enlightenment allowed you to acquire rewards from clearing towers and dungeons. The Hero Association called this phenomenon the status window, which could only be seen by its owner. However, I enjoyed exceptions and had made one for this setting.

Instead of your eyes, you could also use other senses or mediums like a book or a weapon to view your status. Special enlightenments naturally came with special powers. The main character would eventually undergo 2 enlightenments because of this setting.

“...Is this that?”

According to my settings, this laptop served as a medium for enlightenment. This special event excited me, but analyzing the situation came first. Several windows popped up when I hit the *Enter* key.

[Synchronization Complete] [Kim Chundong status reset. Kim Hajin status transferred.] [All status has been reset. 10 points acquired.]

[Kim Hajin] [Current SP: 64] ▷Stats: Variable Stats [Strength 1.2]

[Stamina 1.3] [Speed 1.5] [Perception 2] [Vitality 1.3] [Magic power 1]

*Invariable Stats [Intelligence – 4.105/10] [Perseverance – 5.010/10]
[Luck – 6.330/10] [Charm – 4.135/10]*

Points: 10 (Will disappear in 10 days if not used)

▷Gift: *[Observation and Reading] [Null attribute] — Observation: You may observe characters in your vision — Reading: You may read the laptop's settings without a medium whenever you desire.* ▷Arts (0/3) X
▷Physique (0/3) X ▷Setting Intervention *[Authority] — You may modify or add settings to a non-living target by using SP. — You may spend SP to modify or add settings to your stats, gift, arts, and physique.*

**Novice Bonus: Once only, you may create a gift worth 10,000 SP free of cost. *SP (Story Point): You will gain more SP as Kim Hajin's importance increases in the world. You may exchange points with SP.*

▷??? — *Will unlock when the main story is completed.*

The words, *Synchronization* and *reset*, caught my attention. I didn't know what they meant, but I knew that it changed my name from Kim Chundong to Kim Hajin and gave me my face back. My stats also seemed to have adjusted appropriately. I was much weaker than Chundong, but obtained 10 spare points as compensation. I should be able to raise my desired stats with those points.

“Points are really nice.”

As this world's creator, I was well aware of the importance of points. An average adult had 1.5 points in each stat. This world lacked a natural leveling system, so points were extremely precious to raise stats and could only be obtained from towers or dungeons. Kim Suho's current magic power should be around 9. I could surpass that if I invested all 10 points into magic power.

“No.”

That wasn't the best plan. I would have to become a magician for that, but being a magician was exhausting. It was expensive and required extreme effort and memorization. I would need to increase both

intelligence and perseverance, but invariable stats couldn't be raised even with points. A magician was out of the picture.

“What's up with the 3 question marks?”

The suspicious question marks in the next line caught my attention.

▷??? — *Will unlock when the main story is completed.*

Perhaps this was the key to returning home. Even if it wasn't, it was the only clue I had. However, I didn't know when the main story would end. I would have to wait 10 years at the very least if it referred to when I went on hiatus. I had to take one step at a time. First, find a way home by accumulating power or authority, which required SP. I needed to involve myself in the story to obtain SP, which meant I needed to grow stronger or stand out.

“Looks like a gun wasn't such a bad choice.”

A gun met both of those conditions.

It didn't require high stats like a spear or sword, which demanded equal distribution into every stat. Likewise, the bow also required most stats except for stamina. Meanwhile, the gun only required speed, perception, and a bit of magic power. I could meet the minimum strength requirement easier with a gun.

Second, I stood out with it. No hero in this world used a gun, so that was more than enough to make me special.

I should continue using a gun until all my stats increased enough and I was mentally ready to fight monsters at close range.

I moved on to the next topic after deciding my main weapon.

Gift.

“I can create a gift.”

A gift held a special meaning for heroes. It still meant the natural ability or talent for something. However, the standard for this ability was very high, at least on the level of a psychic ability. Gifts were separated into many categories, but the 5 most common were: weapon, physical, element, magic, and nature. The main character had 2 gifts. He currently awakened the weapon class gift, Sword Saint. This super cheat gave him the world's protection when it came to swords. Simply put, his sword could cut water. This single gift was enough to make him the world's greatest hero.

That was the importance of gifts. It didn't need to be complex. A simpler and more efficient gift was often better. I began to type.

▷*Gift: — Getting Stronger Everyday [Null attribute] Every 24 hours, all stats will increase by 0.1.*

“Will this work?”

Even I found it shameless. When I went on hiatus, Kim Suho's strength was at 16. With this gift, I would obtain 36.5 in every stat in just 365 days. I gave it a go since I could just delete it before saving.

[Novice Bonus activated. A gift worth 10,000 SP will be created.] [10,000 SP is not enough to create this gift. Its quality will decrease.]

▷*[Getting Stronger Everyday] [High-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Static] Cultivation Physique — Every 24 hours, all stats will increase by 0.0015.*

[Would you like to save the modified result?]

I immediately canceled. That would take 1000 days to gain 1.5 in every stat. In 10,000 days or 25 years, I would gain 25 in every stat. I would be too old by then.

Next, I wrote down a gift I thought of before.

▷*Gift: [Master Sharpshooter] [High-intermediate rank] [Null attribute] — Can wield long ranged weapons well.*

I didn't put much details. I realized the laptop's capabilities from my previous attempt. It would appropriately modify whatever I wrote.

[Novice Bonus activated. A gift worth 10,000 SP will be created.] [10,000 SP is too much to create this gift. Its quality will increase.]

▷*[Master Sharpshooter] [High-intermediate rank] [Composite attribute] [Static] Master Sharpshooter's Training Method: Unconditional proficiency in all long ranged weapons — Thousand-Mile Eyes: Can see farther away in detail and accurately predict target's movement path. Will increase perception and speed by 3. — Bullet Time: Once every 24 hours, you may spend 3 minutes in bullet time.*

“Oh?”

It seemed quite good. I especially liked that it applied to all long ranged weapons. With this, I could even use a bow. The thousand-mile eyes was self-explanatory and bullet time probably increased my shooting speed or something of that nature. It was satisfactory, but I still wanted to change something. I wanted a gift that could grow stronger rather than a static gift that couldn't grow.

[A phrase has been modified.]

▷*[Master Sharpshooter] [Low-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving — Grade 10] [EXP 0%] Master Sharpshooter's Training: Familiarity with all long ranged weapons — Thousand-Mile Eyes: Can see far away and somewhat predict a target's movement path. — Bullet Time: Only in combat and once every 24 hours, you may spend 3 seconds in bullet time.*

“Mmm.”

It fell from high-intermediate rank to low-intermediate and the skills became weaker overall, but an evolving gift was much better in the grand scheme of things. Not to mention, the main story would continue for at least 7 years. *Ah, I'm getting sad again.*

“Fuck.”

I swore and shook it off.

[Points: 10]

Next, I went back to my stats. *How should I spend these 10 precious points?* I shouldn't be able to increase my invariable stats. In that case, I had to pick from variable stats. However... I just might be able to modify my invariable stats.

“Should I exchange these points for SP?”

Points could be exchanged for SP, which I could then use to increase my invariable stats. I decided to test it out first before making an irreversible mistake. Thankfully, I already had 64 SP. I tried increasing my perseverance stat from 5.010 to 5.500.

[You have modified an invariable stat using 64 SP.] [You do not have enough SP. The value will be adjusted. Perseverance has increased to 5.060.]

“It worked?”

My eyes widened. If this worked, what I should do next was obvious. I had to convert the points into SP and invest in invariable stats. The question was which: intelligence, perseverance, luck, or charm? Honestly, charm was extremely enticing as a man.

“Luck it is.”

I knew all too well the importance of luck in this world and recalled a line from my novel.

[The luck stat doesn't just affect the chances of finding treasures in dungeons. It also affects the chances of receiving bonus stats from training, chances to land a critical strike, and even chances to win the lottery. It was the best stat that applied to every situation... Luck mattered the most in life.]

With no hesitation, I exchanged the 10 points for 10,000 SP and spent all of it to increase my luck. What I wanted was *[Luck — 10/10]*.

[You do not have enough SP. The value will be adjusted.]

The laptop rejected my ridiculous wish, but returned a reasonable compromise.

[Luck — 9.100]

“9.1 is the highest I can go, *huh.*”

Since 9 was the limit for humans, 9.1 was extremely high. However, I didn’t hit save and canceled the modification. It would take a bit longer, but a more efficient method existed.

[Luck — 6.4/10]

First, I raised my luck from 6.3 to 6.4 before saving. Next, to 6.5. Then, to 6.6, 6.7, 6.8... I kept repeating this...

[A mysterious luck has been applied! Your luck stat has further increased by 0.01!] [A strange luck has been applied! Your luck stat has further increased by 0.05!]...

[Luck — 9.100/10]

With this method, my luck reached 9.1 with just 9000 SP and I saved 1000 SP. For reference, the Great Sage of this world had a 9.5 intelligence stat. As 9 was the limit for normal humans, spending the remaining 1000 SP was unlikely to increase my luck any further. Invariable stats scaled exponentially, so it was wiser to spend the remaining SP elsewhere.

“Perseverance should be good.”

I would never be able to handle Cube’s training with my current mindset. I didn’t even want to do 10 push-ups. Without hesitation, I invested the remaining 1000 SP into perseverance. I wrote, *[Perseverance — 8/10]*.

[You do not have enough SP. The value will be adjusted.] [Perseverance — 6.600]

I didn’t feel too satisfied, but pressed save. My luck would only apply

after saving.

[An incredible luck has been applied!] [Your perseverance stat has increased from 6.600 to 7.207!]

“Wow.”

Now I was satisfied, but I didn't feel any changes yet. The normal stat for an average person was 4 and 7 would be a talented individual. I would become just as overpowered as the main character by increasing my invariable stats whenever I gained SP. Immediately after such a blissful thought...

[An error that could greatly affect the plot has been detected. From now on, invariable stats cannot be modified with SP.]

“What's this?”

A warning window popped up and shut down my plans.

“Hmmm.”

Intervention by the world? It displeased me, but I had no choice. Nothing would change even if I argued with the air. Plus, I already increased my luck and got what I wanted.

“Whatever.”

I closed the laptop and got up with a grin. Now, it was time to test my new gift.

Chapter 6

Synchronization (3)

I left my room in the middle of the night with the handgun rattling uncomfortably in my pocket. I headed towards the shooting range, a dome-shaped building consisting of 20 training rooms located east of Dorm 1. The targets were oddly distributed around the sharpshooter because magic arrows could easily change their trajectory.

— Rank 934, Kim Hajin, confirmed.

An unfamiliar robotic voice called my name when I held my smartwatch against the entrance. Indeed, my name had changed from Kim Chundong to Kim Hajin. I walked inside feeling a bit odd. Ten doors evenly stood apart past the wide circular lobby. I held up my smartwatch against a door.

— Rank 934, Kim Hajin, confirmed.

It opened to a simple shooting range. The center of this circular 130 square meter area contained a scaffolding for the shooter. I walked towards the low scaffolding and stood on it. A courteous robotic voice rang out from the ceiling.

— Initializing targets. Please select the number of targets. You may choose between 2 and 20.

“Ten.”

My voice rang out and blue insects popped up from the ground. I looked at the targets surrounding me, mole crickets that could barely be considered monsters. They were similar to the mole crickets everyone knew, but bigger.

— Select your difficulty from stage 1 to stage 9.

Higher levels naturally meant targets moved faster. At stage 9, targets also attacked. Their attacks would only sting at best, but I still considered them dangerous.

“Stage 4.”

I set the difficulty to 4 and loaded my magic bullets. It would’ve been possible to compress magic power into bullets, but the current me didn’t have such talents. Even if I did, using a bow would be much more destructive and efficient.

“Start.”

I notified the system and aimed at the leftmost target. The slow mole cricket seemed to notice as it sped up. It scuttled around without a set pattern, but I could see an afterimage of its future path. I pulled the trigger after predicting its movements.

A blue flare shot out from the barrel. It didn’t make a loud bang like the guns from Earth. The bullet silently pierced the mole cricket. I didn’t even bother to check the results. I moved on to the next target as I fired. My hand moved on its own. One, two, three, four... ten. I pulled the trigger 10 times as the mole crickets scattered into mana particles. Only 2 survived.

“*Oho.*”

I was quite impressed. I managed to hit every mole cricket except the farthest 2 after gaining my gift.

— Your training has ended. Elapsed time: 1.37 seconds. Sharpshooting score: 80/100

In just 1.37 seconds.

“This is pretty fun.”

An eternal truth. The better you are at something, the more fun it is. It was fun because you were good. I felt like I was at the arcades and shouted start once more.

An eternal truth. No matter how fun something is, doing it 20 times makes it boring. I ended my shooting practice at around 3 A.M. After leaving the room, I relaxed my sore finger and heard a noise from next door.

— *Whoosh Whoosh Whoosh*

The faint sound of shockwaves from arrows cutting through the air. Curious, I snuck a peek. I shouldn't have been able to see, but I saw through the door. It turned faint and the interior revealed itself. The scene I saw showed why bows were superior to guns.

"It's Chae Nayun."

Chae Nayun practiced with a serious face. Four magic arrows sat on her bow. She still lacked magic power technique, so she couldn't perform a split shot that multiplied a single arrow into different directions.

— *Whoosh!*

Chae Nayun released the bowstring. Her arrows left a blue trace as they hurled towards 20 targets and obliterated them.

"Amazing."

I exclaimed in shock. Still, Chae Nayun's real aptitude wasn't for bows. Another weapon suited her more, but just what kind of a setting did I make if she was already this good? Suddenly, Chae Nayun turned around and met my eyes. She couldn't see through the wall, but I still felt strange and quickly escaped.

*[Sharpshooting training has increased your gift's proficiency by 3%]
[Repeated sharpshooting training has increased your gift's proficiency by 2.9%] [Luck has been applied! Your perception and speed have increased by 0.1!] [Repeated sharpshooting training has increased your gift's*

proficiency by 2.8%]...

The above messages appeared on my laptop. Master Sharpshooter's proficiency shot up along with bonus stats from my luck. I gained 50% in proficiency EXP thanks to the gift's low grade. Achieving grade 9 didn't seem too difficult.

▷[Master Sharpshooter] [Low-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute]
[Evolving — Grade 10] [Proficiency EXP 50%] — Master Sharpshooter's Training: Familiarity with all long ranged weapons — Thousand-Mile Eyes: Can see far away and somewhat predict a target's movement path. — Bullet Time: Only in combat and once every 24 hours, you may spend 3 seconds in bullet time.

This gift seemed better the more I thought about it, especially how it applied to every long ranged weapon. It was easier to currently raise my proficiency with a gun, but I would have to switch eventually since bows were stronger.

“But what's up with the SP?”

[You have obtained 0.2 SP!] [You have obtained 0.2 SP!] [An auspicious gift! You have obtained 1 bonus SP.] [You have obtained 0.2 SP]...

I only obtained 5 SP after practicing for 20 rounds. Choosing a gun as my main weapon gave me 64 SP, which meant standing out gave more SP than quietly training.

“Tsk.”

I only received a small amount, but I still had uses for it. Our dreaded combat training would take place tomorrow. I needed to make up for my lacking physical abilities to score even the fewest points. My biggest problem was stamina. I was weaker than an ordinary person after investing everything into luck.

[Training Sneakers] — Specially crafted sneakers. Will increase stamina and speed by 0.3 points.

“Maybe with this...”

The easiest way to fix my problem was with equipment. I began to tap on the keyboard.

[Mystical Training Sneakers] — Specially crafted sneakers with a mystical power. Will increase stamina and speed by 0.3 points. Will enhance energy and stamina recovery.

[You do not have enough SP.]

The modification I made was canceled without any adjustments. I wasn't too surprised. After all, I only had 5 SP, but it was still too early to give up.

[Mystical Training Sneakers] — Specially crafted sneakers with a mystical power. Will increase stamina and speed by 0.3 points. When activated, energy and stamina recovery is enhanced for 1 hour. After use, this effect cannot be used again for 24 hours. This effect disappears after 1 month.

I added 3 restrictions to save SP. A 24 hour cooldown, a 1 hour duration, and its effect would disappear after 1 month.

[You have used 5 SP. Would you like to save?]

“Oh! It worked!”

I ecstatically hit the *Enter* key and a blue light flashed from the laptop. The dancing light melted into sneakers with a streak of color on them.

Chapter 7

Combat Training (1)

Outcall was a magic power explosion that shook the world 50 years ago. Mysterious entities like towers, dungeons, and monsters appeared after this incident. These chaotic existences destroyed the very foundation of humanity and transformed the blue planet into hell. Towers and dungeons endlessly produced monsters that devoured humans.

Humanity's science and technology lost all meaning in front of these newfound calamities. Society collapsed and the rule of law returned to law of the jungle. Survivors crumbled to their instincts and lost all human virtues.

Heroes emerged like shining stars within this hellfire. They wielded transcendental powers and corrected the chaos. The world was reconstructed just as quickly as it collapsed. They brought about miracles with gifts bestowed by the heavens. With their help, humanity regained its virtues and developed magic science and magic engineering.

Towers, dungeons, and monsters were all eventually designated as targets to destroy. However, the differences among them were great. Towers required many people and a long period of time. On the other hand, a single person could conquer a dungeon depending on its difficulty. Towers bestowed the greatest rewards that humans could never dream of.

What was the name of the tower conquered by the guild, Apostle of Saints, on August 17, 2023 and what was its reward?

"Minor questions like these don't come up often, but you should still know about the conquests of towers and dungeons."

Morning class was Post-Outcall History. The few sentences I had

written turned into a 400 page textbook. We had to remember rewards from towers, names of monsters, dungeons in Korea, conquerors of towers and dungeons, and countless other facts.

I couldn't process all that information even as the author. Thankfully, it didn't pose a problem with my gift, Observation and Reading.

[On August 17, 2023, the Apostle of Saints conquered the Tower of Floods and obtained an ocean stone.]

I had nothing to worry about since I could obtain something's information whenever I looked at it.

"Huuu..."

On the other hand, the girl in front of me scratched her head and sighed. I couldn't help but laugh as I looked at the character I had created. Chae Nayun hated studying. She could've been the number one ranked female cadet, but she had to give up first place to Rachel due to written exams. Written exams were too much for her even if she gnashed her teeth in mortifying defeat.

Chae Nayun half-turned and glared at me. She must've heard me laugh. After all, sharpshooters had keen senses. I pretended to be calm and lowered my head into my notes. Chae Nayun clicked her tongue and faced forward.

The lesson continued about locations with high mana, monster behavior, djinns on the wanted list... The bell finally rang after 2 hours.

"Make sure to review your notes today. Otherwise, you'll cry on the exam."

The grey-haired professor wearing round eyeglasses left with those words.

"Argh, so annoying. Why do I have to learn all this? Written exams are so annoying."

Chae Nayun complained the moment the professor left. However, she happily looked forward to the next class.

Anti-monster combat training. As its name suggested, we would fight against monsters. The monsters were mana puppets, but their appearance and destructive power matched the real thing. They were slightly weaker than their real counterparts, but a high chance of injury still existed.

I felt scared.

“We’re meeting at the field in 20 minutes!”

A loud voice rang out in the classroom. I turned towards the oval face, small gentle eyes, and muscular body that didn’t quite match. He was Kim Suho’s supporter, Yi Yeonghan. The instructor chose Yi Yeonghan to be class president since Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak didn’t get along.

Sigh.

I just hoped it wouldn’t hurt.

* * *

After a 20 minute break, everyone from Veritas gathered at the Novice Field. It seemed quite crowded with 100 students. The cadets shared their nervousness and excitement with friends, but I stood alone. Only I was alone.

“Fuck...”

Instructor Kim Soohyuk showed up as I wallowed in loneliness. The cadets immediately lined up into 10 columns in front of him.

“I’ll get straight to announcing the teams since I’m sure you all know what this lesson is about. Unless something special happens, your teams will remain the same until after midterms.”

Team formation. The cadets grew restless.

A team generally consisted of 5 members: 2 warriors, 1 sharpshooter, 1 supporter, and 1 utility player. Warriors were usually close range combatants like spearmen or swordsmen, sharpshooters were long ranged attackers, and supporters were people like Yoo Yeonha and Yi Yeonghan who attacked and also supported main attackers.

Finally, the utility player was generally a magician, so that would be excluded until after the first year. Supporters also had the additional role of protecting magicians. After all, magicians could easily turn the tides of battle.

My role would be a bit iffy. Roles were assigned based on our main weapon. I wasn't a warrior, but I was also too lacking to be a proper sharpshooter. Guns had a much shorter range than bows and were weaker compared to melee weapons.

[Sharpshooter (long range) — Rank 4 Chae Nayun, Rank 9 Im Yeongjin... Rank 934 Kim Hajin, Rank 945 Oh Jiyun]

It seemed I was assigned as a sharpshooter.

“Team members will be selected fairly. Lower ranked cadets will be paired with higher ranked cadets.”

Kim Soohyuk announced to the class.

An artificial intelligence developed by the Great Sage administered Cube's training classes, so there was no room for foul play. I could see the pitiful results with my own eyes.

[Team 1] [Kim Suho / Kim Lang] [Sung Seung-Un / Paine]

[Team 2] [Demian / Rosen] [Chun Lee / Chae Nayun]

...

...

[Team 5] [Jin Hoseung / Hazuki] [Kim Hajin / Yoo Yeonha]

“...”

I became speechless at my assigned team. *Yoo Yeonha*. Yoo Yeonha was on my team. In my novel, she was one of the most beloved and hated characters. Her eyes briefly flashed with contempt as we made eye contact. Her negativity disappeared by the time I blinked. Surprisingly, she walked towards me with a smile. Her long hair fluttered with each dignified step and her beautiful lips moved.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

“*Ah, um, I...*”

“Hoseung.”

I wasn’t the one she greeted. Meeting eyes with her was also my imagination. She spoke to the boy behind me.

“*Ah, hello.*”

“Weren’t we on the same team before?”

Yoo Yeonha talked too politely for a 17 year old, but that was how she kept her distance.

“Yes? *Ah, right, haha.*”

Jin Hoseung broke into a cold sweat after exchanging just 2 sentences. Yoo Yeonha was difficult to talk to, and it wasn’t just because of her background or personality. Yoo Yeonha and Shin Jonghak were officially a couple in everyone else’s eyes, but it was just a one-sided crush from Yoo Yeonha.

“*Ah, Hazuki is here too.*”

“Hello...”

Hazuki was a Japanese cadet as her name suggested. She walked over with teary eyes. Yoo Yeonha glanced at her slightly displeased, then

spoke.

“Who’s the other person?”

“It’s me.”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t like people who lacked confidence, so I confidently stepped up. Hazuki and Jin Hoseung turned towards me.

“Uh...”

Hazuki tilted her head as though she didn’t know who I was.

“Ah, the guy who chose a gun.”

When Jin Hoseung mentioned that, I checked Yoo Yeonha’s expression. Unexpectedly, she didn’t show any emotion, but I found that even more frightening. Then Kim Soohyuk suddenly shouted.

“There’s no time for chitchat. You should’ve received the coordinates and information on your smartwatch regarding your target. Get going!”

Our class consisted of 25 teams. There were a total of 100 teams after the other classes joined. Our mission was to kill the monster at the coordinates. We would be ranked on how quickly and safely we completed the mission.

Wiing — Yoo Yeonha projected her smartwatch into the air as soon as the instructor shouted.

[Blackhump Octopus 37° 31’ 32” N]

The monster’s name and coordinate were displayed. Yoo Yeonha spoke briefly.

“Let’s go. We can talk while we’re moving.”

I ran through a field. The black hump octopus should be beyond this ocean of golden reeds, but I felt exhausted due to my horrible physical stats. The sneakers I made last night seemed useless. Its 1 hour duration hadn't run out yet, but my stamina bottomed out. In the end, I fell and the team had to stop.

"It's fine. What matters is whether or not we can kill the monster."

Jin Hoseung handed me a water bottle as I gasped on the ground.

"He's right. Apparently, this is common when you work with magicians."

Hazuki also consoled me with her mediocre Korean. I felt thankful, but I was concerned about Yoo Yeonha's reaction the most. Contrary to my expectations, she didn't seem too displeased. She simply sat modestly on the ground, reading information about the black hump octopus on her watch. I also pulled up the information in my head.

[Blackhump Octopus] — low-intermediate rank monster — Special features: The main body is weak, but numerous baby octopuses will pop out from the hump on its head. They are quite difficult to deal with as dozens pop out at a time. The baby octopuses can suck human blood and turn them into mummies in just a second. They are classified as low rank monsters. — Strategy: Eliminate all baby octopuses. Alternatively, destroy the black hump where the main body's magic power is stored. — Weakness: Black hump — Strength: Suction cups and baby octopuses.

I received thorough information about the blackhump octopus perhaps because I wrote the setting for it.

"I'll deal with the babies while you two take care of the main body."

Yoo Yeonha turned off her smartwatch and ordered Hazuki and Jin Haseung. *Ah, I get it now.* Yoo Yeonha acted like I didn't exist. I was on the same level as air, which was why she didn't reprimand me or seem displeased.

"...Let's go now."

I forced myself to stand after her offensive treatment. My stamina had

recovered thanks to the sneakers.

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah. I’ll go first. *Hup!*”

I ran ahead of them. I was much faster than when I was on Earth, but I found myself far behind them again after 10 seconds.

Chapter 8

Combat Training (2)

“There.”

We found our target when my legs almost gave out. A giant octopus ran amok near the beach. Its black hump looked like a second head.

“I’m ready.”

Yoo Yeonha lowered her body into the thicket as Jin Hoseung and Hazuki took out their sword and axe respectively.

“Baby octopuses will pop out of its hump when we charge. When that happens, the two of you should fall back until I kill them all. Warriors need to save their magic power as much as possible. Black hump octopuses have high regeneration, so we need to remove its hump in a single blow...”

Yoo Yeonha continued explaining. Honestly, it was best to leave the baby octopuses to me. A handgun had a high base power, so it could kill any number of baby octopuses in 1 blow. On the other hand, it would be quite difficult for me to damage the main body unless a critical hit occurred. However, Yoo Yeonha didn’t say anything to me, so I just stood there and refrained from yawning.

“Then let’s start.”

The moment her words fell, Jin Hoseung and Hazuki charged. Jin Hoseung let out a deafening roar after closing in.

“Kueeeek!”

“Kyaaak!”

My ears throbbed, but it had the desired effect. The black hump octopus lowered its head after discovering us and pointed its cannon-shaped hump at us.

BOOM!

A thunderous noise erupted and dozens of creatures shot out. Mushy lumps rained down on us. Jin Hoseung and Hazuki stepped aside as Yoo Yeonha brandished her whip, but I held up my gun before she could do anything.

“Hey, you don’t have to...”

Yoo Yeonha tried to stop me, but I ignored her. Now was the only time I could shine. I activated bullet time. Immediately, the blood in my body began to boil. My vision grew clearer and the world slowed down. I could see and predict the trajectory of every raining octopus. Their one-dimensional movements made them easier targets than the mole crickets. I had 20 magic bullets loaded and just had to aim and pull the trigger. My additional luck would be icing on the cake.

The magic bullets silently cut through the air and left behind blue traces. One bullet per target. I emptied the clip in a second, but instantaneously reloaded. I shot another 20 bullets, then another 20. The world returned to normal after I fired 60 bullets nonstop.

“...Huh?”

The creatures that covered the sun disappeared without a trace. The sudden change confused Yoo Yeonha and the others.

“C-Come on. Let’s go.”

“Ah, right.”

“Yeah!”

Yoo Yeonha snapped out of her daze and rebuked Hazuki and Jin Hoseung. Only then did the 2 warriors charge at the main body. Yoo Yeonha’s long whip shot out and grabbed onto its hump.

A mole cricket shot out from the ground the moment she crushed the hump. *Kieeek* — It cried and jumped towards Yoo Yeonha. I fired my last bullet and hit it on the mark. The mole cricket exploded and all its blood and mucus splashed on Yoo Yeonha. She quickly spread out her magic power before the goo covered her. The mucus slid down after hitting her barrier.

“Uk...”

However, she couldn't block everything. Yoo Yeonha gave me a deathly glare, but she knew it wasn't the time to complain. Her whip shot towards the octopus once again. It danced among the sword and axe against the tentacles.

* * *

[Mission accomplished. Time elapsed: 9 minutes 40 seconds.]

Yoo Yeonha brilliantly severed 4 of the 8 tentacles without straying more than a foot away from me. She thoroughly fulfilled her duties of supporting the warriors and protecting the sharpshooter.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha closed her eyes and sighed after the battle ended. The mole cricket's blood and mucus had dried around her ankles and snow-white collarbone. She took out a handkerchief and wiped it off. Then she turned towards me.

“Excuse me.”

Her eyes smiled, but she didn't seem so friendly. I silently looked at her. The hidden anger in her eyes shone like blades. Yoo Yeonha was a fearsome woman. She hated getting dirty more than anything else.

“You didn't need to bother. I can take care of a mole cricket just fine. And much more cleanly.”

“...”

“My clothes ended up dirty because of you.”

Two insensitive warriors suddenly approached.

“*Whew*, that was swift thanks to you. You killed all the baby octopuses, right? Guns have their advantages, *huh*.”

“That was amazing!”

Jin Hoseung and Hazuki were covered in blood and ink. Yoo Yeonha slowly stepped away, afraid of getting dirtier.

* * *

[Team 5 — Total time: 58 minutes 58 seconds. 16/100]

We placed 16th out of 100 teams. Yoo Yeonha didn't seem too happy even though we placed high, but she didn't mind too much since grades were based on individual performances filmed through the drones. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak's teams obviously took first and second place respectively. She was bitter that Chae Nayun's team came in higher.

“Drones filmed everything. They'll be sent to your smartwatches, so analyze why you were quick or slow, your team's compatibility, and how you can improve for next time. It'll be part of your grades.”

Kim Soohyuk gave a long-winded statement. Yoo Yeonha looked behind her. A dull-looking man yawned in a daze. It was entirely his fault they couldn't reach the monster sooner. What should've taken 10 minutes ended up taking 50.

However, they also managed to finish 16th thanks to him. His bullets quickly killed every baby octopus in just 3 seconds. Yoo Yeonha had prepared to fight them for 15 minutes, so he contributed a great deal. Of course, she played the biggest role since she crushed the main body.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha held back her impulse to blame someone, but that only increased her envy towards Chae Nayun. She faced forward and glared at the back of Chae Nayun's head. She would've smacked the back of that head if she could get away with it. Yoo Yeonha's hands trembled towards Chae Nayun, but she only lightly tapped Chae Nayun's shoulder instead of doing anything extreme.

"Nayun, how was it?"

"*Hm? Ah*, as you can see, 4th place. What a shame. I wanted to beat Shin Jonghak and Rachel. What about you?"

"I'm... 16th."

"Oh? Wow, you got 16th with that gun-using sharpshooter?"

"We got the black hump octopus, so we just had to remove the hump."

"You were the one who did it, right?"

Yoo Yeonha nodded with a bright smile.

"Yep."

* * *

I worked out in the training room late at night. I felt like dying after I ran. It was necessary, so I focused on working out for 3 hours. Thankfully, the training equipment wasn't too different from Earth's, only that the weights were heavier. For example, the leg extension machine went from 15 kg to 500 kg.

"*Ugh.*"

I fumbled back to the dressing room like a zombie and collapsed on a seat. I took out my laptop and a fatigue recovery drink after catching my breath for 5 minutes. First, I checked today's results on the laptop.

[Luck has been applied! Your accuracy has greatly increased because the

enemy is low-ranked!] *[All attacks have hit their mark! Your gift's proficiency has increased by 20%!]* *[Perception has increased by 0.03.]* *[Luck has been applied! Your eyes and ears seem to work better!]* *[You have gained 27 SP.]*

As expected, I got lucky with my accuracy during today's combat training. I gained some SP too because I stood out to Yoo Yeonha.

[Your strength has increased by 0.02 after working out.] *[Your stamina has increased by 0.02 after working out.]* *[Your vitality has increased by 0.02 after working out.]* *[Mana has mysteriously seeped into your torn muscle fibers! Your strength, stamina, and vitality have increased by 0.03!]*

I received more stats from working out than I expected. Something like this would've been impossible on Earth. My enlightenment and luck played a huge role.

I wasn't sure I could even get up tomorrow with sharp pains all over my body. Of course, I already had a solution in mind.

[Fatigue Recovery Drink] — Will restore your body from fatigue. Contains a tiny amount of temperate mana.

Current SP: 36

This was a fatigue recovery drink provided by Cube. I planned on modifying its effect. Of course, something that completely restored the body probably wouldn't be possible. Even if I could, it would be a huge waste of SP. I could come up with a decent product with the right amount of restrictions. I added a line to the drink's description.

— If Kim Hajin goes to sleep within 2 hours of use, he will slowly recover from physical fatigue over 8 hours.

I added 4 restrictions: only Kim Hajin, sleeping within 2 hours, physical fatigue only, and non-instantaneous recovery, but slowly over 8 hours.

[You can save the modified setting using 0.5 SP.]

The drink already had a similar effect, so it only required exactly what I gained from working out. I gulped down the drink after saving the modified effect.

Burp.

Now, I had to go back and sleep. Otherwise, the drink would be a waste.

“Agh, my joints.”

I staggered away like a zombie.

* * *

At the same time, Yoo Yeonha analyzed the day’s video from combat training. She could watch the battle from multiple angles with several drones filming each team.

“At least he’s quick.”

She became more curious the more she watched it. The black hump octopus fired a total of 59 babies, but the sharpshooter killed all of them before they could even touch the ground. Black hump octopuses usually reabsorbed the babies they shot out to recover their energy. Then they’d shoot more out from their hump. Yoo Yeonha had prepared for a drawn-out battle because of this annoying trait, but the actual fight ended in just 10 minutes.

“I don’t remember seeing him in Military Agent Academy.”

This sharpshooter grew stranger the more she thought about it. He had abnormally low stamina and had also suddenly changed his weapon. That was all Yoo Yeonha noted down about Kim Hajin. Then she suddenly received a message.

[What’s up?]

It came from Shin Jonghak. Yoo Yeonha tapped away on the hologram keyboard with a grin.

[Analyzing the video from today.]

[Why are you doing that now?]

[I'm going to inherit a guild in the future, so I have to look for promising talents.]

[There are none in your team. They're all trash.]

Yoo Yeonha snickered. He was right, but also arrogant. She would've found such behavior detestable from anyone other than Shin Jonghak, but the fact that he was Shin Jonghak turned it into chicness. It wasn't logical, but the reason she liked Shin Jonghak was far from logical.

[How's that gun-shooting guy?]

"Haha."

So he was curious after all. He had a pretty cute side.

[He's okay. He did a man's worth of work. Exactly what you'd expect from rank 934.]

In 2.78 seconds. He shot 60 bullets and hit 59 in that short amount of time. Yoo Yeonha pulled with her index finger. *Was it possible to pull the trigger 20 times in a second? Or did that handgun have an automatic firing function?*

Ding Dong —

The bell rang in the middle of her thoughts.

[Ah, my room service is here.]

Yoo Yeonha hopped towards the door and opened it. Her neatly dressed butler waited in front. She was happy to see the butler her father picked out for her.

"Thank you, Sechan."

The butler respectfully bowed. Yoo Yeonha took her food and came back to her seat.

[I'm back. Were you waiting?]

Yoo Yeonha lifted the dome-shaped lid off the elegant silver platter.

[No.]

She had ordered fast food. A hamburger with a side of french fries and a bottle of Coke, a meal only for commoners.

First, she munched on a fry.

[What did you order?]

Shin Jonghak asked. Yoo Yeonha casually replied.

[Just the usual. A little bit of foie gras entier.]

Chapter 9

Within Everyday Life (1)

Wednesday's first class was anti-personnel training, a 2 hour class where cadets simply paired up and sparred. Cadets used training weapons to avoid injuries and make grading easier. Kim Suho paired with Yi Yeonghan and Shin Jonghak paired with Kim Horak.

"Uwooh."

"Rank 934 Kim Hajin, get up!"

"I, I can't."

As for me, I paired with the anti-personnel combat instructor rather than a cadet because there were no training guns. I was stuck fighting the instructor since a real gun could cause serious injury.

"What do you mean you can't!"

The female instructor ordered me to give my all. Exactly 1 minute later, it was the instructor giving it her all. It seemed my gift threatened her more than she anticipated.

"Get up!"

She furiously grabbed my collar when a bullet grazed her forearm. I suddenly regretted spending my first 2 weeks in this world loafing around. I should've been working out.

"I can't continue."

"Yes, you can!"

"My body won't move."

“It will!”

The instructor forcefully pulled me up.

“Put your guard up and do something!”

She ordered, but the handgun in my hand felt heavy. I pulled the trigger half-heartedly. The instructor blocked the bullet with her hand and tackled me. I couldn't resist and fell. A stinging pain coursed through my body.

“I give up. I give up.”

“You didn't move after shooting. I said do something!”

Chak! She slapped my face.

“GET UP!”

Chak! I was starting to get annoyed. *Come to think of it, wasn't this woman younger than me?*

“I said, GET UP!”

I refused to take it a third time. I grabbed her arm, then...

“You fucker.”

I bit the instructor's hair.

“*Ah!* What are you doing!? 934... *Ak!* Let go! Let go! Let go!”

I gnashed on her hair and pulled back as though my life depended on it. My strange actions turned the surroundings silent, but I didn't have the time to pay attention to something like that.

“T-This is a warning! Let go! I said, LET GO!”

This hair, I'll bite it off. I swear I'll bite it off.

“Y-You...!”

I could see the instructor's fist in front of my eyes. I had no memories of what happened next, but it didn't feel too bad since I managed to gain 40 SP.

* * *

Cube also had various clubs. Head instructor Kim Soohyuk said we wouldn't be able to enjoy our youths, but I didn't create Cube to be so horrible. While it was normal to be covered in monster blood or to kill djinns from time to time, Cube encouraged cadets to enjoy their hobbies for mental health. Being in a relationship was technically prohibited, but tacitly allowed by all the faculty.

Cube's clubs were no different from college circles. Club promotions happened in the second week after first year cadets arrived.

I set the number of clubs in my novel to around 100, but that might not have been realistic considering the school only had 5000 cadets. A club existed for practically any topic: hobby clubs like bowling, pool, VR, and also academic clubs like studying, martial arts, and training.

I planned to join more than one to stay close to the main characters. I already knew who was in which. Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan were in traveling. Chae Nayun was in traveling and hunting. Yoo Yeonha was in traveling and academics. Shin Jonghak wasn't in any and Rachel was in reading. Obviously, I had to choose the traveling club. Next, I had to decide between the hunting club, reading club, or academic club. I could join all 4, but that would be too tiring. I only had one body, and the easiest club to gain SP seemed to be the academics club. Among the academic clubs, the academic circle called Veritas contained an important antagonist early in the story.

“VR club, Folklore Village... Interesting.”

I felt strange sitting on a bench in Cube's Hero Park. The park bustled with students after classes had ended. It all felt too mysterious. The setting I had scribbled took a life of its own, filling up missing holes

and creating this complete world. Many things were new to me, like the VR club and the couple secretly making out behind the bushes.

“*Sigh*, that’s a bit...”

I left with a frown after seeing their public display. Then I busily ran around to collect club applications around the park. Four forms. I didn’t receive favorable looks when I asked, but I succeeded nonetheless.

“I’ll need to join the traveling club for sure.”

Four leading characters participated in the traveling club because I simply wanted them together for major and minor events. The club played a major role, but it wasn’t popular. It only had 20 students from all three grades, but third years were usually busy with guild interviews and internships, so the club really only had about 14. That was just how I set it because more people seemed troublesome.

I confirmed the traveling club. I decided to join just 2 more after some thought. I chose the hunting and academic club instead of the reading club.

Clubs began after classes and these 3 never overlapped. The academic club met on Tuesdays, hunting on Thursdays, and traveling was either Saturday or Sunday. I ended up leaving Rachel out, but I couldn’t interact with her yet anyways.

“Okay.”

Thwack. I flicked the application papers and stood up. The club leaders would surely give me strange looks.

* * *

The capital of Korea, Seoul was filled with guilds that vied for the world’s top position. Distinguished guilds such as Essence of the Strait, Desolate Moon, and Frost Sanctuary were all located in the collective guild district of Seoul, making it the center for djinn and monster subjugation requests, technological advances, and businesses.

“The guild visit is set for the Friday in 2 weeks.”

Skyscrapers filled Seoul’s guild district, but one particular building wasn’t too tall. However, the geometric design would catch any passerby’s attention. It belonged to the guild, Creator’s Sacred Grace.

The building’s interior was double its appearance with cutting-edge magic engineering and its mana density was always maintained above grade 3.

“*Mmm*, understood.”

Vice-leader Yun Seung-Ah reviewed her secretary’s report in this mana-rich environment for heroes. Currently, Yun Seung-Ah was solely devoted to finding promising talents. Everyone widely acknowledged that Cube’s freshmen class was exceptional. Some had gifts that could alter guild rankings. Their first place position would be jeopardized if she let her competitors take them. Yun Seung-Ah stared at the guild’s intranet database, which contained videos from Cube’s first combat training.

“Kim Suho really is something.”

Her screen displayed the combat training’s 1st place finisher, Kim Suho. His sword qi looked extremely sharp, but that wasn’t the only awe-striking scene. His techniques flowed like water. Like a formless style, his swordsmanship didn’t resemble anyone else’s. With this, he seemed to tear apart space along with the monster.

“Yes, he doesn’t seem close to any guilds either. He’s first on our priority.”

“I want to bring him in no matter what. Oh? Someone’s using a gun?”

Kim Suho’s video ended and another caught her curiosity.

“Yes. There were some talks about it in the guild community.”

“Was there? Sorry, I’ve been too busy lately.”

"It was uploaded from the Cube community. He was in Yoo Yeonha's team, which was why it gathered so many views in the first place. He's quite the strange one according to insiders."

"Mmm... Strange one, huh?"

Yun Seung-Ah watched the video out of curiosity.

[Team 5] [Jin Hoseung, Hazuki, Yoo Yeonha, Kim Hajin]

It didn't awe her, but the 10 minute video most certainly drew her attention.

"He wasn't using an automatic rifle, but still managed to fire 60 shots in 2.78 seconds?"

That was physically impossible. The gun wouldn't endure even if you could pull the trigger 60 times. A trans-physical power was at play.

"Yes. It seems he changed weapons from a sword to a gun as soon as he entered Cube."

"...Enlightenment."

"I think so too."

Enlightenment at just 17 years old... Yun Seung-Ah leaned back in contemplation. Changing weapons after enlightenment. It was rare, but it happened. Gifts presented cadets with individuality, but it was impossible to know one's gift before enlightenment. In cases like this, it would take at least 3 years to catch up after changing weapons. This was why Cube's lower academy, the Military Agent Academy, encouraged cadets to experiment with a variety of weapons. Knowing how to wield several weapons made it easier to transition should it be necessary.

"He experienced enlightenment early, but I can't say it's too desirable if using a gun is all his gift can do."

"Right, he would've chosen a bow if his gift allowed it."

Yun Seung-Ah agreed, but enlightenment at 17 was still rare.

“We should keep an eye on him at least. Is there a free recruiter?”

“No. Everyone is full because of this year’s exceptional cadets.”

Yun Seung-Ah hesitated. Recruiters were expensive nowadays. They could simply run away with the information if she hired a new one from outside the guild.

“...Then let him be. I’m sure he’ll stand out again if he’s special.”

Her secretary nodded without objection.

Chapter 10

Within Everyday Life (2)

I needed to make money. Not out of greed, but necessity. I almost fainted when I looked at the bill that came to my room. I had 300 million won in debt. Chundong had taken out all the loans a Cube cadet could get.

The loan only had 1% annual interest, but that still meant I was losing money since I wasn't making any. Unfortunately, Chundong's bank account only contained 3 million won. That was nowhere near the amount needed to live in this world where power and money meant everything.

Thankfully, I knew multiple ways to get rich.

First was the stock market. Towers and dungeons constantly formed in this world. I knew the guilds that would discover or conquer them. Guilds in this world functioned like companies, so I could buy their stocks.

Today was March 2, 2025. My settings book should be full of juicy information. I opened my laptop.

▷*Settings List*

[March 15, 2025. The newly found guild, Packhorse Master, goes public. July 4, 2025. They conquer the dungeon, Suwon Royal Devil's Nest.]

Djinns had established the Packhorse Master guild. I noted them down because they played an important role in the story. Conquering Suwon Royal Devil's Nest would skyrocket their stock prices by 1000%. It wouldn't be until 3 years later that they were discovered and delisted.

[December 8, 2025. Guild, Creator's Sacred Grace, announces its plan to conquer the Tower of Miracle.]

This incident would become the lowest point for the current first place guild, Creator's Sacred Grace. It was also the decisive event that made Yun Seung-Ah their leader. This plan, which Yun Seung-Ah opposed, would lower their rank to 7.

I had 2 opportunities to make money with this incident. First was before they announced their plan and second was before the plan failed. I could make a fortune with just these 2 early incidents in the settings book.

"The problem is..."

I didn't have any money to start with.

"Do I need to visit the field?"

Fields referred to danger zones with monsters. Unlike towers and dungeons, the danger level of fields vastly depended on their grade. Less dangerous ones didn't require permits. I should be able to enter the field in Gangwondo.

"Wait."

I remembered something. I had arranged a setting in Gangwondo. I wondered what it was again and specifically searched for the word with *CTRL + F*.

[Year 2026. Djinn Tomer discovers aether from Gangwondo's Gari Mountain Dungeon.]

Found it. Aether was a mystic grade formless weapon. I wanted to take it for myself, but Tomer wouldn't have a weapon without aether. Tomer was an important antagonist, so the story would become much easier. However, I might unknowingly impact the future if I took aether. I feared that uncertainty...

"Well, whatever."

Tomer was strong even without aether. I should go obtain aether once all of my stats increased to around 3 or 4.

Wiing —

I felt a vibration on my wrist as I received a message.

[Traveling Club Announcement] — There will be a short trip on Saturday for freshman orientation.

“Oh right.”

That was a thing. My smartwatch vibrated again after I recalled that.

[Academic Club Announcement] — There will be a freshmen orientation on Friday.

“And there was this too. So annoying.”

I thought I could rest on the weekends, but there were clubs. Not to mention, the academic club was tomorrow.

* * *

Cube's combat training took place on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. I should've been able to relax on Mondays and Fridays, but I walked towards a certain clubroom on this precious Friday. Yoo Yeonha entered the room some distance ahead.

The academic club met in room 304. As expected, I saw many first years inside. About 30 in total and 23 were girls bewitched by the club president.

I sat behind Yoo Yeonha after looking around. I could smell a flowery scent from her hair. After unavoidably smelling this scent for 5 minutes... The club president finally arrived.

“Nice to meet you. I'm Yun Hyuk. Welcome to our academic club, Veritas.”

The club president was a third year named Yun Hyuk. I didn't enter this club just for Yoo Yeonha. Yun Hyuk was a djinn. Soon, several

incidents would occur in Cube, including a monster invasion with Yun Hyuk as the mastermind. Of course, I couldn't just shout, *That guy is a djinn!* Honestly, that would probably give me a decent amount of SP.

Yun Hyuk contracted with the devil of enchantment, Lilith. He obtained a beautiful appearance and an ability called enchantment in exchange for his soul. Currently, he should be targeting Yoo Yeonha. That was why Lilith gave him a high rank ability.

“We'll only briefly discuss what our club is about since today's just orientation.”

The eyes of the female cadets sparkled from his charming voice.

“In Veritas, we research and discuss the classifications, weaknesses, behaviors, and attributes of monsters. Topics include how they behave, where their vital points are, what their attribute is, and how to efficiently deal with them.”

Yun Hyuk mentioned an important topic in modern society. Monster analysis was one of the most competitive college majors with even non-combatant heroes. These heroes weren't fit for combat, but were still revered because their gifts aided in trans-human knowledge.

“I'll give a quick example. Let's take a look at this monster. I'm sure you all know a totem scallop.”

A hologram popped up. As its name suggested, the totem scallop was a scallop that produced a totem. Totem scallops were high-intermediate rank, grade 3 monsters with high intelligence and magic. Thankfully, they acted gentle and didn't attack as long as one stayed out of their territory. However, their pearls fetched an incredible price and every guild targeted them.

“As you know, it's extremely hard to kill totem scallops, but careful analysis shows they're classified no differently than an ordinary scallop. It's quite difficult to locate their vital points because no other monster shares similarities with them.”

Yun Hyuk continued explaining. I couldn't help but yawn since I already knew everything.

“Yaaawn...”

Immediately, Yun Hyuk frowned and every other female cadet glared at me. I wouldn't be surprised if they attacked me for yawning one more time. Only Yoo Yeonha kept her eyes on the screen.

“Cough.”

Yun Hyuk let out a dry cough before continuing.

“The totem scallop's vital point hasn't been discovered because of its ambiguous attribute and behavior. As for other monsters like the thousand-mile horse...”

* * *

The orientation ended after 40 minutes. This time, I inwardly yawned to avoid being attacked. I almost left when I saw Yun Hyuk approaching Yoo Yeonha. Then I paused.

“Cadet Yeonha.”

“Yes?”

“You forgot this.”

Yun Hyuk handed her a paper she left behind. I didn't write this in my novel, but I knew he was scheming. He probably pulled it out with his magic power instead of Yoo Yeonha forgetting it.

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

Yoo Yeonha took the paper with a smile. That seemed to be the end of their encounter.

After leaving, I went to a nearby vending machine and bought a Coke and Sprite. I couldn't help but laugh at the names on the cans. I named them Coin Cola and Spring Sprite to avoid any copyright issues and that was exactly how they appeared.

Meanwhile, Yoo Yeonha left the clubroom.

I blocked her path with the Coke and Sprite in my hands. Then I handed her the Coke.

“Here.”

“...?”

Her face was full of question marks.

“I’m in the same club. Same team, same club. Funny coincidence, right?”

This was a test. Working out like my life depended on it only gave me 4 SP. *How much SP would I get for talking to a leading character?*

“Do you think I’ll drink something like this?”

Yoo Yeonha frowned and her lips protruded as though she was angry. I casually played it off since I expected such a reaction.

“I just got it from the vending machine.”

Yoo Yeonha was likely attracted to bad boys. Of course, being handsome was also a requirement.

“Touch it. It’s cold.”

“I’m fine. You can have it. Also...”

I could feel the hostility from her glare. That was the only trace of her true feelings behind her mask.

“Don’t talk to me so casually. This is your first warning.”

That was it. Yoo Yeonha walked past me without waiting for my reply. I popped the Sprite open as her perfect figure strode away.

Psssh — Gulp, gulp.

Yoo Yeonha's shoulders twitched at the sound. According to my settings, Yoo Yeonha loved unhealthy food like carbonated drinks, hamburgers, fried chicken, and ramen. She couldn't buy them out of embarrassment, so she made her trusty butler or attendant buy them for her. Even then, she could only enjoy it once a week.

The reason was simple. Not only did she hate showing such a side, but her mother also detested unhealthy commoner food.

I threw the Coke into her luxury bag to make up for the pitiful setting I gave her. It drew a clean arc and landed inside.

“Carry me next time too.”

Yoo Yeonha glanced back as I spoke. Then she walked away muttering to herself. However, I could hear just fine.

“Who is this crazy guy?”

* * *

Yoo Yeonha soon noticed the slight change in her bag. The condensation from the Coke made her textbook wet.

“That nutjob.”

She took out the Coke with a frown. *Just when did he put it in? That little rat.*

“Huuu.”

After a deep sigh, Yoo Yeonha released her magic power. It seeped into the paper and separated the moisture from her textbook. The collected moisture fell to the ground as she retracted her magic power.

“Huuu.”

Yoo Yeonha broke out in a cold sweat. She felt extremely proud at the same time. The magic power application she just showed was difficult for even heroes. It looked simple, but was actually quite mysterious and complicated.

“When I see him again...”

Yoo Yeonha twisted her lips as her sense of pride turned into anger.
That talkative bum. I'll need to ask the guys to educate him.

That thought only briefly lasted. She fiddled with the Coke in her bag and checked for anyone nearby.

Cough. She took out a handkerchief and wrapped it around the Coke before placing it back in her bag.

“Hmmm.”

Then she quickened her pace as if nothing happened.

Chapter 11

Change (1)

Saturday arrived before I noticed after spending the rest of Friday training.

[Traveling Club Announcement] — There will be a short trip on Saturday for freshman orientation.

The traveling club's orientation was today, and we planned to meet at the Cube portal station that connected to Seoul. I walked to the meeting place after packing my gun into my cross bag. Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, Chae Nayun, and Yoo Yeonha were already waiting there.

They seemed completely oblivious to my existence, but being with all of them still made me nervous. An unexpected incident would occur in Seoul today. This would be the story's first major incident. The club president arrived as I organized today's impending event in my head.

"Hello, I'm the club president, Oh Hanhyun. I didn't believe it when I saw so many applications, but... it's true. Who knew such amazing cadets would join?"

Oh Hanhyun had an average height and a gentle impression. He looked around while scratching his neck.

"First, I'll give a short introduction about the traveling club."

He bashfully smiled and took out a piece of paper from his pocket. He had prepared a speech. I described Oh Hanhyun as a timid person, so I wasn't too surprised.

"*Cough.* Once or twice a month, we will take a trip out of Cube to simply relax. Training during trips will be strictly forbidden. It's also why our club is nicknamed Healing Rain."

Cough. After clearing his throat once more, he put the paper away.
What? That was it?

“Today, we’ll take a short trip to Seoul for orientation.”

From here on, things proceeded as I had written. The club members would pair up and visit Seoul together.

“We usually have a theme for each trip, but today will be an exception since it’s orientation. We’ll split into pairs.”

Kim Suho would be paired with Chae Nayun and run into trouble at a museum. As for what trouble, I would experience it soon.

“Then we’ll start by drawing lots.”

Drawing lots was completely based on luck, but not for me. I could clearly see the contents with my gift, Observation and Reading. I pondered with a hand on my chin. *Should I choose Kim Suho? Or Chae Nayun?*

“I’ll go first.”

Yoo Yeonha stepped up. I watched her pull out a name and realized I had overlooked my own existence. Yoo Yeonha’s lot contained my name.

“Kim Hajin.”

My heart sank, but Yoo Yeonha’s face remained unchanged. She calmly stared at me with her usual mask.

* * *

Thankfully, everything else remained unchanged. Kim Suho paired up with Chae Nayun and Yi Yeonghan paired up with the club president. After drawing lots, the members gathered in front of the portal.

Portals were cutting-edge technology utilizing magic science and

engineering. With a height and width of 15 and 30 meters respectively, over 100 of these giant gates could be found throughout Korea. Traveling from Seoul to Busan took less than 3 seconds.

“Cadet Kim Hajin. Confirmed.”

The portal operator handed us a seal that would resonate with the portal and teleport us to Seoul.

“Let’s go.”

The club president entered first. Then Kim Suho went through the swaying blue portal next, followed by Yi Yeonghan, Chae Nayun, and finally me.

A strange feeling briefly enveloped my body.

In the blink of an eye, the surroundings changed into an unfamiliar place. The Seoul portal station looked quite futuristic. With just 2 steps, I had crossed the East Sea.

“It’s 12 P.M. right now. We’ll meet back here at 6.”

We were the only ones around since our portal connected to Cube. However, the portal next door connecting Seoul to Busan should be much more crowded. After all, they were both global cities.

“Follow me for now.”

We received another seal from the portal employee as we followed the club leader. I read the words, *Yongsan Station*, as we left.

“You can go wherever you want as a pair using public transportation. We won’t require you to write a report today, but make sure you’re back by 6. You’ll be penalized if you’re late.”

The club president warned as we left in pairs. Yoo Yeonha didn’t say anything as I followed her. She suddenly stopped as I thought about how Yongsan Station had changed from what I knew. Yoo Yeonha turned around and blurted.

“Let’s split up.”

“*Hm?* Oh, yeah. Sure.”

Most likely, she planned to visit her father’s guild. I was fine with it. I planned to join Kim Suho no matter what.

“Again.”

She glared at me with a hand on her hip as though I ticked her off again.

“Don’t talk to me so casually.”

“*Huh?*”

“This is your second warning. There won’t be a third.”

I knew she wasn’t bluffing. She might really get back at me in an unthinkable way if I did it a third time.

“Yes, I understand. I apologize.”

“*Tsk.*”

Yoo Yeonha walked away without saying goodbye. She clearly disliked me. We split up after just 5 minutes.

* * *

“*Whew*, I thought I got lost.”

I finally arrived at the National Weapons Museum after switching buses 3 times. The museum displayed replicas of weapons excavated by Korea. Today, an incident would occur here. I walked in with a trembling heart.

“Daddy, what’s that?”

“Oh, that’s the Four Tiger Sword...”

Perhaps because it was a weekend, the museum bustled with parents and children who hoped to become heroes. No matter the crowd, some people would always stand out like Chae Nayun and Kim Suho. I quickly spotted Chae Nayun.

“I want it.”

Smacking her lips, she greedily eyed a bow in a glass display, but she wasn’t the one I was looking for. It didn’t take long to find the tall and handsome main character who always stood out. I carefully approached Kim Suho and happened to recognize the weapon he was looking at.

“Is this the famous Seven-Branched Sword?”

The king of Baekje who ruled the most powerful kingdom before Korea was unified bestowed this iron sword to the Japanese emperor. It was a historical weapon found in the final room of the Wiryeseong Dungeon. [1]

“Hm? Ah...”

Kim Suho turned towards me. However, he was at a loss for words. I had a good idea why.

“Kim Hajin.”

“Ah, right. Sorry, I didn’t expect to meet you here, so I forgot.”

With a kind smile, he pointed to another section of the museum.

“Apparently, Napoleon’s rifle is also here. Have you seen it?”

“Napoleon’s rifle?”

“Yep. It was a reward from a dungeon in France.”

According to my world setting, any weapon used by a legendary figure could become an artifact. Since that was the case, it wasn't weird for Napoleon's rifle to exist even though I never mentioned it. I did want a rare weapon, but I wasn't interested in replicas.

"No, I don't think I'll have time."

I unexpectedly answered without any excitement. It felt strange talking to the main character I created. I wasn't quite sure how to describe this feeling, but it wasn't pleasant. Kim Suho was handsome, exceptional in martial arts, and had a fantastic personality. He was too perfect, so he felt inhuman. That was why some readers rooted for Shin Jonghak. Anyways, it should be about time. I tapped on the ground with my sneakers.

"Then..."

Right when Kim Suho was about to say something...

— *BOOM!*

A thunderous sound reverberated. Everyone grew silent. *Koong. Koong. Koong.* A thud repeatedly pulsed throughout the deathly silence. A giant creature's footsteps began to make crushing sounds. The atmosphere took a quick turn.

"Kyaaaak!"

"What is that!?"

The unknown led to anxiety and anxiety quickly turned into panic. Visitors began to scream and run. However, only death waited outside. The safest place was still inside.

"Stay here! Don't go out!"

Kim Suho shouted to warn everyone as he sensed the dangers outside. Currently, an intermediate rank monster and its subordinates were attacking outside. Just a single intermediate rank monster posed little threat. A hero would arrive in less than a minute and 20 minutes was

enough to take care of the entire situation, but that wasn't the only problem. A djinn was also here, making it a double-pronged attack. Heroes usually rushed to the most dangerous areas. They wouldn't prioritize the museum since it had security guards. The Djinn Association took advantage of this and dispatched an assassin to target a special child the Hero Association had discovered.

Clang —

Glass shattered from not too far away. Kim Suho turned in that direction and shouted.

“Chae Nayun!”

Chae Nayun broke a display and took out the bow inside.

“Are you crazy!”

“No, I'm perfectly sane.”

It was only a replica, but the museum's alarm rang and its defensive mechanisms activated. All exits closed in just 3 seconds. People panicked even more, but even an intermediate rank monster couldn't break through the barriers.

“This is better than stopping to warn people one by one.”

With that, she cleared her throat and shouted at the panicking citizens. “Everyone! Stay calm! It's safer here! We're heroes too!”

“Hey, you...”

“Shut it. Don't just stand there. Grab a weapon.”

“What? Why should I?”

“Because it's dangerous outside.”

Looking at us... No, at Kim Suho, Chae Nayun nocked a magic arrow

onto her bow.

“Look there.”

She pointed with her eyes at a man wearing a black coat. Chae Nayun fired without a shred of hesitation before Kim Suho could say anything.

“Hey, don’t —”

Her magic arrow pierced the man’s throat. Immediately, Kim Suho froze. He seemed dazed by the sudden murder.

Any ordinary person would have died, but the man grabbed the arrow sticking out of his neck and pulled it out. Black magic power rose from his hand and burned the arrow to ash. *Tap, tap*. The man turned around in the direction where the arrow came from. His eyes burned red with hostility.

“...”

Without a doubt, he was a djinn. Kim Suho’s face paled. Just like Chae Nayun, he shattered a display and took out the Seven-Branched Sword. It was only a replica, but its faithful reconstruction made it a high grade weapon. It should be strong enough to kill the djinn.

“Oh, that’s a nice weapon. I heard it splits into seven branches.”

Chae Nayun smirked and stood by Kim Suho’s side. I also took out my handgun. I thought about standing next to them, but took 2 steps back after some consideration. I was still too weak. It would be the end if I showed off too much and the djinn targeted me.

1. Wiryeseong was the name of two early capitals in Baekje. 📖

Chapter 12

Change (2)

Blue sword qi surrounded the Seven-Branched Sword. The blade shone from the pure mana. Sneaking a glance at Kim Suho's Seven-Branched Sword, Chae Nayun asked.

"You ready?"

"Yeah."

Meanwhile, I slowly backed away. There was nothing I could do here. Kim Suho would reveal his hidden power and easily take care of this djinn. Overwhelmed by Kim Suho's might, Chae Nayun would give up being his rival and admire him instead.

"Support me."

Kim Suho spoke as he adjusted his grip on the sword.

"Support? Please, I'll be the one to kill him."

Chae Nayun playfully rebutted and nocked another magic arrow.

"Guooo—!"

The djinn ignited his magic power before she could fire. An evil black qi hurled towards them like hellfire, but a single streak of light extinguished it. A sword saint could cut fire, wind, and even magic power.

Chae Nayun's arrow flew through the lifted magic power. The condensed mana arrow pierced the djinn's shoulder.

Kim Suho didn't miss this opportunity. Leaping up, he slashed down

diagonally. This attack should've immobilized the djinn, but he only smiled despite being cut. Kim Suho instinctively felt something was wrong. Immediately, fierce magic power shot out from the wound. The shockwave blew Kim Suho away as if a storm had crashed through. He didn't even have the chance to scream and crashed into a wall across the room.

“...”

“...”

Both Chae Nayun and I became speechless. *Strange*. Something was definitely strange. This shouldn't have happened. After being pushed back a bit, Kim Suho should've released his hidden power and overwhelmed the enemy.

“Uuu...”

Thankfully, Kim Suho stood back up, but he didn't seem to be in good shape.

“Hey, are you okay?”

“I'm fine... *Kuu*.”

Kim Suho needed time to heal. The djinn walked towards Chae Nayun as her face stiffened.

Chweek— Chweek—

Chae Nayun fired two arrows, but none of them worked. The djinn didn't stop even though she continued to shoot until he looked like a porcupine.

“This isn't regeneration.”

Chae Nayun murmured in a daze. As she said, this djinn didn't have high regenerative power. He simply had a sturdy body. In the first place, I didn't design him to be an opponent Chae Nayun could defeat.

Chae Nayun's face turned pale as fear and horror crept up inside her.

"Just support me!"

Kim Suho jumped in front of her and blocked the djinn's path. However, the djinn kept his eyes on Chae Nayun. Condensing his black mana onto his arm, he produced a giant wolf-like beast that bared its fangs toward Kim Suho.

"Uuuk!"

The djinn fought Kim Suho with one hand and grabbed Chae Nayun's face with the other.

"Are we screwed?"

I murmured.

By now, I had run away to the back of the exhibition. However, this place was already occupied by a father and child.

"Go that way."

"Y-Yes?"

"There, go farther back. It's dangerous here."

I could feel my voice shaking. Honestly, I was scared to death.

"B-But..."

"While the djinn's too busy fighting, hurry!"

At my urging, the two quickly scurried away. I took out my laptop from my cross bag. The djinn in my setting shouldn't have been that strong. *What was up with that arm?* I sneaked a glance and saw the djinn's wolf-like arm evenly fighting against Kim Suho. I didn't recall making such a setting.

I had to do something. At this rate, both Kim Suho and Chae Nayun could die. I unloaded my gun magazine and placed a bullet on the laptop. My damned hands kept trembling. I checked the bullet's setting with the laptop.

[Mana Bullet] [Null attribute] [Attack Power (3/10)] — A bullet with condensed mana. It is much stronger than a gunpowder bullet.

That wasn't enough. With an attack power of 3, even scratching that djinn would be impossible. *Would increasing the attack power be enough?* Thankfully, I had a solution within my settings. The reason this world required a variety of heroes was because of attributes. An attack could have varying effects depending on attributes. Contradicting attributes like water and fire could allow one to overcome a difference in power.

The djinn clearly had a darkness attribute. The opposite of darkness was undoubtedly light. I just had to change the bullet's attribute.

[Mana Bullet] [Light attribute] [Attack Power (5/10)] — A bullet with a condensed essence of light. Will explode a second time after hitting its target.

[This modification requires 104 SP. Would you like to save this setting?]

It was expensive. That cost 80% of what I had earned in the past week, but I still wasn't sure if that was enough. It was better to overdo it than fall short. I tried adjusting the attack power to 6.

[You do not have enough SP. The value will be adjusted.] [Attack Power (5.6/10)] [Would you like to save the adjusted modification?]

I hit save. White light erupted from the laptop before melting into a magic bullet with a shiny iron casing. *Modification complete.* With this single bullet loaded, I took a deep breath and peeked past the wall. Chae Nayun struggled to escape from the djinn's grasp while Kim Suho fought the djinn's right arm. No, Kim Suho was pushing the djinn back now. We were at an advantage. It seemed he would defeat the right arm soon. The problem was Chae Nayun. Either she couldn't breathe or the djinn's magic power was poisoning her, Chae Nayun's neck had turned purple. I clicked my tongue and jumped out.

“Hey!”

Then I shouted.

“Move!”

Kim Suho rolled to the side without even turning around. The djinn’s right arm chased after him, but that only increased the target for me. I pulled the trigger with a slightly calmer mind. A bright light flashed from the barrel as though a flash bomb had gone off. The bullet emitted as much pressure and heat as its brightness. The handgun couldn’t withstand the power and exploded in my hand. The broken parts fell as I writhed in pain. Thankfully, the trajectory of the bullet didn’t change. It accurately struck the djinn’s left shoulder.

Bull’s eye.

The bullet exploded and purified the djinn’s arm, which was now gone.

Chae Nayun, on the brink of death, fell to the ground. Kim Suho didn’t miss this opportunity. A metal attribute surrounded his sword. He finally used the sword saint’s all-severing technique. It should be limited to just once or twice a day, but that was enough. I could just watch from the side now.

“Hmm?”

A child suddenly approached me. It was the child I met before with a pretty face, but it was hard to discern a gender from the short hair. The child grabbed my hand and completely healed it. *I see, this must’ve been the child the Hero Association barely managed to find.* The child with the authority of healing.

“Thanks.”

I stroked the child’s hair with a grin.

Guuuu—!

A deep growl rang out and I quickly turned. The djinn gasped without an arm and kneeled in front of Kim Suho.

He managed to win.

“Huuu...”

I felt all my strength leaving my body and sprawled onto the ground.

* * *

“Gueeek!”

Chae Nayun regained consciousness and began to vomit. She continued vomiting everything she ate and drank. She seemed frantic like she was coughing blood. I empathized with her at the horrific scene.

The reason Chae Nayun chose a bow was similar to mine. She acted tough on the outside, but was still a sheltered lady on the inside. It wouldn't be until much later that she overcame her delicate nature.

“...”

Kim Suho approached her to pat her back, but Chae Nayun angrily slapped his hand away. He reluctantly backed off.

“Leave her be. I'm sure her older brother will come to comfort her.”

I thoughtlessly said as I recalled what would happen. Her older brother would arrive first. Then her father would come to clean everything up, but it seemed Chae Nayun took my indifference as an insult.

“You, you... *Gueeek!*”

Her bloodshot eyes stabbed at me. *Did she want something or someone to blame?* It was understandable. Unlike Yoo Yeonha, Chae Nayun was a real lady. Anything but the highest quality food would upset her

stomach. A cockroach or a rat would ruin her mood for an entire day.

“...You.”

“I’ll head out first.”

Kim Suho tried to say something. For some reason, his face went stiff. I ignored it and turned around. I also needed to reflect. The djinn’s strength was far greater than what I had set. I couldn’t understand why.

* * *

A single sword cut through the air. The blade slashed out white magic power in every direction and obliterated every monster. A clean execution. Yun Seung-Ah retracted her sword and turned around. Her hair fluttered in the gentle breeze. Dozens of ordinary people who saw her were left speechless. Their eyes contained unshakable respect and admiration. Seeing the world’s most popular hero would become a great story for a long time.

“You can rest assured.”

“Vice-leader!”

A coarse voice interrupted Yun Seung-Ah. She was slightly surprised as a man quickly ran over and relayed surprising news.

“A djinn appeared at the National Weapons Museum!”

“What?”

“You should head over immedi... What? What?” He tilted his head and focused on the transceiver in his ear. “...Ah, yes.”

“What’s wrong?”

“Um... Apparently, the djinn has been taken care of. Three cadets from Cube happened to be at the museum.”

“Oh? That’s great. Who were they?”

“Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, and... *Ugh!*”

Before he could finish, a violent gale rose and momentarily blinded him. By the time he opened his eyes, the hero who decimated dozens of monsters disappeared.

Yun Seung-Ah quickly arrived at the museum as an ordinary young man walked out. He flinched before quickly bowing when he saw her.

“Hello.”

Does he know me? Well, there aren’t many who don’t. Something felt off, but Yun Seung-Ah greeted him without much thought.

“Ah, yes, did something happen inside?”

“Yes. A djinn appeared. He just died though.”

“I see... And you are?”

“I’m a cadet.”

The young man replied with a grin.

Yun Seung-Ah was taken aback. She finally understood the strange feeling. She acted humble, but Yun Seung-Ah was still one of the most popular heroes in Korea. Most cadets would freeze or act nervous in front of her at the very least.

“Oh, I see.”

“Then I’m off. The ones you’re looking for should be inside.”

The young man introduced himself as Kim Hajin and walked away smiling without a hint of nervousness. Yun Seung-Ah observed him for a moment.

“Who is he?”

Quite daring for a young cadet. But Kim Hajin...? I wasn't familiar with the name. How did he know who I came for? Yun Seung-Ah sauntered into the museum.

Inside was a mess. The tiled floors were destroyed and an ominous magic power still lingered as proof of the djinn.

“Nayun!”

An emotional voice rang out from the entrance. Yun Seung-Ah turned and saw a middle-aged man looking around with reddened eyes. It was Chae Nayun's father, Chae Shinhyuk.

“Chae Shinhyuk?”

“Vice-leader Yun Seung-Ah?”

“Ah... You must be busy lately. It's been a while. Should we go together?”

Yun Seung-Ah smiled and pointed further inside.

* * *

I managed to find a seat on a bench beside a curved telephone pole. A car stuck out of a nearby window. In this strange place, heroes busily ran around cleaning up while I inwardly panicked.

The story had changed. This shouldn't have happened if this world was the one within my novel. Of course, an oddity known as Kim Hajin existed, but his role was minimal. Everything had been fine until now. I most certainly hadn't done anything that could've affected... A thought flashed across my mind.

“Ah, that's right.”

I forgot. I wasn't the sole author of this story anymore. To be precise,

this world wasn't the novel I wrote. This world was the remake of my novel.

"There's a co-author..."

An unknown emptiness rose within me. *Why was I so relaxed this entire time? Live a comfortable life? No, that was impossible from the start.* Just like when someone stopped me from modifying invariable stats, that someone wouldn't let that happen.

Wiing— The laptop suddenly vibrated. I saw a message when I opened it.

[Flaw. There was no semblance of danger for others and the main character. If the story continued like that, readers would become bored thinking, "The main character will always win anyways."]

"This crazy motherfu..."

No danger? Of course, there was no danger. Readers didn't like extreme danger! This thoughtless amateur...

However, there was another line below.

[Makeshift solution. Even if things become a mess, antagonists have increased in power.]

Chapter 13

Change (3)

— At around 1 P.M. today, a group of monsters appeared in Seoul, leaving 500 wounded and 7 dead.

A news anchor reported today's incident. With a deep sigh, Chae Shinhyuk stroked the bedridden patient. Her pale complexion stabbed at her father's heart. Although she was an adult who would soon become a hero, Chae Nayun was still a little girl to Chae Shinhyuk.

— According to investigations, the monsters were led by an intermediate rank, grade 1 monster called beast inciter. This man-sized, badger-shaped monster has never before appeared in Korea. The association believes a third party brought it in and has set out a search.

“...*Mmm.*”

Chae Nayun opened her eyes as Chae Shinhyuk called for a doctor.

“You're awake. How are you feeling?”

“...Fine.”

Chae Nayun raised her feeble body. A doctor came running in to check her pulse, but Chae Nayun pushed him away with a smile.

“I'm fine, Dad.”

“Really?”

“Of course. I'm not injured. Didn't the doctor tell you?”

“I, I did.”

The doctor spoke up inadvertently. Chae Shinhyuk was a powerful figure with the country's economy in his palm. Being on this man's bad side would only make his life difficult.

“...She seems fine, so you can go.”

“Yes, sir.”

The doctor hurriedly left. Chae Nayun spoke as the door closed.

“...Dad.”

“*Hmm?*”

Chae Shinhyuk kindly responded.

“About brother.”

Her low-spirited voice called up the dark past he wanted to forget. Remembering his son always caused a sharp pain in his heart. With a gentle smile, Chae Shinhyuk held his daughter's hand.

“...What's wrong?”

“Can I go see him when I'm discharged? I'm on sick leave anyway, right?”

“Of course you can.”

Chae Shinhyuk softly agreed as Chae Nayun leaned her head against her father's shoulder and recalled what happened earlier in the day. The djinn from the museum, the black hand that strangled her, and a voice that mentioned her older brother. Chae Nayun's fury suddenly reignited.

“Dad, by the way...”

Chae Nayun's tone turned dark. Her voice carried a heavy emotion. Chae Shinhyuk worriedly asked.

“What’s up?”

“...No, it’s nothing.”

She began to loathe someone from the bottom of her heart, but she couldn’t tell her father how she felt. She thought back to how her stomach felt like burning from the djinn’s poison magic. She could clearly hear that guy even as she writhed in pain.

— *I’m sure her older brother will come to comfort her.*

He had mentioned her brother. Everyone in the world knew on the day the sky fell 4 years ago. She didn’t even have the opportunity to grieve then. After that day, she etched her brother’s name deep inside her heart and he became an untouchable subject. As a Cube cadet, that guy should’ve known about her brother’s condition. Even so, he mentioned her brother like that. Chae Nayun suppressed the fury in her heart and engraved his name in her head. *Kim Hajin. Kim Hajin.* From that day forward, Chae Nayun would no longer forget his name.

* * *

Seoul’s sky was dyed orange. The setting sun was no different than usual, but the scene below could only be described as pandemonium. Broken asphalt littered the road. A child cried under a telephone pole snapped in half. Ambulances drove back and forth, carrying wounded civilians or corpses. Although the dispatched heroes had taken care of the situation, the chaotic aftermath remained.

“Kim Suho, Kim Hajin. We heard the story.”

Kim Soohyuk waited for them at the portal connecting Seoul to Cube.

“We will ask for the details later. You can go back and rest for now. Agents will take care of the rest.”

For the record, agents were different from heroes. They graduated from the Military Agent Academy, but never attended Cube. They were non-combatants who had very useful abilities in day-to-day life. For example, I saw a man who fixed the broken asphalt with the wave of a hand.

“Um, instructor. Chae Nayun is...”

Kim Suho wanted to ask, to which Kim Soohyuk briefly replied.

“She’s taking a sick leave. She’s with her family right now.”

“Yes, understood.”

Kim Suho didn’t ask any more questions.

“Go back.”

Other cadets seemed to have helped with the emergency, as even Yoo Yeonha looked tired. One by one, we trudged through the portal. The odd sensation enveloping my body no longer interested me. After a short sigh, I found myself back at Cube. Without any words, the group returned to the dorms.

“...Hey.”

After the girls went ahead, Kim Suho stopped me on our way to Dorm 1.

“What.”

“Why did you say that?”

“Say what?”

“To Chae Nayun.”

What was he talking about all of a sudden? Kim Suho suddenly became more hostile when I furrowed my brows in confusion.

“Why did you bring up her older brother? In such a condescending way too.”

“What do you mean? I didn’t mean much by...”

Then I swallowed my words. This world had a co-author. My setting wasn't the only one anymore. Something had changed.

"What about her older brother?"

Kim Suho paused in his steps at my question. He gritted his teeth and glared at me.

"Every cadet knows, but you're going to pretend you don't?"

"What? No, I really don't—"

"Whatever. We can talk about it later. For now..."

Kim Suho quickly walked past me and entered the elevator. He had dark circles under his eyes. He needed to crash since he used that ability. My room was on the first floor, so I didn't need the elevator.

* * *

I turned on my smartwatch the moment I sat on the couch. An internet window popped up in the air. This world's main search engine was called Neighbor. The interface looked no different from what I was used to. First, I looked up Chae Nayun. What Kim Suho said and how Chae Nayun reacted were indeed strange.

[Chae Nayun] (Hero cadet) Family – Father: Chae Shinhyuk, Older Brother: Chae Jinyoon Education — Military Agent Academy Rank 4 — Currently attending Military Hero Academy (Cube)

"So what's the problem?"

Chae Jinyoon. It's not like he was dead or missing, so why were they so worked up? I tilted my head and looked up Chae Jinyoon. Then my jaws dropped.

"Huh?"

[Chae Shinhyuk's son, Chae Jinyoon, is in critical condition from a djinn

attack. The djinn suppression operation, Fireflake, succeeded... However, rookie hero Chae Jinyoon fell into a coma.]

I couldn't understand these headlines.

"What?"

Djinn suppression operation, Fireflake. I knew what it was. It was the first operation that made Chae Jinyoon famous. He would've been promoted to an intermediate rank hero after successfully leading this operation and rescuing three comrades. Chae Nayun, who was only 13, bragged about her older brother who suddenly became famous. No, that was how things should've been.

"What the hell is going on?"

I couldn't take it all in and took out my laptop. There must be a hint somewhere.

[Thanks to your high luck, the light bullet has dealt critical damage to the Dog of Lucius.] [With great luck, your understanding of the light attribute has increased!] [With extreme luck, you have absorbed part of the magic power from the light bullet! Your magic power has increased by 0.03 points.] [You have dealt critical damage to a more powerful enemy. The skill, Sharpshooter Reversal, has been added to your gift, Master Sharpshooter.] [You have gained 131 SP.]

I received many pleasant alerts, but turned them all off and looked for my settings book. No, I didn't need to look for it. This settings book was something I wrote. Since what happened today wasn't part of my setting, looking for it was useless. However, I received a message on my laptop.

[Chae Jinyoon – In the original story, he was Chae Nayun's reliable older brother and Kim Suho's trustworthy helper. However, it has been judged that the main character has too many helpers and this setting was changed.]

[Modified setting – Chae Jinyoon received a devil's brand and fell into a coma in his first hero mission 4 years ago. Currently, he is a devil's seed.]

[Note: Modified settings will appear as messages once the target, Kim Hajin, notices the change.]

I stared at the screen with a gaping mouth until saliva drooped. I barely managed to eke out a voice.

“Fucking...”

That was all I could say. If this message was true, this was an extremely serious problem. The devil’s seed was something that only appeared in the latter half of the novel. If it sprouted, the current Kim Suho was nowhere near strong enough. A master rank hero could stop it, but most had left the secular world. Even if high rank heroes came together, a few of them would surely die. That couldn’t happen because their strength would be needed later in the novel. Everything would go awry if this devil’s seed sprouted. Of course, things had already gone awry, but it was still manageable. *Then what could I do?* There was only one solution.

“He needs to die.”

Thankfully, the devil’s seed had an incubation period of 5-6 years. Four years had already passed. Chae Jinyoon had to be killed before the devil inside him woke up. The problem was who would kill him? I couldn’t hire an assassin. Even if I offered billions, no mercenary would be crazy enough to kill a chaebol. Not to mention, no one would believe me because the devil’s seed was undetectable. I would surely be labeled as crazy.

He needed to die and there was only one way.

“I have to kill him.”

I closed my eyes with a deep sigh. Although Chae Jinyoon was an idiot when it came to his sister, he was a reliable friend and helper to Kim Suho. In this world, he had become a character that needed to die. This shocked me, but I didn’t have the luxury of not doing anything. I stood up. My body felt heavy. My sense of familiarity towards this world transformed into greater anxiety. Perhaps thanks to my high perseverance, I headed to the training room instead of going to bed.

Chapter 14

For Growth (1)

The Tower of Hero was a Hero Association headquarters located in the heart of Seoul. On the 103rd floor, Yun Seung-Ah secretly read the reports on the recent incident and watched a video filmed by the museum's camera. Naturally, it contained the battle between Cube's cadets and a djinn. She hesitated because of the consequences, but an agent's leaked information compelled her.

— *A trace of light attribute mana was found at the scene.*

Light attribute mana. Not only was it strange, but also extremely valuable. Light attribute heroes played a vital role in suppressing djinns who possessed the darkness attribute.

The fact that the light attribute was detected naturally meant that 1 of the 3 cadets who defeated the djinn had the light attribute.

Yun Seung-Ah often emphasized the importance of attributes and wanted to know the owner of this rare mana.

“But this person...”

Indeed, a young man caught her attention. From head to toe, he looked ordinary in every way. He spoke with Kim Suho and stealthily retreated when the djinn appeared.

He hid and made some strange actions as the djinn pushed Kim Suho back. Then he unloaded his gun except for a single bullet and began to tap on thin air.

After about a minute, he loaded the bullet and headed to battle.

What happened next was even more mysterious.

His gun exploded as he fired and a brilliant white light dyed the surroundings. The camera froze for 3 seconds because of the light. Everything had already been settled by the time the screen returned.

“Hmm.”

Most people assumed the attack came from Kim Suho, but Yun Seung-Ah doubted it. The light came from that young man’s attack no matter how she thought about it. Even Kim Suho admitted in his report, “Kim Hajin covered me.”

“Kim Hajin. I remember now. He’s the cadet who chose a gun. So he had a reason.”

Thud!

The door suddenly burst open. Startled, Yun Seung-Ah turned and saw the association’s executive. Aileen had a small build at only 153cm, but Yun Seung-Ah knew a 10 meter giant resided inside. Aileen glared at her with terrifying eyes. Yun Seung-Ah’s face paled as she jumped in horror.

“Un, Unni?” [1]

“I knew you were here. Come out.”

“Ah, wait, Unni. I can explain. I can...”

“Shut up and follow me.”

Yun Seung-Ah didn’t want to follow even if it cost her life, but her body moved on its own. It was Aileen’s one-of-a-kind gift, Spirit Speech. Of course, the price she had to pay for that power was equally great. It had a high risk of magic power recoil and her body remained underdeveloped.

“Unni, I’m a hero too! Please spare me!”

Her ability was honestly too much of a cheat.

“Only the association’s heroes are authorized here.”

“I know! I’ll leave, so let me go!”

“You better hurry before I throw you out the window.”

In the end, Yun Seung-Ah was chased out of the recording room.

“You have 2 choices. One, be punished. Two, help me with something.”

“I’m sorry. Please, let me go this one time. I don’t want to do either.”

The video Yun Seung-Ah watched was left playing in the empty room.

“Save me—!”

* * *

[Tuesday’s combat training, labyrinth exploration.]

Team 5, which included Yoo Yeonha and I, were in the middle of combat training inside a cave created by Cube.

“Hoseung, Hazuki, can you see anything?”

Yoo Yeonha asked with a frown.

We were in an artificial dungeon modeled after a dark labyrinth. Our goal was to break through the undead monsters and reach the labyrinth’s center. Even heroes would find it difficult to light up this cave because of the mist created with dark mana.

“No, I can’t.”

“Me neither.”

Jin Hoseung and Hazuki answered.

“Tsk.”

Yoo Yeonha clicked her tongue and didn’t ask anymore. She still treated me as invisible even after I gave her a Coke.

I shook my head and spoke.

“I can see.”

“*Huh?*”

“Really?”

Jin Hoseung and Hazuki seemed surprised, but Yoo Yeonha ignored me.

“I said I can see.”

Her attitude annoyed me as I loudly spoke to the back of her head.

“I can see through the dark.”

Yoo Yeonha quickly around and glared. However, she faced Jin Hoseung instead of me.

“Stop fooling around.”

Insulted out of the blue, Jin Hoseung was taken aback while I casually retorted.

“I’m just saying. You’re going to fall if you go that way.”

“What nonsense— *Kyak!*”

Yoo Yeonha missed her footing and fell. I jumped to grab her arm as she clutched my shoulder with trembling hands.

“...*Cough.*”

She climbed back up using my body like a rope. Yoo Yeonha dryly coughed as though nothing happened.

“Looks like you aren’t lying. How can you see?”

“I have good eyes.”

It was thanks to my gift. The thousand-mile eyes weren’t hindered by distance or obstacles, which included lighting.

“Good. You should at least be able to do that much. So where should we go?”

“Just follow me.”

“Oh, how reliable.”

Jin Hoseung placed his hand on my shoulder as though we were friends. I brushed off his hand and walked forward.

Things proceeded smoothly from that point onwards.

I just had to walk, dodging what I could and notifying Yoo Yeonha of what I couldn’t. If the unavoidable enemy was a fluid-bodied spirit, Yoo Yeonha’s merciless whip took care of it. If it was an undead, Jin Hoseung and Hazuki took care of it.

My stamina had increased thanks to working out. Although not having to run played a big factor, this particular training was a breeze.

And now, I could see the result with my own eyes. We managed to reach the center of the labyrinth and saw only 8 people. In other words, we scored third place.

“Yoo Yeonha?”

“Hey, Jonghak.”

Shin Jonghak sat on a rock acting needlessly cool and called her. She

ran towards him with an adorable smile and treated him completely different from how she treated me.

“Over here.”

Kim Soohyuk called out our time without paying attention to Yoo Yeonha’s touching reunion.

“Team 5. 48 minutes 10 seconds. Third place.”

Jin Hoseung and Hazuki cheered.

“*Whoo*. It’s all thanks to you. You have great eyes!”

“You do, you do!”

For now, I sat on the ground with them. Yoo Yeonha had already left for Shin Jonghak and Kim Suho slept on the ground. It seemed he still suffered from using that ability at the museum.

I also relaxed.

Another team arrived after about 5 minutes. I wasn’t surprised who it was. Sharpshooters generally had good eyes.

“It’s Nayun.”

Yoo Yeonha approached her and pretended to be happy. Chae Nayun was covered in dust for some reason. It seemed she fell into a trap. She walked in my direction and paused. Her cold eyes pierced at me.

“Nayun?”

She completely ignored Yoo Yeonha and marched towards me.

“What was your time?”

I bluntly replied to the simple question.

“48 minutes.”

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth. Sharpshooters often acted as the team’s pathfinder. She rightfully believed that I guided my team.

“Looks like even you have something you’re good for.”

She was clearly provoking me. I hesitated to reply. *Should I strike back?* I did have a good reason.

The novel’s antagonists had become much stronger, so it was necessary for our side... although Chae Nayun might not be on my side... Anyways, the lead characters also needed to grow stronger.

To do that, Chae Nayun needed to quickly abandon the bow. In this world, her potential was second only to Kim Suho, but it would be wasted with a bow.

“I guess you’re right.”

I didn’t find the need to respond to her provocation. Between negative and positive motivation, the former influenced her more according to my setting. However, the agent of motivation was also important. A weakling like me provoking her wouldn’t have much impact. Now wasn’t the time yet. I felt confident I would surpass her soon in archery. I just had to wait.

“*Hmph.*”

Chae Nayun seemed bored by my passiveness and strode off with a snort. I shook my head. Then I also made eye contact with Yoo Yeonha and her eyes carried a slight hint of interest that didn’t exist before.

“*Hmph.*”

However, she also walked away with the same disdainful snort.

1. Unni means older sister and is used by a female to respectfully address another older female. 🙌

Chapter 15

For Growth (2)

Today's combat training ended, but I still had to attend the academic club in exhaustion. After that, I also had my daily workout. The agony of this routine made me depressed. I would've invested more points into perseverance if I knew this would happen.

I headed to the academic club and spotted Yoo Yeonha ahead of me. Perhaps this was her usual route or we just had similar preferences.

Yoo Yeonha didn't see me and continued walking. She took out a hand mirror and lightly checked her appearance in front of the clubroom. Then we suddenly made eye contact.

"What a coincidence, right?"

"..."

Ignoring me, Yoo Yeonha walked in as I followed. She chose a sunny seat while I took a corner seat under the shade. Yun Hyuk, the club president, stood at the podium with his glasses while organizing the day's lecture notes.

Not long afterward, 43 first years arrived along with 20 upperclassmen. At 7 on the dot, Yun Hyuk began the first lecture.

"Good evening, everyone. The weather's starting to get..."

Any useless talk went through one ear and left the other.

"Today, we will discuss the vital points of monsters. As I'm sure you all know, finding vital points is essential to defeating monsters. Senior Seo Youngji is an excellent example of this skill. She reached the top 2000 in hero rankings by reaching the pinnacle of this ability."

A hologram of Seo Youngji's stats projected on the screen. A hero's stats could be summarized into strength, dexterity, endurance, constitution, and magic power. Seo Youngji's stats were all under intermediate rank except for dexterity, which was at master rank. For the record, only 300 heroes in the world had attained master rank in dexterity.

"Senior Seo Youngji even hunted a high rank monster by herself."

As he said, Seo Youngji was a well-known character in this world. Although she had an introverted personality, I was sure we would meet since she played an important role.

"But don't think a monster's vital points are the same as a human's. Our eyes, heart, and head serve as vital points, but that isn't always the case for monsters."

The higher a monster's rank, the more obscure its vital points.

"Now, let's take a look at an example."

A hologram of a monster appeared on the screen. It looked similar to a mountain tiger, but its giant body, bloodshot eyes, and ferocious teeth indicated it wasn't a normal tiger.

"This monster is called the mountain tyrant. It can be classified anywhere from intermediate to high rank. It has been known for 50 years as one of the first monsters to appear during Outcall, but its vital point still hasn't been discovered."

With that, Yun Hyuk paused and smiled.

"At least, that's how it is publicly. In reality, an individual or guild wouldn't reveal it even if they knew. They likely wouldn't be allowed to either."

He was right. Information was an industry in this world. Some large corporations solely focused on researching monsters. Private detectives and agencies also gathered and sold this information on a smaller scale. All of them would heavily penalize leaking such information.

Of course, publicly releasing this information would greatly benefit humanity, but the power of capitalism prevailed.

“Now, where do you think is the mountain tyrant’s vital point?”

Yun Hyuk gave Yoo Yeonha a meaningful look. She likely had no clue. I created the setting, but never used it since the main character never had a chance to hunt tigers.

“...”

As I thought, she didn’t know. She fiddled with her hair and looked around, ashamed of not knowing.

“Would anyone like to guess?”

Of course, I knew the answer. It was a good opportunity to stand out, but I refrained. Yun Hyuk acted like he knew with a pretentious face, which irritated me. I wanted to see what he was scheming.

“I...”

A girl suddenly raised her hand. I was surprised. *Who the heck was that?*

“Is it his nose?”

She guessed with a flushed face. She was just an extra who fell for Yun Hyuk.

* * *

The academic club continued for 2 hours. Unexpectedly, there was a lot to learn like the vital points of certain monsters, compatibility between attributes, and the difference between magic and spells. I learned the details of things I had lazily explained in my novel, all the while watching cute female cadets.

“We have an after-party at a nearby restaurant! It’ll be great if you can

come!”

Yun Hyuk announced as the club ended. Yoo Yeonha seemed interested for some reason. I felt a bit worried and followed her. I knew she wasn’t the type to participate in things like this.

“Hey, you going?”

I casually approached her and asked. She didn’t respond. Maybe because of how I said it, so I asked again.

“Are you going?”

She continued to ignore me. I asked even more politely this time.

“Are you also going to the after-party, Yeonha?”

Only then did she respond with a faint nod.

“Why? Aren’t you busy?”

“*Tsk.*” *This fool.* That was what her eyes were saying.

“Why are you going?”

I wanted to know.

“Aren’t you curious about the mountain tyrant’s vital point?”

“*Huh?*”

Oh, I get it now.

Public information on the mountain tyrant was scarce, to say the least. Not only did its strength vary greatly from individual to individual, but it also lived in an extremely remote location. Although the mountain tyrant’s leather sold for a hefty price, it was hard to plan a hunt without knowing for sure how many people to bring.

Yoo Yeonha was the successor of a major guild, so Yun Hyuk acted like he knew to approach her. I never wrote how Yun Hyuk managed to coax Yoo Yeonha because my novel wasn't from her point of view. It seemed her guild was the key to luring her. Yoo Yeonha's clan had risen to power during Outcall 50 years ago thanks to the massive success of her family's first head. Her family was still a successful hero clan, but Yoo Yeonha had a bit of an inferiority complex. She felt her family was lacking compared to a true noble clan. This was why she favored Shin Jonghak and also overly obsessed about decorum.

"The mountain tyrant's vital point?"

Was this a good chance to invest? I could gain a lot from a cordial relationship with Yoo Yeonha. She would become the future ruler of Seoul with her outstanding proficiency in business.

"I'm not curious. I already know."

"What?"

Yoo Yeonha asked again as she furrowed her brows. She looked thoroughly annoyed on top of disbelief. I made my decision. Using this information, which would eventually become public, I would draw Yoo Yeonha's interest and instill a sense of mystery into her. It was an acceptable trade considering the SP and additional benefits I would gain. I whispered the information to her in a serious tone.

"The mountain tyrant's vital point is on the heel of its hind leg."

"What nonsense are you..."

"There's a blue mark on the heel of its hind leg, but its DNA determines whether it's the right or left hind leg. That's probably why its vital point hasn't been discovered yet."

Inspired by the story of Achilles' Heel, I was the one who created the mountain tyrant's setting. It was unlikely this setting had changed as tiny details seemed untouched.

"The mountain tyrant's body is tough, but the blue mark on its heel is the only place that's soft. That's the mountain tyrant's vital point. It

should be easy to rob its 2 hind legs if you strategize around this.”

The value of this information had to be tens of millions, but it likely wouldn’t be over 100 considering my current credibility.

“Nuthead.”

As expected, Yoo Yeonha looked at me disdainfully like an insect. She walked away as I followed.

“It’s true. Believe me.”

“Would you believe me if our positions were switched?”

“...”

Of course, I wouldn’t believe her either.

“It’s your choice whether to believe me or not.”

I hoped she would.

“Hey!”

Yun Hyuk suddenly cut in between us. He slightly shoved me back.

“Don’t you think you’re being too pushy?”

I had to look up to this cheesy son of a bitch’s height, so I turned to Yoo Yeonha.

“Am I bothering you?”

“Yes.”

She coldly replied.

“*Heh.*”

Yun Hyuk's mocking laughter angered me.

"By the way, are you also coming to the after-party?"

He spoke condescendingly. I shook my head.

"I'm not."

"Then don't bother other people too much. *Um*, Yeonha?"

However, Yoo Yeonha had already walked away.

"*Heh.*"

I returned what I received. Yun Hyuk chased after her with a distorted face. I simply watched them leave.

I gave Yoo Yeonha valuable information, but I didn't know whether she would use it or not. If she did, I would gain a profitable ally. If not... nothing would happen.

I had nothing to lose.

* * *

On a dark winter night, Yoo Yeonha deeply contemplated as she tapped her pen on the desk.

Tomorrow, Essence of the Strait's elite team would hunt a mountain tyrant. They had secretly purchased information about a lone mountain tyrant in Kumgang Mountain and already confirmed its size with a scout.

It was estimated to be a high-intermediate rank, grade 1. The strength of its pelt reached promentium, a tough ore found after Outcall. As such, the guild would gain an astronomical income if they succeeded.

Yoo Yeonha was worried about one thing. It wasn't the safety of the elite hunting team, but the current vice-leader of Essence of the Strait

who held too much power. She felt that threatened her seat as the guild's successor. She had to start contributing to inherit the guild without any issues.

Yoo Yeonha turned on her smartwatch and made a phone call. Soon, the receiver picked up and a hologram appeared.

“Um, Uncle?”

— Yes, Young Lady.

Kim Sangho appeared on the screen. He was a veteran in his forties, her father's trusted right hand. Yoo Yeonha treated him like her real uncle ever since she was a child.

— What's wrong?

She made the call, but was too embarrassed to say anything.

A blue mark on its heel? You can disable both of its hind legs by attacking it? Just what was I doing, fooled by that nuthead's nonsense?

“Um, I'm saying this just in case...”

The possibility wasn't zero and it wouldn't hurt to try. It came from that nutjob, but he had to have a reason for being so confident. Yoo Yeonha justified it to herself and caught her breath.

— Yes, Young Lady?

“Um, I know it sounds crazy, but...”

She closed her eyes and clenched her fists.

“If things are looking rough, try looking at the heels of its hind legs.”

— Hind legs' heels?

Kim Sangho furrowed his brows. Yoo Yeonha knew what that meant,

but if she could be of use and this information was real...

“Yes, its hind legs’...heels. Either on its left or right heel, there should be... Well, I’m not sure if it’s true, but...”

Yoo Yeonha continued while risking embarrassment.

“If there is a blue mark there, try aiming for that place.”

Chapter 16

For Growth (3)

I returned from working out in the middle of the night and collapsed on my bed. I found it difficult to fall asleep ever since I came into this world. My body felt tired, but countless random thoughts filled my head.

How could I survive? What should I do? Should I just secretly support the lead characters? Or should I become a villain and fight evil from the inside like the noir movie I just saw?

I grew curious about my current stats and checked them on my laptop.

▷Stats: Variable stats [Strength 1.735] [Stamina 1.845] [Speed 2.15] [Perception 2.605] [Vitality 1.65] [Magic power 1.3]

All my stats, except for magic power, had surpassed an average adult male at 1.5. My perception was already beyond an ordinary person. Still, I was far from ready. I needed money and it wouldn't be long before Packhorse Master went public. A thought flashed in my head. Indeed, going to the field was the most honest way of making money. I put it off because of my lacking stats, but I could make up for that by using the laptop to strengthen my weapon. Like how Kim Suho would later sever a mountain with a holy sword... It seemed like the quickest way to become stronger, but also required the most SP.

Currently, I only had the training gun provided by Cube and 380 SP from destroying my potential friendship with Chae Nayun. The training gun would likely only equal a famous handgun like the Desert Eagle if I invested all my SP into strengthening it. I should invest more efficiently into weapons with a better base performance.

“Hmm...”

I suddenly grew curious about the Desert Eagle since it was the only

firearm I included in my setting.

Without getting up from bed, I turned on my smartwatch and entered a weapons dealer website called Essential Armory. It was operated by Essence of the Strait. Essential Armory was the most popular website for factory-manufactured weapons since weapons above the artifact grade were only sold in auctions.

[Welcome to Essential Armory.]

As expected, the most popular weapons dealer had a well-designed website. The homepage featured new items and the top bar included multiple categories such as sword, spear, bow, and rapier. They also provided a wide selection of guns for regular mercenary customers.

I clicked on the *[category – gun]*. It displayed several types such as handguns, assault rifles, and sniper rifles. For now, a handgun suited me best since it didn't hinder my movements. The Desert Eagle seemed quite popular.

Desert Eagle — Feel the transcendental power! Built-in magic amplification that boosts the power of magic bullets! The Desert Eagle is only recommended for the most proficient sharpshooters because of its huge recoil. Weight: 3.5948kg (1.2938kg with weight reduction magic add-on) Length: 333mm (Identification and contract required for purchase.)

Its picture looked much more beautiful than the original design. The barrel was an elegant platinum with a majestic eagle inscribed on the grip. This weapon looked like a work of art and boasted a heavy weight with its bulky size. I could tell it was powerful from just a glance. There was only one problem.

“It's too expensive.”

The base price was 20 million won and the price doubled when I clicked on *full attachments*. I needed the weapon to make money, so buying it for that much almost seemed counterproductive.

“*Sigh.*”

I tried to think of a solution, but I felt tired and went to bed. I turned

off the smartwatch and postponed it for tomorrow.

It was Wednesday when I woke up. A bright light shone through the curtain. I always found it unpleasant since it signaled the start of another exhausting day.

“*Whew.*”

I brushed off such negativity every morning. After trudging to the bathroom and washing up, I put on my uniform and left. This routine only took 10 minutes.

Once outside, I saw other cadets going to school. They busily laughed and chatted early in the morning. I realized why I felt so lethargic watching them enjoy their school life.

I didn’t have any friends in this world. I didn’t even have someone to talk to. What kept school from being boring was friends, but I was no longer in my world.

Should I try to look for a girlfriend? No, I was too lazy. My situation could worsen if I spent too much emotion on needless human relationships. *Yep, I should just be content with dying alone.*

I quickened my pace to the classroom.

* * *

“As you know, a guild’s database contains various useful information, but you must reach a certain rank to access it.”

I thought about my weapon as I half-heartedly listened to an old professor’s lecture. The figure of a majestic eagle shimmered in my mind. *How could I make enough money to buy it?* The first thing I thought of was selling information. I had designed most of the monsters myself, so I roughly knew their vital points and attributes. Since each guild had different data, if I sold them the information they didn’t have... No, this wasn’t the best idea. It took 5 years for an information broker to build up their reputation. It didn’t seem like a good idea to disrupt the world’s balance just to make money.

“Now, let’s continue after a little break.”

Break time rolled around before I noticed. I turned on my smartwatch to enter Essential Armory, but I received an unexpected message.

[Excuse me.]

I was familiar with the sender, *Rank 7 Yoo Yeonha*. Cadets’ smartwatches all connected to Cube’s intranet, so we could message each other without contact addresses. This was the first time I used this feature. Yoo Yeonha sat in the front row. After glancing at the back of her head, I replied.

[What?]

[What are you?]

What nonsense was this?

[What do you mean?]

She didn’t reply for a while. I wondered where this was coming from. Then I remembered what I told her before. I peeked at the time. It was 1 P.M. I gave her the information yesterday and she already confirmed it?

[Ah, is it about that? I’m surprised you believed me.]

[What?]

[So? Wasn’t I right?]

Honestly, I was also dying to know whether the mountain tyrant’s setting had remained unchanged. I would have a tough time ahead if this unknown co-author changed everything.

[Yes.]

“Whew.”

Thankfully, it seemed that wasn't the case. I breathed a sigh of relief.

[How did you know?]

[You think I'd tell you?]

Yoo Yeonha's shoulder twitched. She briefly replied.

[No.]

A smirk emerged on my face. I recalled the Desert Eagle when I was about to end the conversation. The elegant, dignified bird of prey. I gave her the information for times like these. Coincidentally, Yoo Yeonha's guild owned Essential Armory.

[Anyways, I'd like to ask for a favor if you benefited from the information.]

Yoo Yeonha suddenly turned around. She knew exactly where I sat as though she kept an eye on me. She still looked sharply at me, but her gaze held less weight now.

How should I put it? Right, she looked like a big bag of money.

Chapter 17

For Growth (4)

[What do you want?]

I knew Yoo Yeonha would agree because she couldn't stand one-sided favors.

Now, I wondered what I should ask for. Money didn't seem right as Yoo Yeonha was still a minor. She likely couldn't give out tens of millions of won.

[It's simple. I need a weapon.]

After sending her the message above, I also sent her the link to Essential Armory's Desert Eagle. Yoo Yeonha checked it and looked back at me. She didn't seem to have any issues with it.

[I think it's pretty cheap.]

[...I understand.]

Great, she agreed.

[Is it possible to get it by tomorrow?]

The quicker it was, the more money I would make. Even if tomorrow was too difficult, I hoped to receive it by the end of the week.

[Yes, I'll take care of it.]

Surprisingly, she replied without hesitation even though her parents should still be in charge. Her decisiveness impressed me.

“Get back to your seats.”

The break ended at just the right time as the old professor resumed class.

* * *

Wednesday’s theory class ended and anti-personnel training began at 3 P.M.

Each cadet met with their sparring partners at the fairly large training field. Meanwhile, I pitifully looked for the instructor.

“Hey.”

A voice pierced my ears from behind. It seemed to be directed at me, so I turned and instantly froze at Chae Nayun’s terrifying glare.

“Spar with me.”

Her hostile tone bordered on killing intent. *Gulp*. I swallowed a mouthful. As the saying goes, *A word causes a debt worth a thousand gold taels*. I had made a dangerous enemy out of her with a single sentence. To live a peaceful life, I should mend our relationship even at the cost of kneeling and begging.

I fell in thought as I looked at her. *Would she forgive me just because I apologized?* Seeing me silent, Chae Nayun pointed at my gun.

“Your gun. Take it out.”

The first training gun broke when I fought the djinn. This was a new one. I looked down at my holster, then back at Chae Nayun.

“I don’t want to.”

“You scared?”

Those 2 words carried a great echo, causing all eyes on the training

field to fall on us.

“Mmm...”

How should I act in front of Chae Nayun? Without a doubt, every cadet knew about her brother's incident. The original Kim Chundong would've known too, so it might seem like an even greater insult if I apologized.

“No.”

It might be better to remain as a bad guy to her. The reason I worked so hard without resting was to kill her older brother within a certain amount of time.

My actions would only leave a cruel sense of betrayal even if I mended our relationship and became friends.

“I'm afraid you might get hurt. This thing uses real bullets, you see.”

Immediately, the atmosphere grew heavy. Chae Nayun clenched her bow with so much force I could see the veins popping out of her hand.

“I don't think your bullets will even hurt.”

Chae Nayun forcefully suppressed her anger and sneered. I simply responded.

“You won't get hurt. You'll die.”

“Ha, say that again, punk.”

Chae Nayun approached me up close. She looked like she would explode at any moment. Technically, she was 165cm and I was 174cm, but she seemed much bigger for some reason.

“Really, who do you think you are?”

The atmosphere turned for the worse as more spectators gathered. At

that moment...

“Chae Nayun, get back.”

The instructor stepped in as I sighed in relief. Thankfully, she came before it was too late. Chae Nayun turned towards the instructor.

“Why should I?”

“No one can spar with cadet Kim Hajin before he gets a gun for sparring.”

“But I don’t mind.”

“I mind.”

“Why —”

“Failure to heed an instructor’s order will be met with disciplinary action.”

“...”

An instructor’s words were absolute. Chae Nayun clenched her teeth with a bitter expression and glared at me one last time before leaving. The spectators dispersed and went back to training. Everything returned to normal.

“Take your gun out.”

The instructor spoke as she wrapped her hands in bandages. Her name... was it Park Hyun-Ah?

“Does a gun for sparring even exist?”

I asked the instructor.

“How the hell would I know?”

Crack, crack. The instructor cracked her neck and knuckles.

“Now, come.”

With a smile, she gestured with a finger.

This person... Did she enjoy this?

* * *

Thursday was the hunting club’s orientation, but I decided to skip it since it wasn’t required. Partly to avoid Chae Nayun, but mainly because I wanted to test out the new weapon I would be receiving.

“Ah, I can’t wait.”

I waited for the item at Angel Box, a coffee shop near Seoul. For the record, cadets could use portals 5-6 times a month as long as they filled out a form.

The time passed from 5:29:55... 5:29:56... 5:30:00. The shop’s door opened at exactly the appointed time. A man in a black suit and sunglasses walked in with a suitcase. His eyes met mine after looking around. I happily waved. His expression didn’t change as he strode up to me with his long legs.

“Kim Hajin?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

I felt like I knew this man. Only one person popped up when I thought of Yoo Yeonha’s attendant. *Jin Sechan*. The man presumed to be Jin Sechan placed the suitcase on the table without sitting down.

“Here’s the item. Please take a look.”

“Are you in a hurry? You can sit.”

I pointed at the chair in front of me. I wanted to test something before

I received it.

“*Hmm.*”

He sat down without complaint. I took out the laptop from my bag. Yesterday, I made some changes after realizing I could use the laptop to modify itself.

“Are you doing something?”

“What do you mean?”

The man tilted his head.

“Why are you tapping in the air?”

“You can’t see this?”

I lifted my laptop.

“...”

He looked at me as if I was crazy. *I see.* I had a suspicion, but it seemed I was correct. Only I could see this laptop.

“*Haha*, I’m kidding.”

That was fine with me. I turned on the laptop with the additional setting I recently added.

*[When Kim Hajin is within 50 meters of a target with an altered setting, the content and summary of the change(s) will be sent to Kim Hajin’s laptop. *Does not work on targets above a certain level of importance.]*

I added this setting because I thought it would be more efficient if I was told about a change through an objective medium than having to notice it and being told by the co-author. Either the co-author didn’t care or encouraged it, but I only spent 200 SP.

[A change in the setting has been detected.]

An alert popped up on the laptop.

[Jin Sechan – His feelings for Yoo Yeonha have deepened.]

I didn't mind this change.

"Anyways, I'll take a look now."

I opened the suitcase. *Click. Click.* It opened with a pleasant sound and a brilliant light shone from inside.

"Wow."

A platinum handgun and magazine sat on top of fancy red velvet. It looked even more beautiful than the pictures.

"As promised, it's the Desert Eagle with full attachments and a 60 round magazine of pinnacle grade magic bullets."

"Thank you. You may leave now."

I no longer cared about Jin Sechan. I checked my new weapon's setting with the laptop.

[Desert Eagle] [High rank] [Metal attribute] A masterpiece. Contains several added effects. [Attack Power Amplification – 1/10] [Low rank Weight Reduction Magic] [Intermediate rank Recoil Control Magic]

[Magic Bullet] [Pinnacle grade] [Null attribute].44 Macon steel mana bullet with condensed high purity mana. [Attack Power – 4/10]

I felt much better after reading the descriptions. I could easily kill a low-intermediate rank monster without even modifying the gun or bullets. I should be able to obtain aether from the Suwon Devil's Nest.

"Then I'll be going."

“Ah, yes. Take care.”

After sending Jin Sechan off, I checked my SP and had 250 left. *Now, how should I spend this?*

* * *

Jin Sechan contacted Yoo Yeonha after leaving. She asked as soon as she picked up the call.

— Did you deliver the item?

“Yes.”

— Was there anything special about him?

“That’s...”

There wasn’t anything special, but he did find something strange. No matter how much he thought about it, the young man’s demeanor wasn’t that of a 17 year old. Not to mention, it almost felt like he knew Jin Sechan.

— Yes?

“...No. There wasn’t anything in particular.”

He couldn’t conclude anything with just a short exchange. After all, the young man was a Cube cadet. Even Yoo Yeonha carried an air of dignity and elegance that didn’t suit her age.

— Yes, I understand. Thank you for your work, Sechan.

“My pleasure.”

With that, the call ended. He wanted to talk a little more, but remained content.

Chapter 18

Connections (1)

“170,000 won?”

My tone went up at the unexpected price. The portal worker responded unfazed.

“Yes. It’s 170,000 won from Seoul to Gangwondo Wonju.”

Unlike from Cube to Seoul, traveling from Seoul to Gangwondo required payment. I brought my card, but 170,000 won wasn’t a small amount when I was trying to save money.

“*Mmm...*”

“Customer, others are waiting in line.”

The female portal worker coldly warned. Indeed, I could see a line behind me. They all carried a weapon, so it seemed we shared the same objective.

“*Um...* Can something be done with this?”

I showed her my Cube cadet card before I reluctantly paid. Kim Soohyuk said something about cadets having benefits, but I never made such a setting so I wasn’t sure about the specifics.

“*Huuu...*”

The portal worker sighed as though she was annoyed and accepted the card. Her eyes suddenly widened and her voice brightened up.

“*Ah*, you’re a Cube cadet. Cadets are allowed 6 free passes per month.”

“Oh really? That’s great.”

“Would you like to use one?”

“Yes.”

The portal worker stamped a seal on my wrist. Her complete change in attitude genuinely surprised me. Being a hero really was one of the best jobs in this world.

“Thank you.”

“Yes, have a safe trip, cadet Kim Hajin.”

She even memorized my name.

I walked into the portal with a bitter smile.

* * *

I could summarize Gangwondo Wonju with a single sentence.

“So many foreigners.”

Wonju was a global city according to my settings. Its buildings were limited in height due to monsters, but sturdy modern structures filled the city. Foreigners of every skin color walked around with weapons and their agents busily tapped on tablets. Agents calculated the prices of the day’s haul. It was an unusual scene compared to Seoul and Busan.

“We took down a good amount today. How much do I get?”

I couldn’t help but laugh hearing clumsy Korean. Korean had become one of this world’s preeminent languages alongside English. Naturally, this reflected Korea’s authority in the international community. Although Korea was now prosperous, it remained quite close to hell.

Korea endlessly produced towers and dungeons that churned out

monsters. Textbooks contained several explanations, both scientific and religious, but neither were close to the real reason.

The country would've long been destroyed had it not been for heroes who turned monsters into marketable resources. In addition, 5 of the Nine Stars (nine of the strongest heroes) were Korean. One of them even served as Korea's 20th President. As a result, Korea thrived and became a powerhouse.

"You killed 3 hobgoblins, so it should be about 600,000 won after fees and taxes."

Foreigners paid more taxes under the law, but they still flocked to Korea because hunting here was safer. If in danger, one could simply send out a distress call and heroes or agents would arrive in less than 3 minutes. Korea was the only country with such a system.

"Take this. You'll feel better afterward. It's a troll blood potion."

"Ah, thank you."

I walked through the streets of the world I created. The city was full of interesting things: blacksmiths, potion shops, bars, etc. Shops that looked like they belonged in the Middle Ages operated in modern buildings. It felt like a game world. The sentence I wrote without much thought, *Wonju is a famous tourist city*, transformed into a vibrant scene.

Before I noticed, I found myself among a crowd at the field's entrance. I would have to go to Hamgyong Province if I wanted to hunt in peace, but it was currently too dangerous for me.

"E-Excuse me?"

A tall, average man with slouched shoulders and circular glasses struck up a conversation when I was about to enter. I didn't know him, but he was most likely an agent.

"Yes?"

“Are you perhaps here to hunt monsters?”

“Are you an agent?”

“Ah, yes. Here’s my business card.”

I took the card for now. I didn’t know who he was, but an agent was necessary to sell monster parts. I was shocked when I read his name and company.

[SH Agency Head Manager, Park Soohyuk]

“Mr. Park Soohyuk?”

“Ah, yes. Nice to meet you.”

The man smiled as he tidied up his shabby clothes. *Park Soohyuk*. I knew who he was. Indeed, he looked similar to how I described him. Park Soohyuk was the most famous agent in the novel because SH Agency would later become Korea’s greatest agency.

“*Haha*, you might not have heard of me. I started this work not too long ago.”

For now, he didn’t seem to be doing too well. I smiled. Connections were one of the most important aspects in life. A person’s future was often the result of ill or good relationships. Many successful individuals in the future were still weak. The best way to associate with a famous person was to become friends before they became famous.

“SH Agency, I don’t think I’ve heard of it before.”

What bothered me was that this connection was supposed to be Kim Suho’s, but it should be fine since agents had multiple clients.

“It feels like a trustworthy name.”

“*Ha, haha*, thank you.”

“Ah, by the way...”

I naturally took out my laptop and checked for any changes. Thankfully, none showed up, which meant his extraordinary abilities hadn't changed.

“My main weapon is a gun. Is that okay?”

“I don't see why that would be a problem. Gun or sword, mercenary or hunter, it doesn't matter to me! New customers are always welcome!”

Park Soohyuk put his hand out with a bright smile.

* * *

I loaded 8 bullets into my gun. Each pinnacle grade magic bullet cost about 150,000 won. Since each low rank monster went for 300-400,000 won, I couldn't spend more than 1 bullet per monster considering the agent fee I would also have to pay.

With that in mind, I walked into the field.

Park Soohyuk followed. It seemed he was desperate considering agents without vehicles usually waited outside the field.

“Ah, there's one there.”

We finally encountered a monster after about 30 minutes of wandering.

It was a low rank, grade 9 monster called iron hog with a large body and protruding teeth. The iron in its name wasn't because it was made of iron, but because its skin was tougher than iron.

“I think we should ignore that one.”

Park Soohyuk held me back as I approached it.

“Why?”

I asked.

“Yes?”

Park Soohyuk’s eyes seemed to say, *Do I need to explain?*

“You can’t kill an iron hog with a gun. Even piercing its outer skin will be difficult.”

“But it’s expensive.”

“Yes?”

The price of a monster faithfully followed the law of a free market economy. Monsters like the undead gave zero benefits and had no value. Consequently, monsters like these were subsidized by the government.

“Even if it’s expensive, attacking it won’t do any good...”

“You’ll just have to wait and see.”

I took out my Desert Eagle and aimed forward. The barrel shone under the blazing sun.

“W-W-Wait just one min—”

Park Soohyuk made a fuss, but I didn’t hesitate to pull the trigger. The bullet tore through the iron hog’s tough skin and pierced its brain. It helplessly collapsed before it could even notice anything.

“Perfect.”

Both the weapon’s power and my skill felt satisfactory. I struck the iron hog’s vital point with pinpoint accuracy.

“Wow.”

Park Soohyuk exclaimed in awe.

The setting I added to my Desert Eagle was quite simple and effective.

[The Desert Eagle's attack power will be amplified when a monster is one-shot killed.] — Attack power will increase by 1% per kill starting from low-intermediate rank. — Repeated kills of the same ranked monsters will slightly decrease the boost in attack power.

I added a comparatively good effect for the SP spent by setting a restriction that required effort.

“So? Clean, isn’t it?”

Once again, I felt certain about my choice of weapon. Sniping from afar without getting close was the perfect low risk hunting method.

“Uh... That’s a great gun! Your sharpshooting is amazing too.”

“Haha, I’m flattered.”

I pointed to the iron hog’s corpse.

“So how much will this go for? It looks pretty expensive.”

“Well, iron hogs are already pricey and since this corpse is in such good condition, it should be at least 600... no, 800,000 won even after the fees.”

“Wow.”

“Hold on. Let me store the corpse first.”

Park Soohyuk took out a pouch from his bag. It should be a magical pouch with space expansion magic. I grabbed the hog’s front leg as he struggled to drag the hog into the pouch.

“I’ll help out.”

“Ah, thank you.”

“This is really heavy.”

My strength stat wasn’t that high either.

“Uuk, uk, god.”

“Wow, it is heavy.”

“Aren’t you an agent? Shouldn’t you have known beforehand?”

“You’re right.”

“I’ll hold its hind legs. You hold the front. Wait, don’t we have to carry the pouch around afterward?”

“Ah, don’t worry. Anything inside the pouch will have its weight reduced by half.”

“Only half?”

I couldn’t help but sigh. Indeed, Kim Suho only met Park Soohyuk in his third year. Park Soohyuk was in a bad state even then, so now... Well, I could only be thankful he hadn’t starved to death.

“Ugh.”

“Uuu.”

“Come on, put more strength into it.”

“Sorry, I didn’t have lunch...”

We finally stuffed the hog in the pouch after an hour of groaning.

“Whew...”

I collapsed to the ground. My strength and stamina stat should have increased from that.

“It’s already 7.”

Before I noticed, the sun had set and darkness descended on the field. A fearsome cold enveloped my body. From the looks of it, today’s hunt would end with just 1 kill. Although I regretted the huge waste of time, I wasn’t too sad since I established a valuable connection.

“So how do we bring this back?”

“Oh, don’t worry. We can just call 119 if it looks like we really can’t handle it. We just need to reimburse them for the trip.” [1]

“That’s genius.”

We laughed together. Suddenly...

“Hold on.”

Rustle. A faint sound rang out from a tree.

“*Shhh.*”

I took out my gun with an index finger over my mouth. Then I fired in the direction of the sound.

Thud.

No scream. Only the sound of a beefy body crashing down.

“*Huh?* What happened?”

“It’s a black pelican.”

“Yes?”

Park Soohyuk might not be able to, but I could see it clearly. My eyes could see a thousand miles away.

“Black pelican?”

“Yep. Fantastic, we should take this one back too.”

1. 119 is Korea’s emergency contact number. 📞

Chapter 19

Connections (2)

I opened my eyes in bed on Friday and my entire body ached.

The iron hog and black pelican I hunted yesterday were too heavy. Thankfully, I made it back before curfew. Otherwise, I would've faced disciplinary punishment on top of minus points.

“Argh.”

Fortunately, no classes required my body today. With some effort, I got up and checked my smartwatch. I received 3 new messages.

[810,130 won has been deposited.] [450,270 won has been deposited.] [Here is the payment for yesterday's monsters. I hope to work with you again. SH Agency Head Manager, Park Soohyuk.]

The payment came faster than expected. If I remembered correctly, exclusive contracts had monthly payments. Mine must've been quick as a one-time deal, but he still took care of it overnight. As expected of Park Soohyuk.

Thanks to him, I could now open up a brokerage account and buy Packhorse Master guild stocks. One million won sounded like a good start. I went to shower with various thoughts.

Then I dried myself, put on my uniform, and headed to class after washing away my drowsiness.

* * *

Friday's first class was phenomenon realm analysis. From what I heard, today was the most difficult theory class because we didn't have physical training. Of course, that didn't apply to me.

I sat at a random seat and took out my laptop. I openly fiddled with it after finding out that only I could see it.

▷[Master Sharpshooter] [Low-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute]
[Evolving — Grade 8] [Proficiency EXP 13%] — Master Sharpshooter's Training: Familiarity with all long ranged weapons — Thousand-Mile Eyes: Can see far away and predict a target's movement path. Has increased speed and perception by 0.3 points. — Bullet Time: Only in combat and once every 24 hours, you may spend 10 seconds in bullet time. — Sharpshooter of Reversal: You may deal bonus damage against a stronger enemy depending on your luck.

Sharpshooter of Reversal, the low ranked skill that I received from defeating the djinn, was quite decent. Master Sharpshooter had also reached grade 8. Of course, its growth speed would decrease the higher it became.

“Sit down.”

The professor walked in as I admired my growth.

“There is a written exam today as I mentioned last time.”

He announced a test out of the blue. The cadets all groaned. It seemed I wasn't the only one just hearing about this.

“Really? I didn't study at all!”

Chae Nayun despaired in front of me. Kim Suho, who sat next to her, promptly showed her his notes from yesterday. Chae Nayun coughed in embarrassment.

“Now, now, quiet down.”

The professor silenced everyone before handing out the exam sheets. After a few scuffling sounds, I also received it.

Problem 1. Describe the monster, pygmalion.

Problem 2. Describe the Nine Evils (djinnns).

Problem 3. State the attributes that humans can manifest in the phenomenon realm.

Problem 4...

The problems were much more ambiguous than I imagined. Other cadets also sighed the moment they glanced at them, but I was different. I had all the answers on my laptop.

[Pygmaliions are fallen ghosts whose intelligence exceeds that of humans. They cannot be seen in the phenomenon realm, and act as humans after possessing them. Some argue that they should be classified as djinns because of this behavior.]

Of course, I would be wrong if any of their settings changed, but that would also benefit me as I could learn more about new changes.

“What?”

When I almost finished writing all the answers...

“What happened?”

My laptop suddenly shut down. That is, my lifeline disappeared. I began to sweat from this unexpected occurrence. I couldn't do anything because I was in the middle of the exam. Blue words suddenly appeared on the LCD screen.

[A month has passed.] [The laptop's functionality will be updated.] [Kim Hajin's Observation and Reading will be strengthened.]

* * *

Yoo Yeonha planned a social leadership meeting called Noble Society every even-numbered Friday. She wanted to establish important connections for after graduation, but one of the important figures didn't seem to care. For Chae Nayun, Noble Society was simply a reunion with her childhood friends. Today's meeting took place at a coffee shop in Seoul.

“How are your grades?”

“It’s good enough.”

“The Jonghak I know isn’t content unless he places first.”

Only Shin Jonghak and Yoo Yeonha were in the coffee shop. It was popular, but Yoo Yeonha had rented the place out.

“Like I said, it’s good enough.”

“Yeah, okay.”

Clang— The bell on the door rang. Yoo Yeonha and Shin Jonghak turned to see Chae Nayun, who wore Chae Nayun-like clothes, blue jeans and a black jacket over a slightly see-through white shirt. She walked like a man, but her elegant figure was more charming than any other woman.

“Chae Nayun, you came today?”

Shin Jonghak waved. Chae Nayun walked over and spoke after looking around.

“Hey, where did your lackeys go?”

From Chae Nayun’s perspective, Shin Jonghak always brought along his lackeys. His followers were generally sons of large corporations or guilds. The hierarchy was clear despite labeling them as friends.

“They’re training. Midterms are coming up.”

“Oh, those guys also prepare for exams?”

Chae Nayun snarkily commented and took a seat.

“Rather than that, how did you do on the last written exam?”

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No, it’s just that you asked whether the others prepared for exams.”

Unlike when he was with Yoo Yeonha, Shin Jonghak actively brought up conversation.

“That’s different. I’m talking about the combat exam. Who cares if you’re good at theory.”

Chae Nayun replied no differently than usual.

Yoo Yeonha quietly watched them. She didn’t think much of it. They were just friends, but she wasn’t too fond of Shin Jonghak’s soft smile and kind eyes towards Chae Nayun.

Krrk. Yoo Yeonha lightly clenched her teeth and grabbed the coffee she ordered for Chae Nayun 30 minutes ago. It was lukewarm, but she simply heated it with magic power.

“By the way, do you know Kim Hajin?”

Yoo Yeonha’s ears suddenly perked up. She inadvertently joined the conversation.

“Kim Hajin?”

“Yeah.”

“What about him?”

“What do you think about that bastard, Yeonha?”

Chae Nayun’s face distorted.

Kim Hajin. Normally, she wouldn’t even think about someone like him. Even if she did, her assessment would have been, *I don’t care* or *That crazy psycho*, but circumstances had changed. She wasn’t exactly sure why, but he wasn’t so simple. Yoo Yeonha hid her inner thoughts.

“What do you mean? He’s just average.”

“No, never mind.”

Chae Nayun forcefully grabbed her coffee. Her strange reaction surprised Yoo Yeonha.

“That bastard is definitely hiding something.”

“What are you so angry about?” Shin Jonghak asked. He smiled as though he enjoyed seeing an angry Chae Nayun.

“You don’t know? There was a djinn at the National Weapons Museum during the recent monster incident in Seoul. Then that bastard...”

Chae Nayun gulped down her coffee and immediately spurted it back out.

“Aak! Fuck, it’s hot! Water! water!”

She shouted for cold water as she panted. Yoo Yeonha comforted her, but secretly rejoiced.

“Nayun, that’s coffee, not cold water.”

“You haven’t changed, have you?” Shin Jonghak laughed as an employee ran over with cold water.

“H-Here.”

Chae Nayun quickly gulped it down.

“Aagh, I burned my tongue.”

She caught her breath before continuing.

“Anyways, that djinn was stronger than Kim Suho. Even I...”

Chae Nayun paused again and looked at her two listeners. She didn’t want to talk about it in detail because what happened was embarrassing.

“Even I struggled a bit. Kim Suho’s a different story, but how can an ordinary cadet like him deal such fatal damage to a djinn?”

“What happened exactly?”

“I don’t want to explain in detail. Just know he blew up that djinn’s arm. With a gun at that! A gun! How does that make sense?”

Blowing up a djinn’s arm with a gun. Indeed, it was hard to believe without seeing it in person. Yoo Yeonha pondered as she rubbed her chin. She’d seen Kim Hajin fight. It was true he was quick, but it was hard to say he had the attack power to destroy a djinn’s arm.

“Ah, wait.” Chae Nayun suddenly turned serious. She seemed nervous and hesitated. Naturally, Shin Jonghak and Yoo Yeonha waited.

“Could it be that he’s... a djinn?”

“Nayun, he wouldn’t have attacked a fellow djinn if he was also a djinn.”

Yoo Yeonha quickly shot down her hypothesis.

“I guess you’re right. Anyways, there’s something about that guy.”

“So you’re telling me you don’t like him?”

Shin Jonghak listened without a word and finally broke his silence. Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha both understood the hidden meaning behind those words.

Chae Nayun pondered how to answer. She knew Shin Jonghak’s personality. That guy’s future would noticeably change depending on her answer. She replied after some contemplation.

“I’m not sure, but something like that.”

Chapter 20

Connections (3)

[Updating in progress... 79%]

It was currently 9 A.M. on Saturday. My laptop still remained unusable. It only went up to 79% after I anxiously waited an entire day for the new amazing features.

I stared at the update until my smartwatch rang.

[Brokerage account for Kim Hajin has opened.]

“Oh, it’s done!”

I was concerned about this too. It would’ve been easy as an adult, but I was still a minor. Like my previous world, a minor couldn’t open a brokerage account without a guardian. It would’ve been impossible if I wasn’t a Cube cadet.

I quickly went to work now that I had an account. First, I transferred money over to my new brokerage account using my smartwatch. One million won from the previous monster hunt and 2 million won I already had for a total of 3 million. It was pocket change compared to many other traders, but it was enough to start. I opened the stock trading program. The guild stock market operated on weekends to differentiate from the normal market.

[Guild — Packhorse Master]

The exchange also listed the Packhorse Master guild. Each of their stocks cost worth 170 won. I simply bought however much I could since I wasn’t knowledgeable about complicated things like short selling, short buying, or price fluctuations.

[17,647 stocks of Packhorse Master guild purchased.]

It didn't take long, so I looked up a stock-related forum before leaving. *[Gathering of people who enjoy the stock exchange.]* This was the biggest forum for stock-related topics with 930,000 members. I searched up Packhorse Master.

[List of new guilds.] [Guilds newly listed] [Guild market is hard nowadays
TT *None of the new guilds look promising...]*

None of the posts specifically discussed Packhorse Master.

“Well, what did I expect from an online forum?”

I clicked my tongue and turned off the smartwatch. Information equaled money in this world, so one had to pay for the proper websites. Expert brokers didn't spare a glance at free forums. Information guilds possessed their own intranets where one could buy information and those who wished to stay anonymous could use something like the Violet Banquet.

“Oh, right.”

Speaking of secrecy, a group called the Chameleon Troupe lurked in the shadows. They first appeared halfway through the story and were the most powerful gang in my novel. Their members would play important roles later in the novel. Just like how a chameleon changed its colors to hide, the Chameleon Troupe was a secretive group whose identities always remained hidden. Currently, one seat in the Chameleon Troupe should be empty. This seat would remain open for another year or two and would play an important role later. I knew who the Chameleon Troupe's leader was and where she operated. I should be the only one with this information other than their members.

The Chameleon Troupe was a gang of criminals, but they also rejected djinns. Djinns were the absolute evil in this world. If I could become a Chameleon Troupe member... that was unrealistic. If I could just befriend their leader, they might even support me. Just when I was thinking...

“Uk!”

An intense pain suddenly came over my upper left arm as though a hot knife was carving my skin. Blood spurted out into my eyes. I quickly pulled up my sleeve and saw a strange scar on my upper arm.

“The hell...”

It was incomprehensible. I clenched my teeth and put my hand over the mark gushing with blood. A tsunami of information flooded my brain at the same time.

[This stigma containing magic power is one of the Creator’s authorities.] [One streak of stigma will be inscribed each time your total acquired SP reaches a certain level along with your fame.] [You may freely use the magic power stored inside the stigma, which will slowly regenerate over 24 hours.]

“Ah.”

An indescribable pain throbbed throughout my head and arm. I read the laptop screen despite my paralysis.

[Update List] ▷Book of Truth has been added to the gift, [Observation and Reading].

* * *

The weekend sky was clear and blue. The early spring weather felt chilly, but still held some warmth. I was unable to enjoy this beautiful day as I was summoned to Seoul’s Association Tower for subjugating the djinn. *Really, couldn’t they just deliver it?*

The conferment ceremony took place at a garden in Association Tower. Many people had already gathered by the time I arrived. However, the ceremony seemed nowhere close to starting. Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, and I were forced into a rehearsal to receive our commendations from a dignitary, but the dignitary himself was late and we were forced to wait. It felt like sitting on needles with Chae Nayun next to me.

“Yaaawn.”

“Happy?”

I yawned once because I was bored. Chae Nayun looked for an excuse to pick a fight.

I briefly retorted, “What.”

“You’ve had a smirk for a while now.”

“...”

It was unfair that she could look so pretty while making such remarks. I planned to stay silent, but suddenly recalled why I was here.

“You didn’t forget, did you?”

“Forget what?” she asked.

Each of her words stung like a thorn. I spoke as I stared at her.

“That I saved you.”

“...”

She still looked angry, but shut her mouth.

“That’s that and this is...”

“Stop, both of you.”

Chae Nayun tried to strike back, but Kim Suho cut in.

“W-What?”

“Chae Nayun, switch seats with me.”

For the record, our seats were ordered: Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, then me.

“And if I refuse?”

“Hurry.”

“No, why? I don’t want to.”

Seeing them all touchy didn’t feel too good. Thankfully, their scuffle ended as Kim Suho sat next to me. He looked at me and coughed.

“Thank you for back then.”

"What?"

I wanted to be left alone, so why was he still talking to me?

“Back at the museum, we wouldn’t have won if it wasn’t for you.”

“No, you would’ve won even without me.”

If I wasn’t there, Kim Suho might have awakened an even greater power. Main characters were always like that.

“No.”

Kim Suho turned back after a single word. An extraordinary magic power suddenly undulated. The dignitary finally arrived.

“H-He’s here. Everyone get ready!”

Today’s commendation conferrer was the master rank hero known as the Wolf of Valhalla. His shoulder-length hair slightly curved up and he had a well-trimmed beard uncommon for an Eastern man. His regality was more than just an invisible feeling. As though a wind blew, each of his steps caused a tiny tremor of magic power. His raw power had reached a realm where even he couldn’t fully control it.

“Huu.”

The master rank hero, Yoo Sihyuk, looked around with wolf-like eyes and murmured, “These fuckers telling me what to do.”

It was so quiet that only I could hear it with my gift. With arrogance and apathy, Yoo Sihyuk pushed back the guests flocking towards him.

He walked up to the podium overbearingly as his attendant ran up and handed him a paper that listed the order of the ceremony. Yoo Sihyuk clicked his tongue and glanced at the paper before throwing it away. His attendant ran off with the discarded paper.

— Now, the conferment ceremony will begin.

The host announced the start of the ceremony.

— The commendation will be conferred by rank 37 master rank hero, Sir Yoo Sihyuk.

Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, and I walked up to the podium as we rehearsed. Yoo Sihyuk smirked when he saw Kim Suho.

“Are you Kim Suho?”

“Yes.”

“Mmm. I can see why those guys want you.”

Intense interest reflected in his eyes. Yoo Sihyuk advised Kim Suho with unusual kindness.

“Don’t join the association. It might be better to join the Vast Expanse and become a hunter. Being a hero is nothing but a baggage of responsibility and no fun.”

“Still, a hero fits my personality best.”

Kim Suho refused with a smile.

The corner of Yoo Sihyuk's mouth twisted up.

"You're a boring guy. Fine... And you, it's been a while, *eh?*"

This time, it was Chae Nayun. She made a bitter expression when they made eye contact.

"It's been a while."

"Your father told me to take care of you, but I don't plan on doing that."

"I... Master—"

"I'm not your master. A bow user like you thinks you can call me master? Do you want to die?"

Chae Nayun pouted at his reproach. I struggled to hold in my laughter at her pathetic state.

"And who are you?"

"I am cadet Kim Hajin."

"Oh... Okay."

That was it for me. A completely different treatment from Kim Suho and Chae Nayun.

It seemed indifference really was more painful than hatred.

Chapter 21

Second Incident (1)

“He has shown himself to be a model citizen by risking his life to subjugate a djinn. This commendation proves his excellent service for the good of society and his exemplary behavior which motivates others. Cadet Kim Suho.”

Yoo Sihyuk handed Kim Suho the commendation certificate without any needless commentary. Kim Suho took the certificate with honor and dignity.

“Chae Nayun, same as above.”

Next was Chae Nayun.

“Kim Hajin, same as above.”

Then me.

“The conferment ceremony is now over.”

The conferment ceremony concluded with the host’s announcement. One hour and 30 minutes of rehearsal and 1 hour of waiting for just 5 minutes. It was so quick that I didn’t even have time to feel wronged.

“Oh, by the way...”

Yoo Sihyuk, who was about to leave, suddenly stopped as though he recalled something.

“The reward for the djinn subjugation is 15 million won. I almost forgot.”

The moment I heard that I felt grateful for everything. To the Cube

associate who forced me out of bed this morning, the 1 hour and 30 minute rehearsal, even the man who was late by an hour.

“Good luck. We’ll meet again if chance allows.”

Yoo Sihyuk left with a bored smile. We saw him off, then came down from the podium. Guild associates flocked toward us before we even reached the ground. However, they were only interested in Kim Suho and Chae Nayun. No one approached me. Most likely they thought I was just lucky to have been there, but that didn’t mean I felt disappointed. Such was the life of an extra. I blushed at being ignored, but quickly left.

* * *

I went to a nearby coffee shop and ordered a drink. Then I sat down and turned on my laptop. The reason was simple. I hadn’t checked the laptop’s new features yet because I fainted from the pain yesterday and was dragged to the conferment ceremony today.

[Updated Features] ▷*Book of Truth has been added to the gift,*
[Observation and Reading] ▷*Internet has been added to the laptop.*
▷*Stigma.*

I received 3 new features. The second addition caught my attention first. *Internet has been added to the laptop.* It seemed too ordinary. After all, my smartwatch could access the internet, but the laptop’s new feature couldn’t be that ordinary. I accessed the internet on my laptop.

“...Aha.”

I immediately understood. The internet window displayed rows of familiar texts.

[List of Currently Accessible Websites] ▷*Righteous Mind* ▷*Violet Banquet...* ▷*Sword of Jeremy*

The laptop’s internet allowed me to access paid websites. The new feature was like a hacking tool. One caught my attention among those numerous sites.

▷ *Violet Banquet: Website for trading undisclosed information, weapons, bounties, and commissions. *SP needed to obtain an ID: 200*

Violet Banquet was the most famous website on the dark web with over a million members. Its real attraction wasn't actually the website, but its sellers. Violet Banquet served as a lawless place to sell anonymous information, weapons, bounties, and commissions. While the government knew about this underground black market, they had no choice but to stay silent as almost all heroes frequented it. As a joke, a hero wasn't a real hero unless they had a Violet Banquet membership.

Naturally, one needed to pay an enormous sum for membership, but I only needed 200 SP to obtain an ID.

"Ah, there you are."

A charming voice and scent approached me. I recognized her voice and immediately straightened. Yun Seung-Ah nonchalantly walked over and sat in front of me.

"You know me, right?" Her eyes formed an arc as she stared.

"You don't?" Yun Seung-Ah asked again. I shook my head. Only a few in the world wouldn't know vice-leader Yun Seung-Ah.

"No, I know."

"That's a relief. I was surprised because you suddenly disappeared. I wanted to give you something."

Yun Seung-Ah handed me her business card adorned with gold.

[Guild, Creator's Sacred Grace, vice-leader Yun Seung-Ah.]

Yun Seung-Ah continued while I sat speechlessly.

"There's a lot I want to talk about, but I don't have enough time. I spent too long looking for you, cadet Hajin."

Yun Seung-Ah giving out her business card wasn't a simple matter. It was the first step of how she recruited according to my novel.

"There's something I want to ask. Can I?" She politely waited for my response.

I stared into her calm and beautiful brown eyes.

"No."

"Did you destroy the djinn's... *Hmm?*"

Yun Seung-Ah might appear kind and graceful to the media, but she was actually extremely cold-hearted. She didn't hesitate to throw away talents she once eagerly recruited if they didn't meet expectations. Taking what's necessary and throwing away what isn't. The media was unaware of her survival of the fittest attitude. She believed a lazy person would continue to be lazy, and a person falling behind would continue to fall behind.

"Don't ask."

I gave back the business card.

"*Eh? Um*, cadet Hajin? I think you're misunderstanding something. I'm interested in you, as the vice-leader of the number 1 ranked guild."

"I'm thankful for your interest, but only if it's real interest."

According to Yun Seung-Ah's personality, she was probably here because I used a light attribute bullet. Her interest in me was only curiosity. With a single gust of wind, it could cool and she would even forget my name. Playing hard to get would probably be more memorable for the sake of SP.

"I'll be off. There's a lot I need to do. It's almost time for midterms, you see."

I got up before the surprised Yun Seung-ah. Her eyes followed me, but I quickly left the coffee shop. What she was thinking was none of my

concern.

* * *

The reward money had arrived by the time I returned to the dorm at 1 P.M. It was a clean 15 million won, untaxed. Without hesitation, I purchased more Packhorse Master stocks. I was likely a majority shareholder now with over 100,000 stocks.

“Huhu... Ah, right.”

I suddenly remembered what I couldn't finish at the coffee shop. The other 2 features of the update, the Book of Truth and stigma. First, I looked at stigma.

[You may freely use the magic power stored inside the stigma, which will slowly regenerate over 24 hours.]

“...So how do I use it?”

Stigma looked like a tattoo on my upper left arm, but I couldn't even wield magic power in this body. That would likely never change as I described magic power in my novel as an innate talent that required early education. Perhaps this was why the co-author gave me such a unique ability.

“I can freely use it?”

Since I could freely use it, I simply thought about it. That was all I did. Immediately, stigma's magic power unleashed a blue light that enveloped my upper arm. The magic power flowed down my veins to my fingertips before shooting out and manifesting different shapes. First, it formed a triangle, a circle, then a blade.

It grew even more mysterious when I thought about the Book of Truth.

The magic power formed a book with a wavering cover as though it was made of water. I glanced at my veins, which had turned blue, and the strange book that formed in the air. A voice sounded in my head.

[This book contains the truth. Ask it anything and it will answer as long as you have enough magic power.]

“So that’s how it works.”

The words, *as long as you have enough magic power*, stuck out, but it was undoubtedly a great gift.

When I was about to ask something as a test...

Wiing— Wiing— Wiing—

An emergency alarm rang from my smartwatch. It sounded similar to a disaster alert which couldn’t be ignored. I retracted my magic power and turned on my smartwatch.

[Looking for the last person who has seen World class novice cadet, Jin Hajung.] [Looking for the last person who has seen World class novice cadet, Jin Hajung.]

I immediately knew what happened. The next arc had begun. The name of this arc was Cube’s Serial Disappearance Incident. There would be 6 victims and it was fairly important in the story because Yoo Yeonha was the final victim. This would bring Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha closer together.

[Hello.]

Speaking of the devil, Yoo Yeonha suddenly messaged me.

[What?]

[The text just now, that isn’t your doing, right?]

Was she insane?

[No, why?]

[Then never mind.]

[Alright.]

[By the way, I heard you fought a djinn last week.]

[...What are you trying to say?]

Changing the topic over and over until the other side brought up what she wanted to talk about, that was Yoo Yeonha's specialty.

[Do you know about the giant swamp soldier?]

I couldn't help but laugh. It seemed she wanted me to tell her its vital point.

The giant swamp soldier was a high rank monster known for its 30 meter height. It was rare because Korea didn't have large swamps. Her guild must have received information about its location.

[I wouldn't tell you even if I knew.]

Many guilds in the country wouldn't know the giant swamp soldier's vital point.

[I can buy the information.]

[No.]

I firmly cut her off. The mountain tyrant should've been enough to serve as her accomplishment.

[Why not? I can offer a lot.]

It was true Yoo Yeonha would become successful in the future, but her personality hadn't matured yet. Currently, she wouldn't hesitate to mercilessly cut down her enemies. It was dangerous to give her wings before she could grow on her own with the right influences.

[Honestly I don't know. How would I know the vital point of a monster that doesn't appear in Korea?]

I wasn't lying. Although I was this world's author, I didn't know everything. I created the giant swamp soldier, but I only gave it a rough sketch. Since it was a golem-type monster, I only mentioned that an attribute that countered swamps would work well against it. I never wrote any specific details.

After a long while, Yoo Yeonha ended the conversation with a single message.

[From now on, don't talk to me so casually.]

“Pfft.”

I couldn't help but smirk. As I thought, even though Yoo Yeonha acted all adult-like...

“Still a high schooler, *huh*.”

She was only 17.

Chapter 22

Second Incident (2)

[Information Agency – Truth]

Welcome. If you seek the truth, visit the following room.

¿Room of Inquiry?

[]

Please write your question in the space above. As long as it meets the following guidelines, it will be answered.

— Condition 1. Naturally, only answers known by the agency will be answered. If we do not know the answer, we will admit it so do not worry.

— Condition 2. We cannot answer about a person with just their name. We require the person's name, picture, physique, identity, and other personal information.

— Condition 3. We do not answer trivial questions. For example, I lost my cat. Where is it? is not an acceptable question. However, the same question can be answered if the scope is narrowed with specific details.

Note 1. The minimum cost is 100,000 won but is subject to change drastically depending on the question.

Note 2. Please keep in mind that replies will be faster if you are respectful.

Note 3. The information we provide is all true. No refunds.

The above cost and conditions are subject to change at any time.

“This looks good enough.”

I proudly looked at my laptop with the form I submitted to Violet Banquet as an information seller. Now that I had a gift like the Book of Truth, it felt like a waste not to use it.

For now, I gave it the grandiose name, Truth Agency. I didn’t expect many customers yet since reputation played a big role in the Violet Banquet. That was perfect since my magic power wouldn’t last anyway. In 2-3 years, Truth Agency would surely spread because of small interests like, *Why is this still here?* or *Should I give it a try since I’m bored?* I would have 3-4 streaks of stigma by then, so I wouldn’t need to worry about running out of magic power. It was a risk-free, long-term investment. If it worked, great. If it didn’t, that was fine too.

“Okay.”

I pressed the *[apply for seller]* button after looking over the form again. Finally, I had taken care of everything now. The only thing left was my daily workout. I stretched and stood up.

* * *

Kim Suho worked out at the Novice Fitness Center late at night on Sunday. He was a regular, but today looked totally different from the beginning of the year. The fitness center was full of cadets because of the upcoming midterm exams.

“Kuu.”

After finishing a set, Kim Suho looked around while resting. Jin Hanjun, Kim Horak, Shin Jonghak, and even rare visitors like Yoo Yeonha and Rachel.

“Are you checking out girls?”

A sudden coldness touched his face. Kim Suho pulled back his head in surprise and glared at the one person who would prank him. Yi Yeonghan shrugged and handed him the drink.

“So, are you?”

“No, I just...”

“Yeah?”

“I just thought it was a rare sight.”

Kim Suho pointed at Rachel with his chin. Yi Yeonghan nodded in agreement.

“I guess you’re right. This is the first time I’ve seen a real princess working out at a fitness center.”

Blonde hair that shone brilliantly and eyes like sapphire. Her elegant figure flaunted no imperfections. Even while covered in sweat, she exuded charm and looked like a painting. Rachel was the descendant of a noble lineage from England’s royal family.

“Who do you think she’ll marry in the future? Not us, right?”

Kim Suho smiled at Yi Yeonghan’s wishful thinking.

“Is that a sneer? What, you think you can marry her?”

“No, it’s not that. I agree. I don’t think she’d marry someone like us.”

“Uuk!”

While they joked, a sudden loud grunt grabbed their attention.

“Huuuk!”

The strange breathing came from a guy having a life-and-death battle with the fitness equipment. However, there was only a pitiful amount of weight on the equipment.

“...Is he really struggling with that?”

Yi Yeonghan looked on with pity. It wasn't just Yi Yeonghan. Almost every cadet snickered as they walked by. Kim Suho couldn't tell whether Kim Hajin was oblivious or too focused to notice, but he continued struggling resolutely.

"At least he's hanging in there," Kim Suho briefly replied.

"Please, with that weight, I could do the same for half a day. I'm curious how he was even admitted. Even sharpshooters have a minimum physical requirement, and wasn't he a swordsman before? Why don't I remember him?... Oh, look, it's Chae Nayun."

Chae Nayun came out of the gravity room at just the right moment. Covered in sweat, she slightly staggered in exhaustion. It looked like she planned on heading straight back, but she stopped to glare at Kim Hajin. *Jiing*— Two laser beams shot out of her eyes.

"What's she doing?"

"They're not really on good terms." Kim Suho smiled bitterly.

"*Tsk.*"

After glaring at Kim Hajin for a while, Chae Nayun clicked her tongue and turned back. At the same time, her eyes met Kim Suho. She let out a dry cough as though she was embarrassed and walked toward them.

"Hey, Kim Suho. Isn't he a bit strange?"

What nonsense was she spouting?

"Strange?"

"That bastard. He's acting."

"What are you talking about?"

Both Yi Yeonghan and Kim Suho furrowed their brows. They didn't understand what Chae Nayun meant, but she glared at Kim Suho as

though he was dense.

“I can understand Yi Yeonghan, but Kim Suho, you’re being a bit too naive.”

“What? What are you saying out of the blue?”

“You saw him that day and you still don’t get it?”

Chae Nayun’s suspicion was well-justified. Magic power was one of the most important abilities of a hero. What Kim Hajin displayed during the Seoul incident was abnormal. An explosion of magic power strong enough to dye the world white... A guy with such magic power struggled to lift a tiny weight? It didn’t make sense. Kim Hajin had to be acting for whatever reason.

Although the logic wasn’t perfectly sound, it was a justifiable suspicion.

“*Hmm...*”

Yi Yeonghan stared at Kim Hajin again. His face turned so red it was about to explode.

“If that’s acting, he should win an Oscar.”

“*Sigh*. Whatever. Stay dense, you two.”

Chae Nayun shook her head in disappointment as 3 male cadets approached Kim Hajin. Kim Suho frowned since they were well-known delinquents.

“Hey, what are you doing, loser?”

“Look, he’s struggling with this. I only need a finger to lift this.”

They nudged Kim Hajin, but he didn’t react. He focused on working out without giving them a single glance.

“Hey, are you mute? Say something.”

“Let’s take pictures of this son of a bitch and post it online. Look at him, working all hard when he’s a complete waste.”

Annoyed, the three delinquents began to openly curse: *Why live, you’re a waste of money. I feel bad for your parents. You’re not going to graduate anyway, so just leave, etc...*

“...Hey, I’m leaving.”

Chae Nayun left feeling slightly uncomfortable. Kim Suho got up, unable to hold himself back, but Yi Yeonghan stopped him.

“What?”

“Just leave him be. By the looks of it, they’re Shin Jonghak’s lackeys. Nothing good will come out of fighting them.”

“But still...”

“Plus...”

Yi Yeonghan smiled as though he found it funny.

“Who knows? Maybe he is acting.”

* * *

I woke up on Monday morning and thought back to what happened yesterday. Applying as an information seller on Violet Banquet, buying stocks, and working out...

Let’s shower first.

Chwaaa— The cold water washed away my drowsiness. I looked at my wet body in the mirror. It had definitely improved. My shoulders and biceps bulked up, my abs became well-defined, and my thighs felt rock-hard. I could’ve never achieved such fitness on Earth. I wondered

how my stats looked?

After drying myself, I left the bathroom and turned on my laptop.

*[Strength 1.835] [Stamina 1.945] [Speed 2.15] [Perception 3.055]
[Vitality 1.765] [Magic power 1.315]*

I had grown a lot. Of course, I was still at the level of someone who diligently worked out, but it wouldn't be long until I could obtain aether from Gari Mountain. After all, the real reward of the Gari Mountain Dungeon wasn't the completion reward, but the hidden stage.

Wiing— Wiing—

I turned on my smartwatch before heading out and was greeted with anonymous messages.

[Retard.] [Hey, coward, get ready to have your spine broken in the combat exam. I'll disable you and...]

“These guys again.”

It seemed I was being bullied. I had an idea who the instigator was, but I couldn't be sure. Of course, something of this level wasn't enough to bother my 26 year old mind. After all, I had suffered through Korea's military service. It was just kids being kids.

I walked outside after blocking the 2 fools who messaged me. They had written some stuff on the nameplate outside my door. *Retard, loser, pushover...* There was one more, but the handwriting was illegible. They seemed to have carved it with magic power to avoid being detected by CCTV. For now, I really couldn't do anything. Classes would begin in 10 minutes, so I hurried before I was late.

* * *

They greeted me as I opened the classroom door.

“Oh, you're here, loser?”

Some kid I didn't even know struck my head. I started to get a bit annoyed. Sure, it was just kids being kids, but I made sure to remember their faces. *Jokes on you, my SP increases the more you bully me!*

"What? You mad?"

I didn't respond. *Kim Hyuksoo*. I memorized his name and ignored him. I walked past a few more sneering cadets and sat at my usual seat. I made eye contact with Chae Nayun, but she didn't act hostile like usual. Instead, she looked at me somewhat bitterly before turning away.

"Hey guys, the exam results are out for phenomenon realm analysis."

Yi Yeonghan walked in with an armful of scrolls. Cube had a custom where the results of every written exam, big or small, were publicly posted on large posters. Yi Yeonghan put up the posters as the cadets groaned.

The results were as such:

Rank 1. Kim Hajin

Rank 2. Rachel...

Snap. I heard a sound similar to chopsticks breaking and peeked behind me. Two halves of a pen rolled on the table. Next to it was Rachel. She stared at the results in shock.

"Oh, right."

I remembered a setting I had forgotten.

For every written exam, big or small, Rachel had never lost first place.

Chapter 23

Second Incident (3)

Cube's classes and exams were all conducted in Korean. Even the few foreign professors spoke fluently since it had become a shared language and culture across many countries.

However, just because Korean became a shared language didn't make it easier to learn. Foreigners still struggled to master it.

Despite this disadvantage, Rachel understood most of the lectures and could properly write the correct answers on exams. Anyone would understand how much effort she put into studying.

As royalty, she had to maintain a certain level of grace and dignity. She wanted to become the perfect hero in theory and combat. Then she would write a textbook for the English Royal Hero Academy.

Naturally, the citizens of England took pride in Rachel. They believed it was finally time for a master rank hero to emerge from England.

Master rank heroes referred to the world's top 70 heroes. Currently, 33 of the 70 were Korean, while 18 were American and 9 were Chinese. Only 2 came from England, but that was debatable since they had obtained Korean citizenship 15 years ago.

The citizens of England hoped she would become the symbol of their nation.

Rachel never slept more than 2 hours a day to meet their expectations. However, the first place record she painstakingly kept had been broken.

Rachel wasn't sad, only apprehensive and apologetic. Of course, the result of a single exam was unlikely to spread to England, but phenomenon realm analysis was a difficult topic. The gap between her

and first place was unlikely to change for a while.

“...”

She felt someone looking at her. It was an average-looking boy. She didn't know his name, but she noticed all the other cadets also looked at him. Then she realized he was Kim Hajin. He turned back as she committed his face to memory.

She wanted to take a look at the notebook in front of him.

* * *

There was a slight uproar that I placed first on the phenomenon realm analysis exam, a topic widely considered to be the most difficult. Rachel remained silent, but the professor publicly praised me.

“I also looked at cadet Kim Hajin's answer sheet. His knowledge and vision impressed me, to say the least. I hope everyone else can learn from his passion. Once again, theory is very important.”

The professor encouraged the entire class. I found it uncomfortable and quickly left the moment class ended. I had a lot to do. No, I had a lot of SP to spend. I couldn't hoard SP anymore if I wanted to protect myself from upcoming events. Cube was no longer safe now that the second arc had begun. Several djinns should've already laid traps within the academy.

To briefly explain, a djinn was a human who contracted with a devil. A devil gave them power in exchange for their soul. Naturally, high ranked devils bestowed greater powers.

However, an ordinary human who formed a contract would only become a demi-djinn, a mere puppet without intelligence. The Dog of Lucius from the museum was one such example.

In exchange for his sanity, the man gained enough of Lucius' magic power to fight Kim Suho, but couldn't even accomplish his master's mission. Lucius would've been satisfied if he had ignored Kim Suho and killed his target.

It was more difficult, but devils favored humans with magic power and an underdeveloped mind. Naturally, cadets made the perfect targets.

I felt the need to prepare another weapon because I wouldn't survive if I encountered another djinn.

"Hmm..."

I stared at the laptop on my desk. For now, I planned to add another setting to the Desert Eagle. I gained a lot of SP thanks to Chae Nayun or Shin Jonghak's efforts.

[Transformation function has been added to the Desert Eagle. Handgun to 12-gauge shotgun] — Condition: Requires stigma's magic power.

It didn't take a genius to know a shotgun was more powerful than a handgun. The shotgun's power would increase the closer the target. A handgun couldn't just magically transform into a shotgun, but I wondered if my setting intervention could achieve such a miracle?

[Transformation function has been added to the Desert Eagle. Handgun to 12-gauge shotgun] — Condition: Requires stigma's magic power. — Will amplify attack power by a maximum of 100% depending on the target's distance.

[250 SP will be used. Would you like to save?]

Indeed, a miracle had occurred. The laptop modified what I wrote with more details and stated a reasonable cost of 250 SP. Without a doubt, I hit *[save]*.

A silver current shot out of the laptop and surrounded the Desert Eagle. The gun shone before the light gradually subsided. I picked it up and checked whether anything had changed, but it looked the same.

I poured stigma's magic power into the handgun and it immediately dismantled.

Kirik— With a robotic sound, the magazine split as the gunstock and barrel stretched. Soon, the Desert Eagle took on a new form.

Two platinum barrels the size of my arm lay parallel. It looked clean and elegant.

“It’ll surprise them for sure.”

I didn’t know much about shotguns, but the Desert Eagle’s destructive power definitely went up with this modification.

Click— I opened the empty magazine. I would need to purchase 12 gauge ammo or modify the bullets I already had. That could wait for later.

I finished modifying my weapon, but still had a few more tasks.

Creating an art.

An art was a specific skill typically acquired through practice. For example, a painter with an art for drawing or a singer with an art for singing. The difference between an art and a gift was that an art didn’t produce supernatural effects.

▷*Arts (0/3) X*

I could create 3 arts. For now, I had one in mind.

[Parkour] — Can rapidly ride walls and freely run, jump, or climb through obstacles. — The art’s performance scales with the speed stat.

Positioning determined life or death for a sharpshooter. Naturally, parkour was the perfect skill for me. My laptop conveniently modified my vague description.

[Art] [Parkour] [Proficiency 0%] [Low rank] — Grants flexible and efficient movement. — Is not affected by terrain and can freely run, jump, or climb through walls and obstacles. — The art’s performance scales with the strength and speed stats.

[350 SP will be used. Would you like to save?]

I would've shuddered at the cost if it wasn't for recent events. Now, my SP increased by 2 every hour without doing anything. I pressed *[save]* without hesitation and got up.

It was time to test the new changes.

* * *

Tiriring— Tiriring—

I opened my eyes as the alarm sounded. My entire body ached, but I expected that after parkouring through walls and trees until 4 A.M. I had so much fun I couldn't stop.

“Argh, my joints...”

I climbed walls using the tiniest cracks and leaped up trees using the smallest protrusions. Every time I landed, excitement coursed through my veins like a runner's high. Looking down from a lofty height gave me a refreshing sense of ecstasy.

“God damn it.”

I had to go to class now. Combat training resumed starting today. It would be hell since midterms were coming and djinns would also act.

[This message is for all cadets ♪♪. Has anyone seen Seungyeon from World class? I haven't been able to contact her since yesterday ♪♪]

Looking at my smartwatch, a second victim had disappeared. I couldn't do anything about the djinn yet. Of course, I knew his identity and the next victim, but if I exposed him (how I would even go about that was another question), I feared that would greatly distort the story.

“Huuu.”

I sighed. Just because the victims were fated to die didn't make me feel any less guilty. I didn't treat what happened as just another page in a novel.

“Why can't Yoo Yeonha just be kidnapped first?”

Through this arc, Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha would form a meaningful relationship. Kim Suho would positively influence Yoo Yeonha, curbing her temperament, and Kim Suho would obtain the valuable connection known as Yoo Yeonha.

But there would be 4 more victims until Yoo Yeonha.

Chapter 24

Mock Dungeon Trial (1)

Cube created a variety of artificial terrain for more efficient training: mountains, hills, limestone caves, volcanic caves, etc. Each environment contained its own unique puppet monsters. Naturally, they also created artificial dungeons with their cutting-edge magic technology.

“Today’s combat training is a bit special.”

Kim Soohyuk announced to the 2 classes participating together. We gathered outside an eerie cave with a black tunnel-like entrance that oozed ominous energy. Indeed, it was full of traps and puppet monsters. Djinnns would’ve also set lethal traps and real monsters inside. I felt myself trembling.

“Today, you’ll be entering this cave with another class as a joint training exercise. A team from each class will combine to form a larger one.”

The name of this training was Mock Dungeon Trial. Cadets formed a team of 8 to clear the massive grade artificial dungeon. Two hundred cadets would participate, so one could only imagine its size.

“Now, get in your usual teams.”

I looked for Yoo Yeonha, who nervously stared at the cave entrance. The fact that Yoo Yeonha felt nervous showed how threatening this dungeon was.

“I’m shaking.”

“Me too. Look, I have goosebumps.”

Jin Hoseung and Hazuki joined us. The other cadets also found their teams and quickly formed into 50 groups.

“Next, we’ll announce your team pairs. For the record, the cadet with the highest grade was chosen to be the team leader.”

Kim Soohyuk pressed his smartwatch and projected a hologram of the team list.

[Team 1] Veritas class – Team Kim Suho, World class – Team Jo Yoon-Ah

Kim Suho’s team joined another led by a girl named Jo Yoon-Ah. She was just a generic filler character who acted haughtily before realizing Kim Suho’s greatness. I wondered if the co-author changed anything, so I approached Jo Yoon-Ah.

[Jo Yoon-Ah — Her personality has gotten worse.]

Thankfully, that was the only change. I prayed for Kim Suho who would suffer.

[Team 2] Veritas class – Team Shin Jonghak, World class – Team Kaine

I didn’t know much about Team 2. Honestly, I had never heard of Kaine.

[Team 3] Veritas class – Team Chae Nayun, World class – Team Sven

“Huuu...”

Team 3 formed just like the novel and was the team to watch out for because Sven was dangerous. He was an international student from Germany who had a crush on Chae Nayun. Sven was an elite star in his country ever since he was young. He must’ve thought he would top Cube’s rankings in Korea, but unfortunately, Cube was filled with heaven-defying characters. Sven couldn’t come close and struggled with an inferiority complex. His pent-up frustration would explode during this dungeon trial.

The result?

Sven would sell his soul to a djinn, but that wouldn't happen today. He would form a contract after contemplating it for a day... At least, that's what I wrote in my novel.

My laptop alerted me of a change.

[Sven – His mental weakness has intensified. Has a significantly increased chance of contracting with a devil's servant during the Mock Dungeon Trial.]

The keyword was *during*. It meant the incident would happen today. That posed a serious problem as I stared at Team 3.

"H-Hello, Nayun. I saw you in the hunting club."

Sven reached out to Chae Nayun. His eyes filled with affection, but Chae Nayun replied apathetically, "Ah, yes, how old are you?"

"I, I'm the same age as you."

I focused entirely on Sven as other teams were announced. I wanted to tell Chae Nayun not to treat him so rudely.

"Team 8. Veritas class, Team Yoo Yeonha. World class, Team Jayden."

Team 8 was announced. The name Jayden sounded familiar. I immediately looked him up in my settings book. There was only a brief summary because he didn't play an important role.

[Jayden] Typically acts strong in front of the weak, and weak in front of the strong. Has a potential of 7.5/10, enough for Essence of the Strait to scout him.

"Hello, *haha*."

Jayden greeted us with a hearty laugh. He looked generically Western with deep brown eyes and a tall nose. An alert popped up on my laptop. Jayden's setting had also changed.

[Jayden – Potential has increased from 7.5 to 8.]

His potential had increased by 0.5 points. I had assigned potential to characters so I could easily estimate their overall worth. The number wasn't a part of this world. Kim Suho's potential was 10 as the main character and Chae Nayun's was 9.5. Even if one worked their entire life, it would be impossible to make up for a 0.5 point difference. This showed just how important Jayden's half-point increase was.

"You must be Yoo Yeonha! It's great to meet you. I've heard a lot!"

"Ah, yes. Nice to meet you."

Jayden held out his hand. I wondered if Yoo Yeonha would shake someone's hand in their first meeting. She answered my question by readily shaking his.

"Next to me are Kim Jingyu, Oh Soojung, and Lee Shuang."

"This is Jin Hoseung, Hazuki, and Yi Hajin."

"...?"

For a moment, I doubted my ears. *Who's Yi Hajin? Was she doing this on purpose? I'm Kim Hajin!* Yoo Yeonha spoke respectfully to Jayden while his teammates listened. I didn't know whether or not she was managing her image because she had determined Jayden's worth, but I found it interesting.

"I'm a sharpshooter. My main weapon is a bow."

"Mine's my fist."

"Mine is a shield."

Kim Jingyu, Oh Soojung, and Lee Shuang introduced themselves. Hazuki, Jin Hoseung, and I went next.

"Swordsman. Typical, right?"

“I use an axe.”

“...I use this.”

I held up the training handgun. Although I had my Desert Eagle, which was a much better weapon, cadets were prohibited from using personal weapons. Of course, I had my Desert Eagle conveniently stored inside stigma. Since I could use stigma’s magic power at will, creating an extradimensional storage wasn’t difficult.

“Ah, you’re that guy. The one who chose a gun. I heard.”

“It feels strange seeing you in person.”

The 3 of them looked at me, but I couldn’t say it was pleasant. Their looks seemed to say, *At least I’m better than this guy.*

“Aren’t you wasting your gift? Or is your gift not good enough?”

That was brutally honest. I turned toward the voice. As expected, Jayden slyly smiled as no one defended me. I didn’t expect much from Yoo Yeonha, but Jin Hoseung and Hazuki didn’t say anything either.

I felt a bit disappointed, but I understood. The rumors circulating about me weren’t a joke.

Things like using my position as a Cube cadet to blackmail or rape a girl, going to Seoul every weekend to enjoy women and drink... I was practically a societal evil. After today, these rumors would surely spread even more among other classes. I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Well, at least my SP would increase.

“Everyone, get ready.”

The team assignments ended and cadets quickly moved at Kim Soohyuk’s words.

“Go in one by one starting from Team 1.”

“Let’s go!” Kim Suho bravely shouted and took the lead. Jo Yoon-Ah followed after him annoyed.

“Yoo Yeonha, I heard you were number one among this year’s supporters.”

“*Haha*, really? I heard a lot about Jayden too. I think the instructors misbalanced the teams. We’re at too much of an advantage.”

“No, that’s just how the teams are. When there’s one exceptional person... I’m sure you know the rest. Yoo Yeonha clearly has baggage to carry.”

Yoo Yeonha and Jayden chatted. Even from my perspective, Jayden did a good job pleasing Yoo Yeonha without going too far. He was a good talker for a high schooler. Maybe I should have approached Yoo Yeonha the same way.

“Team 8, enter.”

Kim Soohyuk signaled our team’s turn.

* * *

The 8 of us walked through the cave. Our formation was perfect with 3 warriors in the front, supporters in the second row, sharpshooters in the third, and a single warrior in the last row.

After walking for a while, we arrived at a fork. There were 8 paths to choose from.

“Which path should we take?” Yoo Yeonha spoke to me for the first time.

“Jingyu, what do you think?” Jayden also asked his sharpshooter. Sharpshooters often acted as pathfinders.

“I don’t know.”

“Take the sixth path.”

I walked up and stood in front of the sixth path. However, the sixth path would likely be difficult. In truth, the difficulty of the paths was in order. The sixth path had a level 6 difficulty, but I had no other choice since Chae Nayun should’ve chosen this path. If Sven contracted with a djinn, Chae Nayun wouldn’t be able to handle him alone.

“Let’s take the sixth path.”

No matter what, I couldn’t lose a righteous character with a 9.5 potential. Not only would the future story become a mess, but it would also be a huge loss for this world.

“*Huh?* Who are you to tell us where to—”

“Just do as he says,” Yoo Yeonha interrupted Jayden. It was nice to know she trusted me as a pathfinder.

“He might look like that, but his eyes are exceptional.”

“Look like what? Do you have to put it that way?” I muttered.

“I’m praising you.”

Our team walked into the sixth path.

It was completely silent with only a dry wind from the entrance hitting our backs. After 10 minutes of tension... We finally encountered a target.

“There’s a monster in front.”

The salamander flashed its terrifying eyes and flickered its tongue. It seemed to be low-intermediate rank at best from its size, but monsters that could wield the 4 elements (water, wind, earth, fire) were tricky. Salamanders used the most destructive element, which was fire.

“You can see it?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“It’s a salamander. That should be the switch.”

The scenery should change once we defeated the salamander. A dungeon was an extradimensional space created with magic power. It might look like a cave at first, but the interior could change completely once we set off the switch. More often than not, a specific monster served as the dungeon’s switch.

“You can see? I don’t believe you,” Jayden doubtfully muttered.

“I’m telling you because I can see it. Just listen to me, jackass.”

He started to get on my nerves.

“What did you say?”

“*Tsk.* Quiet, both of you. Prepare for battle.”

Yoo Yeonha audibly sighed as she held up her whip.

Chapter 25

Mock Dungeon Trial (2)

“Salamander? Does anyone have the water attribute?”

Jayden asked as he stretched, but no 17 year old cadet would have that. One had to be enlightened to gain an attribute. Jayden didn’t expect much as he held up his sword.

“Well, I’m sure it’ll be easy.”

I took out my handgun. A salamander of that size should be low-intermediate rank, grade 6. Eight people were more than enough, but it seemed too easy. The members proceeded forward with their guard up.

“Oh, there it is.” Jayden pointed at the salamander loafing around.

“So you were right. I guess it’s true you can find dog turd to use as medicine.”

“It’s the other way around, retard.”

Jayden glared at me before quietly asking Kim Jingyu, “Wasn’t I right?”

“About what?”

“The proverb. That you can find dog turd to use as medicine.”

“It’s the opposite. You won’t find dog turd even if you want to use it for medicine.”

“Oh.”

Jayden glanced at Yoo Yeonha, afraid he had disappointed her. Instead, Yoo Yeonha seemed uninterested as she imbued her whip with magic power.

“Get ready. If it’s a switch, it should be a piece of cake.”

Yoo Yeonha swung her whip at the salamander’s tail.

“*Kueek—*”

The salamander couldn’t use its most powerful fire breath attack with its tail tied up. Immediately, Kim Jingyu shot an arrow at its eye while the warriors rushed forward. We killed the salamander in the blink of an eye. I didn’t even have the chance to do anything.

“Piece of cake. That was amazing, Yoo Yeonha. How did you grab its tail like that?”

Jayden flattered her, which made her smile. They felt proud of such an easy fight. I stepped toward them. At that moment... *Thwack*. I tripped on a rock and fell forward. Instinctively, I grabbed what was in front of me, most likely Yoo Yeonha’s head.

“*Kyak—*”

A high-pitched scream rang out. At the same time, a sharp object brushed past my hand and Yoo Yeonha’s hair. *Thud*. Yoo Yeonha fell.

“W-What? Is it an ambush!?”

Jayden made a fuss as he pointed his weapon in every direction. Soon, his eyes landed on me. I kneeled with my hand pressing Yoo Yeonha’s head into the ground.

“...”

“...”

Jayden and the rest of them stared blankly at a loss for words. An

ominous and dreary silence descended.

“...Let go.”

Yoo Yeonha said coldly. I could feel my heart squeeze. I took my hands off and pretended as if nothing had happened.

“You...”

Yoo Yeonha staggered up and glared at me without caring about her messed-up hair.

“*Huh?* What’s that?”

“What’s what?”

Hazuki pointed at the wall. I caught my breath thanks to the interruption. I saw an arrow stuck in the wall when I looked at where Hazuki pointed. Then I finally understood the situation. The sound of something cutting through the air and that strange brushing sensation... It wasn’t hard to figure out what just happened.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha turned. I was genuinely terrified. Her eyes widened as she saw the arrow. Although I didn’t intend it, I let out a dry cough and bluffed.

“There’s no need for thanks, Yoo Yeonha. We’re teammates after all.”

“Wow. How did you know? I didn’t feel it at all!” Hazuki expressed genuine awe.

“...Sharpshooters have great perception.”

Perception or whatever, the real reason must’ve been my high luck. All our perceptions far surpassed normal humans. If the others couldn’t detect it, I wouldn’t have either.

That arrow was most likely a magic power trap. I mean, just look at the power of that thing. It completely dug into the wall! It was too strong to be a trap for training.

“That was close. Are you ok, Yoo Yeonha?” I approached the arrow while making idle remarks.

“Huuu...”

I could hear Yoo Yeonha breathing behind me. *Did she forgive me? Or was she still angry?* I squatted in front of the arrow and turned on my laptop.

[Poison Arrow] [Killing Power – 4/10] [Additional Effect – Silent Ambush] — An arrow tipped with a nerve poison.

As I expected.

“I’ll take this.” I put the arrow in my bag along with my laptop.

“...Let’s go.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke. I flinched before turning around. Yoo Yeonha tidied herself up and stared at me while biting her lips. Jayden asked as he saw her expression.

“Yeonha, are you sure you’re okay?”

“Don’t chitchat.”

“Yes, got it.”

After that, we walked without much talking. The scenery began to change past the salamander’s corpse. The dark surroundings lit up. Plants and trees appeared. The trees looked like red maples. A wind began to blow, but it didn’t feel cool or refreshing. Instead, it felt hot and made it difficult to breathe.

“...So hot,” Jayden murmured as he took off his outer clothes. We all

took off a layer of clothes except for Yoo Yeonha. She kept her dignity even as she sweated.

“Haa... It must be a field type.”

Dungeons could generally be categorized into 2 types, stage or field. Stage dungeons contained multiple layers that had to be cleared in order while field dungeons just had monsters that needed to be killed until the boss appeared.

“Did the advance team hunt everything? There’s nothing here.”

Jayden yawned after walking for about 20 minutes.

“No, each team had different entrances. The other team should’ve started from the west if we started from the east. Also, I just spotted a group of monsters ahead.”

“Oh?”

Four salamanders and 11 peanut flames stood around tiny craters.

“15 in total, salamanders and peanut flames. Looks like it’ll be tough.”

“That many?”

Hazuki’s eyes widened.

“Yep.”

I held up my gun as Jayden condescendingly sneered.

“Pfft, what can you do with a gun? You won’t even be able to kill a peanut flame... retard.”

Jayden whispered the last bit so Yoo Yeonha wouldn’t hear. I had to admit. This training handgun couldn’t pierce the salamander’s skin. Peanut flames could also wield magic power and constantly covered themselves with flame barriers. However, I wasn’t entirely out of

options. I should be able to break the flame barriers if I hit 3 bullets in the same spot.

“You’ll see.”

“Hmph.”

Jayden twisted his lips as he released sword qi. “Do you want to bet if you’re so confident?”

“...”

I wasn’t strong enough to beat Jayden. When I was about to refuse...

Whish!

A whip struck the ground like lightning between Jayden and me.

“Whoa!”

“...!”

We turned towards Yoo Yeonha, but she coldly spoke only 2 words.
“Please. Focus.”

* * *

At the same time, Chae Nayun’s team suffered various setbacks because a trap had paralyzed Sven.

“Where did that arrow even come from?”

Chae Nayun grumbled as Sven murmured.

“You can leave me behi—”

“Leave you behind? Just stay put if you know you’re a bother.”

Even without Sven, Chae Nayun led her teammates this far. She would receive an overwhelming score if she could clear the dungeon. Chae Nayun couldn't give up the chance to win against Kim Suho.

"What should we do?" Her teammate Demian asked.

"Wait here for now. I think the dungeon boss is up ahead. Can you see it?"

Chae Nayun looked into the distance and spotted a giant golem with a lava body. The lava spilling from its body marked its territory.

"Yeah, it has to be the boss."

The magma golem was at least intermediate rank, grade 5. Chae Nayun and her team somehow managed to reach it, but they couldn't defeat it even if Sven was uninjured.

"We won't be able to beat it with just us. Another team should be arriving soon. Let's wait to join forces."

"But what if no one chose the same pathway?"

"That shouldn't be possible. At least 3 teams should come through by design."

Other cadets might've randomly chosen, but Chae Nayun knew a pathway would disappear once 3 teams entered it.

"Remember, we're graded on our individual performance, not who finishes first."

Sven couldn't hear Chae Nayun's irritated voice.

Huu. Huu.

His surroundings turned utterly silent. He felt like he was in a vacuum as he slowly collected his breath. The guilt he felt, his self-loathing, and his inferiority complex all seemed to disappear. Tranquility

descended upon him.

— *Child, don't you want to become stronger?*

A bewitching voice invaded his heart, causing a ripple on the calm surface. Sven slightly opened his eyes. Two brilliant spheres of light lit up the dark. Like eyes, they curved into an arc before pouring into his pupils.

— *Isn't it painful? I can give you power.*

The voice grew clearer as his heart pounded. A wave of emotions surged from the deepest depths of his heart and Sven teared up.

I want to become stronger. I want to become stronger. I want to meet the expectations of my country, everyone who calls me their greatest hope, and my parents who believe I will become the world's greatest hero. I don't want to suffer from this endless hopelessness and defeat. I don't want to hate myself anymore...

— *You only have to pay a small price. It's far lighter than giving everything up.*

Sven nodded at the warm voice. He slowly reached out towards the gentle light caressing him.

Chapter 26

Mock Dungeon Trial (3)

“I’m sure everyone knows what peanut flames are.”

Peanut Flames were low rank, grade 2 element type monsters. They looked like tiny will-o-wisps, but were actually lizards the size of an adult forearm. They looked like wisps of flame because they encased themselves in an oval flame barrier.

“We’ll have to kill the peanut flames first.”

The peanut flames only shot out fireballs, but they weren’t easy to deal with because they had tough barriers and traveled in groups.

“Who’s going to draw the salamanders’ attention?”

“I can do it.” Hazuki raised her hand at Jayden’s words.

“I’m pretty quick. I placed 5th in speed.”

“Perfect,” Jayden replied in English.

Yoo Yeonha spoke with a soft smile, “Salamanders are a lot slower than peanut flames, so you just have to draw their attention.”

“Yes, I’ll leave you to cover me.”

Hazuki stretched before shouting, “I’m going!”

She reached the cluster of monsters in the blink of an eye and hurled her axe with a lively grunt. The angry salamanders waddled towards Hazuki. Using this opportunity, Jayden rushed into enemy lines.

“*Huap!*”

His sword clashed against a peanut flame’s barrier. A flash of light erupted from the collision. Jayden cracked its barrier as a magic arrow struck it. Kim Jingyu’s follow-up attack easily shattered the barrier and Jayden cut down the defenseless lizard.

They displayed perfect teamwork, but many enemies were still left.

Jayden turned to a different direction. A terrifying whip shot past his shoulder, grabbing 3 peanut flames together. He charged towards them.

I also made my move. I didn’t need to run around like the others. I pulled the trigger 4 times after spotting a peanut flame. Simple and elegant. Four bullets shot out in a line towards the peanut flame.

The first bullet struck its barrier and exploded. The barrier still stood, but the second bullet immediately struck the same spot. The barrier shook, but remained. Next was the third bullet. It struck the same spot and finally broke the barrier. With its barrier gone, the fourth bullet instantly killed the lizard.

“...What?”

Next to me, the sharpshooter Kim Jingyu expressed his shock. Admittedly, what I did must’ve seemed quite impressive. I simply killed a peanut flame by pulling the trigger 4 times instead of arduously weaving an arrow with magic power and pulling a bowstring.

“Guns lack destructive power, but have less recoil and delay.”

I boasted as I waved my gun around. Honestly, this was only possible against weak and slow monsters like peanut flames. My luck also played a role.

“...”

“Focus, focus.”

Seeing Kim Jingyu dumbstruck, I pointed at the other peanut flames. Yoo Yeonha struck them down with her whip, which elongated and swept through the ground. I could feel a spark of electricity from her weapon. That was Yoo Yeonha's gift. It seemed she was close to achieving enlightenment.

Now wasn't the time to feel impressed or congratulate her. I looked for another peanut flame. They became more aggressive now that they were fully aware of our attack. Killing them wasn't as easy as before, but that didn't mean it was difficult. Although I couldn't break its barrier after 6 bullets, the seventh luckily pierced its magic core and killed it in one shot.

The battle was almost over by the time I killed 3 peanut flames. We attacked the 4 salamanders together once all the peanut flames died. Hazuki held them back and there was nothing they could do. I understood why salamanders were only low-intermediate rank. No matter how powerful their fire breaths, they couldn't use it once their tails were tied.

"*Whew*, it's over. I managed to kill 6 thanks to Yeonha."

"That's good to hear. Let's count them."

We approached the mana puppets. 1, 2, 3... 15. We had killed them all.

"Do we keep going?"

A light flashed from far away as Jayden spoke with a smile. I turned towards it and my mind blanked. A salamander breathed a beam of fire the size of a pillar. It hurled towards us and melted the ground. I felt my brain screaming. This would be a direct hit. There was no way to dodge. I would die if it hit. I had to block it, but how? Immediately, I thought of stigma's magic power. I might be able to block it if I could form a water barrier like the peanut flames' fire barrier.

Stigma shone blue as pain spread throughout my arm. The magic power released into the air according to my will.

A wave of fire swept through us. *Tzzzzzzzz*— A terrifying amount of

steam erupted from the collision. It clouded around like fog and blinded us. The fire breath destroyed the barrier I just created. A momentary silence descended until a deep voice spoke what everyone thought.

“...T-That was no joke.”

Thick terror could be seen on Jayden’s face. He was on the verge of a panic attack.

“That last attack, wouldn’t we be dead if it hit?”

Yeah, we would’ve been fried up good. I agreed in my head and collapsed. I couldn’t muster any strength left in my legs. My entire body felt numb and I thanked the dense fog of steam for hiding my pathetic state.

“Oy, sharpshooter. The salamander’s still alive, but we can’t see. Tell me where that bastard is before my heart explodes.”

Jayden’s voice still trembled. I also tried to stay calm. *Calm down, Kim Hajin. It can’t see us either. We just have to kill it before the steam disappears.*

“Follow the trajectory.”

I held up my gun. It was better to just show it than describe it with words.

“I’m shooting.”

I pulled the trigger. The bullet shot towards the salamander and left a blue trace. The trail lingered even though the bullet reached the salamander in under a second. The others immediately threw everything they had in the trail’s direction. The salamander died without a yelp, almost as though it had spent all its energy in the previous attack. I could hear the unpleasant sound of metal slashing through flesh.

“Wait, is this blood?”

Jayden murmured in surprise. Fresh blood streamed from the salamander's wound.

"A mana puppet with blood? That's impossible."

"Then what the fuck is this? It's sticky as hell. And what was that last attack? That was a real fire breath. I didn't even touch it and my skin burnt a little."

Mana puppet attacks were lowered by 2 ranks compared to their real counterparts. An attack from a low-intermediate rank mana puppet wouldn't even be at the level of a low rank monster. Mana puppets in combat training attacked according to the data set by Cube scientists.

"Calm down."

"You think I can just calm... Yes, you're right."

Jayden, who was about to erupt, calmed down in front of Yoo Yeonha.

"They didn't say something like this wouldn't happen. It's entirely possible that a normal salamander naturally evolved into a monster. After all, we're still in a dungeon even if it's artificial."

"..."

Jayden remained silent after Yoo Yeonha's explanation. He collected his breath. Yoo Yeonha was always like this, but Jayden was fairly composed for a high schooler. The steam around us began to dissipate. Everyone was slightly wet.

"Are you okay?"

Yoo Yeonha asked, likely because I was directly in front of the fire breath. My luck was 9.1, so why did it aim towards me of all people? Was the world trying to tell me to gain more SP? Or was it because I was the only one capable of blocking it? Yoo Yeonha dying would've been a great calamity.

"I'm fine."

I was fine, for now.

“Oh right. What the fuck was that?”

However, Jayden approached me with a fuss.

“What?”

“I said in the beginning that anyone with the water attribute should come out.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Oh, please. How did you block that fire breath then? That fucking steam was created because it clashed with water, didn’t it?”

“Sharpshooters normally carry a shield or two to protect themselves.”

“What?”

Stigma’s magic power followed my will and created a water barrier. This shield blocked the salamander’s attack, but I didn’t have any magic power remaining. This wasn’t something I could explain.

“This son of a bitch...”

“Quiet. Let’s get out of here for now. What just happened... I’m sure we’ll be compensated with additional points.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke as she stared at the salamander’s corpse.

* * *

Yoo Yeonha stole a glance behind her while walking. A dumb-looking man brushed his sweaty hair up. It would’ve looked cool if he was Shin Jonghak, but it was a bit unsightly when he did it. In any case, Yoo Yeonha couldn’t hide the strange feeling inside of her. A water attribute had undoubtedly blocked the salamander’s fire breath, but could a cadet who wasn’t Shin Jonghak or Kim Suho have an

attribute?

Yoo Yeonha recalled Chae Nayun saying that Kim Hajin was hiding his true strength.

Kim Hajin explained that he had a magic armament. Indeed, such defensive armaments existed. This equipment called cloth armor looked exactly like ordinary clothes, but could release magic power to protect its wearer.

For a moment, Yoo Yeonha wondered if Jin Sechan gave him cloth armor without telling her. Of course, that was impossible. Although salamanders were only low-intermediate rank, items that could block their fire breath cost at least 40 million won. Jin Sechan couldn't have possibly afforded that. He also had no reason to either.

Only 2 possibilities were left. Either what Chae Nayun said was true or Kim Hajin actually prepared cloth armor in fear of his life. Yoo Yeonha found the former more likely. In that case, how Kim Hajin knew the mountain tyrant's vital point would also make sense. The question was why he was hiding his power. She couldn't understand. Just why...

"We're here." Kim Hajin spoke up as Yoo Yeonha flinched from a guilty conscience.

"W-What's here? There's nothing here."

"We're almost there. The dungeon boss is up ahead along with another team."

"Oh?"

"Yeah, let's hurry. It looks like they're in trouble."

Kim Hajin took the lead and quickened his pace. Yoo Yeonha followed, still harboring suspicion.

Chapter 27

Mock Dungeon Trial (4)

[15:29:07]

Chae Nayun's team remained dead silent. They had no choice but to wait for another team. She wanted to stay far away from the boss so they could relax, but she also had to stay close enough to spot another team.

“Kuaaaak!”

A sudden scream broke the silence. Sven was suddenly having a seizure. Chae Nayun and her members turned to him in shock before turning back towards the magma golem in terror. Just as they feared, the magma golem spotted them. The team members all turned pale.

“—Guooooo!”

With an earthshaking roar, the magma golem slammed its fists on the ground. Lava flowed from its body as Chae Nayun carried Sven and shouted, “Dodge!”

Immediately, lava erupted from where they stood. The magma golem's terrifying ambush sent lava underground and erupted it into a pillar of fire. The cadets managed to spread out in time, but the magma golem was only getting started. Its mouth opened wide and a lava current poured out. Then it rode the current and charged at them.

“—Guooooo!”

The entire team ran away in fear. It targeted Chae Nayun, who was slowed by Sven. Instantly, it arrived in front of her and brandished its arms, slamming down and swinging sideways. Chae Nayun concentrated on dodging. Meanwhile, Sven murmured strange words on her back. Chae Nayun couldn't understand because he spoke in

German.

“Hey! Stop screwing around and wake up!”

Chae Nayun shouted as a pillar of fire shot up from where she stood. She quickly jumped back, but that wasn't the only pillar. Lava erupted all around her and trapped her inside several pillars. The magma golem raised its arms in front of her.

At that moment, Chae Nayun could feel her death. *This golem is going to kill me. This terrifying monster can't possibly be a puppet...* Petrified, she couldn't think. She stared at the 2 fists crashing down on her.

Tang!

The magma golem's head bent forward when the horrifying lava torrent almost devoured her. Then it suddenly stopped with its arms raised. It seemed angry, but froze from the previous attack.

Chae Nayun turned in the direction of the mysterious attack. There, she saw the guy with a handgun.

* * *

[15:30:30]

“What's this?”

We stood in front of a giant wall made of volcanic rocks at least 10 meters tall. This wall blocked the path to the boss, but it wasn't here a moment ago. Figuring out who put it here would have to wait.

“Hey, sharpshooter, didn't you say the boss was up ahead? It's a dead end.”

“It should be past this wall. Break it.”

“Acting like the leader, *huh*.”

Jayden took out his sword even though he complained and diagonally slashed with magic power.

Pang!

However, not even a scratch appeared on the wall. Only Jayden's hand trembled.

"Aaak! Yeah, genius idea!"

It must've hurt as he ran around in pain. I stood still and thought. It must be made of magic power if Jayden's sword qi couldn't break through. Yoo Yeonha wouldn't be able to break it either.

"Is this the right path? There was a fork in the road on our way here."
Yoo Yeonha asked in doubt as she touched the wall here and there.

"This is the right place."

No matter what anyone said, I could see Chae Nayun and her team fighting the magma golem beyond the wall. I closely inspected it and raised my head. I could see a faint stream of light from the top.

"Up there."

"What?"

The team members all looked up.

"There's a gap."

Was it for ventilation? Or was it carelessness by whoever created this wall? It was most certainly a mistake.

"How are we going to climb up there?" Jayden asked.

"You can't?" I retorted, genuinely curious. Warrior cadets could jump 4 meters on average. With magic power, it shouldn't be difficult to jump several times that height. It shouldn't be impossible for them

even though the wall was a bit high.

“What, you think you can do it? What are you going to hold on to when we can’t even make a dent?”

“...”

Jayden gave up, but I felt like I could do it. Just as he said, we couldn’t make any dents on the wall. However, the surface of volcanic rocks was rugged by nature. I should be able to climb it with my art.

I didn’t think parkour would come in handy so soon...

“I’m going ahead, so you can do whatever you want.”

“Stop joking. Let’s go back and try the other path.”

Yoo Yeonha turned back, but I lightly jumped up. I grabbed a jagged part of the surface and put my legs up. Then I reached up with my other hand. My hands and feet stuck to the wall like magnets.

Just like that, I reached the top in the blink of an eye. I looked down and felt lightheaded for a moment. It was higher than I thought.

“Is that guy a cat?” Jayden murmured in disbelief. I enjoyed surprising my team, but didn’t have the leisure to admire the view.

“Guooooo—!”

A terrifying roar came from beyond the wall.

“W-What! What was that!?”

“You guys come up too. I’m going first!” I squeezed through the gap and climbed down with parkour.

After landing, I caught a glimpse of the magma golem chasing Chae Nayun and her team. I knew it wasn’t a puppet the moment I saw it. It melted the field every time it moved, so how could it be a puppet?

I ran towards them and opened my extradimensional storage with stigma. The tattoo on my upper arm glowed and magic power gathered in my hand. It instantly condensed into the Desert Eagle and several bullets.

I loaded a water attribute bullet I had prepared for an emergency. It was an expensive investment that cost 30 SP. With my high luck, it should be incredibly powerful.

“Whew.”

I paused to catch my breath after getting into range, but didn't have time to rest. The magma golem surrounded Chae Nayun with fire pillars. I aimed at the back of its head and fired.

Tang!

The bullet squarely struck its head and the magma golem bent forward. The water attribute reacted with its lava body and petrified it thanks to the so-called paralysis state.

I looked past the magma golem and spotted Sven on Chae Nayun's back. She seemed shocked, but Sven looked like he had already fallen to a djinn. I shouted at Chae Nayun.

“Hey! Snap out of it!”

“...Huh?”

Thankfully, Chae Nayun responded.

“First, put that guy on the ground.”

“What, where are the others? Why are you the only one...”

“Put him down!”

Chae Nayun put Sven down.

“Happy?”

“Yeah.”

I ran in since the situation looked grim, but now I broke out in cold sweat. The magma golem’s body trembled. It tried to eject the bullet from its body, so it could move again. I signaled Chae Nayun.

“Hurry up and...”

Save me.

“Battle position!”

Chae Nayun shouted before I could finish my sentence. A spear flew in and pierced the magma golem’s neck. Her teammates followed suit. I turned around and ran behind Chae Nayun’s team.

“Buy time for me!”

Chae Nayun shouted as she pulled on her bowstring. Soon, her magic power condensed onto her bow. She was making a special magic power arrow. It seemed she learned from her previous defeat to the djinn at the museum. As expected, Chae Nayun was diligent when it came to self-reflection and training.

“...”

My jaws dropped at the sight in front of me. Chae Nayun’s magic power created a fierce current as it rushed towards the bow and formed an arrow. In truth, it was too big to be called an arrow. It was a pillar. An attack on this level would be impossible without exceptional mental and magic power.

The magma golem freed itself before her arrow could finish forming.

“Guooooo—!”

Her teammates held out as long as they could, but the magma golem

sent them flying with a single swing. It roared and charged towards Chae Nayun. I held up my gun, but a sword struck the magma golem before I could fire.

The sword strike... came from Sven. After blocking the magma golem with his sword, Sven turned around and muttered.

“Sorry, I recovered late.”

Chae Nayun let loose her bowstring without an answer. Sven jumped to the side. With a brilliant light, her giant arrow pierced through the magma golem’s heart.

“*Haa... Haa...*”

Chae Nayun collapsed as soon as she shot her arrow. It would take roughly 15 seconds for her to recover.

“—*Guooo...*”

The magma golem didn’t die even after such an enormous magic attack. Chae Nayun bit her lips.

“I’ll take care of the rest.”

Sven sliced off its head before the magma golem could recover. Then it turned into hard volcanic rock before crumbling into dust. Silence descended.

Sven sheathed his sword and gave me a slight nod.

“Thank you for helping us.”

“...”

I stared at him. He had undoubtedly formed a contract with a djinn, but he hadn’t lost control yet like in the original story. I felt thankful since I had no energy left to fight a djinn, but Sven was destined to go berserk. He would only tread further onto the path of destruction

because the devil he contracted with was far too powerful for him.

“Sure took your sweet time, bastard.”

Chae Nayun muttered on the ground. She had a lot to say, but ran out of strength.

Chapter 28

The Djinn and Gari Mountain (1)

I stared up while lying on the ground. The dungeon boss had been killed, but the scorching heat remained and dug into my clothes.

Bored, I tilted my head to the side. Chae Nayun's team chatted some distance away. They offered me to join them, but I refused. I was too tired to answer any questions they'd inevitably ask.

"Huum."

Chae Nayun took a deep breath and got up. She walked over after stealing some glances.

"..."

She cast a shadow over me and looked down at my face.

"What."

I curled my upper body. Chae Nayun frowned as her sweat dripped. She straightened her expression and sat next to me. Of course, she was still about 10 feet away.

"...I thought I should say this."

I wasn't sure if she was embarrassed or ashamed, but Chae Nayun stuttered with great difficulty.

"T-Thanks."

"..."

I was genuinely at a loss for words and stared in shock. I never thought I'd ever hear that from her.

Chae Nayun. Age 17-27 in the story. She was only 16 by American standards. [1] Despite her youth, her life was far from normal. On the contrary, it was filled with tragedy.

The first should have occurred on her sixth birthday. A djinn killed her mother on what should've been her happiest day. Her personality completely changed after that incident. The child who dreamt of becoming like her mom cried tears of blood and sought to become a hero. She trained to hit and destroy targets while other children laughed and played.

The scar from that day was deeply etched in her heart. As a fourth generation chaebol, she couldn't even confide in a friend to mend this wound. Revealing one's deepest thoughts was akin to weakness and the hyenas would jump at any opportunity.

The only person she could rely on was her sibling who also shared the same pain, Chae Jinyoon. She rarely saw her father because he was too busy as the family's successor.

However, this cruel world had even taken Chae Jinyoon from her. What she must've felt... I had no idea because I never wrote them. Most likely, Chae Nayun must've honed her conviction even sharper. Believing only in herself and pursuing strength as the way of life, she must've ignored her wounded heart. Telling herself she could overcome everything without ever opening up to anyone. She must've painfully trained and trained...

Not many people would've ever received a thanks from her. I knew this better than Chae Nayun herself because I once wrote her saying *sorry* instead of *thank you*.

Just now though, she said thanks. That was the greatest praise she could give someone, but my heart sank because of what I had to accomplish.

I had to kill the person she loved the most. I had to make her experience losing her family once more.

“By the way...”

Chae Nayun’s voice cut off my thoughts. She smacked her lips as though she had something else to say.

“What.”

I urged her in frustration. Chae Nayun added just a sentence while still looking up.

“...Why aren’t you fighting back?”

“*Hm?* What do you... Oh.”

She meant Shin Jonghak’s lackeys. She felt regret even though she instigated it.

I simply replied, “Because I can’t win even if I fight back.”

Chae Nayun furrowed her brows and finally looked at me. She truly had a baby face. Unlike the adult-like Yoo Yeonha, Chae Nayun’s cheeks still had a bit of baby fat. Was it because the magma golem beat her up? She looked like a bun. I laughed inwardly.

“What are you talking about? I saw the power of your gun with my own eyes.”

“Oh, that?”

I took out the Desert Eagle from my bag. I couldn’t use my extradimensional storage until stigma recovered its magic power.

“My personal weapon. Does that explain it?”

Chae Nayun stared in shock at my high rank weapon.

“You know you could get expelled if you’re found out, right?”

“That’s why I only use it when I need to.”

Chae Nayun closed her mouth and rubbed her chin. I had no idea what she thought, but I waited since she looked serious. After about 3 minutes, she finally voiced her thoughts.

“It still doesn’t add up completely... *Ah*, wait, your gift! You must have a gift that strengthens guns!”

I held myself back from laughing. A gift and enlightenment were 2 different things. Even before enlightenment, a gift could be observed and developed through hard work.

“You can think what you want.”

I shrugged without correcting her misunderstanding. Chae Nayun concluded her guess as the truth and proudly nodded.

“*Huhu*, I knew it. Oh, I’ll let you off the hook for using your personal weapon. Just don’t use it again.”

Chae Nayun stood up and dusted herself off. She paused before walking away.

“...By the way.”

“What.”

She asked in a much lower tone with her back still facing me.

“...Don’t you have anything to say to me?”

“...”

Her question made me flinch. This might be her offer of reconciliation that she would forgive me for my remarks about her brother. This was a huge concession from what I knew about her personality.

“...I don’t.”

However, I rejected her and got up. My current relationship with Chae

Nayun was at the perfect distance. Cold, but not freezing. I called it the uncomfortable neighbor distance. Anything more would burden me.

“...I see.”

I made eye contact with Sven as she left. He didn't avoid my gaze and tilted his head with emotionless eyes. I felt a chill down my back.

— *Emergency alert. All cadets must evacuate the dungeon immediately. Once again, all cadets must evacuate the dungeon immediately.*

A sound rang out from above. The mock dungeon trial had concluded. I turned back to where I came from.

“Huh?”

Although others might only see a faint silhouette, I could see Yoo Yeonha in the distance. She made it up the wall all covered in dust, but the mock dungeon trial just ended. She went through all that trouble for nothing.

“Argh...”

Yoo Yeonha shook at the injustice with her eyes shut.

* * *

The mock dungeon trial ran into several problems. The first was that many of the internal cameras had stopped working. The second was a systematic error. The instructors had discovered the broken cameras too late. The final and biggest problem was that real monsters had trespassed into the dungeon. As a result, they canceled the mock dungeon trial and postponed everyone's grades.

“Wow, really? A natural born magma golem?”

“Yeah, I heard it was intermediate ranked.”

“No way... So what happened? Who killed it?”

“It was Chae Nayun and Sven...”

The cadets outside the dungeon chattered loudly while the instructors checked everyone off to make sure there were no casualties.

“*Sigh.*”

...Then what was all the trouble I went through for?

Yoo Yeonha felt lethargic and staggered. Then she spotted Chae Nayun at the dungeon entrance. Yoo Yeonha wanted to ask several questions.

“Nayun.”

“*Hm?* Oh, Yeonha. What’s up?”

“Are you okay? I heard the magma golem...”

She brought up a topic she wasn’t interested in before bringing up Kim Hajin when Chae Nayun looked bored.

“Oh right, you know Kim Hajin, right? The guy you brought up during our last—”

“*Mmm?* Ah, Kim Hajin?” Chae Nayun murmured.

“...*Eh?*”

Chae Nayun reacted completely different from before. Previously, she growled when Kim Hajin was mentioned, but now she seemed fine.

“*Uh...* Yeah, Kim Hajin.”

“What about him?”

“Well... Remember what you said before? That he—”

Chae Nayun lightly cut her off. “Oh, that? It was a misunderstanding.”

“...Yes?” Yoo Yeonha was dumbfounded.

Just a few days ago you coughed up blood talking about him, and now you're saying it was a misunderstanding? I don't think it's a misunderstanding!

“It was a misunderstanding. Well, I wouldn't say he's someone I want to be friends with, but he's not such a bad guy.”

Yep, that's right. Chae Nayun nodded, satisfied with her judgment.

Yoo Yeonha stared at Chae Nayun. She was so annoyed she wanted to strangle her.

“Oh, hey! Kim Suho!” Chae Nayun suddenly shouted. Yoo Yeonha felt like her eardrums would burst.

“I'll talk to you later, Yeonha!”

Chae Nayun ran past Yoo Yeonha and disappeared. She acted like a puppy chasing after her master. Yoo Yeonha turned and saw Kim Suho. Chae Nayun ran up to him as he left the dungeon, slapped his back, and stood in front of him.

“Whoa, that surprised me.”

“Did anything happen to your team?”

“It was no joke. I almost died from exhaustion.”

Kim Suho had chosen the 8th pathway.

“I can see it on your face. You look like a grandpa.”

“Really?”

Yoo Yeonha watched their affectionate interaction with interest. She was happy to see them hit it off. Kim Suho seemed to resemble Chae Nayun's older brother.

“Oh, Chae Nayun. Here you are.”

Shin Jonghak cut in between them as if to break them apart.

“Huuu.”

Yoo Yeonha sighed. She began to walk towards them since Shin Jonghak showed up, but noticed someone staring at Chae Nayun from a distance.

“What's up with him?”

The way Kim Hajin looked at Chae Nayun seemed... strange. His eyes carried a deep sadness. Yoo Yeonha stared at his disgusting eyes for a moment before coming up with her own conclusion.

“What? He likes Chae Nayun too? The heck... What's so good about a tomboy like her?”

Yoo Yeonha shook from the frustration in her heart, but even if other boys liked Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak couldn't. She quickly walked over to the 3 of them.

1. In Korea, you are considered one year old at birth. 📌

Chapter 29

The Djinn and Gari Mountain (2)

I finally returned to my room at 11 P.M. It took 12 hours after the Mock Dungeon Trial. Cube told the cadets that an internal investigation would occur rather than deploying the police or heroes from the association. That was only because no cadets had been killed or injured.

The djinns in the upper brass of Cube had successfully masked the incident. An extensive external investigation wouldn't occur until after the second incident.

“I got super lucky.”

The fitness center was closed because of the incident today, so I loafed around in my room and looked at my laptop.

[An incredible luck has been applied, you have avoided a silent ambush!]

[Narrow Escape from Death (1/9) – You have partly unlocked the special stat, accumulation of luck.]

I had dodged that poison arrow by pure luck, which unlocked a special stat called accumulation of luck. A special stat was... Well, to explain this, I had to first explain how stats worked.

In this world, stats were divided into 3 major categories: variable stats, invariable stats, and special stats. Variable and invariable stats existed from birth. Even a baby had strength, magic power, vitality, intelligence, and other basic stats.

However, most people didn't have special stats. For example, every human was born with magic power, but not magic power control or mental power, which one needed to use magic power. These 2 abilities came from innate talent and continuous effort. Most cadets generally

had 2 special stats like magic power control and mental power. Kim Suho had one called resistance and Chae Nayun had one called intuition.

“Hmm.”

[Accumulation of luck – 11%]

It was only 11% unlocked, so I couldn't do anything with it. The stat had no explanation, so I didn't even know its purpose.

Well, I'm sure I'll find out eventually.

More importantly, I needed to know what Sven was planning. He was undoubtedly scheming something regarding Chae Nayun and would likely lose control once they were alone. After all, one of the negative side effects of a djinn contract was intensified emotions like obsessions.

Should I contact Chae Nayun? No.

I opened my laptop. It felt like a crime... no, it was definitely a crime, but I had no choice. I hacked Chae Nayun's smartwatch with my laptop's internet functionality. I only needed to spend a small amount of SP.

[Chae Nayun → Kim Suho] [Hey, what's up?]

[Shin Jonghak → Chae Nayun] [Hey, do you want to grab a late night snack?]

Several messages flew by. I tried my best not to look. I only needed Sven's. As expected, Chae Nayun received messages from male and female cadets. I only found Sven's name after scrolling for a while.

Sven: [Thank you for yesterday.]

[Yeah, you did well too. By the way, why do you keep talking politely? It's uncomfortable.]

Sven: [Is it? I'll talk casually then.]

...

Sven: [I hear the hunting club is going to Gangwondo this week. Wanna hunt together?]

[Yeah, sure.]

It looked like a basic conversation between acquaintances, but Sven's last message caught my eye. In the original story, Sven went berserk during the hunting club's trip.

At that moment...

[Hajin.]

I received a message on my smartwatch. I saw the sender's name and couldn't help but feel curious. It was Kim Suho.

[Are you free on Thursday?]

"What's up with him?"

Why was Kim Suho suddenly contacting me? Oh, it's that.

For the internal investigation of the previous incident, Cube decided to select the most trustworthy cadets from each grade to search for the culprit. The freshman representatives were unsurprisingly Shin Jonghak, Kim Suho, and Chae Nayun.

"...But isn't it too early?"

I wasn't sure of the exact date, but I remembered it being around early April. Currently, it was the end of March. The investigation team formed quicker than I thought. I still couldn't understand why he contacted me.

[Why?]

[I can't tell you yet. I'll tell you about it in person. For now, just know that Nayun recommended you.]

“Chae Nayun?”

Why would Chae Nayun recommend me? Because I have good eyes?

I hesitated because the timing wasn't good. Classes were canceled on Wednesday and Thursday, so I planned on going to the Gari Mountain Dungeon on Wednesday and the hunting club on Thursday. I replied.

[I'm busy on Thursday, but I'm free on Friday.]

[That's fine, we can meet then.]

Kim Suho instantly replied.

“Well, it's better the closer I am to the storyline.”

After agreeing, I went back to looking at my laptop. Next on the list was Sven's social media accounts.

* * *

Gangwondo was Korea's biggest mountain range. The region included Baekdu Mountain, which was known for its rich life energy, and other mountains like Mount Kumgang, which were rich in spiritual energy. Martial artists referred to this area as the mecca of training. It attracted all sorts of people like hunters, poachers, heroes, and mercenaries. Among these was also a special occupation known as a ginseng digger.

A ginseng digger searched the mountains for ginseng. They weren't strong enough to combat monsters, but had heightened senses of sight and smell. Ginseng could be found in many countries, but the most expensive came from Korea. Naturally, ginseng diggers commonly inhabited Gangwondo.

Kim Yunjoon was such a ginseng digger.

Gangwondo's ginseng sold for sky-high prices even if they were young because it increased the body's mana capacity. Kim Yunjoon didn't fully understand the effects, but he spent 10 years in Gangwondo's dangerous mountains to dig up money.

The last ginseng he discovered was a 4 year old one a year ago. He hadn't earned any income since, but his family didn't complain since he received 300 million won from it.

Today marked the twentieth time Kim Yunjoon climbed Gari Mountain.

"Hmm?"

As always, he walked while looking down. When he raised his head to wipe his sweat, he spotted a young man who was neither ugly nor handsome, simply average. Still, his body seemed well-built, although that was also common for ginseng diggers. The young man repeatedly walked, paused, and looked at a map.

"A ginseng digger, but ginsengs can't be found on maps. He must be a newbie."

Kim Yunjoon grinned and walked towards him. The young man turned around, noticing his presence. Kim Yunjoon cheekily asked, "Are you also a ginseng digger?"

The young man stared at him before shaking his head.

"No, I'm just looking for a place."

He hid his map behind him. Kim Yunjoon found his actions quite cute.

"Haha, I understand where you're coming from, but ginseng isn't something you can find with maps."

"...Yes?"

"That map, I don't know where you got it, but don't believe it too much. Only heaven knows where ginseng is."

“What?”

The young man tilted his head. Kim Yunjoon had a lot he wanted to teach this novice. He felt it was his responsibility as an elite ginseng digger.

Kim Yunjoon began to talk about his experience and showed off his cutting-edge equipment. He explained how to dig while avoiding damage to the ginseng, and showed some pictures of his wife and 13 year old son before laughing and smacking the young man’s shoulder.

“When I see young’uns climbing the mountain, I can’t help but think they’re simply dreaming of striking a fortune. Jumping into the mountains with such a flimsy mindset is no different from throwing away your life. Forgive me, but I hope what I taught you will come in handy.”

“Ah... yes.”

The young man nodded with a blank face. Kim Yunjoon felt deep admiration and respect from his eyes. His effort felt worthwhile.

“Then take care. I wish you good luck. I hope you can grow up to threaten me as a competitor. Don’t forget the advice I gave you today.”

Kim Yunjoon walked past the young man. He waved just in case the young man was watching him leave.

* * *

“...”

I stared at a man’s back. Then I looked down at my smartwatch. Unknowingly, 30 minutes had passed.

“Who was he?”

I ended up wasting time because of some talkative guy. I wanted to cut him off in the middle, but hesitated because he might have been a

named herbalist. I didn't notice anything special about his appearance or pictures. He was just a normal ginseng digger.

"I think it's this way..."

I looked at my map once again. It pointed to the Gari Mountain Dungeon. I obtained it from the Book of Truth. Just like a genie lamp, all I had to do was ask, *Where is the Gari Mountain Dungeon?*, and it gave me this map.

The map showed my live location like a GPS. I continued towards the dungeon's location. After about 10 minutes of walking...

"Uk!"

Thud. I tripped on something.

"Agh, what is it now?"

I got up after falling pathetically. A stem of some sort tangled around my leg. At first, I was afraid it was some sort of plant monster, but it was just an ordinary stem.

"*Whew*, that surprised me."

I pulled on the stem. It didn't seem very deep and I didn't use much strength. When I pulled the stem out, something resembling a bellflower root popped out.

"What's this?"

I threw the root on the ground. After dusting myself off, I suddenly remembered what the man just told me. *Ginseng*. I looked at the root again. It did resemble a mandrake. I took out my laptop and read the description.

[7 year old Ginseng] — A plant that achieved magic power on its own through condensed life energy and spiritual energy. Has strong efficacy no matter how it's used. — A treasured item full of nutrients.

“ ... ”

I became speechless. I wanted to say something, but I was too dumbfounded. I could only murmur inwardly.

Jackpot.

Chapter 30

The Djinn and Gari Mountain (3)

Ginseng served many purposes such as increasing one's stats by consuming it or grinding it into ingredients for high rank potions. Its magic power could also be used to enchant items.

I didn't have the equipment to make potions or a magician to help with enchantment. I could either eat it or sell it.

"Eating it is a bit..."

This ginseng should be worth 700 million won. I could avoid being scammed by selling it through the Violet Banquet. If I sold it, I could invest the money into stocks and make 4-5 billion won. That was enough to buy 7 ginseng.

"Argh, this is hard."

The unexpected fortune increased my worries. For now, I put the ginseng in my bag. I could think about this first world problem after the Gari Mountain Dungeon.

* * *

I dusted off my hands in front of the cave.

"So this is why no one has discovered it yet."

Huuu. I glanced behind me at the razor-sharp cliff that stood an inch away. The Gari Mountain Dungeon was located in the middle of the cliff, buried in moss and vines. I could feel my heart thumping. Even with parkour, the journey had been difficult. Without stigma's magic power, I would be too scared to jump.

“Hmm.”

I looked into the dark cave before entering. My thousand-mile eyes could see through everything, including the dark. Not long afterward, I discovered a ghost that should’ve been the switch monster.

Like in the original story, the Gari Mountain Dungeon was an undead dungeon. Monsters included dullahans, banshees, and other undead that ranged from low-intermediate rank, grade 9 to grade 3. The boss should be a death knight, which I wouldn’t be able to beat. Not even Tomer had fully cleared this dungeon. A death knight was a high-intermediate rank, grade 1 monster that only a high rank hero could defeat.

I was satisfied with just finding the dungeon. *With my current strength, beating the hidden stage would be impossi...*

“No.”

I looked into my bag. Suddenly, the ginseng I picked up became more dazzling.

“...”

A hidden stage was a completely isolated space from the standard dungeon, making it significantly easier to clear. The quicker one cleared it, the better the reward. Above all, I worried if Tomer might come here sooner than planned if I didn’t clear this stage now. The hidden stage’s reward was a formless weapon called aether. It lacked a clear form and could easily be mistaken as a lump of magic power, but aether was considered a weapon because it had no form. Therefore, it could change into whatever the user desired. Furthermore, aether was an evolving weapon.

It was worth it, even if I had to sacrifice the ginseng. Of course, I wouldn’t use the entire thing. Instead, I broke off 3 of its 7 roots.

[7 year old Ginseng Root] — The root of a 7 year old ginseng. Contains condensed magic power.

First, I tried modifying the root’s setting.

— *For 1 hour, will increase all variable stats by 4 points.*

I thought it wouldn't cost too much SP since I edited the effect it already had.

[You do not have enough SP.]

I was wrong. It seemed that raising stats required more restrictions than I thought. I had no choice but to try again.

— *For 30 minutes, will increase all variable stats by 2 points.*

[5 SP will be used. Would you like to save?]

This was satisfactory. I modified 2 ginseng roots with the above setting. My stats would increase by 4 points for 30 minutes after eating them. Other than magic power, my variable stats would be on par with Yoo Yeonha.

However, I gave the last ginseng root a different setting.

— *Soaks into magic power and strengthens it.*

[5 SP will be used. Would you like to save?]

I hit *[save]*. With this, I should be able to clear the hidden stage.

I confidently entered the cave. An extreme chill penetrated my body as soon as I entered.

“Ugh.”

I walked forward while regulating my breath.

Ssssss.

I heard a strange sound and hid behind the cave's wall. I could see the hologram-like ghost wavering in the air even without the thousand-mile eyes. That was the switch monster. I could kill a monster of that

level even without the ginseng.

I took out my Desert Eagle. My gift, Master Sharpshooter, had already reached grade 8. Piercing the vital point of such a slow monster was easier than push-ups.

I pulled the trigger.

The bullet phased through without doing any physical damage, but its magic power squarely hit between the ghost's eyes. Then the ghost burst into light without a sound.

A strange wind swept by and absorbed the light like a vacuum.

I started following the incredibly faint stream of light to the hidden stage where an inferior witch waited.

After about 10 minutes, I finally arrived in an isolated space.

The witch that carried aether stood in the middle. I took out my laptop.

Whiiiiish.

[Witch] — Evandel the Witch. Possesses a spirit body and produces low rank ghosts.

Countless monsters and devils appeared after Outcall, but witches were rare. It was difficult to classify a monster as a witch.

First, a witch had to have the ability to produce ghosts. A witch's home was often called a stronghold because of the high number of undead they produced. Second, a witch needed a human body to properly use their magic. Finally, a witch also required intelligence on par with humans to efficiently command their ghosts.

The witch in front of me was inferior because she didn't meet the second and third requirements.

However, Evandel would become infamous in the future.

Adult witches were difficult to deal with. The most efficient way to subjugate them was to kill them when they were young before its intelligence and body fully developed. However, djinns had raised Evandel in the original story. After reaching adulthood, she established her stronghold in an abandoned school in Suwon. This stronghold, known as Evandel's Castle, became the most fearsome in history. The Hero Association famously considered it no different than a tower.

I would obtain 2 things from killing this inferior Evandel. One was aether and the other was Evandel's seed. In the original story, Tomer only took aether and gave Evandel's seed to the followers of Isabel. I needed to kill Evandel since I planned on taking both. There was only one problem...

"She's a child."

I hesitated because of her appearance. She had a tiny face and was only 140 cm tall. With soft hands, she squished the soul of the ghost I just killed. Tomer had killed that child and I had to do the same.

"Huuu."

I had to do it. I was the one who created her anyways. I released stigma's magic power after resolving myself. A bullet couldn't kill a witch in a spirit body even if I modified it. That would only waste SP.

Light attribute, spear.

I breathed my will into stigma's magic power. I desired a spear with the light attribute. It used all of stigma's magic power, but the size and sharpness came out horrible. The amount of stigma's magic power wasn't even enough to properly form an arrow, so a spear was too greedy.

However, I could easily sharpen the spear. I placed a ginseng root on it and increased its size and luster. Next, I swallowed the 2 modified ginseng roots from before. Immediately, I could feel my body surge with vitality.

A stat increase of 4 points... no, probably less since I took one after the other. Still, my body felt completely different from before. My muscles brimmed with strength as though they would explode. I felt hot, yet light like I was no longer human, but some sort of radioactive monster. Breathing roughly, I looked down at my body. It had bulked up and my 5 senses felt extremely sensitive. As I thought, the spear was the most powerful choice with amplified stats.

“*Huup!*”

I hurled the spear with all my strength. It shot through the air like lightning towards the target. The spear had already pierced Evandel’s head the moment I let go.

—...?

However, Evandel had survived with the spear in her head. She turned towards me and I felt an indescribable terror. A muddy stream began to form from her hands as a vengeful spirit took shape.

“*Um*, wait. Can we talk this out?”

— *Uuaaang...*

Evandel suddenly collapsed with a strange cry. The life energy disappeared from her body and a seed fell to the ground.

“Was that an instinctive reaction before death?”

After calming down, I went and picked up the seed. Then I proceeded into the dark to retrieve the slime-like weapon with a blue glow. This was the weapon that made Tomer one of the executives of Wicked. Before I reached for it, I checked its description with my laptop.

[Aether] [Mystic – Formless] [Evolving] A corporeal, but formless weapon. Will adhere to its master or a weapon, reinforcing their strength.

— *Master selection: Will not adhere to another being once a master is chosen.*

— *Physical body reinforcement: Will increase the variable stats of its owner by 0.6 points.*

— *Weapon reinforcement: Will adhere to its master's weapon and strengthen the weapon's attack power. Aether can also form into a weapon by itself. (Current aether rank – high rank)*

— *Evolving weapon: All of the above functions will evolve along with its owner. Other functions may develop depending on aether's awakening.*

I had obtained my weapon, but I didn't expect things to end so easily.

Clack clack clack—

Bones joined together to form the shape of humans. Soon, I found myself surrounded by skeletons.

Chapter 31

Same Bed, Different Dreams (1)

“Ah...”

I groaned as I lay on the ground with bones all around me. I had no talent for close ranged combat, but I didn't want to waste precious bullets on skeletons. I had transformed aether into a club. The ginseng's effect had worn off, but I wondered why I acted so bold.

“I would've died if they were black skeletons...”

I destroyed 3-4 white skeletons every time I swung the club. My body felt stronger, but the fight still took 25 minutes. If they weren't low ranked white skeletons... I didn't even want to imagine the outcome.

“Agh.”

I scratched my back with a bone. Finally, I managed to obtain aether and Evandel's seed. This was my most significant accomplishment since entering my novel. I opened my laptop.

[A fraction of the ginseng's effect has dissolved into your body. Your strength and stamina have increased by 0.02 points!] [You have obtained 47 SP.]

I didn't gain much from the system. Was it because aether wasn't a well-known weapon yet?

▷Variable Stats [Strength 2.455] [Stamina 2.545] [Speed 2.85]
[Perception 3.705] [Vitality 2.465] [Magic power 1.925]

The increase in my variable stats felt worthwhile. Aether boosted each by 0.6 points, raising them above 2 except for magic power. Finally, I could barely qualify as a real cadet.

“It’s time to leave.”

I closed the laptop after appreciating my stats. I wasn’t sure if I could properly walk, but I would die if any more monsters came.

I forced my creaking body up.

* * *

I barely made it to the dorm before curfew at 10 P.M. Immediately, I showered and washed away all the dirt. The warm water felt so refreshing after a rough day.

“Phew.”

I wiped myself off after showering. The 0.6 stat increase physically showed. Without flexing, I had a clear six-pack. I guess it was the same for other cadets too. I stopped fooling around in the mirror and left the bathroom. After putting on my underwear, I set my laptop and Evandel’s seed on the desk.

“I brought it, but...”

[Evandel’s Seed] — Seed containing the soul of the witch Evandel.

When this seed germinates, Evandel the Witch of Despair will be born. Her title sounded evil, but she could become a powerful ally. The environment where one grew up was crucial in raising any living being. I just had to raise her well.

Feeding the seed required small amounts of blood instead of water. A witch’s personality and growth depended on whose blood. Chae Nayun’s or Kim Suho’s would be best, but acquiring it wouldn’t be easy.

“I’ll just hold onto you for now.”

I wrapped Evandel’s seed in a handkerchief and placed it in a drawer. Chae Nayun and Kim Suho regularly donated blood. Perhaps, I could pull some tricks and steal their blood.

Next, I hacked Chae Nayun's smartwatch to prepare for tomorrow. Coincidentally, she was chatting with Sven.

Sven: [You're coming to the club tomorrow, right?]

[Yeah, when are we meeting?]

Sven: [Come to the Portal at 4.]

[Why so early?]

Sven: [The meeting is in Gangwondo, so let's bet who will get more kills before the seniors arrive.]

[Sure, sounds good.]

They seemed to have gotten fairly close. The official meeting was at 5 P.M., but Sven had asked to meet an hour earlier.

4 P.M.

After noting the time, I accessed Violet Banquet to sell the ginseng. Packhorse Master stock was on the rise. I wanted to buy more before it was too late.

[Violet Banquet Online Auction House] [Item for Sale] [Description: 7 year old ginseng from Gangwondo's mountain.]

[Please place the item on the portal for appraisal.]

A circular hologram projected from the laptop screen. Once I placed the ginseng there, it would be transported to Violet Banquet's appraisal center where they would appraise and auction it. Unfortunately, I couldn't explain the technology. Magic engineering created a portal, but I had no clue how it projected remotely. Modern technology wasn't advanced enough to achieve such a feat.

However, Violet Banquet could do it. The reason was simple. It was the reward from the Tower of Information. Towers gave rewards

beyond anyone's imagination.

[The item has been transported. It will be appraised within the next 24 hours.]

I closed the laptop after the ginseng disappeared.

* * *

Thursday, 3:30 P.M.

I got dressed before it was too late. I felt in peak condition thanks to the modified fatigue recovery potion. Now, I just had to coincidentally join up with Sven and Chae Nayun. I wanted to chase Sven away if possible, but that was beyond my ability.

I left the dorm and arrived at the bus station. A bus soon arrived, but I passed. I waited for Chae Nayun and noticed her from a mile away. Her face radiated wherever she went.

“What are you doing here?”

Chae Nayun acknowledged my existence at least. I tilted my head nonchalantly. Sven should already be waiting at the portal station, but I knew Chae Nayun would be late. That was just her personality. I also peeked at the message she sent Sven.

“Why didn't you get on the bus?” Chae Nayun asked. I flinched for a moment. So she had seen me waiting for the bus. Come to think of it, Chae Nayun also had good eyes.

“I came too early for the club meeting, so I skipped it since I don't have anything better to do.”

“Oh? What club are you in?”

“Hunting.”

“Hunting? I'm in hunting too. I don't remember seeing you...”

The bus arrived while Chae Nayun spoke. I hopped as she followed.

“I didn’t go to the orientation, so that’s probably why.”

I sat on a seat.

“...I see.”

Chae Nayun sat across from me and doubtfully glanced before opening her mouth.

“Just how many clubs are you in? I heard from Yeonha that you were in her club.”

“Three.”

“Wow, what a waste of time.”

“You’re in 2 too.”

“I’m... So what?”

I forced myself to smile before closing my eyes. I didn’t want to continue this conversation. Chae Nayun didn’t seem to mind ending it either.

We arrived at the portal station without talking for the rest of the ride. I could see Sven in the distance. He ran towards the bus, but paused when he saw me. Then he walked up with a smile.

“You came earlier than I expected.”

“*Mhm.* Oh right, Sven. You know him, right? He’s the one who helped us before. Kim Hajin.”

“Yeah, I know. Hey.”

Sven and I shook hands. He tried to let go, but I didn’t let him. Instead, I firmly grasped his hand and stared into his black, lifeless

eyes. My observation gift peered deep into his pupils and caught a glimpse of Asmodeus' evil energy.

“Hey, what are you doing?”

Chae Nayun stepped in and separated us. No, she separated Sven from me.

“Why are you picking a fight?”

She snapped at me, but I turned around without saying anything and walked to the portal station's entrance. I wasn't particularly skilled at distinguishing the state of djinns, but Sven was undoubtedly in a dangerous condition. I could simply tell by looking at my laptop.

[In the original story, he died after going berserk without accomplishing anything.] [Modified setting – Has increased self-control and mental power to help restrain Asmodeus' power.]

* * *

We arrived at a residential area in Gangwondo. Many monsters and wild animals roamed around because of the high mana density. The hunting club, Leonidas, cooperated with the local government and residents to hunt in the area. The cadets helped the citizens while enjoying their hobbies by hunting these creatures.

“You met on the way here?”

Sven asked Chae Nayun at the club's meeting place.

“Yeah.”

Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes at Kim Hajin's movements. He sat on a rock and looked at his watch. He kept doing that while pretending to be oblivious and loitered around them.

“Doesn't it look like he's following us?”

“Yeah.”

“...”

Sven stared at Kim Hajin for a while before continuing, “Be careful.”

“About what?”

“You heard about cadets going missing lately, right?”

“He wouldn’t do something like that.”

“But...”

“He has an alibi.”

Kim Hajin had been recorded using a portal during the estimated time of the third victim. That’s why Chae Nayun recommended him to the djinn investigation team. After all, Yoo Yeonha, who was known for her objective judgment, also praised his eyesight.

“Really?”

“Hm...”

Chae Nayun pondered as she rubbed her chin.

Although he wasn’t a suspect, he acted strangely. *Even today, Kim Hajin skipped a bus to take the next one with me.*

"It can't be that he likes me, right?"

It didn’t sound completely absurd now that she thought about it. *He must’ve brought up my older brother to get my attention. It all makes sense. Not to mention his aggressive stance towards Sven today... Oh, and even before then, at the National Weapons Museum, his partner should have been Yoo Yeonha, but he came to the museum.*

Of course, it was only suspicion, but he went about it completely

wrong if that was his intention. Harassing someone for attention was so shameless and awful. Secretly following someone was no different from stalking.

“*Nah*, no way.”

Chae Nayun shook her head.

It didn't make sense. She couldn't even remember if they had met before the museum incident. Of course, she knew lots of guys had crushes on her. But still...

“Look, the others are here.”

Sven pointed ahead. Startled, Chae Nayun looked up. The hunting club's leader and the other members walked over.

* * *

[546,000,000]

My ginseng sold for 546 million won half a day after the auction. Even after the 11% auction fee, I received around 500 million won for the ginseng with 4 missing roots (I snapped off another one in case of an emergency). If I invested all this into stocks...

“Now, gather around everyone!”

A cheerful voice rang out. The club leader and everyone else had arrived.

Today's event would finally start.

Honestly, I didn't exactly know what would happen today. I only roughly wrote the conclusion.

[The berserk Sven gravely injured Chae Nayun before turning into dust.]

That was it. The whole point of this event was for Kim Suho to look

out for Chae Nayun. He would mistake Chae Nayun as the djinn's target and Yoo Yeonha would be kidnapped while everyone paid attention to her. Something like that.

The biggest problem was that Sven had become calmer and more elaborate. Chae Nayun might suffer even more since he could better control Asmodeus' power.

"It's nice to see everyone again. Our hunting club helps citizens by hunting wild animals, killing two birds with one stone."

The club leader began his speech.

"Oh, by the way, who might you be? I don't recall seeing you at the orientation."

He suddenly paused his speech and asked me.

"I'm Kim Hajin. Unfortunately, I couldn't attend the orientation due to a personal matter."

"Ah, that's fine. We didn't do much at orientation. For today..."

I looked for Chae Nayun while ignoring the club leader. I quickly found her, but almost jumped in surprise. Chae Nayun was also staring at me with a suspicious look.

Chapter 32

Same Bed, Different Dreams (2)

I climbed the tallest red pine on the mountain. From the treetop, I could see everything within the horizon. The thousand-mile eyes saw through all the dense trees and leaves. I could see a nameless cadet chasing after a wild boar, a second-year couple making out instead of hunting, Chae Nayun skillfully shooting her arrows, and Sven throwing pebbles by a creek.

Chae Nayun and Sven separated for their bet on who could hunt more wild animals. She focused on hunting while Sven continued to stare at the creek.

Something strange happened. A wild leopard cat appeared from the opposite side of the creek. It was one of the most common animals. Sven didn't even glance at it, but a tentacle shot out from his back and pierced its neck like a spear. He dragged the leopard cat towards him like a skewer.

It was Asmodeus' power.

He continued hunting in that manner for an hour. Chae Nayun searched for wild animals while Sven killed any that came within a 300 meter range without lifting a finger. Finally, they joined up at the creek at their appointed time.

— A total of 6. Three wild boars, 1 leopard cat, and 2 rabbits.

Chae Nayun proudly declared.

— As you can see, I killed 8.

Sven smiled as he pointed to the wild animals next to him. Immediately, Chae Nayun's jaws dropped.

— Really?

Chae Nayun approached the pile of corpses and confirmed it.

— Wow, you weren't kidding. How did you find 8?

Chae Nayun sat next to Sven as she ruffled her hair.

— You bought them from somewhere, didn't you? How much did you pay?

She joked as she poked Sven's arm. It looked like Chae Nayun was leading him on, but she probably did it thoughtlessly.

— So now you have to grant me a wish, right?

— *Tsk*, yeah. What do you want?

They had bet on a wish. I began to understand why Sven had lost control.

— *Um...*

— Yeah?

—...

Sven looked straight at Chae Nayun. Then he shook his head with a grin.

— No, it's nothing.

— What is it? Tell me.

I took out my gun from stigma's extradimensional storage. I could snipe from a kilometer away without a problem. *Wheesh*. Aether adhered to the gun and increased its performance.

— You see...

Why Sven went berserk made sense if he confessed and got rejected. Sven fell in love with Chae Nayun at the beginning of the school year and he contracted with Asmodeus, the Devil of Lust. A djinn with amplified emotions and obsession hardly showed restraint.

— I like you.

—... *Huh?*

Chae Nayun frowned at the sudden confession.

— What are you saying so suddenly?

—... You don't like me?

— Of course I don't. It's only been 2 days since we first talked? You expect me to fall in love with you in 2 days? Well, maybe you did, but I didn't.

Chae Nayun coldly stood up. Sven drooped his head. His body already began to transform as black magic power rose from his body.

I aimed at his head.

— Plus, I like men who are stronger than me.

—... Than you?

— You're much weaker than me, so I don't even see you as a man.

With that, she triggered the switch. Sven's eyes turned blood red. He managed to endure it until now, but Sven was only an extra. This was his limit.

—... Really?

Sven stood up. Chae Nayun spoke without turning around to look.

— Yeah. So don't contact me from now on. I'm sorry, but cutting off our relationship will be better than staying friends and giving you false hope.

Sven leaned towards Chae Nayun. I fired at his head, but hit his shoulder because of the distance and the fact that he moved.

Sven planned to jump on Chae Nayun, but lost his balance and headbutted her because of my shot.

— *Uk!*

Chae Nayun flew forward after being struck by Sven. However, she avoided injury with an agile forward roll. Then she quickly turned around and saw that Sven had half transformed into a djinn.

— You, you!

—...

Sven glared at Chae Nayun and sent his tentacles after her. I fired consecutively. One, two, three, four... I emptied the magazine. The mysterious support bewildered Chae Nayun, but she acted accordingly.

She jumped back to gain some distance before firing her bow. An arrow penetrated Sven's shoulder, but he charged at her and grabbed her head.

— But I'm...

Then he slammed her to the ground while shouting.

— stronger than you!

Boom!

Sven mounted on top of Chae Nayun. She struggled and condensed magic power in her hand to form a dagger. However, Sven grabbed

her wrist before she could make her move.

“Tsk.”

I couldn't help her from this distance. Reinforced magic power covered Sven's body. Ordinary bullets couldn't penetrate this barrier, but I couldn't use a light bullet either because Chae Nayun would get caught up in the explosion.

With no other choice, I jumped from tree to tree. I changed the Desert Eagle into its shotgun form. I had to close the distance and blow up his head, which was more vulnerable because of his incomplete transformation.

I quickly covered the 1 kilometer distance and smoothly landed to approach them.

“Uup, uup!”

Sven kept Chae Nayun alive because Asmodeus was the Devil of Lust and it was clear what its contracted djinn would want. I frowned in disgust at Sven licking Chae Nayun's face and put the barrel next to his head. Sven shuddered at the coldness of the steel. His eyes rolled towards me, but I pulled the trigger immediately. The shotgun shell tore through his head and sent him flying with a scream.

“Kek, kek.”

“Thankfully, you're alive.”

I looked down at Chae Nayun. Her face was wet with saliva and she was injured, but alive. Djinn of lust would always fool around and die in vain.

“Stand...”

A tentacle suddenly attacked me when I reached out to Chae Nayun. Aether instantly formed a shield and blocked the first strike, but Sven charged at me again with his tentacle. He struck aether's shield away and grabbed my neck.

“Uuuk!”

It was an indescribable pain. I started losing oxygen and couldn't breathe or talk. All I could do was struggle as my vision turned cloudy and I lost sense of my limbs. Everything felt numb, but I didn't experience my life flashing before my eyes. I simply closed my eyes, unfamiliar with the sensation of death.

— Let go, you bastard!

Like a bolt of lightning, someone's shout woke me from falling asleep. Chae Nayun appeared behind Sven and swung an incredibly long sword. It cleanly severed him in half from his shoulder to his waist.

“...Puhak.”

Sven fell in two as I gasped for air on the ground. This was the first time I felt so thankful for oxygen.

Haa... haa... haa...

After 3 big pants, I leaned against a tree trunk.

“Huu... Wow, what was that, a lightsaber?”

I spoke nonchalantly while pointing at the longsword in Chae Nayun's hands. She had formed a sword purely out of magic power. The blade surged with magic power while the handle remained stable. I knew how difficult it was to achieve such perfect harmony. Even Kim Suho wouldn't be able to do that. Only Chae Nayun could, as this was part of her true gift.

“...I don't know.”

The sword in her hands disappeared. We stared at each other in silence. I realized how badly she was injured the more I looked at her. Her wounds still bled and her clothes were ripped to shreds, revealing her underwear. I handed her my coat, but Chae Nayun only stared.

“Take it.”

“...Are you okay?”

She asked a strange question instead of taking the coat.

“Yeah.”

“I’m glad.”

“What about you? Are you okay?”

“I’m fine.”

Thud. Chae Nayun collapsed as soon as she replied.

“...”

She had used too much magic power. I turned her over to face the sky and covered her with my coat. Then I stared at where Sven used to be. He had disappeared without a trace. That was how djinns died. They belonged to their devil in death.

Chwaaa—

The trees somberly cried. Tomorrow, Germany would receive tragic news.

* * *

Sssss—

Chae Nayun opened her eyes at the sound of ruffling leaves and a chilly breeze. The sky had turned completely dark, but an intense pain swept through her head before she could question where she was. She clutched her head until the pain subsided.

“Haa.”

Once the pain died down, Chae Nayun collected her breath while lying on the ground. Only then did she remember what happened.

“Was it a dream?”

Everything she experienced felt so distant. She naturally wondered if it was all a dream, but her wounds and the coat covering her meant it was real.

“Oh, right.”

Chae Nayun raised her upper body. Then she discovered the silhouette of a man and shouted in surprise.

“Ah! Oh god, you scared me!”

“You’re up.”

Kim Hajin stared at his smartwatch while leaning against a tree. Again. He was always there every time something happened. She had escaped death 3 times thanks to him.

“What time is it?”

“10 at night.”

“What? It’s curfew soon.”

Chae Nayun tried to get up, but she couldn’t feel her legs. She wondered what was going on and tried again. However, her legs wouldn’t budge no matter how many times she tried. An indescribable terror swept over her and she began to panic.

“W-What, m-m-my legs, what’s w-wrong with m-my...”

“Magic power exhaustion. Is it your first time?”

“Huh? Magic power exhaustion?”

Magic power exhaustion. Chae Nayun had heard about it. It was a state in which a person had utterly exhausted their magic power. Their magic power recovery rate would decrease drastically and the

person would be bedridden for at least 2 days.

“Yep.”

Kim Hajin approached Chae Nayun and kneeled with his back facing towards her. Chae Nayun furrowed her brows at this incomprehensible action.

“What?”

“Get on. You can’t walk.”

“Do I look crazy?”

“Then what, you want to stay here forever?”

His look of pity felt humiliating, but she didn’t have a choice. It would be difficult without his help. Chae Nayun wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled herself up.

“I’m going.”

“...Yeah.”

Kim Hajin slowly descended the mountain.

Chae Nayun fell in thought as she gazed at the scenery. *Sven was a djinn. Then was he the culprit behind the disappearances? Djinnns were once humans, so since when was Sven a djinn? And where did Kim Hajin pop out from? Don’t tell me, was he constantly following me?*

This guy... Does he really like me?

Chae Nayun needed more time to process everything that happened today.

Chapter 33

Exam Period (1)

I safely arrived at Gangwondo's portal station with Chae Nayun at 10:55 P.M. Thankfully, many people weren't around. I put her down on a nearby bench as she glanced at her smartwatch and murmured.

"It's almost curfew."

I was speechless at her priorities. Returning to Cube in her current state was ridiculous.

"Contact your father."

"Why?"

"You know why. Go get treated at a hospital."

I turned to the portal, leaving Chae Nayun alone.

"I'm going."

"What? Where?" she exclaimed.

"To Cube. You can give my coat back later."

"Take me too! Hey! Aak!"

Chae Nayun tried to get up and fell forward. I couldn't help but sigh at her pitiful state.

"...You should go to a hospital."

Her lips trembled because she didn't want to call her father. I could

understand why. Her father was a busy and influential man as the head of a chaebol group. Even though he would run over if his daughter was hurt, Chae Nayun didn't want that.

"You have a butler or an attendant, right?"

"...Yeah, you can go," Chae Nayun bitterly replied.

"Alright."

I walked towards the portal employee, then stopped. I suddenly remembered something. Today, Chae Nayun had subconsciously unleashed her gift. She needed to develop that gift that cut down the djinn in a single slash.

"Hey, are you still going to use a bow?" I asked.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"You felt it today, didn't you?"

Chae Nayun's gift specialized in close ranged combat. More specifically, it specialized in war. She could amplify the length of her sword as long as she had a conductor of magic power. For example, her gift could transform a 2 meter sword into a monstrous 20 meter sword. Furthermore, the sword wouldn't be any heavier because magic power was weightless.

It was similar to Sun Wukong's Jingu Bang. ^[1] The only difference was that Chae Nayun didn't need a legendary grade weapon to display similar strength. She would slaughter hundreds of monsters with a single blow, an imperial might that made djinns shudder in fear. They would call her *Empress of the Battlefield*.

"You should be using a sword, not a bow."

Like the original story, large weapons like a zweihander or claymore suited her best. She even had the money to purchase the most expensive weapons.

“Oh yeah? What do you know about me?”

Chae Nayun didn't know her future. She refused to accept the idea because she hadn't yet overcome her fear of close ranged combat.

“...Never mind then.”

I stepped into the portal with a resentful gaze piercing at my back. She might have thought, *‘Is he going to just leave me?’* Yes, I did precisely that.

* * *

Nothing travels faster than words. Last night's matter had already spread that a cadet named Sven turned into a djinn and attacked Chae Nayun. She won, but was seriously injured. Even amid such rumors, Friday's class resumed like normal. I planned to meet Kim Suho today. He asked me to come to room 303 before 5 P.M.

“It's an important matter, so don't forget! If it goes well, your grades could go up too.”

He reminded me once more after class. He should have heard about what happened to Chae Nayun, so he probably planned to visit her after the meeting.

“Yeah.”

I nodded. Kim Suho tapped on my shoulder and busily walked away. I yawned while looking at his back. Since it was 3:30, I had some time. I wanted to go back and take a nap at the dorm.

While I was walking down the hallway...

“...What?”

It felt like someone was following me, but when I turned around, no one was there. The presence was too calm to be a djinn. Was it an assassin? *Why would an assassin be following me?*

“Hmm.”

Was I mistaken? I took out my laptop and continued walking.

[383,013,160 points have been deposited. These points can be used in Violet Banquet or traded for cash. (At least 10,000,000 points required)]

Violet Banquet's enormous fee had shrunk the 600 million won to 400 million, but I knew that would happen. The first trade with Violet Banquet always cost more.

[Purchaser Youngfly has requested to speak with you. (Seller's nickname will show up as anonymous.)]

[If you have any more ginseng, I'd like to buy them.]

I rejected his request. I didn't have any more ginseng to sell.

I turned around.

Shashashak—

Someone quickly hid behind the wall, but my eyes could see through it. I was surprised to see Rachel. With her back against the wall, she held her beating heart.

“Hmm, was I mistaken?”

I pretended not to notice to find out why she was following me. Then I turned off the laptop and used its black screen as a mirror to look behind me. When I started walking, Rachel peeked her head out. Her gaze was fixed on my bag, but why my bag? The only thing in it was a notebook. Ah, thinking about it now, this was the way to the library. The dorm was right next to it.

“...Is she trying to steal my notebook?”

No, a princess wouldn't do something like that. Besides, it didn't contain anything worthwhile.

I continued walking as Rachel tenaciously chased me. She didn't stop until I entered my dorm.

"She followed me all the way here?"

She stared regretfully at the dorm when I looked out from the window. *Interesting.* I walked into my room with a grin.

* * *

After taking a short nap, I left and arrived at room 303. A small group had already gathered: Shin Jonghak, Yoo Yeonha, Kim Horak, and Yi Yeonghan. It almost looked like a scene from my novel, Kim Suho and his friend versus Shin Jonghak and his lackeys. Even Kim Horak, the weakest one here, had a somewhat important role until the middle of the story. I felt entirely out of place. They didn't say anything when they saw me, so I opened my mouth first.

"Why did you call me?"

I asked, pretending not to know. Shin Jonghak frowned at my innocent question. Thankfully, Kim Suho explained before Shin Jonghak could express his dissatisfaction.

"I haven't told Hajin why we're meeting yet."

"So, what is it?"

Kim Suho stood up at my question. He should've just stayed sitting. His height made me slightly uncomfortable. I set his height as 185 cm. Now, I somewhat regretted it.

"Hajin, you've heard about cadets going missing, right?"

"...Yeah."

"It's about that. Cube entrusted us with investigating the cause. Of course, they're going to do their own investigation, but since the culprit is likely a student, they think it'll be easier for students to also investigate."

I was about to nod casually, but after realizing this was supposed to be my first time hearing about this, I pretended to be surprised.

“...But why me?”

“You have good eyes. I heard you can see over a thousand miles away.”

“Well, yeah... I do have good eyes.”

So it was for that single reason? I feigned a smile and sat down on a nearby chair. Kim Suho naturally sat at the head of the table. He looked at me and asked, “Will you help us?”

“I don’t know if I can, but...”

I didn't want to give up on potential SP.

“Thanks.”

Kim Suho smiled. Then he cleared his throat and brought up yesterday’s incident.

“First, I don’t think the djinn who attacked Nayun is this incident’s culprit. But...”

Shin Jonghak interrupted him. “Nayun?”

He interjected at the fact that Kim Suho didn’t address Chae Nayun with her last name.

“...But I think there’s a high chance that Chae Nayun is the real culprit’s next target. Djinn follow their contracted devil’s orders, so if Sven’s contracted devil ordered him to attack her, it makes sense that another djinn would also go after her.”

It was a good theory, but incorrect. Sven’s contracted devil and the culprit’s contracted devil weren’t the same. Asmodeus and Lilith had completely different dispositions.

“So I’m wondering, can you think of anyone suspicious? Someone who has been acting strange recently...”

Before the investigation began, Kim Suho asked for everyone’s opinions. No one stepped forward, but Yoo Yeonha stared at me. Soon, Shin Jonghak and Kim Horak also turned to me.

I knew the real culprit, but I hesitated to reveal his name without proof. The culprit should be leaving traces, but he proceeded faster than I thought. In the original story, six people went missing in two months, but three had already gone missing in two weeks. I felt guilty letting more people die for the story to catch up. There could be more victims than the original story at this rate. Perhaps I should mention his name to speed up the investigation.

“Yeah, I have someone in mind.”

Five pairs of eyes focused on me.

“Who?”

Kim Suho asked. I slowly opened my mouth and spoke the real culprit’s name.

“Yun Hyun.”

...A deep silence descended. No one reacted to my comment.

“Pft.”

Soon, Yoo Yeonha’s mocking laughter broke the silence, and Kim Suho gently rebutted.

“That person has an alibi. We already looked into him because he was close to the first victim.”

It was obvious that Yun Hyun had an alibi.

“But what if the victim went to Yun Hyun on her own?”

“A mental magic that could lure a cadet? Yeah, that makes sense.”

Shin Jonghak sarcastically remarked. He stared at me with contempt and disdain like I was an insect. As Shin Jonghak said, it wasn't easy to lure a cadet with mental magic. Even if possible, it couldn't have escaped people's suspicion. After all, victims under mental magic moved like puppets or scarecrows. However...

“If it's mental magic, yeah. But...”

It was different if it was love. That was the most significant difference between enchantment and mental magic. Someone who was in love wouldn't realize they were bewitched.

“Screw the useless talk.”

Shin Jonghak cut me off before I could finish my sentence. He kicked an empty chair, which fell towards me.

“As for me...”

Yoo Yeonha smiled and slowly pointed at me. “I'm more suspicious of you.”

“...What?”

My head blanked because it was so sudden. I froze at a loss for words.

“Yoo Yeonha, that's not correct either. Hajin also has an alibi.”

Kim Suho quickly refuted the idea, but Yoo Yeonha rebutted him.

“His alibi is a record of him using the portal. If he's a djinn, tampering with something like that should be easy. Compared to senior Yun Hyun who was with others, that person is much more...”

“Why don't we beat him up first?”

Kim Horak daringly stood up. He looked like a mini ogre as he

cracked his knuckles and displayed his muscles.

“I’m sure he’ll sing or transform if he’s beaten. Hey, get up.”

Yoo Yeonha, Kim Horak, Shin Jonghak, and Yi Yeonghan. Everyone other than Kim Suho looked suspiciously at me. I became furious. This had never happened to me before even in a mafia game. So this was what it felt like to be falsely accused. *Should I not have brought up Yun Hyun’s name?* No, even if I didn’t, this would have happened anyways. Yoo Yeonha must have planned it.

“Jonghak, I can break an arm or two, right?”

The ogre asked for Shin Jonghak’s consent. Before Shin Jonghak could reply, I jumped out of my chair.

“Yeah, come at me, you fat son of a bitch. I’ll drill a hole in your head.”

“...What did you say? Look at this crazy motherfucker.”

Kim Horak raised his voice. I took out my gun from my back pocket, but he only snorted disdainfully.

“Retard, you think that can make me flinch?”

Kim Horak positioned himself to charge forward. I also lowered my center of gravity. I had aether. I could cook up some stupid pig whenever I wanted.

“Stop.”

Kim Suho stepped in between us. He even had his training sword out.

“Now’s not the time for this. Hajin, you calm down too.”

I snapped back to reality, looking at the chilling flash of his sword. Although I grandly shouted, Kim Horak was too strong of an opponent. *Don’t get angry. If you get mad, it’s your loss.* After telling

myself that, I took a deep breath and pointed at Yoo Yeonha.

“You, if you’re doubtful, ask Chae Nayun.”

“...What does Nayun have to do with this?”

I spoke to Yoo Yeonha, but Shin Jonghak reacted sensitively.

“When the djinn attacked her, I was there too. We killed him together. She didn’t tell you yet?”

“...”

I said so as I glared at Yoo Yeonha. She received my look in a perfectly calm manner without a single word.

“Anyways, I made myself clear. The culprit is that piece of shit Yun Hyun.”

After saying that to Yoo Yeonha, *the final victim*, I turned around.

“Uk.”

In the middle of walking out, I accidentally tripped. My body slipped to the side as a fat boar suddenly flew in and smashed the wall. However, the charge was too quick and dangerous for a boar as a crack appeared on Cube’s reinforced wall.

“Oh? You dodged that?”

Shin Jonghak’s lips twisted up in interest. Kim Horak had tried to tackle me just now. It wouldn’t have ended with just a few broken bones if he had hit.

“You... son of a bitch.”

Kim Horak stood up. For someone who attacked first, he sure was angry. I pointed my gun at him.

“I think I need to teach you a lesson.”

Kim Suho stopped us again, but he did it with action rather than words. Magic power rose from his sword and separated me from Kim Horak.

“If you’re that suspicious, just ask Nayun! Yoo Yeonha!” He shouted at Yoo Yeonha. Kim Suho’s furious look even made the proud Yoo Yeonha shrink.

“...Wait one minute.”

Tsk. Yoo Yeonha clicked her tongue and turned on her smartwatch.

1. Jingu Bang is the magical staff used by Sun Wukong, which can elongate endlessly. 🙌

Chapter 34

Exam Period (2)

Yoo Yeonha called Chae Nayun and asked if what Kim Hajin said was true. Chae Nayun carefully explained what happened, and it was as Kim Hajin had said. She went so far as to make a definitive claim.

“There’s no way Kim Hajin is a djinn,” she said.

They disbanded the meeting as Kim Hajin stomped out while Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan chased after him.

Room 303 became silent as the three remaining people didn’t speak. Yoo Yeonha looked at Kim Horak massaging his right shoulder.

“...Does it hurt?”

“N-No, I’m fine.”

“That was your gift, right?”

Many cadets knew about Kim Horak’s gift. It simply amplified his body’s explosive and destructive power. This brute and straightforward gift was one of the strongest for martial arts. However, Kim Hajin had dodged his attack with movements that were neither flashy nor nimble.

“...”

Kim Horak looked away from Yoo Yeonha’s gaze. He didn’t feel sorry about accusing Kim Hajin, only embarrassed that his attack had been easily avoided.

“*Sigh.*”

Yoo Yeonha glanced at Shin Jonghak. He stared at his smartwatch. Was he messaging Chae Nayun? Yoo Yeonha worried.

“Jonghak, what are you up to?”

She approached him with an affectionate smile. Shin Jonghak answered without bothering to look at her.

“I’m looking to see if there’s more of an item I bought.”

“Item?”

“Yeah, I bought something.”

“What did you buy?”

Yoo Yeonha pulled on Shin Jonghak’s arm and acted cutely.

“You don’t need to know.”

Shin Jonghak pushed her away. Yoo Yeonha froze at his cold action.

“...*Tsk*. If we’re done, I’m leaving.”

Shin Jonghak clicked his tongue and stood up. He believed his actions were justified. He had been looking at the famous Violet Banquet website. However, Cube cadets were prohibited from being a member. It wasn’t just Violet Banquet. Any black market ID could result in expulsion. Even so, his indifferent attitude hurt Yoo Yeonha’s feelings.

“Kim Horak, aren’t you coming?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah.”

Kim Horak peeked at Yoo Yeonha, but followed Shin Jonghak like a puppy. She stood alone and looked around the empty room. Suddenly, anger filled her heart. This wasn’t the first time something like this happened. She started to get upset.

Shin Jonghak, you bastard, just which part of Chae Nayun is better than me? Sigh. What can I do? I just have to try harder.

Yoo Yeonha was about to chase after Shin Jonghak, but her smartwatch vibrated. A message came from Yun Hyun.

— There's going to be a preparatory exam next Monday. You're coming, right?

Club activities had paused during exams, but the academic club offered peer tutoring. Yoo Yeonha began typing, but she suddenly remembered what Kim Hajin said. The culprit was Yun Hyun...

“Stupid.”

Yoo Yeonha dismissed it and sent her reply.

* * *

I chased away Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan. Then I sat on a bench until 9 P.M. and stared at the night sky in an empty park. Finally, I released the bitterness in my heart.

“...Haa.”

I reflected on what had happened. Not only was I thrown into my novel, I even got into an argument with the characters I created. All sorts of feelings pent up in my heart exploded today. I wanted to just quit and go back to my old, one-room house. I wanted to see my parents, whom I always avoided, saying I was too busy, but now I was full of regrets.

How was time flowing in my old world? If it was the same, I should be a missing person by now. I might even be considered dead. After all, I would have to spend at least 10 years in this world.

I was glad I raised my perseverance stat. In this world, I had nothing. My memories, relationships, feelings, none of them were here. My old self wouldn't have been able to endure it. Even if I didn't commit suicide, I would have given up on returning home. I might have given

up being part of the main storyline and lived a normal life.

“Ah, I want to see you, Mom.”

It didn't feel right saying this as a 26 year old man, but my voice trembled from the sincerity in my heart. I hoped she was healthy. I hoped she was getting along with Dad. If time flowed normally in the other world, I hoped they would find out I was missing as late as possible. I didn't want to imagine them sad because of me.

Once I thought along this line, it didn't seem to end. I remembered my friends whom I cursed from time to time for calling me when I was busy, but I missed them, especially today. Even the seniors from college and the army, who liked to mess with me, popped up in my head. Both good and bad connections lit up in my heart like stars.

But it was dark outside, and not even a faint star existed. Dreaming of stars in a starless world only filled me with anguish.

“...Huu.”

I wiped my eyes and stood up. The handgun in my hand still felt cold and heavy.

* * *

Thanks to my high perseverance stat, my broken mentality quickly recovered after a day. The weekend flew by after working out, hunting, and buying stocks like usual.

“Exams are next week, starting with written exams. Combat exams will be on the following week. Remember that written exams are just as important as combat exams.”

Today was Monday. The professor purposely spoke in a grave tone. Midterm exams would begin in just a week. I was also a bit apprehensive. I had nothing to worry about for written exams, but my problem was combat exams. In duels, cadets fought in one-on-one battles. In monster wars, they fought illusionary monsters summoned by magicians rather than mana puppets. Cadets never showed mercy in duels to maximize their points, and the summoned monsters were

no different than real monsters. I had to prepare myself for the pain of getting cut or having my bones broken.

“...”

Setting aside the exams, I couldn't focus in class today because of someone next to me. Rachel always sat by herself in the back, but ever since the results for phenomenon realm analysis came out, she had been moving closer seat by seat, and now she sat next to me. There was still an empty seat between us, but Rachel kept sneaking glances at my notebook. She also wrote something down. Just to be sure, I wrote down a random string of words.

[Yoo Kim Ok Jun Ja Hyuk]

Yoo Okja. Kim Junhyuk. It was my mother's and father's name. I rolled my eyes to the side and observed Rachel. She snuck a glance before quickly jotting something down in her notebook. I could see the words, *Yoo Kim Ok Jun Ha Hyuk*????

Next, I scribbled a string of numbers next to my parents' names.

[19680529.19660912]

It was my father's and mother's birthday. Rachel also jotted down the numbers. I scribbled the name of the dog I used to have, then *iputsmid*, which was an anagram for *I'm stupid*...

The class ended while I messed around with Rachel.

“Good luck with your exams next week. The results will be posted for everyone to see, so don't embarrass yourselves.”

The professor left after reminding the cadets. Chae Nayun's seat became noisy as she had returned from the hospital today. She still had trouble moving and used all sorts of equipment. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak ran up to her like in the original story.

“What's wrong with you guys. I can move just fine by myself.”

They backed off at her complaint, but hovered around.

“Kim Suho, you should leave.”

“...Why?”

“Can’t you see Nayun is uncomfortable with you around?”

Shin Jonghak provoked Kim Suho as usual, and another girl watched from the side with somewhat lonely eyes. She smiled as though she was fine, but I knew she felt alienated. Yoo Yeonha approached them and spoke.

“Jonghak, Nayun, I’m going first.”

“Yeah.”

“Hm? Oh, bye Yeonha. Good luck studying.”

Shin Jonghak and Chae Nayun only greeted her out of courtesy. Yoo Yeonha left the classroom biting her lips. I stuffed my laptop and utensils in my bag and walked out the back door. Suddenly, I ran into Yoo Yeonha. She should have left to the dorms, but she went the opposite direction.

“...”

We looked at each other awkwardly.

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“...To the dorm.”

This wasn’t the way to the dorm, but I didn’t want to continue talking.

“I see.”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t say anything more either. She slightly bowed and walked past me.

Yoo Yeonha opened the clubroom door. It looked no different than usual, but the empty room was slightly chilly. The only person inside was Yun Hyun, reading at the podium. Yoo Yeonha tilted her head. Where was everyone else? Yun Hyun noticed her and walked over.

“You’re here?”

“...Yes.”

“Come take a seat.”

Yoo Yeonha sat down for now. Not having anyone else around made her uneasy, but she soon calmed down thanks to Yun Hyun. His scent made her feel cozy.

“Where did everyone go?”

“They’re coming soon. Oh right, Yeonha, I heard you joined the team.”

“Team?”

“You know, the djinn investigation team. I’m in it too as the second year representative.”

Yun Hyun’s voice was clear and firm. At least, that’s how Yoo Yeonha felt.

“Oh really?”

As expected, Kim Hajin’s suspicion was complete nonsense.

“But we haven’t made any progress. Do you guys have any leads? Any suspects?”

“No, not yet.”

“Really? So you guys haven’t made any progress either?”

Yun Hyun asked softly. Yoo Yeonha pondered for a moment at his courteous manner of speech. Progress. There wasn’t any. The meeting disbanded before anything happened.

“Mm... One person did say something, but it was stupid.”

“Stupid? I’m curious what it was.”

Yun Hyun leaned against the desk she sat on and placed down a scented candle.

“What’s this?”

“A scented candle. It’ll help when we’re studying later. Anyways, what did this person say?”

Yun Hyun asked with a kind smile on his face. Yoo Yeonha smelled the scented candle. It was gentle and aromatic. Her body relaxed, and the day’s exhaustion seemed to wear away.

“Tell me.”

“It’s nothing.”

Yoo Yeonha smirked. “Some guy said you were a djinn. That you could use some sort of mental magic. Absurd, isn’t it?”

After answering, Yoo Yeonha sniffed the scented candle once more. The wonderful fragrance smelled addicting. She missed Yun Hyun’s face because she was focused on the scented candle.

“...Does he have proof?”

“No...?”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly snapped out of her daze. Tension welled up in her body. She turned towards Yun Hyun and glared at him. Most

innocent people wouldn't ask if there was any evidence when being suspected. At least, not as the first question. After all, there couldn't possibly be any evidence against someone who didn't commit a crime.

“Oh, oops, I misspoke. What a funny kid. On what grounds is he calling me a djinn?”

Yun Hyun realized his mistake and quickly corrected himself, but it was too late. Yoo Yeonha retreated, taking out her whip and pointing it at Yun Hyun.

“Who are you?”

“...What's wrong, Yeonha?”

Yun Hyun smiled. The gentle arc in his eyes and lips twisted viciously.

“It's not your turn yet.”

Chapter 35

Exam Period (3)

Cadets filled the fitness center because exams started next week. *Haaap—! Yaaaap—!* Enthusiastic shouts from the sparring rooms pierced through the walls, while magic power created sharp sonic booms. In the physical training room, cadets effortlessly lifted 120kg dumbbells.

I also worked out among such monsters. Admittedly, what I could do was pitiful compared to them, but I sweated out effort in my own way.

Wiiing—

“Uuk.”

I put down the bar using my smartwatch’s vibration as an excuse. Dizziness overcame me. A 130kg bench press was still too much. I wiped my sweat off with a towel around my neck and checked my smartwatch.

[The documents are ready... But are you sure about investing so much money in us?]

It came from Park Soohyuk. Of the 500 million from selling the ginseng, I bought more stocks with half and invested the other half into SH Agency. I knew SH Agency would become just as successful as Packhorse Master.

[Of course. I’ll see you tomorrow.]

[Um... Why us?]

Park Soohyuk was quite confused, but I couldn’t blame him. The

current SH Agency was a small company that had yet to accomplish anything.

[It's fun, growing bigger together. Don't you think it'll be nice to see each other grow?]

I wasn't investing in a company, but a person. That was how highly I valued Park Soohyuk. He was a future tycoon, jumping into this business without any connections and achieving the world's most brilliant enterprise.

[Ah... Yes... Then I'll see you tomorrow with all the documents and contracts. Thank you once again.]

[No problem. See you then.]

After ending my conversation with Park Soohyuk, I lay back down on the bench press. Just as I gripped the bar, my smartwatch vibrated once again. Who was it now? When I checked, I couldn't help but furrow my brows. It was Yoo Yeonha.

[9]

I couldn't understand why she suddenly messaged me, but the content seemed even more mysterious. Just a single number. *Did she press the wrong button?*

"What's up with her?"

Since she didn't say anything else, I ignored it and put my hands back on the bar. Then, putting some strength into my body, I lifted it while breathing. One, two, three, four... nine. Nine. 9. Suddenly, I thought of something.

"...Don't tell me. Is this a rescue signal?"

* * *

Yun Hyun had detained Yoo Yeonha in the penthouse of Cube's second year dorm. Not even an elite like Yoo Yeonha could do

anything against a djinn favored by Lilith. Yun Hyun had easily subdued Yoo Yeonha before storing her in an extradimensional space and moving her here. He usually hid his tracks, but the CCTV surely caught Yoo Yeonha's struggle. Since he planned to leave Cube after this, he didn't care.

"Oh, this is him? The quick-witted one who said I was a djinn?"

Yun Hyun looked at Yoo Yeonha's smartwatch and grinned. The screen displayed the message Yoo Yeonha had sent Kim Hajin.

"Looks like I'll need to kill him later... Anyways, what's this 9? That's all you sent to ask for help? Who would understand something so cryptic?"

Yun Hyun dropped the smartwatch and easily crushed Cube's expensive device with a stomp.

"Of course, even if he understood what you meant, he wouldn't be able to come here. There's a barrier around this place, you see."

Yoo Yeonha fiercely glared at Yun Hyun while clenching her teeth. He trembled in ecstasy at how she looked.

"Ah, amazing. Those eyes are amazing. It's okay, Yeonha. Soon, you'll come to like me too."

Tap, tap. Yun Hyun slowly approached Yoo Yeonha, who he tied to a chair. She struggled, but the restraint spell prevented her from moving.

"You have beautiful skin."

Yun Hyun placed his hand on her thigh and left a faint handprint on her white skin. Yoo Yeonha teared up at the disgusting sensation that felt like a snake licking her.

"Once is enough. You won't be able to escape afterward. Lilith allowed it too. That's right, Lilith wants you."

Yun Hyun spoke leisurely. The Devil of Enchantment bewitched humans on a fundamental level. Once Yun Hyun had his way, Yoo Yeonha would become a completely different person.

“Yeonha, weren’t you lonely? I know that feeling too.”

Speaking persuasively, Yun Hyun placed his hand on her neck. His breath contained a hypnotic magic power. Yoo Yeonha trembled. No matter how powerful her mental power, she couldn’t resist ecstasy forced by magic power. She would not have hesitated to bite her tongue and end her life if she could.

“It’s easier if you give up.”

Yun Hyun caressed Yoo Yeonha’s face and whispered. The magic power of passion flowed into her from his hand. It stimulated many parts of her body and urged her to submit. An intense pleasure akin to euphoria overwhelmed her. In the end, she let out a small moan.

CLANG! A flash of light erupted from the window and a translucent beam of light pierced Yun Hyun.

“...What?”

He fell to his knees at the unexpected attack. As he struggled to comprehend what just happened, an unidentifiable voice rang out from the room.

— Serves you right for not listening and suspecting me.

“...!”

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes widened at the familiar voice. Yun Hyun used this chance to heal his injured leg with magic power, but the extraordinary regenerative power of djinns didn’t activate. Only the pain increased.

— Don’t think about recovering from that wound. I refined that bullet to be a bit more efficient. Unless you undergo surgery to take it out...

“Shut it!” Yun Hyun roared. Red magic power erupted from his body.

His eyes, which turned bloodshot, glanced around the empty room in vain.

“Where are you! Show yourself!”

Yun Hyun swung his magic power around desperately and swept through the surroundings like a storm, but nothing appeared out of the ordinary.

— You can try all you want, but you won’t be able to reach me. I’m far, far away, you see.

“You little rat—!”

As if in response to Yun Hyun’s curse, another bullet shot through the window and pierced his shoulder. Yun Hyun felt rage before the pain.

“You, You—!”

He frantically swung his arms.

“Show yourself—! Show yourself, you son of a bitch—!”

His frenzied cry muddled his speech, and it became harder and harder to tell whether it was a human or an animal crying.

A few more bullets flew in through the window. Yun Hyun erupted in rage. Now, he was no different than a beast.

Yoo Yeonha watched this overwhelming scene in a daze. Setting aside where the bullets came from, how could mere bullets injure a djinn to this degree? She grew curious about this unprecedented power.

— So this is why people enjoy sniping.

With a mocking taunt, another bullet flew in. This time, the bullet hit Yun Hyun’s chest. He collapsed from the shock and began pitifully crawling with his hands. Immediately, bullets pierced his knees and shoulders. The critical blow prevented him from further movement.

“This...”

The bullets all came from the window. Yun Hyun thought he just had to hide, but the cold-hearted sharpshooter showed no mercy. Another white shooting star flew in and pierced his back. Yun Hyun’s hands trembled as his bloodshot eyes swelled.

— So durable... Oy, Yoo Yeonha, I’m about to use up all of the bullets you gave me. If you have a conscience, provide me with better ones.

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t even laugh at the joke. Yun Hyun looked pathetic now as Kim Hajin protected her from a faraway place. She relaxed, knowing she would survive. Drowsiness overwhelmed her as the tension in her body disappeared.

— If you’re tired, just sleep. Kim Suho should be arriving soon.

Before she fell asleep, Yoo Yeonha asked the one question on her mind.

“By the way... Where are you talking from?”

— Above you. I hacked into the ceiling’s speaker.

“...Oh.”

I see... Yoo Yeonha chuckled and closed her eyes.

* * *

At first, I thoughtlessly asked the Book of Truth whether Yun Hyun had kidnapped Yoo Yeonha. The Book of Truth answered yes, and I shot up in surprise. The schedule had moved up, and I received a notification about a settings change. Because my novel was for all ages, I made Yun Hyun impotent, but an absurd setting had been added to his genitals...

I alerted Kim Suho, but proceeded on my own since every second counted.

I ran to a mountaintop with a clear view of the second year dorm. Thanks to my increased vitality and stamina, I only needed five minutes to climb the mountain. As a result, I could save Yoo Yeonha before it was too late.

“Thank god I chose to come.”

Just now, Kim Suho barged into Yun Hyun’s penthouse after breaking the barrier. Yun Hyun resisted with little strength, but Kim Suho cut him down with a single slash.

“...But this, it’s better than I expected.”

I admired the giant anti-material sniper rifle in my hands. With a length of 1.5 meters, it flaunted a domineering and beautiful appearance. The gun barrel looked extremely vicious with amplified firepower, but its platinum color and golden patterns exuded a noble aura. I had fused aether with the Desert Eagle and transformed it into this sniper rifle using my SP.

[Sniper rifle mode – transforms into a high-powered sniper rifle when fused with aether.]

Even after adding the restriction that required aether, the modification cost 250 SP. I sniped a target 1.5km away using this anti-material sniper rifle. I shot the enemy from a distance where he couldn’t even see me or attack. It was quite exhilarating.

“I’m sure Kim Suho will take care of the rest.”

I canceled the fusion between aether and Desert Eagle. The 1.5m sniper rifle returned to its handgun form.

[You have obtained 457 SP!] [An incredible luck has been applied. You have obtained an additional 11% as bonus!] [You succeeded in a long range snipe. Proficiency of Master Sharpshooter has increased to grade 7.]

I gained a lot of SP in one day since I completed a major arc.

I sat on the ground and watched what happened far away. Kim Suho

put Yoo Yeonha on his back as Cube's heroes rushed into the dorm.

With this, the number of victims had decreased. Although faint, Kim Suho also established a connection with Yoo Yeonha. I was confident he would take care of her as the main character. Things became a bit messy, but the outcome satisfied me.

Chapter 36

Exam Period (4)

Yoo Yeonha opened her eyes to a white ceiling and the sound of something being cut. She turned and saw Kim Suho slicing an apple with a fruit knife.

“...What are you doing here?”

Yoo Yeonha asked dumbfoundedly. Kim Suho glanced at Yoo Yeonha before smiling bashfully.

“You’re awake? It doesn’t hurt anywhere, right?”

“...I’m fine.”

“The doctor said there’s nothing wrong with your body.”

Yoo Yeonha sat up. She felt slightly stiff and sore, but could still move.

“What I want to know is why you’re here.”

“We’re taking turns nursing you. Me, Nayun, Shin Jonghak, and Kim Horak.”

“Why?”

Yoo Yeonha asked, genuinely curious.

“Well, it’s kind of our fault...”

“...Huh?”

Yoo Yeonha pondered Kim Suho's incomprehensible words. *How was it their fault?* She couldn't understand after contemplating what had happened. *Did they do something I didn't know about?* Yoo Yeonha glared at Kim Suho and demanded an explanation.

"As members of the same team, we should have been more careful. Unfortunately, we were too absorbed in caring for Nayun that we neglected you..."

The sheer stupidity of Kim Suho's statement astonished Yoo Yeonha. It wasn't like they could have known she would get attacked. The investigation team only met twice, and a huge argument occurred in the second meeting.

"...Sorry."

"Pfft."

Yoo Yeonha chuckled at Kim Suho's apology. If anything, she realized he was stupidly kind.

"You don't need to be sorry. I got what I deserved."

Kim Suho scratched his neck and gave Yoo Yeonha a plate of sliced apples shaped like rabbits. She subconsciously smiled. Naturally, she liked cute things like any other girl.

"They look cute."

"Thanks."

Kim Suho laughed innocently. His handsome face seemed to shine. Yoo Yeonha stared at him before suddenly remembering something.

"...Oh right, um, did that person come?"

"That person?"

Kim Hajin. Yoo Yeonha couldn't say his name. She still had a

conscience and didn't expect him to visit after what she had done.

“No, never mind.”

She looked outside the window and didn't see a cluster of clouds in the East Sea's blue sky. The world appeared exceptionally bright under beaming sunlight.

Yoo Yeonha fell in thought at this dazzling scenery. She had learned many things. Of course, her 17 year old personality wouldn't entirely change with just this one incident. Tomorrow's Yoo Yeonha might not be too different than today's, but she undoubtedly felt many things from the bottom of her heart. She wasn't sure whether it was self-reflection, introspection, or just plain gratefulness. Before writing everything down in her diary, she picked up her smartwatch. She still needed to do something.

* * *

I received a message.

[Thank you. I'll repay today's debts for sure.]

It came from Yoo Yeonha. I smiled as I saw her name and read the message. I wanted to say something cool, but the person in front of me asked for another affirmation.

“Um... So I can just take this money? Really?”

I stared at him. Park Soohyuk had been like this for a while now. I lost count of how many times he asked if this was real. *Haa*. I couldn't help but sigh. It was my money, so why was he so hesitant? Just buy a HUV (hunter utility vehicle) and a proper magic pouch!

“Yes, yes, yes. Please take it! Please!”

I stood up and bowed at a 90-degree angle.

“Please take it!”

“Ah, um, I—”

“Do I need to kowtow? I’ll do it!”

“No, no! I’ll take it! Thank you so much for investing in SH Agency!”

He finally put the signed documents in his suitcase. How did this easygoing person become the world’s greatest agent? I created this setting, but couldn’t understand it.

“By the way, how old are you?”

“I’m 29.”

“Ah, you’re more than a decade older. You don’t have to talk so formally.”

Talking casually would be better for our relationship.

“How can I do such a thing to an investor...”

“Don’t think of me as an investor. Think of me as a business partner. You know, like we’re building SH Agency together.”

“But still...”

“Don’t worry. I’m fine with it.”

“But...”

A back and forth argument went on about talking formally or casually. Eventually, Park Soohyuk submitted.

“Okay... I won’t talk so formally then.”

“Good.”

I got up.

“Then let’s go hunt. We’ll stop at just two for today.”

“Alright, this hyung ^[1] will support you from the back.”

Park Soohyuk laughed as we left the coffee shop. We planned to head out to the field, but I spotted a convenience store.

“Um, Soohyuk hyung?”

I suggested talking casually, but I felt somewhat shy now.

“Hm? What’s up?”

“We should buy a lottery ticket.”

I pointed at the poster that said [*lottery tickets for sale*]. Honestly, this was the first method I thought of to make money with my absurd luck. I hadn’t been able to until now because I was a minor without a guardian.

“Come on. Lottery tickets are a waste of money. You might be too young to understand, but the lottery is a scam.”

“It’s not a scam. I have good luck, so I’ll probably win something. I’ll invest what I win into SH Agency, so give it a try.”

“No, I’m telling you it’s a scam...”

“Just follow me.”

I dragged Park Soohyuk to the convenience store. I grabbed ten instant lottery tickets from the counter. The clerk didn’t even ask for ID because of Park Soohyuk’s older face. After buying the tickets, we went to a nearby table.

“I need something to scratch them with.”

“Oh, here’s a coin.”

Even though he said lottery tickets were a scam, he gave me a coin with anticipating eyes.

“I’ll start then.”

Shashak. I started scratching the silver foils on the ticket. The first was a failure. Immediately, I moved on to the second. Then the third.

“*Yaaawn.*”

Park Soohyuk had already lost interest. Unperturbed, I continued scratching. Fourth, fifth, sixth... While Park Soohyuk walked around the cup ramen aisle, I scratched the tenth ticket.

“Oh, finally.”

“You won? How much?”

Park Soohyuk casually asked after picking up a cup ramen.

“20 million won.”

“Oh, nice.”

Park Soohyuk started walking towards the counter before stopping and tilting his head. *Did I mishear that?* Murmuring so, he turned towards me.

“...Can you repeat that?”

“I won 20 million won. Looks like winning the first place jackpot is asking for too much.”

First place was 100 million won. I showed Park Soohyuk the lottery ticket. His jaws dropped.

“W-What, is, is this real?”

“It’s real, so take it.”

I handed him the ticket.

“W-Why are you giving this to me?”

“I’m still a minor, so I can’t claim the money. You can take it as an additional investment, so send me a modified contract.”

Park Soohyuk stared at me in shock. His gaping mouth didn’t seem to close. The cup ramen could probably fit in it.

“Take it.”

“Oh, yeah.”

Park Soohyuk quickly put the lottery ticket in his pocket. Then he looked around and began to sweat as though he had committed a crime.

“You can put your guard down. No one is going to steal it. “

“No, you don’t understand how scary the world can be...”

* * *

Moonlight shone through a broken window and lit up dusty ruins. Only vines and mosses lived in this desolate place.

This abandoned factory in Suwon served as the Chameleon Troupe’s temporary base.

— Boss.

A voice rang out in the empty space. The call woke an existence sleeping in the darkness.

— You’re awake?

The existence slowly opened its beautiful yet threatening eyes.

— Those bastards started moving. They just listed themselves as Packhorse Master on the stock market.

The voice relayed the information.

“Understood.”

The existence briefly replied in a dull voice.

— What should we do next?

It put off answering the question and slowly raised its body. Meanwhile, a full moon appeared from behind the clouds. The bright moonlight shone through the window and lit up the existence’s body.

— That aside, Boss is beautiful as always.

She had a graceful figure with long black hair seemingly weaved out of shadows, full pink lips, and smooth white skin. A woman who seemed to be the manifestation of modern beauty spoke without the slightest change in her expression.

“Do you have a death wish?”

Dark blue magic power crackled from her hands.

— I’m kidding, but it’s not like I can say Boss is ugly. Forgive me.

The magic power akin to an erupting volcano calmed down.

— Anyways, what are we going to do? Packhorse Master is making its move.

“We will only steal. We don’t care about anything else.”

She answered apathetically, but her command was clear.

— Oh, by the way, someone is buying Packhorse Master’s stocks en masse.

“Stocks?”

— Yep. I thought it was just a small investor with 3 million won at first, then another 10 million, but he suddenly threw in 250 million won on top of that. A small investor wouldn’t randomly do that.

“Coincidence?”

— Mm... 95%, I’d say. But Boss, I’m concerned with the other 5%. There’s no reason to buy this stock. Packhorse Master doesn’t even have a guild page yet.

The guild stock market posed much more risks than the regular stock market. Few investors would support new guilds without accurate information, and no one would have information on Packhorse Master.

“Don’t mind it. We only have one job.”

— Mmm... If you say so. I’ll tell the troupe members.

“Un.”

With that, the voice disappeared. Then it quickly came back.

— Oh right, a few exciting pages appeared on Violet Banquet.

The woman tilted her head.

— Artifact Search Corp, Jonggak's Dog Meat Soup, and Truth Agency.

“Are they of any use?”

— The first two are slowly building their reputation, but I don’t know about Truth Agency. I just included it because of how confidently it introduced itself. Since it’s boasting on Violet Banquet, I’m sure it has some skill.

“Take it out.”

— Come on. You know how things are. It wasn't just once or twice we hit the jackpot with ordinary pages. I'll give you the page number later, so take a look. It says it'll answer any question. Who knows? Maybe it can help us find that son of a bitch.

However, the woman remained uninterested.

“That doesn't happen often.”

— Still. Alright, I'm going. See you later, Boss.

The conversation ended, but the voice came back once again.

— Oh, one more thing, Boss.

“...”

Veins popped out on the woman's white forehead.

“What now?”

— Cube's exams start next week. You'll go watch, right?

Huuu. The woman sighed before replying.

“Yeah, I will.”

1. A term that means older brother, how younger males refer to older males in a friendly, family-like manner. 🤝

Chapter 37

Intruders (1)

The sound of scribbling pencils filled the classroom on Thursday. Every cadet worked hard to prepare for the exam in four days.

“Argh... I want to play soccer or something.”

Of course, at least one cadet hated studying. Chae Nayun’s entire body expressed her boredom.

“My body’s healed, but I can’t move.”

The news reported this week’s incident worldwide, and combat training was canceled because Cube’s executives were under investigation. As a result, we only had review and theory classes until the exams. It must be like hell for Chae Nayun.

“Exams are next week. Study hard, or you’ll regret it when the results come out.”

Kim Suho spoke with a laugh next to her. As the diligent protagonist, Kim Suho was also good at written exams, but not enough to contend for the top ranks, so he asked Yoo Yeonha whenever he had any questions.

“Um, Yeonha, can you tell me how to solve this?”

Yoo Yeonha glanced at the problem Kim Suho showed her.

“...Can you not forget my last name?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.”

I yawned as I watched them. Then someone poked my shoulder. I

tilted my head towards Rachel as she handed me a piece of paper. It was another complex problem. Rachel started asking me for help on problems like these, but I hadn't even heard her voice.

[Suppose the dungeon boss is a high-intermediate rank, grade 3 demi-devil. It is a stage dungeon, and each stage consists of a minimum of 10 and a maximum of 30 low rank and intermediate rank monsters. Assuming this dungeon is medium-small, find the minimum and maximum mana density, and approximate the number of people needed to conquer this dungeon.]

I had no clue. Was this going to be on the exam? I glanced at Rachel. She tapped on the desk while staring at me. I should probably answer the question using my gift. Observation and Reading should be able to solve this problem as long as it followed the world design I created.

[A high-intermediate rank, grade 3 demi-devil has a minimum magic power capacity of... medium-small stages have four to six floors... 878ppm-1133ppm. Nine people can use and recharge magic power without being overburdened.]

I wrote down the sentences that popped up in front of me on a piece of paper and handed it to Rachel. Immediately, her eyes widened. She buried her face in the paper and carefully scrutinized every calculation.

Ding dong—

The bell rang as class ended, but few cadets rose from their seats since it was just a self-study class. They all continued studying hard. Of course, I planned on returning to the dorm. That's just what intelligent students did. A shadow loomed over my desk as I packed my utensils and laptop. I raised my head curiously at Chae Nayun.

"Hey, help me study."

She spoke with a sweet smile as I stood up to leave.

"...I don't want to."

"What? Why?"

“It’s too troublesome.”

Written exams began next Monday. That was less than four days, so her grades wouldn't change much. Not to mention, I had no way of helping her study.

“H-Hey! Um, please! How about a study guide on phenomenon realm analysis?”

She sounded desperate, but I cold-heartedly left.

* * *

The written exams flew by like a breeze. From the first exam on Monday to the final exam on Friday, time quickly passed. I felt like I got everything correct. At first, I thought about aiming for an average score, but since I might score near the bottom for combat exams, I did my best not to get held back.

Today was Saturday, and combat exams would begin on Monday. During combat exams, Cube opened up to cadets' families, various hero associates, and every institution that hired heroes. Naturally, Cube bustled with people.

“Oh, it’s Cube’s rank 117, Kim Junha! I saw you on YouTube. My son is a fan. Can we take a photo?”

The combat exams felt like a festival because of all the people. I found it odd that teenagers fighting each other was considered a festival, but this was Cube’s tradition.

“We are in Cube, the world’s best hero academy...”

Reporters also came in from approved broadcasting companies. Since heroes were like celebrities, they should also become familiar with cameras.

“There sure are a lot of people.”

I sat in Hero Park, located in the center of Cube. The place boomed

with people like Disneyland.

“Ah! Hajin!”

Someone called my name. *Tap tap*. I turned in the direction of the footsteps. It was Hazuki.

“Hajin, what are you doing here?”

“Oh... Just taking a break. Who are the two behind you?”

“My parents. This is my mom, and this is my dad. Mom, Dad, this is my teammate.”

“H-Hello.”

I shook hands with Hazuki’s parents. They smiled and said something in Japanese. Since I couldn’t understand, I just smiled.

“Hajin. His name is Kim Hajin.”

Hazuki introduced me to her parents as they asked for my name. After Hazuki told them, they grabbed my hands. “Hajin-san, Hajin-san.” I didn’t know what they said, so I replied, “hai, hai.”

After the greetings ended, Hazuki left with her parents. Once again, I sat alone on the bench. I couldn’t help but feel jealous.

Huuu. If only my parents were in this world too...

As I wishfully thought, a particular person caught my eyes.

A woman slowly walked through the crowded park. Her long black hair flowed like shadows, and her eyes shone like obsidian. She seemed tired, but held a certain melancholic charm that darkened her surroundings.

I felt like I knew her. She was exactly as I described in my novel. One of the few wanted criminals on the Hero Association’s blacklist, the

leader of the Chameleon Troupe, and the person who inherited the title, *Yasha of the Eight Legions*. She disguised herself with countless identities, but I was the only one who knew her real name.

She suddenly paused and turned her head to meet my eyes. I looked away, but my body froze. Her eyes seemed to strangle me. I felt out of breath and broke out in cold sweat.

“...”

When my mind almost turned blank, she turned away. *Clack, clack*. Her high heels rang out as she walked off.

“Haa... Haa...”

I collected my breath after the immense pressure.

Suddenly, I felt her gaze on me again even though her back faced me. My instincts roared. I had to say something to explain why I stared at her...

With a gulp, I muttered, “Wow, she’s so hot.”

She slightly tilted her head, but continued walking away.

“Whew.”

I let out a sigh of relief. I beat my stifled chest and put my hands over my hot face.

I almost forgot. The Chameleon Troupe would sneak into Cube during combat exams to scout anyone worthy of filling their vacant position. In the original story, they targeted Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak, but disqualified Kim Suho because of his beliefs. They would return peacefully with Shin Jonghak in mind and wouldn’t cause any trouble.

However, heroes from the association currently patrolled Cube.

“I’m looking around constantly, but everything’s normal,” Oh Junhyuk

reported. He was a high rank, grade 6 hero with a world rank of 1737.

“There’s no one out of the ordinary. Let’s just go grab lunch.”

“Just focus.” The high rank, grade 7 hero Seo Youngji responded. Seo Youngji also held a world rank of 2000.

Several heroes in disguise acted as security because of the incident with Yun Hyun before the combat exams. The Hero Association had also dispatched them to investigate.

“Let’s eat pizza.”

“Shut it. Just keep your eyes out for anyone suspicious.”

If the Chameleon Troupe clashed with them, it wouldn’t end with just one or two dead.

* * *

Clack, clack. A woman stopped in an artificial forest. After confirming that no one watched her, she murmured, “Someone saw me.”

The forest was empty, without a shadow of a person. However, a strange voice came from the ground.

— Really? Maybe you were mistaken.

“No, he said I was hot.”

— Pfft. Well, did you like it, Boss?

“Do you want to die?”

— Check again. Maybe the necklace isn’t working.

A full-body mirror rose from the ground. She looked at her reflection and the Siren’s Necklace around her neck, an item that prevented people from recognizing her.

“The necklace is working fine.”

— Really? So someone saw through the necklace? He must have good perception. I’ll keep an eye out. Do you remember his name and face?

“Stop joking. You saw him too.”

— Huhu, I know, I know. I’m already looking into it. Wait just a bit.

Tadak, takdak. A keyboard typed away. The woman closed her eyes and waited for the report.

Chapter 38

Intruders (2)

— There's nothing special about him.

The voice answered after ten minutes. The woman smacked her lips when she was dissatisfied.

— Really. He's an orphan without parents or relatives. The orphanage held an examination for potential heroes, and the Military Agent Academy admitted him at the age of 6. He never stood out with a below-average rank before Cube. He also has a 300 million won debt. That's about it.

“...”

Then how did he notice me? The Siren's Necklace was a mythical grade accessory with perception distortion, among many other abilities. Named after the half-human half-bird creature from Greek mythology, it was impossible to see through without exceptional perception and eyesight.

— Do you still have doubts? I can put his name down in the notebook if you want.

“...No.”

The woman shook her head.

“We still have many chances. We can write his name down after finding out more about him.”

“Oh, Boss, you were here.”

An imposing voice resounded. The woman turned and saw a huge

man smiling viciously.

“It’s been a while, Boss.”

It was a bit funny seeing him call her Boss when she didn’t even reach his shoulders. However, the man treated her with great respect.

“This place is filled with powerful heroes.”

Click, click. The man clenched and unclenched his gauntlets.

“Take it off. We didn’t come here to cause trouble.”

“Ah, right. I almost forgot.”

At the woman’s command, the man’s black gauntlets scattered into dust. He scratched his neck in silence while she coldly glared at him.

“W-What?” Startled, the man asked.

— The report.

The mysterious voice asked instead of Boss.

“Oh, right. There’s nothing to report. I can pop everyone’s head with the flick of a finger.”

— Idiot. That’s obvious. I’m talking about their future potential.

The man rubbed his chin.

“Hmm... I’m not sure. I went to watch the second year’s rank 1 cadet, but he wasn’t anything special.”

— You should be watching the first years. They said this year’s freshmen were exceptional, so look again. Oh, Boss, I have something to do now, so I’ll talk to you later.

“Yeah, screw off.”

— You shut up.

The voice disappeared, and the man smiled as he stared at the woman.

“Boss, I don’t think there are any good saplings. What do we do? Since we’re here, can’t we fight these self-proclaimed heroes?”

The man couldn’t hold back his desire to fight. He flaunted his battle spirit by releasing his magic power, which fluttered in the air. Although it was careless and a keen hero could notice, the woman watched apathetically.

“...Gyeong.”

“Mmm?”

“Let’s test something.”

She imbued magic power into the necklace, and it changed color from gold to blue.

“How is it? Can you see me?”

“Oh, is that the treasure you got before? I can see a faint silhouette, but not your face. Ah, I have to focus. Even though you’re not moving, I keep losing sight of you. Ah, you just fused with the tree, Boss!”

“...”

As expected, the necklace worked fine. Although the man was a muscle-brained brute, he still had a high perception that matched his skills. Even he couldn’t see her, so how did a mere cadet do so?

“Oh, dang. I can’t tell where you are now, Boss. Let me borrow that too. I’m way too noticeable because of my large body. If there’s someone I wanted to kill...”

“We’re done here. Go.”

The woman cut off his chatter.

“Make sure you complete your mission.”

“Yes, Boss.”

He turned around without a fuss as she watched him walk away. His bulky back, mountainous shoulders, and flawlessly refined physique definitely stood out. He was an irregular who inherited the old Martial God’s spirit and vigor.

— Cheok Jungyeong wasn’t always that stupid, right Boss?

His name was Cheok Jungyeong. Through enlightenment and inheritance, he awakened his past life as Korea’s strongest swordsman who commanded the country’s fate.

* * *

The weekend passed, and combat exams began. Monday’s exam was a duel. Cadets could nominate other cadets to fight. Each cadet had 3 nominations, and a nominated cadet couldn’t refuse.

Although it might seem like the strong would bully the weak, Cube wasn’t that stupid. They designed the exam to be fair and gave bonus points based on differences in rankings. For example, if the rank 1 Kim Suho fought a bottom-ranked cadet, he would receive negative points even if he won, while the bottom-ranked cadet would gain points even if he lost.

Furthermore, an ungraded element called fame encouraged cadets to challenge stronger opponents. Thousands of cadets fought in numerous duel arenas under limited time. Naturally, scouts from multiple countries and guilds spectated the high ranking cadets, so low ranking cadets could also appeal to these scouts by challenging up the ranks.

“...I knew this would happen.”

Even with this mechanism that encouraged fairness and challenge, the rank 18 cadet nominated me.

[Duel 1] [Rank 18 Kim Horak vs. Rank 934 Kim Hajin]

If Kim Horak won, he wouldn't gain more than three points. In a fight between rank 934 and rank 18, this muscle-brained buffoon would obviously win.

"Well, what can I do." He wanted to beat me up.

I put my laptop in my cross bag and left the dorm. The scenery outside felt heartwarming with a flowery scent in the wind.

"Yunseok, say cheese! Wow, isn't that Kim Suho? O-Oppa, are you friends with him!? I want to take a picture with him!"

Cadets went about with their families. Since last Friday, their families stayed with them in the same dorm room. I walked alone, watching other cadets laugh and joke with their families.

"Where are you going?"

Someone scurried next to me like a cat. I paused and turned.

"To the duel arena."

"Oh right, Horak nominated you." Yoo Yeonha feigned ignorance.

"...Is there something you want to say?"

"I tried to stop him, but he insisted on fighting you. I had no choice."

"Oh, I see."

I continued walking. Yoo Yeonha followed me, then suddenly backed off. She didn't want a camera to record us together. Once the camera disappeared, she came back.

“Oh, also...”

Tak. She snapped her fingers. A tall man walked up and handed her a suitcase.

“Here are 100 pinnacle grade bullets. If you need more, just tell me. Of course, you can also ask for any defensive equipment.”

“Oh?”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly pulled the suitcase back when I was about to take it.

“But don’t misunderstand. This isn’t payment for saving my life.”

“Huh?” I was confused.

Yoo Yeonha stuttered somewhat bashfully.

“T-This is... just a present.”

“Yeah, I get it, so give it here.”

I snatched the suitcase.

“Also, they're asking for my testimony.”

“Hmm?”

“For the djinn incident.”

“Oh yeah, what about it?”

“They want me to testify, but I’ve been delaying it since it looked like you wanted to hide your power.”

So she purposely didn’t report that I sniped the djinn.

“...Then keep doing that.”

Yun Hyun contracted with an especially dangerous devil. Lilith's djinns were all ill-natured and heinous, so things could get problematic if they found out I killed Yun Hyun.

“Understood. Ah, by the way, will Horak win?”

Her question had a strange connotation. It sounded like she was asking if I would lose on purpose. I couldn't win even if I wanted to.

“Then I'm off.”

Before I could reply, Yoo Yeonha left. Was there another camera? A group of reporters noticed Yoo Yeonha and ran towards her.

* * *

I arrived at the second duel arena. It was only eight in the morning, but the place bustled with people. Numerous reporters filmed with cameras and microphones.

Coincidentally, a nearby reporter explained why.

“Today, Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, and Kim Horak are scheduled to duel from 9 A.M. to 11 A.M.”

I maneuvered through the crowd and proceeded towards the arena. Suddenly, a man in an official Cube uniform stopped me. I asked, somewhat disgruntled.

“I'm wearing a cadet uniform, can't you see?”

“Haha, it's not that. Cadets need to go that way.”

The man pointed at a pathway next to the main entrance.

“Oh, thank you.”

I walked through and arrived at my assigned waiting room.

[Waiting Room 5]

This room should be full of extras like me. People like Kim Suho and Chae Nayun resided in waiting room 1, closest to the reporters.

I opened the door, and the 30-40 cadets talking among themselves suddenly turned quiet. They all stared at me for about three seconds before resuming their previous activities.

I walked in and sat down on a random seat.

“I heard Kim Horak nominated you.”

As I rested, a stranger struck up a conversation. His face looked somewhat familiar, probably someone from my class. I nodded without replying.

“Damn, Kim Horak must have you marked. You shouldn’t have shown off so much.”

“...”

I wanted to say something but gave up. Instead, I murmured inwardly.

Unlike you guys, I get stronger by showing off.

“Oh right, why do you keep leaving Cube? Are you really throwing money away in cabaret clubs and brothels?”

It seemed these rumors still went around. I shook my head silently.

“No way, you do?”

Somehow, he interpreted my gesture however he wanted. I opened my mouth without a choice.

“No. Even if I wanted to, I don’t have the money.”

Chapter 39

Intruders (3)

Cube designed the duel arena as a miniature version of the Roman Colosseum. The central stage was slightly bigger than a soccer field with about 5000 seats circling around. Ten minutes before the start, guests filled in all the seats.

“How did you get such nice seats?”

The high rank hero, Oh Junhyuk, asked in surprise as he handed Seo Youngji a hotdog. She had grabbed front-row seats with the best view.

“You tell me to focus, but you come here first thing in the morning to grab the best seats...”

“Shut up and sit down.”

Oh Junhyuk snickered and sat next to her. “Wow, it sure brings back memories, doesn’t it?”

“You must mean bad memories. I remember you got beaten up so bad you couldn’t even watch mixed martial arts anymore.”

“...I’ve gotten better because it’s always on TV. My son loves it too.”

Mixed martial arts was one of the most popular sports, especially among kids. It featured one-on-one and team battles between superhumans. Naturally, the fights looked flashy with magic power explosions and strikes cutting things in half. The mighty display motivated children to pursue strength.

“Really? That’s nice to hear.”

“Nice to hear? Please, the world must be coming to an end. Djinnns are

more active than ever, but a sports star is ranked third in career choices. They'd rather go into sports than join a guild."

"I don't see what's wrong with that."

"You don't see what's wrong? Because of people like you, the association is pitiful."

Suddenly, Oh Junhyuk felt an extremely battle-thirsty gaze.

"...Who's that guy?"

He stared at the seat on the opposite side of the arena. A menacing man smiled with his teeth out at Oh Junhyuk and Seo Youngji.

"He's been doing that for a while. Must be a fan."

"A fan? He can see through our disguise?" Oh Juhyuk was surprised.

"I guess so. Ah, it's starting."

The host announced the start of the duels, and Seo Youngji took out her laptop.

"Typical associate executive... Alright, who should I be looking out for?"

"Kim Suho and Chae Nayun. They're at the top of their class. And I guess Yi Yeonghan and Kim Horak too."

"Oh! Two of the top 6 are here? Who are they fighting?"

Kim Suho and Chae Nayun were well-known in the association. Even Oh Junhyuk, who didn't care about duels, showed interest.

"Kim Suho is fighting Yi Yeonghan. Chae Nayun is fighting Joseph. And Kim Horak is fighting Kim Hajin."

"Other than Kim Horak, most of them chose appropriate opponents.

So, who's Kim Hajin?"

"Kim Hajin, rank 934"

"...Rank 934? Isn't that too low? Is there anything special about him?"

Seo Youngji pushed up her glasses.

"I heard some bad rumors. My cousin in Cube told me he's quite distasteful."

"Ah, so Kim Horak's punishing a delinquent. I see. Who would have thought Kim Horak had a sense of justice? He's sacrificing his grade too..."

Tak. Seo Youngji closed her laptop.

"It's starting."

"...Tsk."

Oh Junhyuk crossed his arms and leaned back into his seat.

— The first duel is between rank 18, Kim Horak, and rank 934, Kim Hajin! How will Kim Hajin overcome the difference in their rank? Why did Kim Horak nominate such a low ranked cadet?

The host tried his best to hype up the match, which had an obvious winner. A mana barrier rose around the arena to prevent attacks from leaking out.

"That must be him."

"Yep."

Oh Junhyuk looked at the cadet walking out from the right passageway. He looked... average. So average that Oh Junhyuk wouldn't remember his face the next day.

Cadets couldn't use their personal weapons, so scouts could accurately assess their abilities. I couldn't use the Desert Eagle, and I wanted to hide aether if possible.

I only had the training handgun and protective armor provided by Cube. My chances of beating Kim Horak were slim to none, but that didn't mean I planned on losing one-sidedly, especially against that bastard.

"Let's go."

"...Yes."

I followed the staff up the stage. First, I took a good look around the arena. A translucent mana barrier surrounded it, with thousands of spectators looking down. I felt indescribable pressure and excitement. As I shook from this strange sensation, Kim Horak walked up from the other side.

"Oh, Kim Horak."

I smiled and waved my hand.

"How did you do on your written exams?"

I provoked him, but Kim Horak silently equipped his gauntlets. I held up my handgun. Our physical stats differed by at least 4 points, which was the difference between an ordinary human and an adult elephant. He would snap my body in half the moment he closed in.

"Let's take it easy, alright?"

— Counting down! Three!

The host must have thought we were ready as he counted down.

Crack— Crack— I could hear Kim Horak cracking his knuckles.

— Two!

His magic power ignited and covered the surface of his body. The layer of magic power around him was a technique called qi reinforcement. Kim Horak was still inexperienced, but my bullets wouldn't be able to penetrate his incomplete qi reinforcement.

— One!

He leaned forward, and he dug his feet into the ground. Currently, we were 150 meters apart. Kim Horak could easily close that distance in just three seconds, but I didn't come unprepared.

— Start!

Immediately, he charged forward like a beast. My sense of time slowed as I activated Bullet Time.

I released stigma's magic power, which flowed into my handgun and adhered to a bullet. With stigma's magic power, the bullet carried the special property of anti-magic I set beforehand. When it clashed with reinforced magic power, it would shatter it instantly.

“Sigh.”

I used half of stigma's magic power, but it was worth it. I pulled the trigger at the wild boar who didn't even bother to dodge. In his mind, my shots couldn't hurt him.

Clang—

When my bullet clashed with his qi reinforcement, a strange explosion occurred. The blast shattered his qi reinforcement like a glass window. Now he was nothing but a target as I freely pulled the trigger.

Kim Horak jumped to the side to circle around, but I followed his movement and shot accordingly. He helplessly backed off at the barrage of gunshots. I continuously pulled the trigger after him. He held on, jumping, rolling to the side, and lifting the arena's tile as a shield.

“...Hmm.”

I paused and rubbed my chin as I stared at him. A blue aura rose from his body once again. His qi reinforcement had regenerated, but qi reinforcement wasn't a technique that could be used repeatedly. It was thinner than the first and was probably his final one.

“Huuu.”

He licked his dried lips and charged at me once again. This time, his movements became quite complex. Like a crab, he zigzagged while steadily moving forward without a set pattern. I could no longer shoot because he moved faster than my bullets.

However, I had prepared for this. I took a dagger from my belt and tethered the blade to stigma's magic power. Then, I lightly threw it as Master Sharpshooter also applied to throwing. The dagger flew forward like a boomerang, but it had no special power and wouldn't even scratch his qi reinforcement.

“Fuck!”

Kim Horak didn't know that. He would think the dagger was special like my first bullet and couldn't help but be suspicious.

Kim Horak hopped to the side to dodge the dagger. I pulled on the string of magic power connected to the dagger and changed its trajectory. The dagger turned at a ninety-degree angle and chased after him. Judging by his surprise, he must've thought, *This dagger is definitely special.*

However, Kim Horak didn't dodge the dagger because it wasn't as fast as a bullet. He attempted to grab it and succeeded with incredible hand-eye coordination. But as he caught it, he stopped moving. I fired a bullet that penetrated his qi reinforcement.

“Uk!”

The bullet shattered his magic power as he staggered, and I retrieved the dagger. Now, Kim Horak was completely open. What would he do next?

“...Damn it!”

As expected, he recklessly rushed in. He didn't back off or move to the side. He simply charged forward while taking all my bullets. Right arm, left arm, right thigh, left calf... He held on even after I shot him in multiple places.

“Huaaaap—!”

After finally closing in, he swung his fist. I tumbled back to dodge, and Kim Horak chased after me. Eventually, I arrived at a dead end with the wall behind me, but I quickly climbed up the wall with parkour before Kim Horak could celebrate. My hands and feet adhered to it like magnets, and I continued to fire from a distance that Kim Horak could never reach.

“Hey! You fuck, this is cheating!”

Exactly as I had planned, I shot his legs. Kim Horak wouldn't have enough strength to jump this high.

Now, I one-sidedly attacked him. Kim Horak constantly moved, hoping to dodge, but even a single hit caused him pain. Thigh, shoulder, foot... His injuries piled up, and Kim Horak gradually slowed to a halt.

I aimed at his stomach for the final attack. Every cadet had a device around their stomach that would end the duel if a critical injury hit.

Click—

“...?”

No bullet came out. I rummaged through my pockets, but I had no ammunition left.

“Ah.”

I brought 240 bullets, but I used them all. I jumped down with no other options. I also exhausted stigma's magic power and only had my

daggers left. All I needed to do was stab Kim Horak's stomach, but it didn't seem like he would surrender.

"Huu... Huu..."

He glared at me with ferocious killing intent. He would undoubtedly rip me to shreds if I got close. One of his arms was still uninjured. I looked around, but the excited crowd had grown eerily quiet as though I was in a library.

"Mmm..."

This was good enough payback. Kim Horak couldn't hit me once as I continuously pummeled him. Not to mention, my score would go up even if I lost. I sneered at him and raised my hand. Then I spoke.

"I surrender."

Hweee—

The referee blew his whistle as the mana barrier around the arena disappeared. I walked away while leisurely whistling.

Chapter 40

Intruders (4)

The duel ended after about eight minutes. Neither fast nor slow, the result was as expected, but no one could have predicted what just occurred. The audience remained dead silent.

“How terrifying. Those were real bullets, right?”

Oh Junhyuk looked down at Kim Hajin walking back to the waiting room.

“Yep.”

Seo Youngji nodded.

“But he doesn’t look hurt at all, even though he looks like a beehive.”

He pointed to Kim Horak, whose body was full of bullets. The protective armor covered his vital points and he didn’t bleed much or seem to be in pain.

“For martial artists, their bodies are their weapons. Recovery is their specialty.”

“So, what did you think?”

“Kim Hajin did well, but Kim Horak was too reckless. Kim Horak showed off and lost. If he took it slow... Well, I guess the result would have been the same.”

Honestly, Kim Horak didn’t need to use qi reinforcement. Instead, he could have simply imbued his gauntlets with magic power and slowly overwhelmed Kim Hajin.

“I guess it was Kim Hajin’s tactical victory. He still lost though.”

Oh Junhyuk scratched the back of his neck. He wasn’t sure how to feel since Kim Hajin surrendered a won fight.

“It leaves a bad aftertaste,” Seo Youngji murmured with a frown. Her laptop displayed a picture of Kim Hajin as she wrote a report.

“What, that he lost on purpose?”

“No, Kim Hajin put up a good fight, but I understand his loss.”

“...Really?”

Oh Junhyuk looked at Kim Horak being treated in the arena. No, it couldn’t even be called treatment. Kim Horak simply drank a high rank potion, and the bullets popped out of his muscles after he flexed. His expression contained both anger and relief at the results.

“At first... no, from the start until the end, Kim Hajin overwhelmed him. His initial reaction speed and dynamic vision honestly surprised me. His firing speed was unbelievable too.”

“I agree. His firing speed was something else.”

“However, he slowed down just as much as Kim Horak, even though he never got injured. I think Kim Hajin can’t maintain that movement for long.”

Tak tak tak. Seo Youngji spoke as she tapped on the keyboard.

“And before Kim Hajin surrendered, he tried to finish off Kim Horak. I saw him pull the trigger, but nothing came out. His face stiffened, and he rummaged through his pockets without taking anything out.”

“So he used up all his bullets.”

“Yep, but he didn’t try fighting Kim Horak, even though Kim Horak only had his left hand. Why?”

“Because he wasn’t confident in winning?”

Seo Youngji lightly nodded.

“Right. He used up his bullets, but he hadn’t won. Kim Horak only had a single arm left, but he could still fight. At that point, Kim Hajin lost.”

Oh Junhyuk took a deep breath. Then he tilted his head.

“Oh right, how did he break Kim Horak’s qi reinforcement? He only used a single bullet, and twice at that.”

“Right, that’s the problem. That’s why I said it left a bad aftertaste.”

Seo Youngji took off her glasses. It looked like she was getting ready to explain in detail. Oh Junhyuk swallowed his saliva.

“Most people, including you, probably missed it, but I spotted the movement of magic power on his bullet.”

“...Is that possible? He’s only a cadet!” exclaimed Oh Junhyuk.

Mana was extremely difficult to control. Making it thin enough to coat a bullet and compressing it to destroy qi reinforcement, even Oh Junhyuk wasn’t confident.

“I’m looking it up on the market in case it’s a trick that uses an item, or if it’s related to his gift. If he used an item, it’s cheating. But if it’s his gift... It might be the first of its kind.”

Oh Junhyuk sighed at Seo Youngji’s serious expression.

“Huu... Anyways, I don’t like it. I thought Kim Horak was carrying out justice, but Kim Hajin crushed him.”

Kim Horak won, but suffered enormously. In a one-on-one fight, warriors countered sharpshooters. Kim Horak should have overwhelmed Kim Hajin, but Kim Hajin toyed with him instead. Not

only would this be traumatic, but his scout evaluations could also plummet. On the other hand, Kim Hajin attracted everyone's attention, including the guild associates present.

— Yes, Kim Hajin. Never heard of him? Me neither, but he just fought with Kim Horak and he...

— He uses a gun. Yes, his limit should be clear, but he broke a qi reinforcement. Yes, it was an incomplete qi reinforcement, but just the fact that he broke it...

— I don't know how he destroyed a qi reinforcement either. That's why I'm calling you...

Guild associates started calling.

“Justice doesn't always win. Well, we don't really know which side is justice.”

“...Yeah, yeah. Just keep writing your report. New talent discovered. Nice title.”

The host announced the next duel as Seo Youngji glanced at her watch.

“Kim Hajin, I'll have to remember him. Let's leave after we watch Kim Suho's match. It's coming up in three fights.”

“Yeah, I planned on doing the same. What is he complaining about?”

Oh Junhyuk gestured across the arena. The man who previously grinned at them stared at Kim Hajin's passageway with killing intent.

Seo Youngji replied, “...He must not have liked how it turned out. Everyone has their taste.”

* * *

After the first duel, I used two of my nominations. I picked two male

cadets around the 300-400 ranks. The duels started around 5 and ended around 8.

The fights were... strange comebacks.

Of course, I was no longer at my best. I had depleted stigma's magic power against Kim Horak, and couldn't use Bullet Time, which was limited to once a day. In addition, I fought against swordsmen.

Kim Horak made for an easier target because he used martial arts. Although I would have been helpless if he didn't use qi reinforcement and saved his magic power instead. He lost because of his carelessness. He might have been aiming for the quickest win record to show off.

Unlike Kim Horak, my other two opponents slowly closed in on me. They blocked my bullets with their swords and dragged the fight out.

In the end, I managed to win thanks to my luck.

The first opponent lost to a ricochet. The bullet I accidentally bounced off the ground and struck his armpit. He dropped his sword in pain and instantly surrendered.

The second opponent lost to his own mistake. It was a drawn-out battle over 30 minutes. He sweated so much from blocking my bullets that it pooled into a puddle. Before the referee announced a draw, he charged at me while I reloaded. Then he slipped on his own sweat. *Hoiik*—! I recalled his scream.

“God, that guy was just too funny.”

I giggled and lay in bed. The final results were 2 wins 1 loss. Sharpshooters also gained bonus points for fighting warriors, so I no longer had to worry about being held back.

“*Auuu.*”

I stretched and looked out the window. Darkness concealed the world like a thick curtain, and the pale moon was its only source of light.

The eerie scenery made me anxious.

“I hope everything will be okay.”

I suddenly thought about the Chameleon Troupe. I saw them at the arena. Not only the boss, but also that guy. A monster with the instincts of a savage beast, completely obsessed with strength. According to the original story, he should have felt Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak’s potential and peacefully returned after promising to fight them in the future. However, that didn’t seem to be the case. He wanted to fight immediately with the strong heroes currently patrolling Cube.

“Well, it’s not like I can do anything about it.”

He could kill me with a single breath.

“Hmm...”

My gaze wandered to the corner of my bed. Park Soohyuk gave me a rather expensive gift for being his first investor.

“A drone...”

It was a fist-sized drone with a camera.

* * *

A chilling wind brushed against the leaves in one of Cube’s artificial forests. A bulky man sat on a tree trunk in the darkness. He wore a formal suit that made him quite eye-catching.

“He wasn’t much by my standard,” the man murmured.

— By your standard?

“Yep, he’s a mouse. I don’t like him, a tiny guy who only shoots from a distance.”

— You mean you don't like his fighting style... You were supposed to find out why Boss is interested in him.

“How should I know?”

The man's voice turned hostile.

— What are you mad for?

“You would understand if you saw that little rat's fight. Rats like him... I need to pop off their heads...”

His eyes looked bloodshot. The duels he watched between rookies made his blood boil. He wanted to jump in and show them a real fight, but barely held himself back.

— What about Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak?

“Mmm... I thought they were okay... Maybe not...”

— Make up your mind.

“They were fine. Happy? I want to wait until they grow up to fight.”

At that moment...

“Who are you?”

A voice rang out from behind him. The man turned around and saw a police officer roaming around because of the combat exams. The man didn't notice him because he was such a weakling without magic power.

— Don't forget why Boss brought you.

The man nodded.

“Yeah... I know. I'm a master when it comes to recognizing the strong.”

— Right, that's the only reason.

“Excuse me, what are you doing here? The forest is off limits. Please come out.”

The police officer approached him with a flashlight. The man stared at him with killing intent, but the officer couldn't see his expression in the dark.

“Oh right, how did you get here in the first place? Sir? Come out!”

The man laughed.

“...Hey.”

— What.

“I'll go after I crack open a nut.”

“Sir, stop talking to yourself and come out!”

The man's fist cut through the air. He punched the air and caused a shockwave that crushed the officer's body.

— Did you do it?

“Yep.”

— Boss is going to kill you.

“Keep it a secret.”

— I will until she finds out. For now, do your job.

Thanks to the weakling, his mind slightly cleared up. He stood up and walked away. The dorms were only a few minutes away. After a while, his keen hearing picked up on a few faint voices.

— Hey, what is this?

— *Ueek*. Fuck, this is a corpse! Contact headquarters!

Far off in the distance, he grinned as he watched the two officers vomiting.

Wiing— Wiing—

“Mmm?”

He heard a mosquito buzzing and turned.

— What?

“Nothing, just a mosquito.”

— How lame. Hurry up before I tell Boss that you killed someone.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m going.”

The man quickened his pace.

A tiny drone hovered silently above and watched him leave before disappearing.

Chapter 41

Sudden Encounter (1)

— *Tak.*

I closed my laptop.

“...Well, that's terrifying.”

Cheok Jungyeong killed someone purely for enjoyment. I had created this world. On the surface, society seemed functional with science and magic vastly improving the quality of life, but underneath existed demi-humans without morals. Demi-humans referred not only to djinns, but also superhumans who rejected heroes. Governments officially recognized them as wanted criminals, but the public called them villains.

“What killed him?”

The drone was unable to capture exactly what happened. Only after slowing it down ten times did I catch a glimpse. Cheok Jungyeong threw a jab and a violent pressure erupted, instantly killing the police officer.

“He killed someone without even touching them. Also, this thing...”

I stared at the drone on my bed. It could come in handy if I bought a more expensive one and modified it with my settings.

Wiing—

My smartwatch rang.

[Yo, can I nominate you?]

It was Chae Nayun. She seemed to be talking about tomorrow's duels.

[Why?]

[What do you mean why? You provoked me several times.]

I still had one nomination left. Cadets had to duel at least three times and at most six. I didn't need to fight anyone else unless someone nominated me.

[No, I'm exhausted.]

I couldn't possibly win against Chae Nayun when I couldn't even dodge her arrows which were stronger than my bullets.

[You can think about it tomorrow. Also, how did you destroy qi reinforcement with a bullet? You didn't even use your personal weapon. That's all everyone is talking about. It was your gift, right?]

So this was her real goal.

I just ignored her. I doubted she had any nominations left. Even if she did, she wouldn't waste her energy since she was fighting Rachel tomorrow.

"Whoa, it's already 12?"

I took off my smartwatch and prepared for bed. When I turned off the light, I received another message.

[You put on quite a show.]

It came from Yoo Yeonha. I briefly replied.

[I didn't want to get hit.]

[Because you destroyed a qi reinforcement with your bullet, many guilds are interested.]

[I know.]

I gained quite a bit of SP, 185 since noon. Once I collected a bit more, I could create another art or physique.

[They're already calling your gift superpower bullet and bullet reinforcement. Speaking of which, what do you think about guilds?]

[Those names suck.]

[No, what do you think about Essence of the Strait?]

“Hmm.”

Yoo Yeonha only judged people based on their usefulness. Unfortunately, this would only worsen as she grew older.

[Contacting cadets beforehand is illegal. That's a 500 million won penalty.]

I sent a joking message to end the conversation.

[First, I'm still a cadet. Cadets can recruit other cadets without violating the law. Second, I can afford to pay at least that much.]

She replied quite seriously. I felt a bit awkward.

[That's not your money, it's your parents.]

[Oh right, your acting during the second and third match was superb.]

“...This girl.”

Why did she talk like I hid my true power? If anything, Kim Suho was the one hiding his power.

[Were you watching?]

[I had some time. I think your growth rate is too quick. You were rank 934 during the initial exams, but overwhelmed the rank 18 cadet after switching to a gun. It's too noticeable...]

“What is she going on about?”

I also ignored Yoo Yeonha. Honestly, I was exhausted after three fights today.

“...Oh right.”

I suddenly remembered something else. I turned on my smartwatch and sent Park Soohyuk a message.

[Hyung, thanks for the drone. I'll take good care of it.]

* * *

The Chameleon Troupe's boss sat cross-legged on the ground in a pitch-black abandoned factory. A series of battles from the day played in her head.

Kim Suho's swordsmanship was as she had heard. His sword strikes were light as a feather, but carried destructive power. Every movement flowed like water. It was so well polished it seemed more suitable to call it a sword art than swordsmanship.

Next was Shin Jonghak. His spearmanship was truly domineering. He stabbed directly at his opponent's vitals and overwhelmed anyone's defense. Using his long reach, he relentlessly attacked from every direction. It looked more like a one-sided beating than a duel.

— Next is the man you mentioned, Boss. The one who called you hot.

She nodded silently. The video in her eyes changed to a battle between a sharpshooter and a warrior. It was obvious who would win. However, she suddenly opened her eyes. She had only briefly watched the video, but the sharpshooter's bullet destroyed the warrior's magic power. She carefully examined the magic power around the bullet. If her eyes weren't mistaken, it could only be one thing. The power of

anti-magic. What she was looking for all along, the silver bullet that could kill that man.

— Interesting, isn't it? I was surprised too when I first saw it.

“Kim Hajin. Write his name down on the notebook.”

She spoke without hesitation.

—... Really?

“Yes.”

— But Jungyeong said he didn't like him.

“Gyeong hates sharpshooters.”

Cheok Jungyeong was a true warrior who believed in staring into the opponent's eyes and striking them down. He also didn't like the other Chameleon Troupe members that fought from long range.

— I guess. He did say Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak were okay.

“Then put their names down too.”

— Then we'll only have 5 slots left. Is that okay?

Individuals with their names in the notebook would have their live locations tracked. The notebook acted like a GPS. In addition, the owner of the notebook could teleport to the target's location. However, one condition had to be met: [The target cannot know their name is in the notebook]. As long as the target wasn't told, there was no reason they would notice.

— Who do we prioritize?

“Mmm.”

Boss closed her eyes and recalled that day 11 years ago when she first

cried because of that man's betrayal and the death of their previous leader. She vowed revenge in front of a grave and carried the Chameleon Troupe on her shoulders.

"For now..."

The Chameleon Troupe survived after the death of its previous leader. With a new leader, they took a giant leap forward using vengeance as nourishment. However, they couldn't find the traitor. Even if they did, they wouldn't be able to do anything, so Boss kept searching.

The power of anti-magic, which could destroy the magic power physique...

"Put Kim Hajin on top priority."

* * *

I stayed in my room until noon on Tuesday. Although the duels continued until today, no one nominated me.

"I should have just stayed in my room."

Currently, it was 1 P.M. and I stood outside. I was bored, so I went to watch Chae Nayun (rank 4) fight Rachel (rank 3) and Kim Suho (rank 1) against Yohei (rank 8).

"The seats are full."

The arena had 5000 seats, but I couldn't spot a single empty seat.

Should I go back? Or should I just stand and watch?

A couple suddenly stood up and left.

"Cough."

I nervously took a seat, hoping they wouldn't come back.

— Thank you for waiting!

The host announced the start of the duels, and the crowd excitedly cheered.

Sssss.

Someone sat next to me. I glanced with a bag of popcorn in my hand and looked back ahead.

“...?”

An image of the person flashed in my head. She... looked familiar. I swallowed the popcorn in my mouth and glanced again. My heart suddenly stopped as I held my breath. The boss of the Chameleon Troupe sat next to me. She lived without a name and was only known by the title Yasha.

I stuffed my trembling hands into the popcorn and fixed my eyes on the arena. *Why is she here? Did I do something wrong? Or is it a coincidence? Right, it's just a coincidence.* She came to watch Kim Suho and just happened to sit next to me...

In the middle of my panic...

“Huak!”

Someone walking down the stairs suddenly tripped. This nameless person held a large soda that spun in the air before landing on someone's head like a hat. For the record, the soda was filled to the brim.

I didn't know whether my luck played a part, but not a single drop landed on me. However...

I turned to the side, feeling dizzy. Under the soda cup, Boss' eyes trembled uncontrollably.

Chapter 42

Sudden Encounter (2)

“Oh no, I’m so sorry.”

The nameless person apologized. The Chameleon Troupe’s boss looked surprised. I took the soda cup off her head as ice cubes drizzled down. Boss shut her eyes.

“Please wait just a moment. I’ll go get a towel...”

The nameless person suddenly froze. His eyes turned lifeless, and he walked away in a zombie-like manner. I glanced at Boss’ neck and saw a faint light. I almost recognized that necklace, but couldn’t quite remember. I wasn’t too keen on item settings.

“Haaa.”

She sighed and turned towards me. I scratched my neck. I had a tiny pack of tissues in my pocket, but it wasn’t enough to clean the mess on her.

“...”

She kept staring, so I took out the tissues.

“Um, you can use this...”

She looked back and forth between me and the tissues. Then she grabbed them and wiped her face, legs, and arms.

“Thank you.”

She lightly bowed. I couldn’t believe what just happened. Suddenly, the host’s loud voice resounded.

— We will now begin!

The crowd loudly cheered. Countless reporters aimed their cameras at the arena. Although they weren't allowed to film, they could take pictures. The reporters from England were incredibly excited.

— Rank 3 Rachel vs. Rank 4 Chae Nayun!

A battle between a rapier and a bow. This also happened in the original story, and I already knew Rachel would win.

I stared at them on stage. I could see as though they were only a few feet away. Chae Nayun's mouth moved, and I could hear what she said.

— Princess, our rank will be changing today.

Rachel didn't react to the provocation.

— Counting down! Three! Two!

Chae Nayun aimed her bow at Rachel, and Rachel held up her rapier. Neither side showed any openings in their stances as they waited for the signal.

— Start!

Chae Nayun fired immediately. Her magic arrow flew at lightning speed. However, Rachel efficiently skirted past by a hair's breadth.

Chae Nayun continued with a barrage of arrows that rained down from the sky. The arrows split into several offshoots with unpredictable paths. It seemed this was Chae Nayun's plan. Since Rachel would just dodge direct shots, Chae Nayun tried boxing her in.

However, Rachel elegantly evaded the terrifying barrage. Not only that, she didn't hesitate to stab with her rapier when given a chance. Her magic power shot towards Chae Nayun like beams of light. Even so, Chae Nayun didn't dodge. Instead, she emitted magic power in the form of a shield and blocked them.

The crowd erupted into cheers and applause. Chae Nayun's magic power control surpassed the level of a cadet.

However, the outcome of this battle was already determined. Chae Nayun couldn't win against Rachel.

Rachel was a swordsman who specialized in receiving long ranged attacks. Her flexible body could dodge arrows with the slightest movement, and her accurate attacks continuously disrupted an archer's posture. Chae Nayun created a shield to protect her posture, but it consumed too much magic power.

Rachel would win the moment Chae Nayun's magic power ran out.

"I saw your duel against Kim Horak."

A voice suddenly spoke next to me. I slightly jolted because I was so focused on the duel that I forgot about her. That felt incredibly foolish since she was far more powerful than Rachel or Chae Nayun.

"Um, thank you," I calmly replied.

"Was that your gift?" she asked while staring at me.

"...I'm sorry, but that's not something I can reveal."

"..."

She took out a business card from her pocket.

"This is who I am."

She handed me her business card.

[Li Xiaopeng] [Desolate Moon's grade 3 hero] [Contact address: 0103-3243-9203-93]

It was one of her many fake identities. Even so, my heart trembled as few people could contact her. I simply smiled and muttered. "It's

illegal to scout cadets in advance.”

“...”

She tried to put away her business card.

“Ah, but...”

I grabbed her wrist. As I thought, she didn’t know about playing hard to get.

“I’ll hold onto yours.”

“...” She nodded and gave me her business card.

“I’ll leave now. Contact us whenever you want.”

She stood up and walked out. I stared at her back in a daze.

“...What did she come here for?”

I couldn’t figure out why she would visit me.

* * *

All the duels ended by 5 P.M. Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Rachel, and another cadet named Joo Youngho were the only ones who won all their duels. Many unexpected outcomes occurred due to fatigue as cadets fought up to three times a day,

— Wow, that was amazing. Did you see Kim Suho? He’s so stylish!

— Chae Nayun lost to Rachel... I’m a bit bitter. This is the first time I’ve seen Korea’s rising star lose against a foreigner.

By the time I left, the sky had already turned dark. Spectators brushed past me as they chatted about today’s battles. Before I returned to the dorm, I went into an alleyway at the back of the arena. I sat down and took out the drone from my cross bag. This drone was different from

the original because I added several settings like battery life boost, stealth mode, and target lock-on. These modifications would only last four days until the Chameleon Troupe left, costing relatively little SP.

“Fly.”

I threw the drone into the air as it flew into the forest. Then I headed back to the dorm.

— *kuk... huk... kuk...*

“...Huh?”

I heard someone crying and stopped. It sounded a bit like an animal, but was pitiful enough to make me turn. My eyes saw through several walls into a nearby forest. Chae Nayun hid between the trees crying. Her body shook with her face buried between her knees.

“Ah.”

I remembered this event. Chae Nayun would completely fall for Kim Suho after he consoled her. She would view Kim Suho as more than just a friend after everything else that happened between them. Although things had slightly changed from the original, the big picture remained the same.

I turned back without much thought.

“...Tsk.”

However, I hesitated to leave. Kim Suho would comfort Chae Nayun, but his kindness wouldn't change anything. *You can do better next time. Work hard with me. I will help you get stronger.* Such words wouldn't help Chae Nayun. In life, sometimes it was better to give up and change. However, Kim Suho never gave up on anything and would never suggest it to others. Chae Nayun wouldn't give up the bow for a long time because of Kim Suho.

“...Huuu.”

I turned on my smartwatch. Chae Nayun's message from last night was still there.

[Hey, don't ignore me. If you don't reply, I'll nominate you for real.]

I responded after 18 hours.

[What are you doing?]

Through the walls, I could see Chae Nayun's smartwatch ring. She didn't check it because she was crying, so I sent another message.

[I saw your duel today.]

Chae Nayun glanced at her smartwatch.

— What does this bastard want now?

She planned on ignoring me, so I sent her a message she couldn't ignore.

[See, I told you. You're more suited for a sword than a bow. It's not too late to change your weapon. I did too.]

— This son of a...

It was incredibly effective. Chae Nayun fumed and tapped on her smartwatch.

[Screw off before I kill you.]

I replied with another message that would drive her over the edge.

[Come on, you defeated a djinn with a sword, so why do you insist on using the bow? I just can't understand. It's almost... pitiful. If you fought Rachel like how you fought that djinn, do you think you would have lost?]

[What? You wanna die?]

[Think a little. You beat her when you were in the Military Agent Academy, so why do you think you're losing now? It's because you don't have an aptitude for bows.]

[You piece of shit where are you do I look like a pushover you bastard don't be so arrogant just because you beat Kim Horak]

I could hardly understand her emotional message with all the punctuation errors. I didn't bother replying either. I wanted to mess with her more because of her funny reactions, but it was time.

— Huh? Chae Nayun?

Kim Suho peeked behind the tree where she hid.

— Eh?

— What are you doing here?

— W... What!

Chae Nayun quickly wiped away her tears. She tried to run, but Kim Suho caught her.

— Let me go!

Chae Nayun tried to shake him off, but Kim Suho wasn't the type to leave a crying girl. He had a typical main character personality.

“...It's time to leave.”

I didn't stay to watch what would happen between them. I only made sure Chae Nayun didn't forget about her real gift. That was the extent of my role.

* * *

The next combat exam began on Wednesday. Cadets would fight against monsters, so guests couldn't spectate. Furthermore, because

the summoned monsters varied, the exam was graded on an absolute scale rather than a relative one.

“Be especially careful in today’s exam. If you refuse to give up, you might die.”

Kim Soohyuk solemnly warned. The monsters couldn’t comprehend complex orders. *Annihilate the enemies and protect allies*, was the extent they could understand. An order like, *test that cadet’s skills*, was out of the question. Not to mention, summoned monsters didn’t disappear after magicians reverse summoned them, so cadets had to be careful after surrendering.

“If you think your life is in danger, give up immediately. You can yell, *I surrender*, or simply tap on the ground twice.”

“...”

I calmly listened to Kim Soohyuk’s explanation. Chae Nayun glared at me, but I ignored her.

“The magicians in charge will explain the rest. Give them a warm welcome.”

The door opened and robed magicians walked in. Summoner magicians weren’t given any special treatment. The Magician’s Tower had a strict hierarchy depending on specialties, and summoner magicians were average. They didn’t have twisted personalities like most magicians because they often worked outside the Magician’s Tower.

“Nice to meet you all. I am the Chief Magician, Jin Joohwa.”

The lead magician bowed to the cadets.

“Today, you will fight monsters we will summon. Be careful, since summoned monsters are no different from real monsters. Even if we reverse summon them, they won’t disappear immediately. If things look dangerous, please surrender immediately.”

The cadets nodded at the magician's kind explanation.

“Good. Then we will tell you how the exam will proceed.”

Jin Joohwa smiled.

“Four cadets will go in at a time, and each cadet will be given 15 minutes. You will not be graded based on victory or loss, and your role will be taken into account.”

Jin Joohwa stuck up his index finger.

“First is how long you last. Next is how calm you responded. In other words, you don't have to kill the summoned monster.”

Wiing—

A smartwatch cut him off. The magician looked around the room.

“Please turn off all your smartwatches.”

He spoke nonchalantly as we turned off all our smartwatches.

Chapter 43

Sudden Encounter (3)

Chief Magician Jin Joohwa's explanation dragged on about the process, how groups would form, and the types of monsters. I understood his caution, but just wished he would start the exam already.

"Now, we will begin. Group 1, please stand up."

Group 1 consisted of Hazuki, Kim Junho, Yoo Jungjin, and Spenner. I only knew Hazuki.

"I'll do my best!"

Hazuki stood up as her friends encouraged her. The four members followed a staff to the examination grounds.

"Everyone else, please stand to the side."

The 96 remaining cadets in Veritas stood against the wall. Jin Joohwa clapped, and ten circular tables with ten chairs each rose from the floor.

"Take a seat, everyone. You will write a report for this exam as well."

The cadets all groaned.

"Sit wherever you want."

Since I already knew, it didn't faze me. I took a random seat as the other cadets sat with their friends.

"...?"

I glanced sideways and saw Rachel. She stared at her fingernails and trimmed them with a nail clipper. We made eye contact, and she hastily put away the nail clipper.

“Battle analysis will also be a part of this exam.”

Jin Joohwa explained, “It’s simple. You will carefully analyze the cadets battling monsters and write a report.”

A monitor for each seat shot up from the tables. The screen split into four, each showing a different cadet taking the exam.

“How they defeated the monsters, or why they lost. Even if they won, what did they lack? If they lost, what could they improve? This is what we are looking for in your reports.”

Chak, chak. Jin Joohwa clapped, and the other magicians handed out the papers.

“You will write three reports, but only the best one will reflect your grade. That doesn’t mean you can write only one. If you do, you will be penalized.”

I picked up the peer assessment paper and looked at it. Suddenly, I recalled my college days as I wrote my name and the name of the cadet I was evaluating. *[Check the anonymous checkbox if you wish to remain anonymous.]*

Thankfully, we could remain anonymous.

“For the record, this report only makes up 5% of your grade, but they will be given to the cadets you evaluated.”

The cadets looked around at their peers.

“Giving your peers advice and encouraging others are also the duties of a hero. You will be penalized if you act maliciously.”

The chief magician smiled.

“It seems we’re ready. Group 1’s exam will now begin.”

I stared at the monitor and clicked on Hazuki’s box. The other three disappeared as the screen displayed Hazuki fighting a low-intermediate rank, grade 1 monster. This ghoul should be a difficult fight.

— *Clang, clang*

The ghoul’s claws clashed with Hazuki’s axe. She calmly responded to its attacks, but the ghoul’s claws were sturdier than average high grade weapons. After exchanging a few blows, Hazuki concluded the disadvantage and began circling the room. She took advantage of the ghoul’s slowness as she looked for an opening, but 15 minutes passed with no change. The ghoul disappeared after being reverse summoned.

“Draw, Hazuki and Yoo Jungjin. Victory, Spenner. Defeat, Kim Junho. Next is Group 2. Chae Nayun, Hojun, Jutryn, and Carlos.”

Chae Nayun walked up in an imposing manner. The weight of her bow seemed lighter than usual. What could Kim Suho have said to her? I looked at Chae Nayun through the monitor.

“A thousand-mile horse?”

Chae Nayun’s opponent was an intermediate rank, grade 9 monster. The thousand-mile horse was one of the trickiest monsters for an archer, but Chae Nayun stood confidently in front of it. Not long afterward, the battle began. Chae Nayun drew her bow, and the thousand-mile horse charged at her. I examined the fight with the help of my gift. Master Sharpshooter had also increased my sense of judgment with my eyes. I could clearly see Chae Nayun’s faults.

[Chae Nayun]

Chae Nayun rolled to the side and missed an opportunity to attack. She should have stabbed an arrow in its flank or fired after rolling to hit the horse’s butt.

[Chae Nayun only shoots her bow in upright positions. She lacks

adaptability and situational awareness as an archer.]

Chae Nayun fixated on textbook stances. As a result, the thousand-mile horse easily dodged her arrows.

[In a one-on-one fight, sharpshooters require detailed analysis and background knowledge of their targets. However, Chae Nayun lacks knowledge about monsters.]

She could easily defeat the thousand-mile horse after disabling its legs first. However, Chae Nayun attacked large areas like its neck and body.

She didn't like memorizing theory. I had created that flaw in her myself.

[Her ability to predict her opponents is superb, but she doesn't take the speed of her arrows into account.]

This was a matter of talent. Chae Nayun's talent for the bow was ranked second or third at best. In contrast, her talent for the longsword ranked first. The spear and bow came after. Chae Nayun couldn't predict what I could as a sharpshooter. That was the difference between our gifts.

[Chae Nayun only managed to win against the thousand-mile horse because of her overwhelming magic power.]

Eventually, the thousand-mile horse grew tired and couldn't withstand the endless barrage of arrows.

[Overall, I recommend Chae Nayun find a more suitable weapon for her immense magic power.]

The exam ended with her victory, but my report only criticized her. Still, they were reasonable. The person grading this report would agree if they had sharp eyes.

"Victory, Chae Nayun. Defeat, Hojun and Jutryn. Draw, Carlos."

Chae Nayun returned in the same imposing manner as when she left. I didn't give her a single glance and felt somewhat guilty as I flipped over my report.

"Next is group 3..."

The exam continued.

* * *

Meanwhile, Oh Junhyuk patrolled the west forest. He felt a faint vibration that bothered him. Normally, he would have ignored it, but someone had killed a police officer yesterday. As a result, he acted much more diligently.

Oong—

A vibration even clearer than the one before rang out.

"Youngji, did you feel that?"

— Yep, another vibration. I think it's coming from the ocean. Can you tell me exactly when you feel it?

Seo Youngji quickly replied through a micro-transceiver.

"How should I know?"

— Then just send me your smartwatch data.

"..."

Oh Junhyuk did as she requested.

— I'm in the east forest. The vibration was 0.03 seconds faster on your side. The source must be in the west sea.

"Can I use the smartwatch to calculate the same thing?"

— You should be able to since the association specially crafted it. Anyways, I'm headed there now. Wait for me.

“Got it.”

Oh Junhyuk proceeded towards the west sea through a field of weeds. Since the vibration came from the west sea, he planned to observe from a distance. Suddenly, he felt magic power. Oh Junhyuk quickly turned and saw a shadowy figure coming out of the forest.

“...”

Oh Junhyuk stared at the figure he had seen before. *Tap, tap*. The man walked out with heavy steps. Oh Junhyuk remembered him because of his unique aura and large build with a sinister face. The man who glared at him at the arena smiled widely. Oh Junhyuk spoke in a businesslike manner.

“This area is off-limits to outsiders.”

“Is it?”

A fierce light shone from the man's eyes.

“Then why are you here?”

His voice sounded deep and husky. However, Oh Junhyuk retorted.

“Because I'm not an outsider.”

“Mm, what a surprise.”

The giant man dryly replied as he rubbed his chin. Oh Junhyuk forced himself to smile.

“If you understand, please go back.”

“I refuse.”

With a grin, the giant man suddenly cracked his knuckles. He was asking for a fight. Oh Junhyuk deeply sighed.

“You were the one who murdered the police officer, correct?”

“Huh? I don’t know. Rather than that, don’t just stand there.”

A chilling wind blew from the sea. Oh Junhyuk’s smartwatch loudly rang.

“Move if you don’t want to get beaten up!”

As the giant man’s voice fell...

Chwaa—

A huge creature shot up from the depths of the sea with a burst of water. Oh Junhyuk quickly turned around. The creature looked like a snake, but with overwhelming size and viciousness.

A mythical serpent dragon had appeared in the west sea.

Chapter 44

Sudden Encounter (4)

“Wow, I wonder if I gained some sort of insight. Who knew I could win against a thousand-mile horse so easily?”

I looked at my laptop in boredom when I heard Chae Nayun bragging.

“Really, what happened Nayun?”

Yoo Yeonha chimed in. She was genuinely curious. Chae Nayun’s battle probably looked flawless since Yoo Yeonha didn’t know anything about bows. It looked like an amazing fight, but one shouldn’t judge a book by its cover.

“I learned from failure, something like that, hahaha.”

Chae Nayun heartily laughed. She must be feeling great since she even brought up her loss yesterday. Meanwhile, Kim Suho smiled at her. I felt a chill down my back as I imagined Chae Nayun reading my report. *Should I submit it anonymously?*

“Group 10. Rachel, Kim Hajin, Skid, Lee Wei.”

Jin Joohwa announced my group. I glanced at Rachel next to me, and we made eye contact. She stood up, and I followed.

“Come this way.”

Rachel and I followed a staff with the rest. We arrived at a waiting room, and the staff opened a giant door on the right.

“Please enter.”

We walked into a long hallway behind the giant door. Soon, the

hallway ended, and multiple doors stood side by side.

“Stand in front of the door.”

The staff guided each of us to a door. I was next to Rachel.

“Good luck on your exam!”

I cheered her on, and she nodded.

“You have one minute to confirm your monster and terrain.”

I could see a chrome wolf in some flatlands through the door’s window.

Chrome wolves ranged from low-intermediate rank, grade 4 to grade 2. Other cadets had faced much stronger monsters. However, it would be difficult since bullets would just bounce off their skin.

*[Trait – its skin can reflect metallic objects] [Weakness – inside its mouth]
[Strength – tough skin]*

I had designed the chrome wolves.

“30 seconds left.”

They had dual metal and earth attributes, and their vital point was inside the mouth. Their dual attributes could be problematic, but I knew their weakness. I simply needed extreme heat that could melt metal and earth. I could use stigma’s magic power to heat the dagger in my pocket.

“A minute has passed. Please enter.”

We walked onto the examination grounds.

The room measured about 130 square meters. Dirt and rocks filled the ground while a wolf crunched on something. I didn’t have much time to plan since chrome wolves could attack from long range. I quickly

held up my gun. *Ptu*. The wolf spat something out. A metallic fragment hurled towards me. I aimed at the object and fired. It clashed with my bullet, and they destroyed each other.

The chrome wolf charged at me. I activated Bullet Time and saw its movements in slow motion, but didn't dodge. I fearlessly waited for it to open its mouth. The chrome wolf opened its jaws towards my neck. I jabbed my gun into its mouth and fired consecutively. I had already jumped back by several meters by the time it shut its mouth.

My sense of time returned, and the Chrome Wolf convulsed in pain. Unfortunately, it didn't die yet and spat out ten crushed bullets after retching a few times. Then it growled and glared at me.

"Tough, aren't you?"

The chrome wolf's bulletproof trait put me at a disadvantage. I took out my dagger with no other options. With a gun in one hand and a dagger in the other, I slightly lowered my body and glared at the wolf. My lips felt dry, although my body sweated profusely. Close ranged combat still scared me. Right when the fight almost broke out...

KWANG—!

A huge explosion occurred, and the lights went out. The room turned completely dark, but I didn't let my guard down because of the savage beast.

— A problem has occurred. All monsters will be reverse summoned. Cadets must leave the examination grounds immedi— *Tzzzk*.

The speaker cut off into static. I stared at the wolf. It grew more ferocious instead of being reverse summoned.

"Um, is that thing going to be reverse summoned?"

One or more of the dispatched magicians must have been a djinn. I already checked my laptop that Jin Joohwa wasn't a djinn. The laptop never detected any setting changes. This could only mean I didn't know the djinn. That sounded plausible since many existed and it wouldn't be strange if an extra appeared.

“Haa... I knew this would happen eventually.”

An event that I didn't know about. My heart rate suddenly went up at the uncertainty, but I forced myself to calm down. After a deep breath, I looked through the wall to the room next door. Rachel seemed to be in a similar situation as she glared at her opponent silently. But her opponent was... a person.

— *Kuwalwal!*

The chrome wolf charged at me with a howl. I took out my personal weapon from stigma. The Desert Eagle materialized, and aether quickly fused with it. The grip felt snug in my hand as I fired, and the wolf fell with a whimper.

“Know your place.”

The Desert Eagle had grown more powerful than before, but I didn't have time to admire it. I didn't even have time to check my laptop. Rachel was in danger.

One of the story's antagonists wanted to conquer England, but it shouldn't be time yet. They should have only attacked after their forces grew more.

— *Krrrr...*

I turned towards the growling. The chrome wolf had multiplied into three, but I wasn't worried.

“Hm.”

I transformed the Desert Eagle into its shotgun mode. The three wolves flew towards me. I simply pointed and shot.

KWANG—!

Thunderous gunshots rang out.

In a dark room, a man coldly murmured with killing intent.

“I knew this day would come.”

The familiar language surprised Rachel. She glared at the man who appeared from the darkness. Although he wore a cape and covered his face, Rachel felt like she knew him. She called his name.

“...Sir Lancaster.”

The previous captain of the royal guards and Rachel's former master, Alex Lancaster. He disappeared a few years ago after his family died in the infamous London Incident, but now he appeared again with murderous intent.

“I'm honored you remember me.”

Rachel felt great malice from his sinister smile. She could see the path he had chosen.

“...You sold your soul.”

Lancaster shook his head and denied the claim.

“I lived my life for my country, but my country took everything from me. I didn't sell my soul. My master took me in after my country abandoned me.”

For a moment, deep sadness emerged on Rachel's face. What happened had been a painful memory for her as well.

“...Is that why you came to me?”

“Princess, does it look like I came here?”

Rachel furrowed her brows. Then she stabbed with her rapier, but it simply passed through his body.

“I am somewhere, but not here.”

“...”

Rachel turned around. The door was tightly shut. No help seemed to be coming.

Lancaster spoke with a smile.

“It’s quite chaotic outside right now. Of course, if this was England, Princess’ safety would be the top priority. Tens, hundreds, thousands of lives wouldn’t compare...”

Lancaster paused and smiled viciously.

“The entire country would not hesitate to throw away their lives to save Princess. After all, you are England’s hope.”

Lancaster looked smugly at Rachel.

“But that isn’t the case here. You are only one of many cadets.”

Rachel stared at him with sadness. His resentment and anger made her feel guilty. However, Lancaster clenched his teeth.

“So you still won’t remove that hypocritical mask of pretense...”

Rachel took a courageous step towards him.

“Sir Lancaster...”

“I would like to talk a bit longer, but we are out of time.”

Lancaster rejected her and bowed.

“Farewell Princess.”

He turned into black fog and disappeared.

“Wait...!”

Suddenly, an assassin jumped out of the fog and swung a sword. Rachel managed to defend against the abrupt attack, but it destroyed a chunk of her sword qi. The weight behind the magic power astonished her.

The assassin was also quite agile. His attacks focused on her left flank and shoulder, two of her weak points. The swords clashed and resounded. Hot sparks ignited, and fresh blood burst into the air.

Rachel could only defend. As the fight continued, more scratches appeared on her body. Admittedly, she couldn't defeat this assassin with normal tactics, so she decided to gamble.

“Uk!”

The assassin didn't miss the opening she purposely left and stabbed her wrist. Rachel dropped her rapier. Feeling victorious, the assassin stabbed forward once again. Rachel's rapier also reacted, still connected to her by magic power. The assassin proceeded to pierce Rachel's heart as her rapier shot up towards his neck.

KWANG—!

However, a terrifying explosion interrupted them. Rachel lost her balance along with the assassin. He couldn't reach her heart, and she couldn't pierce his neck.

KOONG!

The room rumbled with another quake. They both turned to the right at the wall that shook.

KOONG!

Another shockwave shook the wall. The assassin held up his sword, and Rachel grabbed her rapier with her left hand.

KOONG!

After the second shockwave, the assassin charged at Rachel as she rolled to the side.

KOONG!

A third and final shockwave blew up the wall and sent the assassin flying.

“Geez, so much dust. *Ptui.*”

Rachel saw Kim Hajin walking out of the cloud of smoke.

“...!”

The assassin ran towards him.

“Who the hell are you?”

Kim Hajin simply fired his gun.

“Kuak!”

The shotgun displayed terrifying power as it sent the assassin flying to the other end of the room.

Kim Hajin walked up to the assassin stuck against the wall. *Click click clack*— He finished reloading.

Rachel stared at the white magic power flowing around his arm, but now wasn't the time to ask. Kim Hajin aimed at the assassin and didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. A radiant light lit up the dark room.

Chapter 45

After the Trouble (1)

The amplified heavy shotgun shells cost 50 SP each. Although I used ordinary bullets against the chrome wolves, I used five of these special bullets to break down the wall and kill the assassin. I had consumed 250 SP in less than a minute, but I didn't regret it since I saved Rachel.

"Um..."

I reached out to Rachel on the ground. She blankly stared at me before standing up by herself. I awkwardly withdrew my hand and scratched my cheek.

"..."

Rachel stared at the broken wall to her right. My shotgun had destroyed the examination room's reinforced wall.

"Oh, the mana barrier disappeared when the electricity went out."

I made an excuse since her gaze looked suspicious. Rachel's eyes landed on my shotgun as I hurriedly stuffed it into my bag, but it didn't fit. I turned around and changed it into its handgun form before putting it away.

"R-Rather than that..."

I looked at Rachel's body riddled with bleeding wounds. I should have been concerned, but I thought of Evandel's seed first. Rachel's blood would make the perfect nourishment.

"You're hurt."

I took off the fanny pack around my waist. It was an all-purpose emergency kit for all my fears and apprehensions. Antidotes, painkillers, tranquilizers, bandages, gauzes... all sorts of medicine and supplies. Of course, I also carried the external recovery potion. Although recovery potions were expensive, they were cheap compared to what Rachel's blood was worth.

"Here, it's an external recovery potion."

When I gave her a glass bottle containing a red liquid, Rachel's eyes widened in surprise.

"Before I apply it, I'll wipe your blood first."

I nervously licked my dry lips, "May I?"

"..."

Rachel nodded and permitted me. First, I wiped the blood from her left arm with some gauze. As I took out more gauze, I kept the used ones without throwing them away. Once I cleaned her arm, I wet a gauze with the potion before applying it to her skin.

Rachel clenched her teeth from the potion's stinging sensation, similar to antiseptics. I planned to heal her left arm first, but Rachel suddenly grabbed me. Then she spoke for the first time since we met.

"...Here first."

She showed me the severe wound on her right wrist. The cut was deep to her bone. Any deeper and her wrist would have been severed. Surprisingly, no blood came out since Rachel suppressed it with magic power.

"Ah! You should have told me earlier!"

I was genuinely shocked. I only focused on the light wounds and missed the one that needed immediate treatment.

"Any later and you would've had to give up the rapier forever."

Despite costing 7 million won, external recovery potions weren't omnipotent. Sensitive areas like a person's nerves had to be treated immediately. Otherwise, not even the authority of healing could do anything about it.

"It's going to sting. A lot."

I poured the rest of the potion over her wound and wrapped a bandage over it.

"Aaak."

Rachel endured the immense pain with only a short groan. I wrapped three layers of bandages over the wound. When I let go of her arm, Rachel crouched in pain.

I put away the bloodied gauze into my cross bag. While I waited for Rachel to recover, I turned on my laptop. As expected, a settings change had occurred.

[Alex Lancaster] [Attachment to his lost family has worsened. His rage has also deepened. Has an increased chance of attacking Rachel whenever given the chance.] [His potential has risen from 7.5 to 8.5 and now poses a greater threat.]

"Hmm..."

I had created Alex Lancaster as an antagonist related to England. He appeared in the middle stage of the story and wanted to topple England's government. Such a dangerous antagonist became stronger and appeared earlier than anticipated. Unfortunately, I couldn't do anything about it.

I would have created more righteous characters if I knew this would happen. Of course, plenty of righteous characters did exist. For example, a secret service agent from MI6 named James Jone would later serve Rachel. Based on the agent that everyone knew, his love and loyalty for his country were unshakable.

"...Hua."

Rachel faintly exhaled. Sweat covered her body, but she must have overcome the pain since she looked much better. She staggered up slowly and bowed to me.

“Thank you.”

“Ah...”

Suddenly, the electricity returned along with the lights and interrupted our conversation. Rachel and I checked the locked door, but it easily opened this time.

After leaving, I stared at the examination rooms through the other side of the walls. Unfortunately, the other two cadets couldn't escape as their corpses lay on the ground. I felt mixed feelings, but I knew I couldn't have done anything. I led Rachel back with me and saw the chaotic waiting room up ahead.

Tap, tap. Someone walked towards us, and Rachel put up her guard. I simply smiled at her.

“Thankfully, we restored the electricity...”

Kim Soohyuk walked down the hallway while communicating with someone on a transceiver.

“Both of you, what are you doing here? No, why did you come back here?”

“Come back?”

“Didn't both of you...”

Kim Soohyuk paused as though he'd realized something. From his reaction, I could guess what happened. Djinn who could create human illusions also existed.

“The other two are still inside.”

“Ah, shoot! You two, wait here. No, run to the infirmary!”

Kim Soohyuk ran to the examination rooms. As his back disappeared from view, I turned towards Rachel. Then I whispered, “Um, I may have to lie soon, so please match words with me when the time comes. I’ll be expelled if they find out I brought in my personal weapon.”

Rachel nodded at my request.

* * *

After the huge disturbance, a silent shadow in the empty waiting room suddenly sprung up into a human figure. The figure formed a short cute boy with a big smile.

“Boss, Boss! I just saw something amazing!”

The boy, Droon, came to observe Kim Hajin as per Boss’ orders. He couldn’t hide his excitement over what he saw. He finally understood why Boss was so interested in that guy.

“Guns, it’s a gift related to guns. It’s not just anti-magic...”

— For now, return. I’ll listen to you later.

However, Boss coldly cut him off.

“...Okay.”

Boss is no fun. Droon grumbled inwardly as he disappeared into the shadows once again. Next, he messaged another troupe member.

— Jungyeong, how was the serpent dragon? Did you kill it?

* * *

Oh Junhyuk sat cross-legged on a rock facing the clear ocean breeze. He tried to comprehend what he just witnessed. A serpent dragon

popped out of the sea, but...

“Oh Junhyuk!”

Seo Youngji arrived after everything had calmed down. Oh Junhyuk turned towards her.

“What’s going on? Didn’t you say a serpent dragon appeared?”

“You knew that and you’re this late?”

“I ran into a problem on the way. Monsters suddenly escaped from the laboratory, so I had to take care of them. Where’s the serpent dragon?”

“It was chased away, deep into the ocean.”

“...Huh?”

Serpent dragons belonged to the dragon family, but they weren’t terrifyingly strong compared to a high rank hero. They ranged from high-intermediate rank, grade 1 to high rank, grade 7. Serpent dragons didn’t know how to fight and feared pain because of their high intelligence. Of course, it would be a different story if a serpent dragon found a Cintamani. ^[1]

Even so, what Oh Junhyuk witnessed still shocked him.

“Someone provoked the serpent dragon.”

“Provoked?”

“Yep. It was enraged with red eyes.”

Hurling down from the sky with its gigantic mouth, the serpent dragon felt oppressing.

“How did you chase away an enraged serpent dragon?”

“Well...”

Oh Junhyuk didn't know whether to laugh or cry as he thought back to what happened.

“Apparently, you just have to beat it until it regains its sanity.”

He recalled what he saw just ten minutes ago. The giant man with gauntlets stood before the serpent dragon and punched it. He used a simple straight punch, but the shockwave was tremendous. The ground shook, and trees lost all their leaves. The force tore through the serpent dragon's tough scales, broke through its bones, and struck its muscles. The serpent dragon's bloodshot eyes instantly cleared up.

“...You want me to believe that?”

“If you don't want to, don't. Oh, by the way, I need you to put someone on the wanted list. I filmed him on my smartwatch. He's the suspect behind yesterday's murder case.”

Oh Junhyuk sent Seo Youngji the video of the giant man. Seo Youngji tilted her head as she checked it.

“Tell them to contact me if he's found.”

“...Why?”

“Nothing. It's been a while, but I found someone I want to fight.”

Oh Junhyuk grinned.

* * *

The Cube monster incident became a hot topic across the world. They hid the fact that djinns orchestrated it, but because a serpent dragon and several other monsters critically injured two cadets (I thought they died, but were just unconscious), Cube received huge global backlash.

Cube decided to postpone the rest of the combat exams. They would keep the results of the duels, but another monster war would take place later. Finally, the group rescue mission on Friday was also canceled. In addition, classes wouldn't resume until the Thursday in two weeks.

In other words, we had no classes for the next ten days.

With the sudden holiday, cadets returned home or went on vacation with the compensation they received from Cube. Cadets filled Cube's official community forum with posts asking for good places to visit in Japan or America. Some people snarkily commented about how they could go on vacation when other cadets were injured.

None of these problems mattered to me. Even now, I simply sat in my dorm room.

"...Oh, did it just eat?"

Evandel's seed, which I had obtained from the Gari Mountain's hidden stage, sucked on Rachel's blood. The bloodied gauze returned to its white color. Once three months passed, a kind witch would be born and become my trusted helper...

A sudden pain from my upper arm overcame me. I felt it once before as I pulled up my sleeve. Another streak of stigma appeared.

Calm down and be patient, Kim Hajin. You've felt this pain before. You can do a lot more with another streak of stigma. For example, you can put more magic power... into bullets...

I couldn't continue my encouraging train of thoughts as it felt like someone had stabbed my brain. My thoughts cut off, and I clenched my teeth, unable to scream.

In front of this tremendous pain, my consciousness slowly faded.

* * *

"Wow, it's been so long."

Chae Nayun returned home to a traditional Korean house with tiled roofs and eaves. However, that was only the exterior. The interior was no different from a European castle.

“Welcome back, young lady.”

A butler greeted Chae Nayun with a warm smile.

“Long time no see, gramps.”

“I’ve been worried sick. I’m glad you’re safe.”

“Only two people were hurt. None of the ordinary visitors were injured either.”

Chae Nayun bowed to the butler who had protected her home for thirty years.

“Oh right, is the item I ordered here yet?”

“It arrived yesterday.”

“Yes!”

“Oh, and Cube sent some documents.”

“Documents?”

The butler nodded.

“Yes, they’re exam reports, 24 of them.”

“Oh that. Send it back to my dorm. I don’t want to think about school when I’m... No, wait.”

Chae Nayun recalled her might as she fought the thousand-mile horse. Other cadets must have been extremely impressed since she received 24 reports. That meant close to 25% of the class wrote about her feat.

“Huhu, send it to my room. I want to read it.”

Chase Nayun wondered what sort of praises she would receive.

“Yes, understood.”

The butler bowed respectfully.

1. A wish-fulfilling jewel in Hindu and Buddhist traditions. Wingless dragons would seek this object to gain wings and ascend the heavens.



Chapter 46

After the Trouble (2)

As expected of a wealthy young lady, Chae Nayun's huge room featured a queen size bed, a living room, a bathroom the size of a public bath, and a gaming room designed for the best virtual experience. Lying comfortably in bed, Chae Nayun opened the envelope with her exam reports.

"Whoa, look how thick it is."

The stack of 24 papers added up to quite a bit. First, she read the name on the first one. *Kianu Jin*. He was a spearman around rank 100.

[Chae Nayun's archery was extraordinary, and her magic power inspired my deepest respect. The thousand-mile horse is difficult for most sharpshooters because of its agile speed and sturdy body, but Chae Nayun not only dodged its charges with incredible movements, she also...]

"Haha."

He had poor Korean with grammar mistakes, but it was still readable. She especially liked the phrase, *her arrows fell like rain*.

After reading Kianu Jin's report, Chae Nayun worked her way down the stack. Some cadets objectively analyzed her battle, while others noticeably sang her praises. Chae Nayun's smile curled up more and more as she read them.

"Huuu, no."

Chae Nayun collected her thoughts before they reached cloud nine.

Some of them are just flattering you. Be humble.

She calmly moved on to the next report from a familiar person.

[Evaluating cadet – Kim Suho]

“...”

His name slightly shook her heart, but Chae Nayun acted unconcerned and furrowed her brows. She quietly read the contents.

[It was a victory of self-conviction. Recently, Chae Nayun seemed to doubt herself. Losing to a rival and being criticized by someone wore down her confidence, but Chae Nayun is a naturally talented archer. Against the thousand-mile horse, she showed a confident battle. Her movements contained no hesitation, and she attacked swiftly and accurately. I believe Chae Nayun has already reached a certain realm as an archer. She told me that someone said she lacked talent, but what she lacked was only trust in her abilities. If she continues like today, she will surely become the greatest hero.]

“...Huua.”

Chae Nayun softly caressed Kim Suho’s report. His heartfelt encouragement moved her. A smile emerged on her face, and her worries disappeared. With her eyes closed, she reaffirmed her belief.

A bow suits me. No matter what anyone says, a bow suits me best.

Chae Nayun carefully placed his report on her bed. Now, only two reports remained. One was anonymous, while the other was from Shin Jonghak. She decided to finish them. First, she read the anonymous report.

“Hmm.”

She picked up the report without much thought.

“...”

Not long afterward, she clenched her hands. Chae Nayun’s face distorted behind the crumpled report.

“Huu, huu, huuu...”

Chae Nayun trembled in anger at the anonymous report filled with criticisms. Its malicious words struck her deeply.

“...Who is this fucker.”

The report contained a respectful tone, but its message was clear.

You have no sense, talent, or brains. You only won thanks to your magic power.

Although it was anonymous, Chae Nayun felt she knew the writer's identity.

“Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin...!”

She picked up her smartwatch in anger.

* * *

On a fine afternoon, Cube investigators questioned Rachel and me. I still felt sore from the additional streak of stigma yesterday, but I earnestly cooperated.

“Thank you.”

I thanked Rachel on our way back to the portal station after the investigation. As promised, she matched her story with mine. The investigators who doubted me fully trusted her since she was a royal.

“No, I should be the one to thank you.”

Rachel said without changing her expression. Then she showed her wrist to me. It fully healed without a scar thanks to the timely treatment.

“Is it fine?”

“Yes.”

She spun her wrist around.

“That’s good. So where are you going?”

“Back home.”

“Ah, to England.”

“Yes.”

England would be much safer than Cube. The Queen’s residence was a fortress that even a devil couldn’t easily enter.

“Ah, I’m also going hunting right now...”

I told Rachel even though she didn’t ask because we headed in the same direction. Suddenly, my smartwatch rang. It wasn’t a text, but a call from Chae Nayun. I felt like I shouldn’t pick up, so I ignored it.

“I’m also taking Cube’s portal, so...”

My smartwatch rang once again. I immediately ended the call. Then a message arrived.

[Hey, you wrote that report, didn’t you?] [I just don’t understand, just how are you in any position to say something like this?] [I don’t have the sense or talent of an archer? Have you ever used a bow before? I’m so freaking speechless.] [And you said I’m stupid? What, you think you can mock me because you’re good at studying?] [You wanna fight? Wanna make a bet? Want me to teach you how hard it is to use a bow?]

“What is this bombshell...”

A barrage of messages arrived in just ten seconds. However, the last message caught my attention.

Bet.

I recalled my gift's proficiency level. It should be grade 7 and about 67% to the next grade. *Could I beat Chae Nayun with a bow?* I purposely nitpicked her flaws, but Chae Nayun's archery was undoubtedly one of the best among cadets. Although she was more talented with swords, that didn't mean she had no talent for bows. Not to mention, she trained in archery for ten years.

[Sure, let's fight and bet on it. I'll also use a bow.]

It was about time I showed her the difference between talent and a true genius. Even if grade 7 wasn't enough, I also had incredible luck. I couldn't see myself losing as long as we used regular arrows. Just in case, I should ask for a month to practice.

"...Why isn't she replying?"

For some reason, Chae Nayun stopped messaging me. Did she think it was meaningless to bet against someone who wasn't an archer? Looking up, I saw that Rachel had already gone ahead. I quickly caught up as she glanced back at me.

"Haha, I'm also using the portal. I'm going to Wonju."

"...Ah, yes."

We walked side by side without talking. Eventually, we arrived at the fairly empty Cube portal station. Most cadets had left as requested so Cube could conduct a more thorough investigation. Rachel would now take the Seoul portal, while I headed to the Wonju portal.

"Um, if it's okay... can I ask what weapon you used back then?"

Rachel asked before we separated. I guess she found it hard to accept what happened. After all, I killed an assassin that threatened her with only two shots.

"...It's an extremely expensive weapon, and cadets generally have one or more special abilities."

That was all I could say. Rachel stared at me before nodding.

“Thank you again. I’ll bring something back from England as thanks.”

Rachel left towards the Seoul portal.

* * *

I arrived in Gangwondo Wonju. The portal station bustled with people during the middle of a weekday. I plowed through the swarm.

“Hajin! Here!”

A man in a well-tailored suit and sunglasses shouted as I arrived outside. Park Soohyuk looked completely different with an HUV next to him. Although it was an older model, I approached with a smile.

“Wow, I almost didn’t recognize you. Looks like you had fun with my money. Maybe you should be investigated for embezzlement.”

“Haha, this is a proper business expense. Get in.”

Park Soohyuk opened the back door as though he had done it a thousand times.

“Are we stopping at the 1km mark again?”

“Yeah, but we’re going to hunt more today.”

“Great, then I’m going.”

Yoo Yeonha promised me an unlimited supply of bullets. I had to hunt as many monsters as possible since I modified the Desert Eagle into an evolving weapon.

“So, how’s the business lately?”

“It’s much better thanks to you. Everything is easier with a car.”

An HUV was a necessity, especially for monster hunting.

“It’s over there, but the crowds have gathered already.”

We arrived at the entrance of the field.

“Let’s get off for now.”

“Yeah.”

Park Soohyuk and I got off to get a permit for our vehicle.

“...Hmm?”

I saw a familiar face in the distance. She would stand out no matter where she went with her long black hair that fluttered in the wind. It shone under the sunlight and her charming black dress also separated her from the sea of people.

Yoo Yeonha observed the field, surrounded by her guild members. Her serious expression made her seem like an adult.

“Oh right.”

I recalled that it was about time Yoo Yeonha came to Wonju’s field for business. In the original story, she became the greatest investor for SH Agency because of Kim Suho. After finding out that Kim Suho contracted with SH Agency, Yoo Yeonha invested an astronomical sum, which turned out incredibly successful. From that point onwards, Park Soohyuk and Yoo Yeonha would walk the royal road.

“What, do you know her?”

“Mm... I do, but let’s just go.”

She seemed busy, so I pretended not to see her.

“Eh?”

Yoo Yeonha spotted me.

“Hello?”

Clack, clack. She approached me in high heels and seemed much taller and more threatening.

“What are you doing here?”

Yoo Yeonha asked at the same eye level.

“I’m here to make money.”

“Mmm, I see.”

Yoo Yeonha glanced at Park Soohyuk next to me. It felt like I needed to introduce them, so I did.

“This is my agent.”

“Ah, nice to meet you. I’m SH Agency’s head manager, Park Soohyuk.”

“I’m Yoo Yeonha. I’m still a cadet.”

“Ah, yes.”

I peeked at the two of them. Although I didn’t intend it, their meeting moved forward by three years. I wasn’t sure about the consequences, but it didn’t seem bad. I also glanced at the four men behind Yoo Yeonha like guards. They all carried high class equipment.

“Ah, they’re members of Essence of the Strait.”

Yoo Yeonha introduced them. The members stood around, not knowing how to react, but Yoo Yeonha’s glare immediately made them bow.

“Essence of the Strait...?”

Disbelief emerged on Park Soohyuk’s face. Essence of the Strait was the second ranked guild. Park Soohyuk never imagined meeting them.

Wiing— My smartwatch rang. A message came from Chae Nayun.

[Haa, what would I gain by betting with someone who doesn't know anything about bows? Just screw off.]

She planned to ignore me, so I provoked her.

[What, you're scared?]

[Ha. You wanna die? I was going easy on you, so don't you...]

[Just like you said, I've never even touched a bow. But if it's you... one month. One month is enough to catch up to your level. Of course, that's strictly in archery.]

I crossed my arms after sending the message. Suddenly, Yoo Yeonha asked.

“...Are you perhaps texting Nayun?”

I stared at her in surprise.

“W-What, how did you know?”

Wasn't I the only one who could hack smartwatches? Yoo Yeonha grinned and projected a hologram from her smartwatch.

[Hey, look what this kid is saying. I'm speechless. S.P.E.E.C.H.L.E.S.S. Do I take this bet?]

Chae Nayun told her friends what I said and asked for advice.

“Aha.”

I laughed and briefly spoke, “Tell her to do it.”

“Eh? Have you used a bow before?”

“Nope, not even once.”

I’ve never touched one. Before coming to this world, I’d never even seen one outside of movies or the Olympics.

“But I only need a month to beat her.”

However, this was a contest of pure skill. My Master Sharpshooter gift specialized in long range weapons, while Chae Nayun’s gift was more relevant to swords. Although grade 7 would be a close call, grade 6 would guarantee my victory.

“How can you be so confident? Isn’t your gift related to guns?”

“...”

I silently stared at Yoo Yeonha and pondered how to answer.

“Tsk, fine. I won’t ask. So sensitive...”

Yoo Yeonha misunderstood and clicked her tongue before I could explain. She stared at Park Soohyuk and his HUV before asking.

“Ah, if you’re here to hunt, can I come with you?”

Chapter 47

After the Trouble (3)

Koong. Koong. Koong. The HUV violently shook every time the tires hit a rock. Just how old was it to not even have a steady driving module? Yoo Yeonha felt shocked and confused.

“Sigh.”

Why did I ask to follow them? She regretted it after just five minutes.

“...So why are you here?” Kim Hajin asked from next to her as she balanced herself in her seat.

Yoo Yeonha retorted, “Vacations are useless if you want to grow and improve.”

“Oh.”

Kim Hajin agreed and simply faced forward. He looked average no matter how many times she saw him. If he wore glasses, he would look like an average salaryman.

“Hmm...”

However, she found one or two things suspicious about him. He was full of secrets. Unfathomable was too grand a word to describe him, but he felt mysterious. Suddenly, she felt her smartwatch vibrate. A message came from Chae Nayun.

[Alright, I'll take on his bet. Looks like he needs to be put in place.]

She sounded quite angry. Yoo Yeonha spoke with a snicker.

“Hey.”

“Hm?”

“Nayun says she’ll do it. The bet.”

Kim Hajin’s smartwatch also vibrated. Yoo Yeonha was curious.

“Show me too.”

Kim Hajin displayed the message.

[Sure, let’s fight. I’ll give you a month. I’ll bet everything that I win. What are you going to bet?]

A duel between an archer and a gunner. Yoo Yeonha found it ridiculous, but also intriguing.

“By the way, why are you doing this?”

Why did he keep provoking Chae Nayun?

Kim Hajin spoke as though it was an obvious truth. “Chae Nayun’s real talent isn’t in bows.”

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t understand.

“If she gives up the bow, she can grow much further.”

Yoo Yeonha felt he sounded somewhat bitter. Then she slowly understood. Criticism also meant he cared. He had to carefully pay attention to spot her flaws. *Just how long has he watched Chae Nayun to be so sure? Three months? Half a year? A year? Or perhaps even longer? Come to think of it...*

Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun were in the same third year class at the Military Agent Academy. They would have been only 11 years old. *Could it be that for six years, this guy...*

Clunk!

“Ak!”

The HUV violently shook and stopped. Yoo Yeonha hit her head against the front seat.

“W-What’s going on!”

Yoo Yeonha wasn’t as experienced as Park Soohyuk and Kim Hajin. Park Soohyuk turned off the engine and spoke.

“This is the monster point. We’re getting off.”

“Monster point?”

“Ah, yes, it’s a place where many monsters appear...”

“I know what it is, but how do you know this is a monster point?”

“Monsters become more active near the end of April. The weaker ones will be pushed out, and this is a natural escape route. There are a few more places, but they’re all famous and crowded,” Park Soohyuk replied without hesitation as Yoo Yeonha stared at him in surprise. Her gaze fell back onto her smartwatch because of a message.

“Hmm... Well, I’ll be going now.”

“Huh? Didn’t you want to hunt with us?”

“Something came up just now. Plus, I only said I wanted to come with you, not that we would hunt together.”

Yoo Yeonha got out of the car. Essence of the Strait members came running from a distance.

“Then I’ll be off.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

“See you back at Cube.”

Yoo Yeonha turned back after looking again at Kim Hajin's average appearance.

"Ah, by the way..."

She turned around as though she forgot something and reached out to Park Soohyuk.

"Can I get your business card?"

* * *

I focused on hunting and training for a week. I went to Wonju every day and hunted 15 monsters per day on average. The combination of aether and the Desert Eagle was undoubtedly overpowered. Even if I didn't aim at any vital point, I could one or two shot any monster under low-intermediate rank, grade 6.

"Hm... It's not going up by much."

Wednesday arrived, and classes would resume in two days. Cadets returned and the archery bet between Chae Nayun and me had already spread.

[Master Sharpshooter] [Low-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving — Grade 7] [Proficiency EXP 75%]

Master Sharpshooter was only 25% away from grade 6. I shot monsters for an entire week, but it didn't even increase by 10% as the requirements rose exponentially.

"Will I be able to reach grade 6 in a month?"

I had to win the bet, but I felt uneasy at just grade 7.

Drrrr—

The room suddenly rumbled. Was it an earthquake? I quickly looked around, but it felt like I was at the center of it.

“Eh?”

The seed on my desk fiercely shook. I noticed that the blood had disappeared from the gauze I wrapped it in.

“Is it hungry?”

The shaking suddenly stopped when I asked. I was dumbstruck, but took out another gauze soaked with Rachel’s blood. Immediately, the seed happily trembled before burying itself into the gauze.

“Interesting.”

Was Rachel’s blood that delicious?

“Oh right.”

Soon, the traveling club would go on their next trip. I checked my smartwatch for an announcement.

[Traveling Club – There will be a trip this weekend.]

Unfortunately, the academics club ended because of Yun Hyun, and the hunting club was suspended because of Sven. I only had the traveling club left. Everything had happened according to the original story.

During this trip, another incident would occur. The traveling club would get caught up in an assassination.

The traveling club’s leader was kind and gentle, but his naivety made him the target of a French conman. The conman disguised himself as a wealthy businessman and coaxed the club leader into bringing the members to his giant mansion, saying that he would pay for all expenses. The club leader agreed after visiting France and enjoying his time.

However, the wealthy businessman was an infamous conman constantly under threat of assassination by individuals he previously conned. Although he didn’t care because most were powerless, he

accidentally provoked a dangerous group called Shadow Step.

— *Your life will be taken when Saturday turns to Sunday.*

He received an assassination notice from Shadow Step, a notorious group known for targeting criminals.

The conman despaired. He couldn't receive help from the Hero Association as a wanted criminal. He also didn't have enough time to liquidate his assets and hire mercenaries. After pondering, he invited cadets to protect himself over the weekend. However, the event also held another secret.

“Hmm.”

I should be correct since the incident was supposed to happen a week after the combat exams.

Ding dong—

An alert from Violet Banquet popped up on the corner of my laptop screen. I clicked on it and received my first customer as the Truth Agency.

— Here is detailed information on someone I wish to find. He's an evil man who conned my family and ran away. Can you tell me his location?

“What's this?”

The stereotypical appearance of a conman with a beer belly, snake-like eyes, and chubby cheeks. This man was Belbet, the assassination target who would orchestrate the traveling club incident.

* * *

In a dark, abandoned factory, the Chameleon Troupe gathered for the first time in a while. Ten shadows stretched across the floor. All ten colors besides Black gathered to discuss the open seat, which had been empty for three years.

The shadows sat around a round table and watched a video projected by Droon. Droon's gift could project or materialize anything he experienced with his five senses. It showed a person that he had observed. The ten shadows watched the video, some with curiosity and some with disapproval.

[KWANG—!]

“Oh geez, that surprised me.”

A thunderous gunshot with a brilliant white flash marked the end of the video. The leader of the shadows called for a discussion.

“Raise your hand if you see potential.”

However, the voting didn't immediately begin as a high-pitched female voice quickly cut in.

“By the way, Boss...”

Boss stared at the beautiful Caucasian woman.

“When did we need to meet to analyze some greenhorn?”

Her complaint clashed with a man's gentle voice.

“I think he has potential. Most importantly, I like that he doesn't have parents or significant others.”

“What does that have to do with anything?”

“If you don't have anyone by your side, you start to indulge in other things. We might not be able to give honor, but we can give money.”

The Chameleon Troupe was one of the few groups on the Hero Association's violet list. However, all their members remained anonymous.

The Chameleon Troupe guaranteed the freedom of its members. They

could live their lives however they wished. The members only gathered to complete missions.

“So what, you want to recruit him? A kid who can be sent flying with a little nudge?”

“We’re strictly talking about his potential...”

“Quiet.”

Boss crushed the rising debate between the two members.

“From this young man...”

In truth, the Chameleon Troupe functioned like a mercenary group. Of course, their goal was much grander than just money. They always did what was necessary to achieve their goal. Currently, it was to kill the traitor.

“I confirmed the power of anti-magic.”

Boss glanced at Droon as he projected another video. The young man used an ordinary gun to fight an opponent using qi reinforcement. When his bullet shattered the qi reinforcement, the air felt heavier than before.

“...It’s illogical to think the same thing would work against that guy just because he managed to break a qi reinforcement on that level.”

“As I said, Jain, Boss didn’t say we were recruiting him right away. She asked if he had potential. At least in my eyes, he seems to have it.”

Jain glared at the man after his snarky rebuttal.

“Fine, let’s say we bring him in after he grows up. Black is the only color left, so is he getting that seat?”

Black wasn’t a color suitable for a greenhorn. It belonged to the man

who betrayed the previous boss. The color black always belonged to the strongest member. This rule remained unchanged for over 20 years.

“Then I’ll take over that color.”

A giant man spoke up. Cheok Jungyeong had stayed silent this entire time.

“Rejected. You’re too stupid.”

“I also reject. I’m stronger.”

“Then what do you bastards want to do?”

“Aren’t there others? Are we just going to ignore Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak?”

“We’re going to vote on them next. This discussion is for who we’ll select as candidates.”

The members who had remained silent began to speak up one by one. Voices overlapped and caused a headache for Boss. She spoke in a subdued voice.

“Show of hands.”

Everyone quieted down.

“We’re voting.”

The troupe members voted 8:2. Jain already voiced her objection, and Cheok Jungyeong didn’t like the young man. The rest of the members voted in favor.

“Hmph.”

Jain snorted in dissatisfaction.

“By the way, Jain, take this. It’s an invitation letter for the VVIP masquerade party in France.”

“Oh, stealing that ring, right? Don’t worry.”

Jain didn’t sulk for long as she took the invitation with a bright face.

Chapter 48

Tit for Tat (1)

“Huuu.”

I took a deep breath outside the classroom. It was Friday, and cadets had returned after all the chaos. I nervously opened the door. Several gazes fell on me as I took my usual seat and heard them whispering about my bet with Chae Nayun. I tried to ignore them while burying my face in a textbook. At least the bullying stopped since I beat Kim Horak.

“Grades for the written exams are out.”

Yi Yeonghan walked in with large scrolls in his arms. He hung them up one by one on the wall. It listed the results for each theory class and a ranking of the total marks. Everyone groaned as they looked over the scrolls and turned towards me.

Rank 1. Kim Hajin

Rank 2. Rachel

My name stood at the top of every exam and the overall rankings. Not just in Veritas, but the entire academy.

“Cough.”

It felt slightly awkward as I stole a glance at Rachel. She sat behind me with her face resting down on her desk. I faintly heard her sigh and murmured in English, “I should have worked harder.”

“I hope everyone knows that we have new classes.”

Yi Yeonghan added.

“Check the announcements if you haven’t. Starting from today, Fridays will have two classes.”

Classes changed after the first semester midterms for freshmen because Cube wanted cadets to experience a wide variety. In addition, magicians would also join the second semester, and cadets could choose their own courses. Typically, they took classes for their roles.

I turned on my smartwatch and saw that today's new class was *[Practical Magic and Intermediate Magic Power Control]*.

Drrrrk— The professor for phenomenon realm analysis walked in. The noisy classroom fell silent.

“Take your seats.”

The professor peeked at the scrolls and grinned.

“I’m sure you’ve all seen the exam results.”

The cadets slightly groaned.

“Now, now, your tests were much easier than the ones I gave to college students. Also, cadet Kim Hajin.”

Suddenly, the professor pointed at me. Everyone else also followed his finger.

“An unconventional outlook and logical judgment, I could sense true wisdom from your answers. Frankly, I can’t believe you’re only 16. You’re good enough to be writing thesis papers for graduation.”

I would have simply been happy if the professor’s praise had ended there. After all, it was the first time someone praised me for doing well on an exam.

“Since today is the first class after exams, I will give a quick lecture using cadet Kim Hajin’s answer sheet and call it a day.”

He caught me completely off guard by displaying my answer sheet on the screen.

“Now, take a look at this. Hajin wrote, *If monsters had linguistic abilities...*”

The class continued as I covered my face and felt it growing hot.

* * *

It was now 3:30 and time for Friday’s second class. Veritas class gathered at the magic library, where the chief magician waited in a lecture room.

“Hello, I am the chief magician from Seoul Magic Tower, Kim Hyojun. I will teach you practical magic and magic power control every Friday from 3:30 to 6. However, today’s class will only be 30 minutes.”

The chief magician introduced himself with a gentle smile. However, I couldn’t help but frown since I knew he was a prick. He led a successful life as the third generation of a magic clan, but wasn’t talented enough to become the chief magician. Although he landed the position thanks to his clan’s lobbying, that was his limit. In the end, he turned to education, but his poor character would be problematic. Eventually, he would even fearlessly touch Chae Nayun while pretending to teach her. Fortunately, he never contracted with a devil.

[Kim Hyojun – Currently considering a contract with a devil.]

But he might soon.

“You may be thinking, *Why should I learn magic when I’m not a magician?* That’s valid, but I’m sure you know, qi reinforcement and sword qi are an extension of magic.”

Kim Hyojun demonstrated with his magic power. The soft jellylike magic power instantly hardened when he concentrated.

“Now, if you physically reinforce your magic power, that becomes qi

reinforcement or sword qi. However, if you refine your magic power with some calculations...”

A pink flame rose from his magic power. Cadets exclaimed in awe.

“It becomes magic.”

Kim Hyojun smiled.

“Even if you can’t wield magic of this level, you will learn to use more practical magic or wield things like qi reinforcement and sword qi more naturally. Since today is the first class, we will only go over our goals.”

Suddenly, a blue sphere the size of a ping-pong ball shot up from his palm.

“This is necessary magic to learn before entering any dungeon. It’s called a light sphere and will guide you in many dark areas. It may look simple, but to wield it skillfully...”

Kim Hyojun gave a complicated explanation. To simplify, we had to compress magic power and air into a spherical shape that lights up.

“Now, before I teach you, try it yourself.”

Cadets began to emit their magic power. I stared blankly at my desk before joining my hands and thinking, *Appear, sphere of light. Appear, sphere of light.*

Stigma’s magic power didn’t require intense focus or complex calculations. Soon, magic power flowed into my hands and formed a white sphere of light. The cute sphere floated around my palm.

Wiing—

My smartwatch vibrated. Startled, I canceled the light sphere.

“Please turn off your smartwatches during class.”

Kim Hyojun's disgruntled gaze fell on me.

"Sorry."

I slightly bowed and saw a message from Yoo Yeonha.

[Um, we can't do something like that yet. If you show people what you just did, they'll misunderstand.]

"What."

I quickly scanned the room and found Yoo Yeonha sitting diagonally from me. We made eye contact, and she smiled while mouthing silently.

Amazing. You did that after listening to his explanation once?

I glanced around me after her sarcastic remark. Less than half of the cadets could compress their magic power into a sphere, and even those who succeeded couldn't maintain the form for long. No one was even close to making the sphere shine.

"W-Whoa!"

A nameless cadet in the front row suddenly exclaimed. A blue light shone from the sphere in Kim Suho's hand. Other cadets expressed their shock as Kim Hyojun's face stiffened. He suddenly snapped after staring at Kim Suho's light sphere.

"Stop."

Oh right, this was why Kim Hyojun envied Kim Suho. He scowled, but quickly straightened his face before continuing in a kind tone.

"You'll be wasting magic power if you make it like that. Now, pay attention everyone. I'll give a more detailed explanation."

Kim Hyojun began to give Kim Suho a private lesson. It seemed he wanted to test Kim Suho's limits. Yoo Yeonha sent me another

message as I watched quietly.

[It must look like child's play since you can easily make a brilliant white light while someone else is praised for only a faint glow.]

“...What is she saying.”

I ignored Yoo Yeonha's strange comment.

* * *

I arrived at the traveling club's meeting place the next day at 12:30 P.M. on Saturday. Most had already gathered and seemed excited about the overnight trip.

“Hajin is here too. Alright, let's form our teams before setting off.”

The club leader, Oh Hanhyun, took out a box for drawing lots like before. According to the original story, Kim Suho would pair up with Yoo Yeonha. I didn't care about the rest.

“First, Suho? Please step forward. You'll be drawing first.”

I was still a bit nervous. Hopefully, everything would match the original story. Now, who will Kim Suho pick?

* * *

I stepped into Paris for the first time. Thanks to the Seoul-Paris portal, it only took ten seconds to arrive.

“It really is different.”

The scenery resembled the pictures, but also looked different from my old world. State-of-the-art buildings surrounded the Eiffel Tower, and cadets from Paris Hero Academy walked around with swords and spears. For the record, France led the European Union in my novel because of their well-operated hero system.

“Korean cadets, over here!”

Someone called us over as we looked at the Paris scenery. We spotted a limousine in the direction of the voice. The club leader, Oh Hanhyun, walked up to the limousine with a hearty laugh.

“Nice to meet you. You must be Raymond.”

“Yes, nice to meet you.”

“Can we drop off our bags before touring the city?”

Raymond nodded with a smile. We stuffed our bags into the limousine.

“Now, we’ll travel in the pairs we formed.”

I paired with Chae Nayun. I felt good that Kim Suho went with Yoo Yeonha like the original, but I wasn’t too comfortable with Chae Nayun.

“Alright, it’s 1 P.M. right now. Let’s meet back here at 7.”

Oh Hanhyun left with his girlfriend, who he brought along with his authority as the club leader. They planned on attending the masquerade party later today.

“...”

Chae Nayun stared at Kim Suho with a wistful look before walking up to me.

“Hey, where do you want to go?”

“I’m getting lunch.”

I had already researched several gourmet places since I was excited about my first European trip. After looking through several pamphlets, I even used the Book of Truth to find the best restaurant.

“Lunch? I guess it’s about that time. Where are you going?”

“You’re coming with me?”

Chae Nayun didn’t seem to mind. I was surprised, considering the rumors that she practiced archery with pictures of my face on the targets.

“We drew lots, and what’s done is done. So what, do you want to split up?”

“Oh right.”

Chae Nayun had no sense of direction. She would easily get lost like a five year old in a forest. She could find her way home with her magic power and scent, but foreign places were like mazes to her.

“What’s right?”

“Nothing. Just follow me.”

Chae Nayun crossed her arms as though she doubted my manliness. Then she pouted and curtly spoke, “And how do you know where anything is?”

“I know better than you.”

The Book of Truth showed only two restaurants. A cheap, delicious restaurant and an expensive one worth its cost. I felt okay with either, but the latter should suit Chae Nayun more. I turned on my GPS to the expensive restaurant.

“Follow me.”

“Hmm... Okay, but I’m letting you know, I’m a really picky eater.”

“I know.”

She acted like a tomboy, but because she ate only the highest quality

food from a young age, her palate was more refined than most nobles.

“...How do you know that?”

I ignored her and walked to the restaurant as Chae Nayun followed like a cat. After about 15 minutes, we arrived at [*Goût Céleste*]. I had no clue what it meant, but anyone could see it was fancy.

“Oh, this is the place?”

“Yep.”

“Ooh.”

We walked to the entrance until a man in a suit stopped us.

“@!#\$!@#\$!@#\$”

We couldn’t understand because he spoke in French. Chae Nayun tilted her head and asked, “What?”

The man cleared his voice and asked again in Korean.

“Do you have a reservation?”

“Oh, he speaks Korean. Hey, you didn’t make a reservation, right? Don’t you know you need to make reservations for high-end restaurants?”

I silently opened my laptop. I didn’t make a reservation, but I could hack into their reservation list. I paid a cheap price to access the restaurant’s private server using the laptop’s internet function. Then I quickly found the reservation list and added my name around a 1 P.M. slot.

“Hey!”

Chae Nayun shouted. I took my eyes off the laptop and saw her right in front of me. I couldn’t spot a single flaw in her smooth skin.

“Eh? W-What?”

“Reservation. Did you make one?”

Chae Nayun asked again, and I nodded.

“Yeah, I did.”

“...Really?”

“Tell him my name.”

Chae Nayun looked doubtful, but approached the man.

“Kim Hajin. Is his name there?”

The man checked his smartwatch. He found my name and let us through with a smile.

“Yes, Kim Hajin and one companion. Welcome.”

“...Oh wow.”

Chae Nayun looked at me in surprise. Then we walked in together.

“I like the atmosphere.”

I agreed. The interior looked as imposing as the exterior. Calm classical music flowed, while every decoration appeared delicate and elegant. The customers inside wore dresses and suits despite it being lunchtime.

“Follow me.”

We followed the waiter and sat next to a window.

“Welcome to Goût Céleste. Do you need help with the menu?”

“You handle it.”

I let Chae Nayun decide. She skillfully looked over the menu and finished ordering. Silence descended once the waiter left. We awkwardly stared at each other until I looked out the window.

“...What?”

Suddenly, I spotted an unexpected individual.

Chapter 49

Tit for Tat (2)

A familiar face flashed by the window. Although she wore a mask and sunglasses, I saw through her disguise. It was Yun Seung-Ah, the vice-leader of Korea's number one guild. She walked past with a companion. This never occurred in the original story, and I wondered why she was here.

"Wait for me."

"What? Hey, where are you going!?"

I ran out of the restaurant. Thankfully, Yun Seung-Ah didn't walk fast, so I caught and grabbed her shoulder.

"Hey."

"*Huak!*"

Yun Seung-Ah jumped with an odd scream. She turned and flinched when she saw me. She definitely recognized me.

"...W-Who are you?"

However, she feigned ignorance. Was she here on a mission? I looked at the Caucasian man next to her, but didn't recognize him. Naturally, I turned on my laptop. An alert came up as expected.

[Settings change – An ill relationship has formed between Jain and Yun Seung-Ah through an anonymous informant.]

They had a cat and dog relationship that I knew better than anyone else. Jain held the Chameleon Troupe's yellow seat, and her gift specialized in disguise and stealing. She disguised herself as Yun

Seung-Ah's old classmate and entered Creator's Sacred Grace out of boredom. After several events, the two grew incredibly close. Eventually, Jain became Yun Seung-Ah's only friend, but betrayed her. While fighting djinns for an artifact, she critically wounded Yun Seung-Ah and took the artifact for herself.

I knew Jain would infiltrate the VIP masquerade party to steal a particular ring. The ring wasn't worth much yet. However, its value would skyrocket once its potential was unlocked.

Eventually, the ring would belong to Chae Nayun. When she switched to the sword, her father gifted it to her after buying it from the black market.

"Um, I don't know who you are, but we have to go."

Yun Seung-Ah denied knowing me, and the man next to her separated us. He stood taller than me by a head. However, the man was actually a she. My eyes saw through her disguise too. Jain Valerin. She disguised herself as Yun Seung-Ah's subordinate.

"...Ah."

Yun Seung-Ah stood next to her fated enemy, but didn't even recognize her. I couldn't help but feel sorry.

"I must have mistaken you for someone else."

I bowed apologetically and backed away for now since we would meet at the masquerade.

* * *

"That crazy bastard..."

Chae Nayun wondered what illness of his relapsed this time as Kim Hajin ran out, but she didn't overthink it since he always acted strangely. Honestly, she was more concerned about someone else with another girl. She agonized over what to do and held up her smartwatch.

“...Hey Yeonha, where are you?”

She called Yoo Yeonha, who paired with Kim Suho.

— Me? I’m shopping. Why?

Where was she exactly? Chae Nayun feigned indifference and asked.

“What shop?”

— I’m buying some clothes.

“A-Alone?”

— No, with Kim Suho.

Chae Nayun felt uneasy.

“...What are you doing with him?”

— Hm? I’m just making him try on some clothes. He’s got a model’s face, but you know how he dresses. So I’m buying him some clothes.

“What? Why are you buying him clothes!?”

Chae Nayun inadvertently shouted. The other customers looked at her as she awkwardly lowered her head.

— Huh? What, I can’t? It’s for the masquerade party later.

“No, not that you can’t, but you know... it’s expensive. You have to save money when you can. If you buy him things, he’ll get used to it.”

—... Um, sure. So Nayun, where are you?

“I’m at a restaurant.”

— With Kim Hajin?

“Yeah, he brought me here, but not many restaurants suit my taste. I’ll just endure it like Military Agent Academy’s lunch.”

Chae Nayun recalled the painful memories when cadets had no choice but to eat the Military Agent Academy’s food. She would starve if she didn’t, but also felt queasy for an entire day if she did. Chae Nayun lightly sighed.

— Really? What’s the restaurant called?

Chae Nayun spotted the sign, but didn’t know how to read it.

“I don’t know. Hold on.”

The waiter brought their appetizer.

“Excuse me, how do you read that?”

“Yes?”

“The restaurant’s name.”

“Ah, it’s Goût Céleste.”

“Can you say that again here?”

Chae Nayun held up her smartwatch to the surprised waiter as he pronounced the name.

“Goût Céleste.”

“Thank you.”

“Um, have you perhaps not heard about our restaurant?”

“Hm? Ah, no.”

Chae Nayun dismissed the waiter and continued speaking with Yoo

Yeonha.

“Hey, did you hear that?”

— Did I hear that right? Goût Céleste? The Flavor of Heaven?

Chae Nayun didn’t know whether Yoo Yeonha meant the same place, but she pronounced it like the waiter.

“Yeah, I think so. Why? Is this place famous?”

— Kim Hajin brought you there? How?

“Hah?”

Chae Nayun tilted her head at Yoo Yeonha’s odd reaction.

— I tried to make a reservation and failed. Even with VIP membership, you need to make a reservation at least a week in advance.

“Really? Is this place that famous?”

— *Sigh...*

Yoo Yeonha felt frustrated by the innocent question. Chae Nayun had no idea how famous the restaurant was because she didn’t care about such things.

— That’s De Jubon’s restaurant. You know, the cooking hero.

“Ah?”

Chae Nayun had heard that name before. All sorts of heroes and gifts existed in the world, but De Jubon stood out because he could move people with just his food. They said that djinns and heroes were all equal in front of De Jubon’s food.

— Goût Céleste in Paris is his flagship restaurant, so it should be him

cooking and not his apprentices.

“...”

Was this place that amazing? Chae Nayun was speechless.

— Oh right, Nayun, do you remember being in the same class as Kim Hajin during the third year of Military Agent Academy?

“Eh? Was I?”

— You didn’t know?

“No, not at all. How am I supposed to know that?”

She couldn’t recall because she only focused on training.

— I see. Well, since you’re there, enjoy the food. Ah, don’t forget to take pictures of every dish before eating. I want to see them later.

Yoo Yeonha sounded jealous.

“Uh, um, yeah.”

— Okay, I’m hanging up.

Should I be happy or uncomfortable? The call ended before Chae Nayun could make up her mind. She stared at the appetizer in front of her. The simple soup and salad glistened like jewels. Chae Nayun picked up her spoon and sipped the soup. Her eyes widened and her body trembled the moment her tongue touched it.

“...”

She became speechless. So this was why they called De Jubon the world’s greatest cook. The flavor of mana shocked her refined palate. Finally, Kim Hajin returned.

“It’s already here?”

He sat back down and picked up his spoon. Chae Nayun wanted to ask him many questions. First, how did he manage to make a reservation? Yoo Yeonha said even VIP members needed to reserve a week in advance. Even if he was VIP, the trip was only announced four days ago. Oh Hanhyun couldn't have told him beforehand. A thought flashed across her mind. She recalled her conversation with Kim Hajin twenty or so minutes ago.

— Hm... Okay, but I'm letting you know, I'm a really picky eater.

— I know.

Kim Hajin knew I was a picky eater. In other words, he must have planned on taking me here. Even though they randomly paired, he could have manipulated the results with the club leader.

“Hmm...”

Chae Nayun glared at Kim Hajin.

“Hey, where did you go?”

“Hm? Oh, I thought I saw someone I knew, but I was mistaken.”

“You know someone in Paris?”

“Something like that,” Kim Hajin briefly replied.

“How did you make a reservation for this place? I heard it's famous. Did this acquaintance help you?”

Chae Nayun noticed his hands slightly shook.

“Um, yeah. Anyways, aren't you going to eat?”

Kim Hajin quickly changed the subject.

“I will.”

The lunch continued as the two of them ate in silence. The waiter brought the main entrée once they finished the appetizers.

Chae Nayun's suspicion quickly melted away at the transcendental flavors of De Jubon.

* * *

"*Whew*, I'm stuffed."

Chae Nayun and I left the restaurant. As expected of an entire course, delicious food continuously streamed in for over an hour. Of course, I could have stopped, but the food was too tempting. I thanked this world for allowing me to taste this heavenly flavor.

"...Hey."

Chae Nayun suddenly called me as I patted my full belly. She also looked satisfied.

"What."

"Thanks for the food."

"...Don't be. You paid for it."

Chae Nayun insisted on paying since I made the reservation. The bill came up to 700 euros.

"The membership fee must be expensive, so it's the least I can do."

Chae Nayun glanced at me from top to bottom. I didn't know what she meant, but I nodded understandingly.

"Right."

"...So, where are you going now?"

I glanced at my watch and saw it was almost 3:00. Since the

masquerade started at 5:00, I needed to scout the venue.

“Do you want to split up now?”

I had to leave Chae Nayun to prepare for the masquerade party.

“Yeah, that’s a good idea. I’ll go first.”

Chae Nayun nodded and headed off in the opposite direction.

“Hello. Yeah, Yeonha, where are you? I’ll meet up with you guys.”

I could hear Chae Nayun’s voice from a distance with my gift.

— What about Kim Hajin?

Yoo Yeonha spoke from the other line.

“We just split up.”

— Huh? Why? We still have some time left.

“It just felt awkward alone with him. I don’t know what to say either. By the way, can I also go to the masquerade party you were talking about?”

Chae Nayun’s words caught my attention. The masquerade party... wasn’t in that direction.

* * *

Yun Seung-Ah entered to a nearby café. She took a seat and sighed after ordering two cups of coffee.

“*Whew*, that surprised me. Why did he pop out of there...?”

Her heart pounded from the earlier encounter.

“Who was that?”

“A cadet. His name is Kim Hajin.”

“...Is he any good?”

Yun Seung-Ah firmly nodded at her subordinate’s question.

“He’s all the talk recently. I think it was last week? Cube released a video of his duel to the guild community. He shattered a qi reinforcement with a single bullet. I’m pretty annoyed since I was the first one to notice him,” Yun Seung-Ah complained.

“Haha... That aside, do you think that woman will show up at the masquerade party?”

“Yeah, she will. I know it.”

Yun Seung-Ah confidently replied as her subordinate frowned.

“...How can you be so sure? Was it the informant?”

“No, that woman just likes parties, especially if there are things to steal.”

“I see...”

The subordinate answered somewhat bitterly. Yun Seung-Ah stared at him and asked, “Why, do you want to know the informant’s name?”

“...No.”

“Honestly, I don’t know either.”

Yun Seung-Ah smiled as she leaned in her chair.

“It’s not just one or two people who hate that woman.”

That's good. The subordinate thinly smiled and asked another question.

“...What will you do if you capture her?”

Yun Seung-Ah's answer was simple.

“What will I do? Nothing. I'll just hand her over to the association. Ah, let's get going. It's 4, and I still have to buy a dress.”

Chapter 50

Tit for Tat (3)

The masquerade party took place at a Paris castle constructed by a wealthy magnate. I positioned myself on a hill overlooking the castle. If possible, I hoped everything would proceed according to the original storyline.

5 P.M.

The sun had yet to set, but the party was already underway. Luxurious cars arrived, and people in flamboyant dresses and masks entered. I checked Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha's location by hacking their smartwatches.

5:30 P.M.

Two people exited a limousine. Yun Seung-Ah and Jain wore masks resembling a fox and a tiger. They followed the chauffeur into the castle.

Finally, Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha arrived. The formal wear accentuated their perfect figures, and they stood out even with their faces hidden.

“Hmm.”

I couldn't help but feel that my face was too bare. I should also wear a mask if I needed to interfere and conceal my identity.

Although I didn't prepare a mask, I could just use aether to form one since it could transform into any equipment.

I thought about a design and recalled the movie Black Panther. Although it resembled more of a helmet, I transformed aether into it

and put it on. Then it adjusted itself to fit around my head snugly.

6 P.M.

The air became chilly as the sun set. The castle looked even more beautiful under the glow of the setting sun. I carefully observed the interior. I could see and hear everything as if I was inside. This came from the synergy between *[Thousand-Mile Eyes]* and *[Observation and Reading]*.

— I don't know how to dance.

— So what, you're going to just stand there after coming all this way?

— Well, I guess I'm a quick learner.

Kim Suho followed Yoo Yeonha's lead as they danced to a classical piece. Meanwhile, I discovered a strange movement of magic power on the other side of the castle from a magic portal.

"I knew it wouldn't be so easy."

Only djinns could make artificial portals. They had to be beloved by their contracted devil to have enough magic power for a magic portal. An alert popped up on my laptop.

[Homer's Ring – Mythical grade artifact. It didn't make sense that only a few people would aim for it just because it hadn't fully awakened.]

[Modified setting – The djinn group, Evil Society, will interfere in the story.]

The situation became complicated. I looked for Jain and spotted her infiltrating the underground vault. She had already taken out the security guards.

— Let's see...

Jain's gift made iris scanners, fingerprint scanners, and password locks

all useless. She easily opened the vault and stole a blue diamond and a ring. Then she placed them into her magic pouch and returned to the masquerade party.

So far, everything happened according to the original story. The only difference was Evil Society. It would all be over if Jain safely escaped. However...

— Yoren, where are you going?

Yun Seung-Ah appeared out of nowhere and grabbed Jain's arm. Jain momentarily flinched, but quickly pretended to be Yoren.

— I went to the bathroom.

— I have something to discuss with you. Follow me.

Yun Seung-Ah grabbed Jain's wrist. The exit was right in front of her, but Jain obediently followed.

* * *

“Um, vice-leader?”

Jain followed her to an empty room on the second floor. The worn room only had a single bed and some dimly lit lanterns. Clearly, the place harbored secret love affairs.

“W-Why here?”

“You know why.”

Acting coquettishly, Yun Seung-Ah pushed him onto the bed. While Yoren stared at her, she closed the door and pulled her hair up in a ponytail. The real Yoren would have been thrilled.

“I, um...”

Yun Seung-Ah mounted Jain in a somewhat lewd position. Then she

slowly took off Jain's mask and lowered her face to his.

"Yoren..."

Yun Seung-Ah's breath caressed Jain's face, but Jain felt the slight killing intent.

"You won't trick me a second time."

Yun Seung-Ah shoved her hand under the bedsheet.

Shiing—

A well-sharpened sword glistened in the dim light. Jain quickly pushed Yun Seung-Ah off.

"Vice-leader, what are you—"

Yun Seung-Ah's sword struck before she could finish. Jain used an emergency dagger to block the attack. The weight and size of the weapons vastly differed, but the density of magic power enveloping them was equal.

BOOM!

The surroundings shook from the fierce collision.

"You're making a mistake, vice-leader... *Uk!*"

Yun Seung-Ah lunged towards Jain with a kick as Jain continued to feign ignorance. She pounced after Jain like a ferocious beast once the kick sent Jain flying. Although Jain bought some time running around, Yun Seung-Ah was more tenacious and nimble.

"*Ak!*"

Eventually, Yun Seung-Ah stood over Jain and prepared to strike when a whip suddenly flew in and restrained her sword.

“A lover’s quarrel shouldn’t be so noisy.”

Yun Seung-Ah and Jain turned in the direction of the elegant voice. A girl wearing a cat mask had entered before they noticed. It was Yoo Yeonha.

“I am a hero cadet from Cube.”

She went upstairs to find a bathroom, but heard metal clashing. She would have normally ignored it, but she grew tired of Kim Suho’s clumsy dancing and wanted to improve her image as a Korean cadet in a foreign country.

“I’ll make sure there’s no bloodshed if you put your weapon down.”

Yoo Yeonha added strength to her whip as she leisurely spoke. Her whip snatched onto Yun Seung-Ah’s sword, but Yun Seung-Ah ignited her magic power and scorched Yoo Yeonha’s whip into cinders.

“...Oh.”

Yoo Yeonha took a few steps back in shock.

“Uh...”

I, I got too cocky just because I was in France. I should have known that Korea isn't the only country with powerful individuals.

Yoo Yeonha felt her lips dry. She hoped the woman’s sinister sword qi wouldn’t aim for her and quickly bowed at a ninety-degree angle.

“I will be on my way now. Please do continue what you were doing.”

Yoo Yeonha stealthily backed away before making a run for it.

“DIE!”

The fight continued. Yun Seung-Ah’s sword repeatedly struck down. Lightning crackled, and flames ignited each time. The roaring

attracted everyone's attention, and security guards rushed to the room.

“Don't just watch! Help! *Uwaak!*”

Jain tried her best to withstand Yun Seung-Ah's demon-like attacks with her short dagger. However, she felt more cornered as time passed. Finally, Jain became desperate enough to ask the spectators for help. However, the security guards could never dream of interfering in such a fierce battle.

“*Uk!*”

Finally, Jain's dagger broke in half. As Yun Seung-Ah prepared her final strike, someone stole a security guard's sword.

A single streak of light shot through the air and cut between Jain and Yun Seung-Ah. Kim Suho blocked Yun Seung-Ah's flame sword with a mere security guard's sword.

“Who are you? Back off before I cut you down.”

Kim Suho didn't budge at Yun Seung-Ah's warning. He wanted to become a hero to protect others. Her threat couldn't shake his conviction so easily.

“I refuse.”

“...Don't say I didn't warn you.”

They couldn't recognize each other because of the masks.

“I don't know why you want to kill him, but...”

“Move!”

“*Uuk!*”

The current Yun Seung-Ah didn't know mercy. She kicked Kim Suho's

solar plexus without hesitation as he fell to one knee.

“Ah, hey! You stop right there!”

Thanks to Kim Suho, Jain found an opening and jumped out the window.

“See you later, crazy bitch... Eh?”

However, her attempt failed. From beneath the window, a thick darkness rose and swallowed her. Then it spat her back into the room.

“...”

The furious Yun Seung-Ah, the injured Kim Suho, and Yoo Yeonha all held their breath as the figure of a man emerged from the darkness.

* * *

“Damn it.”

Chae Nayun compared her surroundings to the map on her smartwatch. After every few steps, she stopped to check her watch before continuing. Eventually, she saw a familiar sign.

[Goût Céleste]

“What!? This is where I ate lunch!”

She raged after arriving in the same place.

“I can’t believe this.”

She fumed at her smartwatch. The problem lay with the map if a user got lost after referring to it.

“What company made this! Damn it...”

She flipped over her smartwatch and saw the word *Daehyun* on the back. It was her father's company.

“...”

Chae Nayun called Yoo Yeonha once again.

“Why isn't she picking up!”

* * *

“So this is the item containing ancient wisdom...”

The djinn who appeared from the darkness held up a ring that faintly glowed red from the setting sun. It was the ring Jain had placed in her magic pouch.

“When did you take... *Ak!*”

Jain muttered despondently after checking her magic pouch. Yun Seung-Ah ran up to her and grabbed her by her hair before pointing her sword at the djinn.

“Put that down.”

“Haha.”

The djinn smiled magnanimously. Yun Seung-Ah grew slightly nervous at its inhuman appearance with reddish-black skin and red eyes. A djinn strayed further from human appearance the more a devil consumed it. From his appearance, Yun Seung-Ah could estimate his strength.

“This item isn't something that suits humans like you.”

A few days ago, Evil Society confirmed the item's location and potential through an informant. Homer's Ring was a cradle of wisdom that amplified all abilities involving magic power. They didn't expect someone else to steal it, but all was well since it ended up in their

hands.

“Now then.”

When the djinn was about to put away the ring in satisfaction...

Whish—

A streak of light broke through the window and snatched it away.

“W-What!?”

The djinn screamed and turned to where the ring flew. He caught sight of someone on a faraway hill holding onto a wire-like object. Kim Hajin smiled from behind his beast-like mask.

Chapter 51

Change of Heart (1)

— So this is that ancient artifact...

The Evil Society's djinn had snatched the ring. The chances of Yun Seung-Ah or Kim Suho recovering it were slim. I had no choice, even if I attracted the djinn's attention.

I compressed a portion of aether around my hand and weaved it into a wire. It was only as long as my hand, but would elongate when I threw it.

Still, the wire wouldn't reach the castle. Although Master Sharpshooter included throwing, I didn't have enough strength. Thankfully, I could compensate with stigma's magic power.

I concentrated magic power onto my right arm. I didn't hold back and converted 80% of my magic power into kinetic energy. My strength remained the same, but stigma's magic power amplified the kinetic energy. It didn't increase my physical ability, so I didn't know how powerful my throw would be.

"Huap!"

I threw the wire with a spirited shout. My target was Homer's Ring in the djinn's hand. The short wire instantly elongated and moved like it was alive until it snatched the target. Immediately, I pulled the wire back.

Whoosh—

The wire instantly retracted.

As expected of an ancient artifact, the ring didn't contain a single

scratch.

“Nice shot.”

I smiled in satisfaction, but not for long. The wire’s unexpected power swung in an arc and severed a portion of the castle walls. It also swept through the floor and sliced apart the castle’s foundation on its way back.

Part of the castle’s second floor crumbled.

I watched the accident in shock. I hoped no one was hurt, but I didn’t have time to worry. The Evil Society’s djinn spotted me. He couldn’t see through my mask, but I had to retreat as soon as possible. I escaped along the route I had prepared beforehand.

“Oy!”

As I plowed through the tall grass, someone fell from the sky in front of me. A djinn who looked like a Caucasian man blocked my path and exuded killing intent.

“You see this, right?”

He tapped on his waist at a bladeless hilt. It was a magic sword created from state-of-the-art magic engineering. Individuals confident in their magic power often used this weapon. As long as their magic power capacity was large enough, it would display greater power than most low-rank artifacts. It suited djinns who gained exponential magic power from devils.

“If you know what this is, you better hand that over.”

He pulled out his magic sword without hesitation. He looked a bit funny holding just a hilt, but a magic sword’s might was nothing to scoff at.

“Um, why don’t we talk it out? I can just give it to you.”

“Why should I? I can just kill you and take it.”

“But weren’t you talking like you wanted to negotiate just now?”

“Was I?”

The djinn sneered and imbued his magic power into the hilt.

Wiing—

A blade of magic power shot out like a lightsaber, but it only briefly lasted. The blade flickered and disappeared.

“...What?”

Confused, he imbued his magic power again, but nothing changed. The magic sword flickered like an exhausted lightbulb. I realized what was going on.

“Hahaha.”

With a hearty laugh, I transformed Desert Eagle into its shotgun mode.

“W-What’s wrong with this thing!”

Flustered, the djinn aimlessly swung the sword hilt.

“Well, you see, that weapon won’t work today.”

I scraped together what little magic power I had left and converted it into the light attribute. This white magic power flowed into the shotgun shell and would obliterate the djinn.

“Because I’m very lucky.”

“Shut it! Even without a weapon—”

KWANG.

The shotgun shell perfectly struck his head.

Chae Nayun sat on a bench near the traveling club's meeting place. She had given up on the masquerade party. It was already 7 P.M., but she couldn't find Yoo Yeonha or Kim Suho.

“...Tsk.”

She wasn't bothered, but somehow felt anxious. She didn't know why, so she played a game.

[Leveling Up Monster]

It was an RPG that came out a few days ago. It wasn't a VR game, but a mobile one she could conveniently play on her smartwatch. She enjoyed it at first, but her thoughts kept wandering. What were they doing at the masquerade party that they didn't pick up her calls?

“Where are all these police going?”

She also couldn't focus because of the constant sirens. Chae Nayun turned off the game and checked her messenger app. No new messages had arrived.

“Haa.”

I'm upset, but why am I upset? As Chae Nayun sighed in annoyance, someone sat next to her.

“...What's up with you?”

Kim Hajin looked pale, and cold sweat drenched his exhausted face.

“Are you sick?” Chae Nayun asked out of courtesy. Kim Hajin just silently stared at her.

“...What? Answer me.”

“I'm a bit tired.”

“What?”

“Well... I can’t move.”

Kim Hajin smirked. He suddenly closed his eyes and leaned on Chae Nayun.

“Whoa!”

Chae Nayun moved out of the way, afraid of his sweat. Kim Hajin fell on the bench.

“H-Hey! What are you scheming—”

“Ah, Nayun. You’re here.”

Oh Hanhyun arrived with his girlfriend, but his face looked grim.

“Club leader? Why are you so late?”

“You didn’t know? Something happened nearby. Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha are being questioned.”

“Eh?”

Chae Nayun’s jaws dropped. *Just what the hell happened while I was gone?*

“Ah, it’s nothing serious. They weren’t injured, and they’ll be released soon since their identities are confirmed.”

Oh Hanhyun glanced at the bench where Kim Hajin lay panting.

“...What happened to him?”

“I don’t know. He arrived just now and suddenly collapsed.”

“Hmm.”

Oh Hanhyun placed his hand on Kim Hajin's forehead. It felt hot.

"Babe, can you take a look at him?"

"...Babe?"

Chae Nayun grimaced. Oh Hanhyun smiled somewhat embarrassed as the girl next to him approached.

"I introduced her before, right? She's my girlfriend, Natasha."

"Ah... Yeah, um, that's a pretty name."

* * *

Father's face suddenly appeared. His black hair carried a few strands of grey. It was a face from 8 years ago, or even before that. Every Korean high school senior had to overcome the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT). I had bombed the test and must have expected it since I told my parents, who insisted on picking me up, to stay home. Mom and Dad agreed and left. After the exam, I trudged to the school gate and saw him.

— Hajin.

Father looked at me with a warm smile. Riding the same car for 10 years, his face suddenly looked aged. I broke into tears because I felt sorry. Father had never once consoled me before, but he patted my back and said just two words.

— It's okay.

"...Is he okay?"

The voice that overlapped with Father's must have been Chae Nayun. I opened my eyes.

"Ah, he woke up. Eh? He's crying?"

Chae Nayun pointed at me and snickered. I touched my eyes and felt the wetness.

“Did it hurt that much? What, did you catch an illness?”

“...”

Annoyed, I glared at Chae Nayun. Was it because of the dream? I didn't feel too good.

“W-What?”

“...Just get back.”

Thankfully, Kim Suho pulled Chae Nayun away. I raised my head and looked out the window. It was already dark.

“Are you okay?”

A Caucasian woman asked as she looked down at me. It was probably Oh Hanhyun's girlfriend.

“Yes, I'm okay...”

“You collapsed from light exhaustion.”

I nodded. It would have been weird if I felt fine. I had instantly used up two streaks of stigma and even raced to the Eiffel Tower like a madman. Not to mention, I took the most roundabout path to avoid attention.

“Where are we?”

“It's your room. You'll be sharing it with Kim Suho.”

The woman sounded gentle and made me instinctively trust her. This was why you couldn't judge a book by its cover.

“That large mansion is supposed to be our lodging?”

“That’s right. It’s already 10, but they said they would prepare dinner if you want.”

Thankfully, I woke up before the incident.

“No, I’m fine.”

I turned down the offer as the woman nodded with a smile.

“Then I’ll be leaving. Come with me, Nayun.”

“Eh? Why me?”

“This is the men’s room.”

She left with Chae Nayun after packing up the thermometer and icepack. I looked around the relatively large room with two beds and plenty of antique furniture. So I would be sharing with Kim Suho...

“Are you feeling better?” Kim Suho asked. I turned towards him and saw his gentle smile.

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“I’m glad.”

“...”

It felt awkward. I lay in silence on the bed and suddenly recalled what happened just a few hours ago. I wanted to ask Kim Suho what I missed, but I had to be careful since I destroyed the castle.

I picked up my smartwatch on the bedside shelf and checked the news.

[Djinn appears in a Paris castle! Cube cadets coincidentally present...]

The news spread quite fast because it mentioned Cube cadets. I read through the entire report. Thankfully, no one died or was critically

injured. The news also reported that the djinns had demolished the castle.

Fantastic. Jain managed to escape since they didn't report anything about her. I felt relieved.

"Hey."

"Hm?"

I projected the report so Kim Suho could see it. I wanted to ask if he knew anything.

"Oh, that?"

He took the bait.

"I can't tell you anything in detail, but nothing major happened. The djinns all ran away before the heroes arrived."

"Mm, that's a relief."

Silence descended once again. Kim Suho must have been bored as he cut an apple and gave it to me. I took it without saying anything.

Crunch, crunch. Tick, tock. The sound of me biting the apple and the clock filled the room. A chilly wind blew across the window. I looked out and felt uncomfortable from the awkward atmosphere. The moon hid behind clouds.

Currently, it was 10:15.

In just 2 hours, the incident would occur.

"Hmm."

Kim Suho had no plans to leave the chair by my bed. I glanced at him uncomfortably. Then I discovered a faint scar on his cheek. Most likely from Yun Seung-Ah's attack.

“Take care of your body more.”

“Huh?” Kim Suho sounded confused. I pointed at the scar on his cheek.

“You’re the main character. You can’t get too hurt.”

Kim Suho was the main character I created myself. However, he fearlessly charged at Yun Seung-Ah and was almost killed. Yun Seung-Ah’s killing intent was genuine. If the djinn had appeared later, Kim Suho might have lost a limb. Of course, I understood why he did what he did. After all, he was the main character who walked the path of righteousness.

However, I doubted whether the righteous main character could overcome this twisted story with only his sense of justice. And whether he could send me home.

“Main character? There’s no such thing.”

Kim Suho shook his head. He must have heard these words before from people who mocked him. I recalled it too.

— Does he think he’s some sort of main character?

Shin Jonghak often said this.

“Really?”

“Of course. If I’m a main character, then you’re one too. No, everyone in this world is a main character.”

What the main character thoughtlessly said touched me. I pondered his words.

“By the way...”

Kim Suho stared at me and hesitated. Considering how nervous he was, this must be what he really wanted to ask.

“Go on.”

“The report you wrote for Chae Nayun, I saw it too. You were a bit harsh.”

For the record, my report on Chae Nayun received an A-. Although my criticisms were valid, telling her to give up the bow was deemed too harsh, so I received an A- instead of an A+.

“I wasn’t harsh. Chae Nayun isn’t a born archer. She needs to give up the bow and choose the sword.”

“Is that why you made that bet with Chae Nayun?”

“Yeah. If I win, I will make her give up the bow. She said she’d do anything.”

Kim Suho’s face stiffened at my determination.

“But it’s the path she chose. I don’t think it’s something someone else should decide for her.”

He was both stern and soft as we stared at each other. His eyes shone brightly with his own will. Although his thoughts differed from mine, that didn’t mean he was wrong.

“Then do you want me to encourage and console her, knowing that she’s headed towards a dead end?”

“No, that’s not what I—”

Without giving him a chance, I continued.

“You can’t succeed with just encouragements. What if you reach a dead end after endlessly toiling away? What if the only thing at the end is greater despair? Will you take responsibility?”

When I finished, Kim Suho sighed. Then he spoke in a low voice as though he was angry.

“How can you be so sure that Chae Nayun isn’t talented with bows, but swords? Are you saying all this because *you* can take responsibility?”

From Kim Suho’s perspective, what he said was completely justified. Chae Nayun had trained for countless years with the bow, but someone who didn’t even know her told her to give up. However, I was angry because I created Chae Nayun with affection. Her appearance, her personality, and even her tiniest hobbies and trauma. Of course, a few things had changed, but still...

“I’ve been thinking about her for far longer than you. And I’ve been watching over her all this time.”

Even if Kim Suho was this world’s main character, no one else in this entire world knew Chae Nayun better than me.

“So I know far more about her than you.”

“...What?”

A strange light flickered in Kim Suho’s eyes. As we stared at each other in silence...

— *Thud*

Kim Suho and I heard a faint sound from the other side of the door. I immediately looked through the wall.

Chae Nayun ran away with a flushed face. I didn’t know from when, but she must have eavesdropped on our conversation. A good archer also required stealth. If anything, she learned that well.

Chapter 52

Change of Heart (2)

Chae Nayun slammed the door to her room and jumped on her bed. She simply went to ask them out for a nighttime snack, but heard an interesting conversation and eavesdropped.

— I've been thinking about her for far longer than you. And I've been watching over her all this time. So I know far more about her than you.

It was the first time she had heard something so direct. She usually prevented such situations and few men would ever confidently approach her.

“Is he crazy?”

Kim Hajin's words still lingered in her ears.

Should I wash my ears? Or should I have smacked him? Chae Nayun bounced around on her bed.

“What's going on...?”

Chae Nayun's seemingly drunk act woke Yoo Yeonha.

“Nayun... What are you doing?”

“H-Huh?”

Chae Nayun flinched as Yoo Yeonha glared at her. Why was this girl beating up a poor bedsheet?

“Are you sick or something?”

“I-It’s nothing.”

Chae Nayun couldn’t tell her what she had just heard. She couldn’t imagine telling anyone something that personal.

“Then sleep. I’m tired.”

Yoo Yeonha muttered and plopped back to bed.

“Uh, yeah, good night. I’m sleeping too.”

Chae Nayun buried herself under her blanket.

Right, it doesn’t matter. I only overheard it. Regardless of Kim Hajin’s intentions, I just have to ignore them.

Chae Nayun pulled the blanket over her head.

However, she couldn’t fall asleep. *Thinking about her... Watching over her all this time...* Fragments of Kim Hajin’s words kept wandering in her head.

Watching over me all this time? Is he a stalker? No, if he was, I would have noticed.

Sharpshooters had extremely keen senses. A stalker who secretly took pictures, followed women late at night, and things like that...

Kyaaaaak—!!

Suddenly, a high-pitched voice rang out in the mansion. Chae Nayun opened her eyes and shot up.

“W-What!? Ah, *aaak!*”

Yoo Yeonha also woke up and fell as she tripped on her bedsheet. She glared at Chae Nayun with her hands on the floor.

“Chae Nayun! Y-You!”

“No! It wasn’t me this time!”

“Then who was it!?”

“...Outside.”

Chae Nayun turned on the lights, and someone else also turned on the hallway lights outside. They could hear loud footsteps running. Yoo Yeonha began to understand the gravity of the situation.

“Was that a real scream?”

“Yeah. Hurry up. We should go.”

Chae Nayun put on a jacket.

* * *

Kim Suho ran out the moment he heard the scream. I was about to follow when I noticed my Desert Eagle on the shelf. I couldn’t store it away since I didn’t have any magic power left, but someone had taken care of it.

“...”

The handgun struck me with a flash of inspiration.

“With this... No.”

I quickly cast the thought away, but what Kim Suho said lingered in my ears.

— If I’m a main character, then you’re one too.

I tried my best not to alter the original story because I feared unpredictability. However, a certain damned person had already altered the story. This world was full of unpredictability, so worrying about it was foolish.

“I’m sure it’ll work out somehow.”

I picked up my gun after shrugging off the hesitation.

Then I ran down the hallway to the mansion owner’s room. The other 14 members stood by in shock.

“T-This...”

In a dark room larger than six ordinary living rooms, the mansion owner lay in bed with a dagger sticking out of his heart. A maid sobbed in front of the traumatic scene. She had presumably discovered the scene.

“Bedel...”

Kim Suho muttered Belbet’s fake name. I could understand why everyone appeared so shocked. During dinner, Belbet must’ve acted like a kind grandfather to gather sympathy. He must’ve said things like, *My son who died also wanted to become a hero.*

“Wait. Let, let me confirm his state.”

Oh Hanhyun’s girlfriend, Natasha, approached as a doctor. I scrutinized her movements as she checked his pulse. Then she shook her head.

“...He’s gone.”

She closed Belbet’s eyes and returned to Oh Hanhyun’s side. I found it laughable that she pretended to be sad and leaned against his shoulder.

“W-What happened...”

The head butler ran into the room. He broke into tears, then talked about all the fake good deeds Belbet had done, and reiterated all the threats Belbet had received from evildoers.

I originally planned on letting the story unfold like my novel, but I no longer desired to watch this farce.

Belbet would later scheme to help djinns. I didn't know what else he would do if left alone. If possible, I wanted to get rid of him now.

"S-So they did it! Those bastards..."

"Calm down, head butler."

While the cadets comforted the sobbing maid and butler, I turned the lights on. Immediately, the room lit up.

"Hey, why did you turn the lights on!"

Chae Nayun shouted because of the bloody corpse. I glanced around before slowly walking up to Belbet.

"Excuse me! Don't go near!"

Natasha shouted as I ignored her and examined Belbet like a detective. I lifted his clothes to check his wound and pressed down on the bloody bed.

"You can't tamper with the crime scene before the police arrive."

Natasha could no longer endure it and came over to drag me away. However, I pulled out my gun and aimed at her.

"Don't come close."

"..."

Natasha raised her hands in shock while the butler, who was crying just a moment ago, shouted, "W-What are you doing!?"

It wasn't just the butler. The cadets also shouted the same thing. My head began to hurt. Was it because I woke up from exhaustion? I felt irritated and gritted my teeth. Then I shouted, "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Even I was surprised by my volume as silence immediately descended. I sighed and calmly continued.

“This person is trying to trick us. He’s not dead. He’s in a state called suspended animation.”

“D-Don’t be stupid. I’m a doctor. What do you know about—”

“I’m going to explain, so shut up and wait.”

I continued with my gun still pointed at Natasha.

“First, this scar is unnatural. It’s too shallow for someone to have stabbed him from above.”

I just reported what I observed. Of course, I wasn’t an expert in crime scene investigation, so I could have been wrong. However, the process didn’t matter since I knew the truth.

“Next, there’s too much blood. He only suffered one fatal injury to his heart, but the blood covered the entire bed and even dripped to the floor. Almost as if to emphasize he was dead.”

I stole a glance at Natasha. She didn’t seem agitated yet.

“Finally, and most importantly...”

I projected the International Wanted List from my smartwatch. I might have lied about everything else, but this was real. Belbet looked thinner in the photo, but the man lying dead looked very similar. I had shaken up all the cadets now.

“Of course, you can argue that they’re different individuals since the man in the photo is much thinner, but something is definitely up if you consider the other two clues.”

“Head butler, you called the police and ambulance, right?”

However, Natasha remained calm and asked the butler, who quickly

responded.

“Y-Yes, I called them.”

“Then we can just ask them instead of making a fuss.”

I couldn't let that happen. Once the bribed police and medical personnel arrived, Belbet would safely escape, so I had to resolve the situation before then.

With a grin, I moved my gun away from Natasha and pointed at Belbet. Only then did Natasha lose her composure.

“W-What are you doing!”

“What do you mean? I'm going to shoot him.”

“The police will be here soon!”

“He's dead anyway, right?”

I put my finger on the trigger.

“T-This scoundrel! Honey, stop him!”

Natasha shook Oh Hanhyun and urged him to step forward. The head butler, Belbet, and Natasha were all in the same boat.

“Um, Hajin...”

Oh Hanhyun carefully spoke up.

“If you move even a single step, I'll shoot. Especially you, Kim Suho. I'm only looking at you.”

“...Got it.”

Kim Suho, who slowly approached, stopped and raised his hands. I

also told the other cadets to back off. Then I spoke to Natasha.

“It’s loaded with real bullets.”

“We already called the police! Put the gun down!”

Natasha’s entire body trembled. Her reaction should be enough proof, but I still needed something more decisive.

“If you don’t confess by the time I count to one, I’m going to shoot. Since he’s dead, it doesn’t matter, right?”

“Confess what? He’s already dead!”

I began to count.

“Three.”

I diverted my focus to the cadets in case anyone tried anything stupid.

“Two.”

Contrary to my expectations, Kim Suho remained calm. The usually timid Oh Hanhyun began to operate his magic power, but Yoo Yeonha stopped him.

“Wait.”

Thanks to her, I could finish my countdown.

“One.”

Natasha still didn’t react.

“Then he’ll have to die.”

Click. I pulled the trigger.

“NO!”

It wasn't loaded, but Natasha wasn't aware and quickly pushed me aside. Then she prostrated on top of Belbet as if to protect him.”

“Don't shoot! Don't shoot!”

“...Hmm.”

I calmly put my gun down with enough proof. Natasha was Belbet's daughter. Belbet settled in France and managed to invite Cube cadets because of Natasha.

“Instead of the police, call the Hero Association. Tell them we caught a wanted criminal.”

I loaded my gun and fired. The magic bullet grazed the butler's leg, who ran away.

“Aaak!”

Only silence remained after that short scream. The other cadets stared at me as I walked outside. My heart thumped like crazy.

* * *

Belbet and Natasha had devised the assassination to avoid the narrowing investigations of multiple countries. His daughter coincidentally seduced a pushover Cube cadet and bore the plan to fruition.

The so-called operation, Return to Life.

Natasha easily obtained the expensive drug to fake Belbet's death as a Cube doctor. Everything afterward was simple. Belbet took the drug after a fake injury and sprayed the crime scene with blood packs. The emergency medical personnel wouldn't notice, and Belbet had already bribed the local police. Next, Belbet would swap with the corpse of a similar man during the ambulance ride. Afterward, the Cube cadets would testify and persuade everyone. The government workers he

bribed would ensure he was officially dead, and the real Belbet would be reborn under a new name.

Kim Suho would only find out in the future.

However, I destroyed the story related to Belbet. The association arrested him while he remained in suspended animation. He would wake up in jail.

[Belbet, the man you requested, has been arrested by the French police and is currently being transported to a local Hero Association branch.]
[Congratulations! This question was answered free of charge because you are our first customer.]

It was currently 9 A.M as I replied to Belbet's victim through the Truth Agency.

"...Are you Sherlock?"

Yoo Yeonha suddenly asked me. I smiled without answering. Honestly, my deductions last night were amateurish at best, but no one questioned what I said because of the unexpected situation.

Luckily, the investigation revealed what I said to be mostly correct.

"The incident with Yun Hyun and now this. You might as well open a detective agency."

"Sharpshooters have good eyes."

"That's true, but how did you recognize him? Do you have the faces of every wanted criminal memorized?"

I flinched. As expected, Yoo Yeonha caught one of the flaws in my actions.

"I apologize. That's a private matter." [1]

That was all I could tell her.

“What’s up with the sudden formality?”

Yoo Yeonha retorted with a thoughtful expression. *A family matter? Family matter...* She wandered off into her world of imagination. I wasn’t even curious about what she misunderstood.

Speaking of family affairs, I suddenly grew curious about Kim Chundong’s family. All I knew from his official records was that he was from an orphanage. I should probably look into it once I returned.

1. The word, private matter, can also mean family matter. 📖

Chapter 53

Vestige (1)

The UN and Hero Association officially recognized Evil Society as the number 1 most wanted djinn group. Although other groups acted more viciously, the entire world knew Evil Society because of their countless crimes across the globe. They also participated in every human-djinn war, from the artifact scramble in China to the Suwon Battle in Korea.

“Say that again.”

Evil Society’s hideout was located in an artificial cave under Russia’s Vladivostok waters. For over 40 years, technological advances transformed it into a state-of-the-art facility.

“My apologies.”

“No, don’t apologize. I said to repeat that, Silasen. You said a cheetah disturbed our plan?”

“No, it was a panther. Um, a man wearing a panther mask.”

Devils had formed Evil Society to steal artifacts. Kim Hakpyo, Evil Society’s artifact retrieval leader, desperately wanted Homer’s Ring. This ring of wisdom amplified all abilities related to magic power, so djinns would greatly benefit.

“You mean a panther that looks like this?”

Kim Hakpyo showed a sketch of the masked man according to Silasen’s description.

“...Yes. He wasn’t ordinary.”

“I know. I heard you lost a subordinate.”

“Yes, we lost Sidius. He seems to have been killed in one blow.”

“...”

Although Sidius had weak defense, even Kim Hakpyo acknowledged his swordsmanship. He was one of the organization’s rising stars, capable of handling low-intermediate rank heroes.

“He wasn’t a djinn?”

Djinns commonly killed each other.

“No, but he didn’t seem to be a hero either.”

“Then he must be a mercenary or hunter. Look into it. Of course, don’t confront him alone.”

Kim Hakpyo vowed to obtain Homer’s Ring when he heard about it from the Collector, and had no intentions of giving up.

“His weapon?”

“Yes?”

“Sidius’ magic sword, it’s expensive. Did you retrieve it?”

“Ah... no.”

Magic swords were man-made, but could display the same power as an artifact. They cost the same as low-rank artifacts at 500 million won.

“I see. That makes sense. Someone who took the ring wouldn’t have missed it.”

Kim Hakpyo accepted the reality that only a fool wouldn’t take 500 million won lying on the ground. His anger then turned to Silasen.

“By the way, why are you announcing that you’re a djinn?”

“...Yes?”

“Your goddamn appearance.”

Kim Hakpyo pointed at Silasen’s black skin and blood-red pupils.

“I’m asking why you’re revealing that you’re a goddamn djinn!”

Kim Hakpyo’s fury shook the cave. Silasen quickly reverted to a human appearance.

“M-My apologies!”

He had honestly forgotten to disguise himself. Djinns looked completely different from humans after their devil transformation. Unfortunately, Evil Society wasn’t so lenient regarding mistakes. Silasen kneeled in a hurry.

* * *

“What am I supposed to do with this?”

On Sunday night, I examined the magic sword I picked up. A spoil of war from defeating a djinn, but it was useless. I couldn’t wield magic power like ordinary people and didn’t plan to fight close range. Of course, I could anonymously sell it on Violet Banquet for a decent sum, but I felt uneasy if a djinn bought it, so I stashed it away in my drawer.

“And what do I do with this?”

Homer’s Ring looked shabby, as though it was made from mud because it hadn’t yet awakened. However, it was actually a unique artifact.

[Homer’s Ring] [Artifact] [Unawakened] A ring Homer wore in the past that contains hidden abilities.

It would have been difficult for me to awaken this artifact compared to a djinn. Fortunately, I didn't require the normal method. Instead, I just deleted the *un-* part of *unawakened* with my settings intervention.

[49 SP will be used.]

It didn't require too much SP since the normal awakening method was rather simple. You just had to imbue a certain amount of magic power, probably around 1.5 times Chae Nayun's current mana capacity.

Once I saved the setting, the surface of Homer's Ring cracked. A beautiful platinum ring appeared from beneath the dirt husk.

[Homer's Ring] [Artifact] [Awakened] A ring Homer wore in the past. It resonates with nature and will endow its wearer with energy. [Enhanced Intelligence – will increase the wearer's intelligence by 0.001 points every 24 hours up to a maximum of 0.365 points.] [High rank magic power amplification] [Camouflage]

Homer's Ring not only amplified magic power, but also increased the invariable stat intelligence. One only needed to wear it for a year to receive its maximum benefit. The maximum of 0.365 intelligence points roughly equaled 7 IQ points.

"I guess I should hold on to it for at least a year."

Homer's Ring wasn't a binding item. The intelligence I gained from it wouldn't disappear after I gave it away.

It would be inefficient to keep it forever since my source of magic power came from stigma. I couldn't equip the ring to stigma, but I tried rubbing it on my upper arm just in case.

"...What am I doing?"

I slipped it on my finger. Homer's Ring better suited Kim Suho or Chae Nayun. Chae Nayun was the best candidate with the most magic power.

“Now...”

I checked my stats for the first time in a while.

*[Strength 2.56] [Stamina 2.575] [Speed 3.250] [Perception 4.215]
[Vitality 2.665] [Magic power 1.925]*

My stats had reached a wall other than speed and perception. A wall referred to a bottleneck in growth. The first was between 2 and 3, the next was 4 to 5, 6 to 7, etc. Most individuals faced these bottlenecks after every 2 stat points, and cadets' upper limits were usually around 12 to 13.

“My magic power isn't going up at all.”

My magic power would probably stay at that level forever, but that didn't discourage me. After all, my magic power came from stigma. Next, I read some encouraging alerts.

*[You have managed to throw a difficult weapon!] [Beginner's Luck has been applied! Your wire throwing accuracy and power has increased.]
[Your gift, Master Sharpshooter, has increased to grade 6!]*

[Master Sharpshooter] [Intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving — Grade 6] [Proficiency EXP 0%]

— *Master Sharpshooter's Training: Skillfully wield all long ranged weapons.*

— *Thousand-Mile Eyes: See far away and predict a target's movement path. Has increased your speed and perception by 1 point.*

— *Bullet Time: In combat only, and once every 24 hours, spend up to 80 seconds in Bullet Time.*

— *Sharpshooter of Reversal: Deal bonus damage against a stronger opponent depending on your luck.*

Master Sharpshooter finally evolved from low-intermediate rank to intermediate. It grew faster than expected, but would exponentially

slow from here. Grade 6 to grade 5 would probably take the same amount as grade 10 to grade 6.

“I should be able to beat Chae Nayun with this.”

I was about to close the laptop when I suddenly remembered.

“...I almost forgot.”

My family, or to be more precise, Kim Chundong’s family. Kim Chundong’s past would have been one of the first and easiest settings for the co-author to modify. I immediately grew curious.

Although he was an extra in my novel, Kim Chundong would have been considered an elite for attending Cube. Furthermore, genes played an essential role in determining the potential for gifts. Therefore, Kim Chundong’s parents must not have been ordinary.

I entered Violet Banquet. *Tak, tak*. From the numerous categories, I clicked on *[detective agency]*.

[100% trustworthy information agency, Veteran.]

[Information agency, Echo. Anything you want to know is at our disposal.]

The multiple agencies displayed on banner ads weren’t the best. After all, well-known agencies didn’t need to advertise. The real deal was here.

[Private Broker Yoo Jinhyuk]

Yoo Jinhyuk was the best of the best in this field. He could find anything when it came to individuals. Naturally, his service was extremely expensive with a base price of 50 million won.

“...Oh right.”

I was about to send a request when I recalled that I was broke.

“I don’t have any money.”

I had already invested everything into stocks.

Wiing—!

Something on top of my drawer vibrated. Evandel’s Seed stood up and shook its body that it was hungry.

“I know, I know.”

I took out a bloody gauze and gave it to the seed.

* * *

[Monday 1 P.M.]

The eventful weekend passed. We resumed the incomplete exam instead of a regular class today. Cadets gathered in the same exam room as two weeks ago and busily wrote their reports while groups 14 to 25 took the exam.

Family affair...

However, Yoo Yeonha pondered over something completely irrelevant to the exam. *Family affair*. What Kim Hajin said kept bothering her.

Kim Hajin had immediately recognized Belbet, but it didn’t make sense for him to specifically know Belbet. From her research, she found out that Belbet was a conman who worked exclusively in Europe. He couldn’t have had anything to do with Kim Hajin. It made more sense to conclude that Kim Hajin memorized the face of every internationally wanted criminal.

But why...

Yoo Yeonha came up with a hypothesis after considering Kim Hajin’s strange obsession with wanted criminals. Something horrible had happened in his past, but he didn’t know the culprit. As a result, he

memorized the entire International Wanted List. Of course, this was only a hypothesis. But...

Orphan.

With another keyword, the hypothesis became more logical. Kim Hajin didn't have parents. Almost every cadet knew because Shin Jonghak's lackeys often harassed him as a parentless bastard.

So that must mean...

Kim Hajin's parents were dead. No, someone murdered them. Because of this, Kim Hajin memorized the face of every criminal and hid his power to find the culprit. It made sense. Yoo Yeonha added another phrase to her notes.

Sad past.

"Yeonha, what are you writing?"

Chae Nayun suddenly asked. She peeked at Yoo Yeonha's notes with tired eyes as though she had just woken up.

"Family affair? Orphan? Sad past?... Are you adopted?"

"Are you crazy? I'm just curious about something."

"Well, I guess you've always been curious about random stuff. You know, you always dig up things with no benefits. You're kind of a dunce. No, you *are* a dunce."

"If you're going to sleep, just keep sleeping, Nayun."

Yoo Yeonha spoke as she gritted her teeth. Chae Nayun yawned and leaned back into her chair.

"Yeah, I should."

Yoo Yeonha returned to the boundary of delusion and thought. If Kim

Hajin had such a past, she could use it to her advantage when recruiting him. It was illegal to investigate a cadet's background, but that just meant she couldn't get caught. She became convinced of recruiting Kim Hajin after the latest incident. Kim Hajin was perhaps even more valuable than Kim Suho. At least, that's what Yoo Yeonha thought.

“Hmm...”

Someone that could investigate Kim Hajin's family background. She knew only one person. If he wanted, he could even draw up the family tree of a cockroach. The only question was whether he would help her.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha turned on her smartwatch. She had avoided the number on the bottom of her contacts for the past 5 years.

[Uncle Yoo Jinhyuk]

Yoo Yeonha tightly closed her eyes and sent him a message.

Chapter 54

Vestige (2)

— *Ding*

“Ah, goddamnit!”

The smartwatch alert obscured his game screen at a crucial moment. Yoo Jinhyuk roared and shot up like a spring.

“What, you lost again?”

His secretary asked apathetically.

“No, but hey! Did you link my smartwatch with the computer?”

“No.”

“You did! I lost because of the alert!”

“It wasn’t me.”

Yoo Jinhyuk grabbed the back of his neck, feeling his blood pressure rising. That loss just cost him 50 million won.

“My life... What?”

His sullen mood disappeared when he saw the messenger’s name. It was his adorable niece, Yoo Yeonha.

“Did the sun rise from the west today? My niece just messaged me!”

If he recalled correctly, the last time they spoke was five years ago. Yoo Jinhyuk quickly checked the content.

[Uncle, I need you to look into someone's family history.]

Yoo Jinhyuk tilted his head.

“Mm? Well, that’s surprising.”

“Is it work?”

His secretary’s eyes lit up.

“No, I told you it’s from my niece.”

“So is it work?”

“...I guess it is. *Yaaawn.*”

Yoo Jinhyuk slumped onto his couch. Yoo Yeonha sent a follow-up message.

[Cube cadet, Kim Hajin.]

“Kim Hajin... Who’s that?”

“Why are you asking me?”

“Look into him. He’s a Cube cadet.”

“Is he?”

Cube enrolled at most 6000 cadets any given year. Finding someone from such a small pool would be a piece of cake. The secretary’s hands moved like lightning on her keyboard. Soon, a general overview popped up.

“He’s an orphan. He has a 300 million won debt.”

“Oh, so that’s why she said family affair. She must want to know the identity of his parents. Also, he has that much debt?”

“Yes. He also has a brokerage account, but I don’t know how much he has in it.”

“I guess I can do it for free if it’s only that,” Yoo Jinhyuk murmured as he picked his ear.

“*Sigh*, there goes my paycheck.”

The secretary complained about his lax manner.

“You’re going to get your pay. Honestly, don’t you think you’re taking too much with 20 million won per month?” Yoo Jinhyuk berated his secretary.

“That’s because I’m worth that much.”

“*Tsk.*”

Then he suddenly shot up.

“Get ready.”

“Are you really going to do it for free?”

“Yeah, I have a favor I want from hyung anyways.”

“Aha.”

The usually uptight secretary went along with Yoo Jinhyuk. He was the best in this field for a reason.

“Would it be 16 or 17 years ago? Let’s start from the day he was born.”

He could experience anyone's past.

Yoo Yeonha pouted at her smartwatch as she returned to the dorm. Three hours had passed since she messaged her uncle, but he didn't reply. Her message was marked read, so he must have ignored her.

"Why isn't he answering?"

"Who's he? Don't, don't tell me, you got a b-boyfriend?"

Chae Nayun shockingly asked from next to her. Yoo Yeonha felt Chae Nayun had become much friendlier these days and didn't know how to feel about it. Chae Nayun used to be aloof and uncaring, so Yoo Yeonha couldn't understand her present behavior.

"I'm going out with Jonghak."

"The whole world knows that's a lie."

"...Sigh. Fine, it's my uncle."

"Uncle?"

Chae Nayun turned to the side and snickered.

"You go ahead. I have to practice archery."

"Archery? Oh right, your bet with Kim Hajin is coming up."

"Yeah, I even rented an archery range. Do you want to come spectate?"

Chae Nayun thought about Kim Hajin over the weekend and concluded that she'd chastise him after winning the bet. If Kim Hajin liked her. The bow suited her best, and the way he expressed his affection was wrong.

"...Spectate?"

Yoo Yeonha pondered in interest. She couldn't see Chae Nayun winning. From her experience, Kim Hajin's confidence was always

well-founded.

“Yeah, I invited a bunch of people over.”

“Is Jonghak also going?”

“Yep.”

“...He’s going to bring more people.”

Shin Jonghak would likely bring ten or so cadets. If Kim Hajin won, Chae Nayun would be embarrassing herself in front of a crowd.

“I’ll use this opportunity to put him in his place.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha stared at Chae Nayun’s confident face. She didn’t want to miss it as she imagined Chae Nayun’s embarrassment and despair.

“I’ll come watch.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled just thinking about it. Then her smartwatch rang.

Yun Seung-Ah: [Let’s grab lunch this weekend. I want to apologize for what happened before.]

She checked her smartwatch, but frowned that it wasn’t Yoo Jinhyuk.

“Who is it now?”

Chae Nayun stopped and asked again.

“Why are you suddenly so curious?”

“I’m just wondering. Who is it? Kim Suho?”

“...Vice-leader Yun Seung-Ah.”

“Eh? Seung-Ah unni? What about her?”

Yun Seung-Ah and Chae Nayun had both been taught by the master rank hero, Yoo Sihyuk. Of course, that was in the distant past when Chae Nayun was only 8 and Yun Seung-Ah was 21.

“She wants to apologize for what happened at the masquerade party.”

“Ah, I should have gone. If only I didn’t get lost...”

“You should have swapped with me. I wanted to go to that restaurant.”

“The place Kim Hajin took me?”

Yoo Yeonha nodded with a bitter smile. Although she loved fast food, the hero’s cooking was something people would kill for.

“Now that I think about it, Kim Hajin must not be so simple if he can make a reservation there.”

“...”

Chae Nayun only just realized. Yoo Yeonha sighed in disappointment.

* * *

I went on my way as I overheard their conversation. Hearing my name surprised me, but it wasn’t anything special. Instead, I found Yun Seung-Ah eating with Yoo Yeonha to be more surprising. After all, they would fiercely compete in the future.

Someone approached me from behind. I turned around and saw a familiar face.

“Hello.”

Rachel greeted me with a slight smile.

“Ah, yes, did something happen?”

“Here. Thank you again for before.”

She handed me a small box that could barely fit a car key. I looked back and forth between the box and Rachel before taking it.

“Can I open it now?”

“Yes.”

I opened the box as soon as Rachel nodded. I felt nervous that it might be a real car key, but it was a key to Cube’s armory.

“Ah, armor?”

With this, I should be able to pick up a cloth armor of some sort.

“Yes, defensive equipment is England’s pride.”

She bowed and left to the girls’ dorm. Her actions perfectly matched my description of her. Rachel disliked talking about personal matters. I felt a royal’s grace from just the way she walked.

* * *

I returned to my room after picking up Rachel’s gift from the armory. A stylish coat emerged when I took off the plastic wrap.

“Whoa.”

It felt perfect, not too heavy or light. It wasn’t too long either, as if tailored for my height. Fashionwise, it didn’t stand out and looked discrete. Although it came with a certificate of quality, I checked its functionality with my laptop.

[Royal Black Coat – Jacket] [Partial Artifact] A coat created by the English Royal Court’s master craftsman. Patched with parts of an artifact.

*[Pinnacle Temperature Control] [Low-intermediate Defense] [Camouflage]
[Form Change: Coat ↔ Jacket]*

Defensive pieces of equipment were rarely full-fledged artifacts. Modern people found it difficult to wear complete defensive artifacts, so craftsmen often reproduced them into partial artifacts.

“This is amazing.”

England was renowned for its cloth-type defensive equipment. This item had to be worth several hundred million won. I put it on, and it perfectly fit. I sent Rachel a thank you message.

[Thank you for the coat. I love it.]

She replied immediately.

[No problem. Use it well ^^]

“She’s surprisingly good at texting, huh.”

She was usually expressionless and quiet, but...

[(∼.∼)]

She even sent emoticons.

* * *

I began attending Cube in February, and it was now May. That would be almost four months since I came to this world. Both theory classes and combat training felt like a daily routine now.

“The finals are coming up in 4 weeks.”

Kim Soohyuk announced at the end of Friday’s class. The final exams would be the last hurdle for this half of the year.

“Written exams will be the same, but combat exams will be

completely different.”

The finals were rigorous and serious, unlike the festival-like midterms.

“Everything you’ve learned until now will be tested in a single exam.”

The final exam wouldn’t be made public until much later, but I already knew.

They would drop cadets on a remote island filled with wild animals and monsters. Cadets needed to survive for a week while amassing as many points as possible. Each monster would be worth one point, and cadets could also defeat other cadets to gain points. In addition, they could freely form teams and even give points to each other.

Cadets would only find out on the day of the exam. Everyone would be dropped off on the remote island without any preparations. They would only be given two days' worth of food.

However, I would thoroughly prepare for that exam and be at a massive advantage since most wouldn’t even have basic camping equipment.

“You don’t have to worry about safety. High-intermediate to high rank heroes will be closely observing you from the shadows.”

Kim Soohyuk dismissed the class after intimidating everyone.

“Now, go back and have fun. I’ll see you on Monday.”

Cadets stood up from their seats. I also packed my stuff.

“Hey, is your practice going well? You didn’t forget, right? Our bet’s next week.”

Chae Nayun appeared out of nowhere when I was about to leave through the back door. She confidently smiled as the surrounding gazes fell on us. They watched our psychological battle with interest.

“No, I didn’t practice at all.”

“...What?”

“I can win without any practice.”

I left the room after giving her a cocky smile.

“Hey! *Grr*, that guy!”

Only a week remained until our archery battle.

* * *

My interaction with Chae Nayun was pointless as we soon met. The hunting club’s leader rented a mountain cabin and planned an overnight trip today.

“Why am I paired with you again?”

“How should I know?”

We climbed a mountain covered in white as a cold wind blew. The boundary between earth and heaven seemed faint in this snowy world. The hunting club had traveled to Norway for an overnight trip.

It would have been sheer lunacy in my previous world, but traveling between countries was extremely easy for Cube cadets thanks to portals. I was honestly excited and always wanted to visit Norway.

“You worked something out with the club leader again, didn’t you?”

“What?”

“Don’t play dumb. I know you pulled some strings to pair with me.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

A computer program chose today's pairs. Despite that, my luck must've paired us again. After all, Chae Nayun was the prettiest in the club.

"Anyways, you keep doing things behind my back, but keep it moderate."

"Worry about yourself. There are plenty of traps around here because of hunters."

I ignored Chae Nayun's nonsense and pointed below her. Chae Nayun stopped in surprise. A huge bear trap lay beneath her.

"Oh, geez. That surprised me."

A scavenger hunt took place to celebrate the club's reunion. Flags spread around the mountain with gifts written on them from the seniors who currently worked as heroes.

Whiiish—

Suddenly, a fierce wind blew a flurry of snow.

"Aah, my face feels like it's going to explode."

The wind disappeared, but Chae Nayun's face turned red from the cold.

"You cold?"

"A, a little bit. I should have brought a coat too."

"I'm not cold."

For the record, I wore the coat Rachel gifted me. I wasn't cold at all, thanks to its temperature control.

"...Did you buy a new coat?"

“Yeah, it’s amazing.”

“...”

Chae Nayun looked at me, aggrieved. Then we walked in silence. Our footsteps gently sounded as we stepped on the fluffy snow. I quite enjoyed Norway’s scenery of snowy mountains.

“Ah, over there! There’s a flag.”

Chae Nayun pointed at a nearby mountain peak. A single flag waved on the edge of a cliff.

“That must be the first place flag.”

It had to be, considering its dangerous location. Would anyone be crazy enough to climb up there?

“Hey, let’s go up.”

The person in question was right next to me.

“We don’t need to.”

I took out a roll of wire from my pocket. I didn’t make it from aether, but just normal wire I brought for support.

“You’re going to throw it and pull it out? Is that even possible?”

I tied the wire around a dagger without answering. Then I attached stigma’s magic power. Recently, I’ve been thinking about more ways to use stigma.

“*Huup!*”

I threw the dagger in full force. It flew in a straight line and passed the flag.

“*Pft.* Nice try.”

The dagger suddenly bent at a strange angle, spinning around the flag and wrapping around it. Then it returned to my hands along with the flag.

Stigma's magic power followed my will. I attached it to the dagger, so I could freely control it. I put away the wire and dagger and held up the flag.

"...N-Not bad."

Chae Nayun tried to sound unimpressed as she snatched the flag out of my hand. Then the flag shrunk to a piece of paper, which I snatched back.

"Ah."

Two lines were written in pretty handwriting.

[First place. The prize is Yun Seung-Ah's contact number. That's me! You know who I am, right? If you need any help, call me any time. I'll help you out once as long as it's something I can help with!]

"Why is Yun Seung-Ah showing up here?"

"Yun Seung-Ah? Address her more formally. Also, this is amazing."

I was extremely disappointed, but Chae Nayun seemed happy.

"You can take it then."

"What? You're giving this to me? Seung-Ah unni is the vice-leader of the number 1 ranked guild!"

"I don't need it."

I handed the paper to her without a care. After all, I already had Yun Seung-Ah's contact. Chae Nayun, who almost happily accepted it, paused with a serious face.

“No, you take it. Why give me what’s yours? I don’t need it.”

“...Uh, yeah, sure.”

Her strange attitude confused me.

Chapter 55

Bet (1)

It was 2 A.M. in Korea, but 7 P.M. in Norway. The two countries operated in different time zones, but their skies appeared equally dark. Night descended on the snowy mountain, and the hunting club concluded their event. Chae Nayun and I obtained the first and fourth place flags. First place rewarded Yun Seung-Ah's one-time coupon, and fourth place rewarded a VR gaming set worth 3 million won. The active hero seniors gave out fantastic gifts as expected. Chae Nayun and I returned to the cabin for the barbecue party. The other members greeted us with smiles.

"Wow, you got first place? I'm jealous!"

The club leader saw the flag in my hand and exclaimed. The other members also looked envious as I bitterly smiled.

"Now, let's eat."

The barbeque started as they placed the meat on the grill. It pleasantly sizzled, but these kids didn't know how to properly grill. I stepped up to volunteer.

"I'll handle the grilling. All of you can rest."

I took pride in grilling since my aunt ran a Korean bbq restaurant. It made me quite confident in my technique.

"...You're different from the rumors, huh."

A male senior said surprisingly as he handed me the tongs. I focused on grilling without talking. Knowing when to flip was the most crucial step, and it was best not to cut anything until the end. Of course, I kept my ears open as I grilled. The seniors gave everyone valuable advice.

“Be careful on your upcoming finals. It’ll be more rigorous than anything before. Don’t trust anyone.”

“Is it that difficult?”

“I’ve seen friendships ruined. Everyone will be on the edge because it affects the rankings. Also, you all know that there’s a separate class for people held back, right?”

“Ah, yes.”

“You have to be especially cautious of them. There are about 200 of them every year. They won’t stop at anything to pass since they’ll be expelled.”

Cadets from the previous year would be the source of trouble. Of the 200 repeaters, close to 20% contracted with djinns or were part of high profile organizations. The co-author might have even increased the numbers.

“Hey, um... Haejin?”

“It’s Hajin. Kim Hajin.”

“Ah, Kim Hajin. You’re a great griller! You should eat some too.”

“I’ve been eating while grilling, so I’m full.”

“Really?”

The barbeque party continued for 20 minutes. Everyone saw me favorably after my spectacular grilling.

“The original plan was to hunt at night, but let’s just rest since we’re full.”

The club leader changed his mind.

“Team 1 will use Cabin A. Team 2 will use Cabin B.”

The 18 club members split into two cabins. Chae Nayun and I were assigned Cabin A, which was surprisingly big. The first floor had three rooms and a large living space, while the second floor had six rooms. After unpacking our belongings, we met in the living room and played Mafia.

Chae Nayun was killed in the first town vote every time she became the mafia. The mafia killed her on the first or second night whenever she had important roles like the doctor or cop. She died relatively fast even as an ordinary citizen. It wasn't anyone's fault. She just simply couldn't hide her emotions.

“Ah, I haven't laughed that hard in a while.”

The game ended, and everyone went to sleep. I left the cabin and sat on a bench outside. I couldn't help but laugh as Chae Nayun's face popped up in my head. She might have cried if we pushed her a bit more. I stopped laughing as a notification came in. I turned on my laptop and saw that Truth Agency had received another request.

[There is a conman named Jerome Müller. He acted as my asset manager until he took the money and ran. Here are several pictures of his face, height, and other identifying information. Please tell me his location.]

This was the second request I had ever received. The first customer must have introduced him, judging from the German name. The Book of Truth could easily find this conman since I knew his face and identifying information. I released stigma's magic power and opened the Book of Truth. I spent nearly 80% of my magic power to find his location and slightly staggered after feeling lightheaded.

[It will cost 5,000,000 points.]

I held back from asking for 50 million. Surprisingly, I immediately received a message saying the money had been deposited. I wrote back what the Book of Truth stated, but no reply came. I closed the Book of Truth and put away my laptop. Then I looked into the distance at Norway's untouched nature. I suddenly thought of something in front of this scenic beauty. *Cigarette.*

“Ah, I stopped smoking...”

I just realized. I used to smoke half a pack daily because of stress, but smoking hadn't crossed my mind since I arrived in this world.

"You used to smoke?"

"Whoa!"

I jolted at the sudden voice.

"W-What! Where are you!?"

"Above you, idiot."

I looked up and saw Chae Nayun peeking from the second-floor window. *Since when was she there?*

"So you used to smoke? A real delinquent, huh. Do you also have tattoos?"

I flinched at her words and looked at my upper arm. Thankfully, my clothes covered the two streaks of stigma.

"What, you really have them? Let me see."

"I don't."

"Hmm."

Chae Nayun raised her eyebrows as she looked down at me. Then she looked back up into the air. It seemed she didn't see me opening the Book of Truth.

"...By the way, are you confident?"

Chae Nayun asked as she gazed at the horizon.

"Confident? About what?"

“About winning against me.”

I replied arrogantly, “What about you? Are you confident in giving up the bow if you lose?”

“That’s impossible, so it never crossed my mind.”

“Are you going to cry if you lose?”

“Do you want to cry now?”

“You almost cried today because of Mafia.”

“...Screw off.”

I felt like I won our exchange, but then I wondered what I was doing with a kid. Being around them started making me childish. I sat back on the bench and enjoyed the view. I only saw snow and evergreen trees until I looked at the sky full of stars. That was the first time I saw such a beautiful scene. Now I understood why Chae Nayun opened her window. She was looking at them too.

“Oh right, traveling club is canceled this week.”

Chae Nayun mentioned the unsurprising news. The same had occurred in the original story, where Belbet succeeded and Natasha broke up with Oh Hanhyun. However, now she broke up with him because Belbet had failed. Oh Hanhyun should be heartbroken right now.

“By the way, have you seen the news article from France?”

“News article? Is it about me?”

“Yeah, Yeonha showed me. They’re calling you the Korean Sherlock who captured the conman of the century.”

“Oh.”

“I can’t believe a delinquent who smokes and fights with me is

Sherlock.”

“Just go to sleep.”

“I was going even if you didn’t tell me!”

Tak. Chae Nayun shut her window. I also got up as my smartwatch rang. Chae Nayun sent me the link to the news article.

[Conman of the Century Captured by Korean Cadet.]

Such an article like this existed. I laughed in embarrassment as I read the translation.

[Authorities arrested Belbet in a large mansion on the outskirts of Paris. Belbet is a conman who scammed thousands of people over the past 20 years... He tried to bury his wrongdoings by faking his death, but a Cube cadet with keen insight saw through his clever methods...]

Tak. Chae Nayun opened her window again and curiously asked.

“Hey, what does a cigarette taste like?”

“...”

* * *

“Oh, man.”

Yoo Jinhyuk returned from his journey. For the past 2 days, he saw 24 hours of a person’s past. His limit was two days because he could only hold in his bowel and bladder for that long. He ran to the bathroom as soon as he woke up.

“Did you find anything?” His secretary spoke from outside the bathroom.

“Yeah, a few strange things.”

“What did you see?”

“The day he entered the orphanage. He spent 23 hours and 55 minutes in front of the orphanage door.”

Yoo Jinhyuk could move around a virtual reality of someone’s past. However, moving spent enormous amounts of magic power because of his spirit body. As such, he would always stay as still as possible.

“Some kid dropped a kid off.”

“...Huh? A kid gave birth to a kid?”

“No, the kid was too young to give birth, but I don’t know too much more. That’s where it ended. His past is strangely dense, so I’ll have to maintain my peak condition and try again.”

Pffft, pfft. Unpleasant sounds rang out from the bathroom. The secretary frowned.

“Anyways, this is looking like it’ll take a while. I don’t know if I can do it for free.”

“You have to because another request came in.” The secretary sent a message to his smartwatch. The screen displayed a familiar picture.

“What, it’s Kim Hajin again?”

It was the same picture of Kim Hajin that his niece sent.

“Yes, but look at the buyer’s rank.”

“Rank?... Red, Red Diamond?”

Red Diamond was Violet Banquet’s highest rank. Yoo Jinhyuk also held the same rank. Red Diamond members could see the ranks of other buyers and sellers. Furthermore, they could recognize each other since only a few Red Diamond members existed. Naturally, Yoo Jinhyuk knew the owner of this account.

[Requesting for this individual's background information. You are not allowed to hurt him. We will deposit 100 million points as a security deposit and an additional 500 million points when the job is done. (Contract will be canceled if the target finds out or is hurt)]

The brief request and the exorbitant amount of money they offered hinted at their identity.

“This...”

Spending 600 million won to investigate a person's background... He was certain this was the Chameleon Troupe.

Yoo Jinhyuk stared at the picture of Kim Hajin.

“There might actually be something about him.”

Yoo Jinhyuk smiled at the first exciting request in some time as he sat on the toilet.

* * *

A week passed, and the long-awaited day of my archery duel with Chae Nayun finally arrived. I would prove that I could beat her with just a month of practice.

I headed to the archery range as soon as class ended. Chae Nayun and her friends followed. She brought quite an entourage. At least 70 people, including well-known cadets like Kim Suho, Yoo Yeonha, and Shin Jonghak.

After about 15 minutes, we arrived at an archery range built on an artificial mountain.

The archery range looked similar to a shooting range, but the lanes were huge. Chae Nayun warmed up in a lane about 50 meters away.

“We'll be doing the usual. You practiced archery for the past month, right?”

I briefly responded, “No.”

“What?”

“I didn’t. Explain.”

“...”

Chae Nayun frowned.

“See that in the distance? The maximum range is 1km. We’ll start from the 100m mark and increase by 50m every time. Let me show you.”

Chae Nayun held up her bow. After clearing her throat, she shouted, “Shot!”

A target immediately rose from the 100m mark. It wobbled as if to dodge Chae Nayun’s arrow. She fired a wooden arrow when the target reached its maximum height. The arrow cleanly pierced the target with her textbook posture and textbook technique. The spectators cheered. Honestly, my jaws also slightly dropped.

“Why? Is it more difficult than you thought?”

I responded with a slight smile, “No, I just thought it was too easy.”

I held out my hand to Chae Nayun.

“What.”

“Give me your bow and arrow. I don’t have any.”

“...I thought you’d do something like this.”

Chae Nayun growled and looked behind her. Immediately, some guy ran up and handed her a bow and a quiver full of arrows.

“Take it.”

“Thanks.”

I set the quiver down and examined the bow first.

“You ready?”

“Wait.”

This was the first time I touched a bow. I couldn't rent from Cube without paying. Thankfully, this traditional bow would be easier to use. I tried pulling on the string and nocking an arrow.

“Is this how you shoot?”

My gift couldn't do anything about my posture.

“...”

Chae Nayun dumbfoundedly stared at me. I meekly laughed and muttered, “I'm kidding. I'm ready. Let's go. Start.”

I could just copy Chae Nayun's posture. She clicked her tongue and turned towards her target. Then she loudly shouted, “Start!”

Her voice echoed with confidence.

Chapter 56

Bet (2)

“You have three lives. Whoever hits the farthest target wins.”

Our duel followed the general archery competition rules. I had seen heroes compete in archery on TV. Of course, they included additional effects like earthquakes and whatnot.

“Am I going first?” Chae Nayun asked.

“Yeah.”

“Alright. Let’s start at 200 meters since 100 meters is too easy.”

Chae Nayun nocked an arrow and pulled the bowstring. She stared at the 200 meter mark where the target would rise.

“Shot!”

The target sprung up from the right side. Chae Nayun turned her bow 60 degrees to the right and easily hit the target.

“It’s your turn.”

Chae Nayun crossed her arms and arrogantly looked over. I clumsily copied her posture by spreading my feet apart and shifting my center of gravity. Then I grabbed the bow and nocked an arrow. *Was it voice recognition?*

“Shot?”

I muttered, and a target sprung up. Startled, I released the bowstring. Naturally, the arrow missed way off its mark.

“Pfft. Puhaha.”

Chae Nayun laughed as she grabbed her stomach and pointed at me.

“Did you really not practice? Do you want to start over from the 100 meter mark?”

I shook my head.

“It’s a handicap.”

Although I failed once, I felt how to position myself now. Chae Nayun had a textbook posture, but I didn’t need the same. Textbook postures only applied in perfect conditions. You couldn’t become an expert with just textbook material. It was only the minimum requirement, but my gift made me a natural master.

“I have to go again, right?”

“Yeah, yeah. You only have two lives left.”

I nodded and stood tall. I didn’t need to aim beforehand since the target moved anyways.

“Shot.”

The target sprung up. I predicted its trajectory and fired so that I would narrowly miss. The arrow grazed its target.

“...Is this a joke?”

I put on a show, but Chae Nayun seemed to have lost interest. The spectators also started calling me a big-mouthed fool desperate for attention. Missing twice in a row took it too far.

“I got the hang of it now.”

“Yeah right.”

“I’m going again.”

I quickly muttered.

“Shot.”

I fired the moment the target rose to about 2 meters. My arrow flew through the air and perfectly pierced it.

“Oh...?”

Chae Nayun seemed surprised at how quickly I fired. The spectators also reacted the same. I gestured at Chae Nayun with a leisurely smile.

“You’re up. No pressure.”

“...I guess you did practice.”

The distance increased to 250 meters. Chae Nayun stared ahead as she drew her bowstring.

“Shot!”

The target zigzagged through the air. Chae Nayun fired after a slight pause, and her arrow effortlessly pierced the center.

“You’re up next.”

Our back and forth felt extremely boring. We took turns firing and hitting our targets. However, the spectators didn’t feel the same as they watched in excitement.

We progressed from 300 meters, 350 meters, 400 meters, 450 meters... The distance increased until we reached 500 meters. The target could hardly be seen.

“...”

Chae Nayun’s arms nervously trembled. She would soon self-destruct

as her personality didn't suit a sharpshooter. She lacked patience and easily grew angry. She wouldn't do well in a close competition.

"Shot."

Chae Nayun took a deep breath and fired.

"...Ah."

However, her arrow brushed past the target. She missed for the first time, and I could tell that shook her up.

"Shot."

She succeeded on her next attempt with two lives left and sighed in relief.

"*Whew...*"

Chae Nayun wouldn't be able to surpass 600 meters. I pressured her by shouting as soon as she finished.

"Shot."

I fired immediately, and the arrow perfectly pierced the center. Chae Nayun raised her bow again with a dark expression, but I interrupted her.

"Since we're at the halfway mark, I'll go first."

I held up my bow and nocked another arrow before she could agree.

"Shot."

The target sprung up from the 550 meter mark, but I could see the birdlike doll as if it was only a meter away. My eyes could also predict its path. I fired at the doll's silhouette after calculating for the speed of my arrow. Just like before, my arrow perfectly pierced the target.

“You’re next.”

Chae Nayun, who stared in a daze, suddenly flinched. Her lips dried, and she swallowed hard before silently raising her bow.

“You know it too, right?”

I provoked her before she could fire. Simply put, I trash-talked her to throw her off.

“You suck at using the bow.”

Chae Nayun glared at me. Honestly, hitting a target 550 meters away without magic power was commendable since wooden arrows couldn’t ignore air resistance. However, Chae Nayun wouldn’t settle for just commendable. She wouldn’t accomplish her goal by being decent.

“But why...”

“Shot!”

Chae Nayun cut me off. She gritted her teeth and fired. However, impatient archers never hit their mark. Chae Nayun’s arrow flew past the target.

“But why do you insist on using the bow? I grew curious, so I thought about it.”

“Shut up!”

Chae Nayun shouted in frustration.

“Shot!”

She concentrated as much as she could and fired. Thankfully, she managed to hit the target. I shouted without giving her a chance to rest.

“Shot!”

My target sprung up before the remnants of Chae Nayun's could even hit the ground. I fired and instantly destroyed the target. I didn't feel any pressure, but Chae Nayun's face began to pale. I continued what I was saying.

"Deep inside, you know it too. You're more talented with swords."

Yoo Sihyuk didn't take her as a disciple on a whim. As a master rank hero, he could care less about anyone's background. He only considered talent when choosing his disciples. Chae Nayun was one of the so-called children of Yoo Sihyuk.

"I said shut up!"

Chae Nayun shouted in rage. I raised my bow at the 600 meter mark. Without magic arrows, the maximum range for our light bows could only reach 1.4 kilometers. Although the 600 meter mark didn't even reach half of that, 1.4 kilometers was simply the maximum. Realistically, even professional archers could only hit at half that distance with 50% accuracy. In addition, our targets moved and flew through the air. Chae Nayun could simply not hit a target at this range.

"You're scared. You're scared of fighting with a sword and being drenched in blood."

She was the same in the original story. Her mother's murder traumatized her, and her trauma should have grown even worse in this timeline because of her older brother.

"That's why you justify it to yourself every day that you're just as talented with the bow. That you can still become the greatest hero."

I took a moment to breathe.

"But with a bow, you won't be able to kill a single djinn, much less avenge your older brother."

That was the final blow. *Tak*. Chae Nayun released her bowstring. Her arrow flew through emptiness and marked her third failure. She lost.

“What did you just say...”

Chae Nayun glared at me, full of rage. I could see blood dripping from her hands as she clenched her bow.

“You should use a sword with that strength.”

I stared into the distance. Then I shouted, “Shot!”

Not once, not twice, but thrice to 600 meters, 650 meters, 700 meters. Three targets rose in quick succession. I rapidly fired and pierced every target. I didn’t stop there. I wanted to know the limit of Master Sharpshooter’s grade 6. Since Chae Nayun lost, I kept shooting by myself to 750 meters, 800 meters... The atmosphere grew heavy as the distance increased, and Chae Nayun’s breathing filled with anger and defeat.

“I’ll stop here at 900 meters.”

I gave up since I felt like the 900 meter mark was my limit. I didn’t want to try and fail at 950.

“Your 550 meters vs. my 900 meters. I win, right?”

I stared at Chae Nayun. Her eyes had watered up before I noticed. Chae Nayun couldn’t win against her anger. Normally, she would have jumped at me when I mentioned her older brother, but she probably didn’t want to make a fuss after losing.

“I got lucky.”

I grinned and extended my hand towards Chae Nayun. Her face distorted, and she refused.

“What do you want.”

Chae Nayun briefly muttered. Unexpectedly, she accepted her loss. I smiled.

“Nothing. I want nothing.”

If I forced her to give up the bow, she would do so in frustration and regret. She would never reach the apex of swordsmanship if she didn't freely choose. I knew she could overcome her fear and trauma. She always grew through frustration, defeat, and anger. That shouldn't have changed.

“I want you to think for yourself. What is your gift and talent?”

I said so as I brushed my hair. I sweated quite a bit from all the focus. Then I remembered that the bow in my hands belonged to her.

“Oh, and I'll take this bow.”

Even the cheapest one cost millions of won. I had to save money when I could. Chae Nayun didn't seem to mind, or she might not have even heard. Her shoulders slightly trembled, and she quietly cried. I turned around and left the eerily silent archery range.

* * *

On the highest floor of Seoul's 5 star hotel...

“Boss, are you really going? You don't have to, you know.”

Jain worriedly asked in front of a fancy table in the penthouse.

“I am.”

Boss nodded.

“I'll examine him myself.”

“*Sigh*. You're obsessed about something again.”

Boss sounded very adamant. Jain released her magic power without a choice. It covered Boss' face and formed a new one on top. Jain could use her gift on someone else as long as they remained within 10

kilometers. She changed Boss' face and physique to a certain cadet.

"So, do we just wait somewhere under the sea?"

Jain murmured as she studied Boss' expression.

"Jain, are you scared?"

"No, I'm not scared. It's just that... you know, Yun Seung-Ah, that crazy bitch might come."

Yun Seung-Ah and Jain resembled a cat and dog. Jain wasn't confident if Yun Seung-Ah appeared as an exam overseer. She wasn't confident in letting her live.

"I lost that ring because of her. If I see her again, I don't think I can hold back."

Boss stared at Jain before nodding.

"Then just wait somewhere nearby."

"Okay. Ah, and here. It's the details for Boss' disguise. At least glance over it."

Jain gave Boss a thick stack of paper. She could copy her target's outer appearance and their habits, but the latter only applied to herself. Boss looked over the document containing the cadet's information.

"You're good at acting, right Boss?"

"Of course."

"...Okay."

Three weeks remained until the final exam.

Chapter 57

Bet (3)

The spectators applauded when Chae Nayun easily struck the target at 200 meters. Everyone felt she was an amazing archer, including Kim Suho. He looked around at the ten or so student archers that came to watch.

“Chae Nayun’s posture is so good.”

“She’s been doing it for a long time.”

“Yeah, but still, how can it be so perfect?”

They commented while Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yoo Yeonha, and Yi Yeonghan naturally listened to their explanations. Then Kim Hajin fired and missed by a mile.

“The hell... His posture is completely off.”

Kim Suho listened as he watched the duel. Kim Hajin fired a second time and missed again.

“Maybe he really didn’t practice.”

“No, he changed his bow’s direction at the last second. He missed on purpose.”

“Huh? Why would he do that?”

“I don’t know.”

Then Kim Hajin fired his third arrow and perfectly hit the target.

“See? He missed his second shot on purpose.”

“Okay, but why?”

“Fuck man, I don’t know!”

Kim Suho continued to watch.

“I’ve never seen him before at the archery range.”

One of the cadets muttered. Two facilities existed for sharpshooters, the shooting range and the archery range. The shooting range required magic power, while the archery range served traditional purposes. Most first year sharpshooters knew each other because they could only use certain ranges.

“Have you seen him?”

“No, I haven’t.”

“Maybe he comes after midnight?”

“No, that’s when I’m here, from midnight to 3, and I’ve never seen him.”

Kim Suho was speechless. *Did Kim Hajin really not practice?* However, Kim Hajin’s archery seemed too sharp and accurate. His arrows shot after the targets like a starving wild beast.

Soon, the archers began to compare their practice hours to solve this mystery. They stopped talking when the distance reached 400 meters. Kim Hajin had performed beyond their expectations. One of the cadets muttered in a daze.

“My record is 450 meters...”

Kim Hajin easily surpassed the 450 meter mark. The noisy crowd began to quiet down, and sounds of hard swallowing followed.

“Ah, Chae Nayun missed.”

Chae Nayun missed for the first time at 500 meters, but Kim Hajin easily succeeded like before. The same occurred at 550 meters. Kim Suho realized Chae Nayun would lose when she failed the second time. Now, they shot at 600 meters away. Kim Suho saw Kim Hajin saying something, but he couldn't hear. Curious, he focused his magic power on his ears.

— But with a bow, you won't be able to kill a single djinn, much less avenge your older brother.

Kim Suho frowned.

“What is he...”

Perhaps because of what he said, Chae Nayun failed again at the 600 meter mark. She fiercely glared at him, but Kim Hajin ignored her and concentrated on shooting.

“Whoa, what the hell!?”

The other archers exclaimed in shock as Kim Hajin shot down three targets at 600 meters, 650 meters, and 700 meters. Kim Hajin's technique looked like a form of art, but he appeared unsatisfied and continued. Kim Suho watched him with mixed feelings.

Yoo Yeonha also observed Kim Hajin perform as expected. However, she felt he only showed a fraction of his real power and couldn't help but wonder how much he hid.

“...What is he?”

“I don't know.”

“It must be a specialized gift.”

A nameless archer threw out an idea. Yoo Yeonha strained her ears at the words, *specialized gift*. It referred to a gift that specialized in a particular role. Although it wasn't showy like Kim Suho's or Shin

Jonghak's, specialized gifts stood at the peak of their fields. Furthermore, most of these rare individuals usually had an additional gift.

"Then there's no way Chae Nayun can beat him in pure archery. Not unless she uses magic power."

"Kim Hajin also uses a gun. They said his gift was the greatest gun-related gift."

"Maybe his specialized gift is for bows, and his other gift is for guns."

"Wow, then imagine if they were both for the bow."

"That wouldn't be fair. If that were the case, he would be in the same league as Jin Seyeon."

The archers nodded in agreement. For the record, Jin Seyeon was one of Korea's master rank heroes, the Divine Archer.

Kim Hajin turned around after hitting the 900 meter target. The archers suddenly froze as he faced them.

"..."

Dead silence followed as Kim Hajin walked past the crowd of spectators. Kim Suho made eye contact as Kim Hajin remained expressionless. Soon, Kim Hajin passed him by, and Kim Suho stared at Chae Nayun alone in the huge lane. Then he began to walk towards her.

"Nayun."

Chae Nayun's body jolted. Kim Suho stood an appropriate distance and picked out words to comfort her.

"Um, I heard from the other archers. It seems Kim Hajin has a specialized—"

“It’s fine.”

Chae Nayun interrupted him.

“I’m... I’m not in the mood to talk. And specialized gift or not, that means there’s a difference in talent.”

“Nayun, don’t be so hard on yourself.”

“Just leave.”

Chae Nayun refused to turn around the entire time.

“...Okay.”

Kim Suho helplessly returned when he caught sight of another person smiling at him.

“Haha, you should know your place. Move over.”

Shin Jonghak sneered and walked towards Chae Nayun. However, Yoo Yeonha lightly grabbed Shin Jonghak’s sleeve and held him back.

“Jonghak, I think you should leave her alone for now.”

“No, I’m different.”

He confidently walked up to Chae Nayun despite Yoo Yeonha’s warning.

“Chae Nayun, I think you’re...”

“I SAID LEAVE!”

Chae Nayun’s roar startled Shin Jonghak.

“C-Chae Nayun? I’m not Kim Suho, I’m Shin Jonghak...”

Somewhat dazed, he placed his hand on her shoulder. She immediately smacked it away.

“I SAID LEAVE! SCREW OFF!”

“...Eh? Uh, um... uh, yeah.”

Shin Jonghak staggered back as though he just lost his soul.

“Didn’t I tell you?”

“...”

Chae Nayun ran into the forest as Shin Jonghak returned to Yoo Yeonha with a devastated face. Yoo Yeonha watched her leave with a grin. She felt happy seeing Chae Nayun get stomped.

However, her cold reasoning had already calculated a plan despite her emotions. The most effective way of establishing a connection was to help someone when they were down.

Chae Nayun held a grade 1 priority in Yoo Yeonha’s connection list. Not only was Chae Nayun a chaebol, but her conglomerate family didn’t run any guilds. In other words, Yoo Yeonha could recruit Chae Nayun into her guild in the future.

“Don’t worry. I’ll talk to her.”

Yoo Yeonha ran after Chae Nayun.

* * *

She discovered Chae Nayun behind a bush with her face buried between her knees. Her body quivered up and down.

“Nayun?”

She trembled, but didn’t respond. Yoo Yeonha quietly sat next to her, and Chae Nayun waddled to the side in response.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha didn't say anything. She only occasionally signaled to Chae Nayun that she was still there, patiently waiting. She waited for a fairly long time as the wind blew, leaves fell, and the sky grew dark. After about 30 minutes, Chae Nayun raised her head and wiped her tears.

“Yoo Yeonha.”

She called for Yoo Yeonha, who responded with a tender voice.

“Yeah?”

Chae Nayun spoke within the forest's silence.

“Did you guys... not hear him?”

“Hear what?”

“He... mentioned my older brother.”

“...Really? We were too far.”

Yoo Yeonha was genuinely surprised. To Chae Nayun, her older brother was a line no one could cross, the reverse scale of a dragon that shouldn't be touched. Every cadet took special care not to mention him.

“Yeah, that bastard... *Haa*, that was the second time.”

Chae Nayun couldn't even continue her sentence. She burned from a mixture of embarrassment and rage. She wanted to let it out, chase after him, and beat him. However, she had no strength left after he thoroughly crushed her.

“*Mmm...*”

Yoo Yeonha scratched her neck at the sight of Chae Nayun. Things got

more complicated than she anticipated. Yoo Yeonha disliked Chae Nayun, but she also wanted to make her an ally. However, the same could be said for Kim Hajin, and he even saved her life. Rather than choosing sides, the best she could do was mend their relationship. Of course, she also wondered why Kim Hajin would say that.

“Haa.”

Yoo Yeonha sighed and contemplated what to say. She thought up a good idea exactly three minutes later. *Cough*. Yoo Yeonha spoke after clearing her throat.

“...It’s understandable.”

“What?”

“Your older brother is still alive.”

“...Are you crazy?”

Chae Nayun glared at Yoo Yeonha as though she was about to strangle her. However, Yoo Yeonha calmly received her anger and continued.

“Did you know? People feel a sense of kinship with others who share similar wounds.”

The leaves shook. Chae Nayun looked confused as Yoo Yeonha continued.

“But when the depths of those wounds are different, if someone who should feel less pain is crying louder, the person with the deeper wound might find it unsightly.”

Yoo Yeonha recalled the message she received from Yoo Jinhyuk three days ago.

[It’ll take longer to look into him. Just know this, there’s definitely something about Kim Hajin.]

There's definitely something about Kim Hajin. Yoo Yeonha was sure of her hypothesis from this meaningful sentence. Someone had murdered Kim Hajin's parents, and Kim Hajin was searching for that person or group.

"What are you talking about? I..."

"That person, he's an orphan. Probably because of a reason similar to yours."

"...What?"

Chae Nayun's eyes widened. Yoo Yeonha expected such a reaction. Chae Nayun never cared about anyone else's past. It served as a defensive mechanism since if she dug up their past, they could dig up hers.

"Don't you know that others harassed him about it?"

Chae Nayun looked utterly oblivious. She couldn't imagine it in the first place. From her perspective, people who made fun of others without parents didn't exist. Chae Nayun swallowed hard and asked again.

"He endured it?"

"That's the only thing you're curious about?"

Yoo Yeonha frowned as though she was tired.

"Kim Hajin was being harassed because of you. Because you told Jonghak."

"T-That's..."

"Nayun."

Yoo Yeonha collected her breath before continuing.

“You’re not the only one with a painful past.”

Chae Nayun’s face turned blank. She recalled mentioning what he said about her older brother to Shin Jonghak. Then the harassment and nasty rumors about Kim Hajin began. She was the source, yet she didn’t try to stop it. On the contrary, she purposely ignored it and couldn’t deny that. Still, she didn’t expect those delinquents would dig up his past.

“*C-Cough.*”

Yoo Yeonha held back her laughter at Chae Nayun’s ridiculous face by clearing her throat. This seemed like enough. Investing any more time and emotion didn’t suit her.

“Then I’m leaving. I’m only a third party, after all. You can think it through yourself, Nayun.”

Yoo Yeonha gently stroked her shoulder and left.

“...Uh, yeah.”

Chae Nayun’s voice sounded much weaker than before. Yoo Yeonha felt like she gained points from both of them. Satisfied, she went back with a light heart.

“...”

Chae Nayun remained all alone in the vast, silent forest. She blankly stared into the distance. *Chwaaaaa*— From the darkness, a calm wind blew and brushed against the leaves. Chae Nayun self-reflected as she watched the leaves shake and fall.

* * *

“Haha, you sure got big.”

I looked at Evandel’s seed with a big grin. It acted surprisingly cute in the way it quivered to absorb blood.

I already knew what the seed would look like once it hatched. At first, she would look like a 3 to 4 year old child, but Evandel was an extraordinary witch. She could easily transform into a cat or a dog.

“Should I go with a cat? Or a dog?”

I worried because raising a child at Cube was absolutely not allowed. However, Cube allowed pets and encouraged them as they could help with mental health. Cube even had a pet adoption center.

“When will you hatch?”

I gently rubbed the seed’s belly. It quivered, almost as if it was ticklish.

“Haha, you’re so cute.”

I suddenly remembered Mong, the dog I used to own. He only liked Mom and Dad, but I missed everyone from Earth at this point. Suddenly, an alert popped up on my laptop on the desk.

[You have obtained 253 SP.] [An incredible luck has been applied to your relationship!] [Narrow Escape from Death (2/9) – A special stat, accumulation of luck, has partly unlocked!]

“What’s this?”

I couldn’t understand the alert.

Chapter 58

Change

In Dorm 4's penthouse, Chae Nayun lay in bed on a Sunday. Classes would resume tomorrow.

"Haaa..."

She sighed about tomorrow. Fear overcame her as it should have already spread that Kim Hajin completely overwhelmed her. Some would feel elated, while others would worry. Chae Nayun rather they felt embarrassed for her than worry or sympathize.

However, what bugged her most was Kim Hajin himself.

"Smoking..."

Chae Nayun recalled her conversation with Kim Hajin in Norway. He had murmured that he quit smoking. She thought he just pretended to act cool, but now she somewhat understood. He must've used it to relieve the pain.

Chae Nayun fell flat on her bed. She found ample evidence of Shin Jonghak's lackeys harassing Kim Hajin. They posted on forums and commented on social media. She looked through all of it and could hardly stomach it. Embarrassment, shame, and remorse tangled up inside her into a complicated emotion.

Kim Hajin had changed weapons and positions first. She read that he was initially a swordsman. Even so, he gave up the sword because of his gift.

He had abandoned everything and chose an unorthodox weapon like a gun. Chae Nayun wondered what he must have felt.

She reached below her bed and took out a big suitcase. Then she got up and opened it. Immediately, her treasured memories resurfaced.

The suitcase contained hundreds of pictures. She had buried them deep inside her heart, but she could never forget those moments with her most beloved people. Her mother and older brother happily smiled with her in the pictures. She teared up from simply looking at her younger self, who seemed so happy.

“*Huup.*”

Chae Nayun held back her tears. Then she picked up the short sword in the suitcase. It only measured about a meter long, but was enchanted with special magic that could increase its length. The maximum height was about 4 meters from what she recalled. Yoo Sihyuk had gifted her this mystical sword eight years ago. She held it in her hands for the first time in a long time. Although it looked like a toy, it was a deadly weapon that felt heavier than the world when she was young.

“What was my limit again? My magic power control wasn’t good when I was 8, but it was around 2 meters?”

Chae Nayun imbued the sword with her magic power. The blade shot up to the ceiling.

“Wow... I grew a lot.”

Chae Nayun stared at the sword for a long time and realized the obvious. She enveloped it with her blue magic power just like her master taught her. *Jiing*. The sword resonated with her magic power and manifested sword qi.

“...”

Chae Nayun rested her forehead against the sword and closed her eyes. She engraved the sensation of the cold metal and the ringing of magic power in her heart.

I had a meeting with Cube's faculty on Sunday because of something called a specialized gift. The rumor that I defeated Chae Nayun and hit the 900 meter mark already spread across Cube. They asked whether it was true, and I nodded after some thought. Then they asked whether I wanted to release the information publicly or keep it secret. I chose the latter. Honestly, it didn't matter since it would be revealed anyway. The only difference was that the latter made me a product. If someone wanted information about me, they would have to purchase it from Cube. Of course, since rumors had already spread, they would only be paying for confirmation.

I left the administration building after the meeting. Hardly anyone roamed around because of final exams in two weeks. Instead, everyone either studied at the library or trained at the fitness center.

I returned to my room and sat on the couch with my laptop. I needed to buy numerous things for the upcoming exam.

[Automatic Tent] [Porkchops] [Chicken Breast] [Frying Pan] [Portable Grill]...

I put every camping equipment I could think of into the shopping cart. It cost me two million won, but I didn't hesitate. Instructors would check our bags before the final exam for personal weapons and defensive equipment. However, they permitted the items I had just bought. If asked, I had more than enough excuses. I could just say I prepared everything in case.

[Your purchase has been completed.]

Park Soohyuk also sent me a message after the confirmation.

[Hajin, we made our website. Take a look. You're on our list of investors.]

[wmw.shagency.com]

"Oh?"

I went to the agency website.

[Cultivation of Trust – SH Agency] [SH Agency Introduction] [List of Investors] [List of Affiliated Hunters]

The design looked decent. Was the list of affiliated hunters just blank? I snickered as I clicked on it.

[Jamie King] [Date of birth: 08/03/1997] A hunter with 5 years of experience.

[Joshua] [Date of birth: 09/01/2005] A hunter with 1 year of experience.

“Oh, there actually are some?”

Surprisingly, he had recruited two other hunters. I clicked on the list of investors, and a particular name pleasantly surprised me. I thought I would be the only one.

[Kim Hajin.] [Yoo Yeonha.]

She acted fast as expected. I closed the laptop with a grin.

[How's the website?]

[It's nice and clean, but I think you should put Yoo Yeonha's name before mine on the list of investors.]

She cared about such things even if she might not act like it.

[Why? I don't care, but shouldn't you come first? You know, both alphabetically and by who came first.]

[No, just do as I say.]

If left unchanged, the number of future investments could decrease.

* * *

The next day.

“Huuu.”

I collected my breath outside the classroom. I felt incredibly nervous since the archery duel had about 70 spectators. It would be strange if anyone didn't know what happened after two days.

I felt somewhat apprehensive, but opened the door and entered. Everyone immediately looked at me, and I could hear them murmuring. I ignored whatever they said and sat at my usual spot. Chae Nayun wasn't here yet.

“...?”

I thought she wasn't, but heard her familiar voice. I turned and saw Chae Nayun, slightly different from her usual self. Her long brown hair, which reached her chest, had been cut to her shoulders. She whispered with Yoo Yeonha.

“So how's the short hair? You look good.”

“Hair is hair. I do like that it's less hot. You should also cut your hair.”

“I like mine the way it is. By the way, you didn't cut your hair because of the bet, right?”

“I cut it because it was hot. Plus, you can't always win. Do I look like someone who would dwell on the past?”

She seemed the same other than her short hair. Chae Nayun stretched and turned her head sideways. I quickly buried my face into the desk.

* * *

Chae Nayun pretended to stretch and peeked at Kim Hajin. He had just arrived, but was already diligently studying.

“Kuu, I'm tired.”

Chae Nayun faced forward.

“Oh right, did you study?”

Shin Jonghak, who sat behind her, asked. Chae Nayun simply replied.

“I did enough.”

Theory classes only played a minor role in Cube. Combat exams and written exams had a 7:3 ratio on grades. Those who ranked near the top in combat exams usually scored similarly in written exams, although exceptions existed.

“Enough? Then you should be around rank 600 again, hahaha.”

Shin Jonghak made fun of her since she looked fine, but Chae Nayun was just pretending.

“...”

She fiercely glared at him. Shin Jonghak stopped snickering and awkwardly backed off.

“Oh right, here are the phenomenon realm analysis notes you asked about yesterday.”

Kim Suho changed the topic in a hurry.

“Thanks. I’ll quickly copy and return it.”

“Don’t expect too much. Phenomenon realm analysis is difficult for everyone except Kim Ha...”

Kim Suho suddenly realized he had made a mistake.

“You’re right. It’s difficult for everyone except Kim Hajin. It’s fine, geez. You don’t have to be so careful.”

Chae Nayun shook her head and placed Kim Suho’s notebook in front of her. Although Yoo Yeonha studied better than Kim Suho, Chae Nayun couldn’t rely on her. In reality, Yoo Yeonha had two notebooks

because she didn't want to lend her real one to Chae Nayun.

Drrrrrk—

The theory professor walked in.

“Now, now, quiet down. You know exams are in two weeks, right? It'll cover everything up to aurora reaction.”

The noisy classroom quieted down. The professor went over the material on the test before beginning the day's class. Chae Nayun opened her notebook and grabbed her pen.

I'll study hard today and show that I'm different from before... but I'm a bit sleepy... this is the professor's fault...

She needed to copy down a ton of material after dozing off.

“Alright, here's your favorite type of calculation problem. I know some of you don't understand why you need to learn this, but once you go out into the real world and enter dungeons, you'll thank me on your knees. So don't slack off now if you don't want to cry tears of blood later.”

The professor finished explaining the theoretical concepts and moved on to example problems. Unfortunately, Chae Nayun couldn't understand any of it.

“For this problem, I would like a helper. Let's see...”

The professor paused and looked over the cadets. Chae Nayun grew nervous that he might call her. The archery duel had already embarrassed her to death. She couldn't handle being embarrassed again.

“Ah. Cadet Kim Hajin. Please come out.”

Thankfully, he didn't pick Chae Nayun. Kim Hajin stood up from his seat and strolled to the podium as everyone looked at him. Then he received a hologram pen from the professor and effortlessly solved the

problem. His procedures and calculations appeared flawless. Even his penmanship looked impeccable. Chae Nayun stared at the variables and numbers he wrote. Then she snapped out of her daze and began to copy everything down.

“Good. Very good.”

The professor applauded as Kim Hajin finished. Everyone else busily copied what he wrote.

“Perfect. As expected of rank 1 in the world. You can take a seat now. I’ll explain.”

Rank 1 in the world? Kim Hajin tilted his head in confusion, but returned without further questions.

“Look everyone. This is what we call a perfect, model answer.”

The professor gathered everyone’s attention. This time, Chae Nayun also paid attention with wide eyes.

* * *

I went to the shooting range on Monday at 10 P.M. after working out at the fitness center. I cranked up the difficulty to stage 10, where the targets also attacked. Faint shouting came through the walls as I practiced. *Huap! Hiyaap!* Something like that. Curious, I peeked through the walls.

“...Hmm?”

Chae Nayun brandished a sword against a dummy in the shooting room next to me. It looked strange seeing someone with a sword at the shooting range, but I felt good about it. In the original story, Chae Nayun switched to a sword about a year after she graduated from Cube because of the Genghis Khan artifact scramble in Mongolia. She had encountered the djinn who killed her mother, but couldn’t kill him with her bow.

She would become a monster if she started honing her swordsmanship

now. She'd be second only to Kim Suho by graduation. Feeling pleased with myself, I stretched and ended today's practice. As I left, the door next to me also opened. Chae Nayun walked out as she wiped her sweat. We both froze.

“...”

“...”

Honestly, I felt sorry about what I said to her. Although I had good intentions, I still hit her nerve twice. I spoke first before she could attack me.

“D-Did you finish your archery practice?”

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah.”

Chae Nayun awkwardly replied.

“W-What, I can't?”

“No, keep up the good work.”

I wanted to end the conversation and leave, but Chae Nayun stopped me.

“Hey.”

“...”

I was a bit scared, but turned around and faced her.

“What.”

“You, um... said you quit smoking.”

“What?”

Her unexpected words caught me off guard. Indeed, I did say that during our Norway trip. Chae Nayun had overheard me muttering to myself.

“I did.”

“...How did you quit?”

It sounded completely irrelevant. Was she trying to offer me a poisoned cigarette?

“You don’t need to know.”

I didn’t have an answer, so I cut her off and left. I could feel her gaze behind me.

Chapter 59

Final Exam (1)

A week before the final written exams. *Tiiring— Tiiring—* I received two messages on my smartwatch while playing a VR game.

[Hajin, do you have plans to sell a study guide?]

[Hajin, this is Yeonji. Can you lend me your notes? ㅌㅌ I'll pay you back with ranking points when we become heroes ㅌㅌㅌㅌ Pleaaaaaase? ㅌㅌㅌ ㅌ]

Cadets started acting desperate as strangers messaged me. They spoke behind my back, calling me a delinquent, so I didn't intend to help anyone. Who was Yeonji anyway?

“Yeah, no.”

I blocked them, but another message came.

“What now...”

My frown immediately disappeared. It came from Rachel.

[Um, can you perhaps help me with this problem ㅠ.ㅠ? It's a calculation problem, but it's too hard... :'(]

Rachel sent a picture of the problem.

“...”

I quietly worked on it.

Four days before the written exams, Yoo Yeonha worked on a talent report late into the night. She wore round glasses with a spelling checker and increased recovery for her eyes.

[Kim Hajin] [Physical] ★★★★★☆ – ★★★★★☆ [Intelligence]
★★★★★ [Utility] ★★★★★★ [Potential] ★★★★★★ [Gift] ???

Evaluation – Grade 1 — He is hiding his power for some reason, but his strength surpasses the level of cadets. — His gift has yet to be revealed, but is estimated to be at least four stars.

[Kim Suho] [Physical] ★★★★★☆ [Intelligence] ★★★★★☆ [Utility]
★★★★★ [Potential] ★★★★★★ [Gift] ★★★★★★

Evaluation – Grade 1 — His gift, Sword Saint, is more than enough to give him full points. — His elegant swordsmanship is well known among cadets. — Although not as much as Kim Hajin, he has the potential to reach the pinnacle of heroes...

“Auuuu, I’m exhausted.”

Yoo Yeonha set her glasses down. She spent five hours writing this report that quantified the ability of seven cadets, including Kim Hajin and Kim Suho. It provided around 200 pages of data and contained secret information. She sent the top-secret document to Essence of the Strait’s guild leader, Yoo Jinwoong.

Yoo Yeonha prioritized the report over her grades. Of course, good grades weren’t bad, but Yoo Yeonha didn’t aim to become the greatest hero. She knew her limits and understood that a hero was only one individual. No matter how strong, they would never win against society. However, Yoo Yeonha wanted to cultivate a new society in Korea. She entered Cube solely to obtain a hero status and make connections.

“Is he going to continue ignoring me?”

Yoo Yeonha grumbled as she picked up her smartwatch. Yoo Jinhyuk hadn’t replied back.

The Chameleon Troupe's Boss collected her breath in front of an unfamiliar door three days before the written exams on Friday.

— Boss, no one will notice your disguise, so don't worry. Remember, your name is Seo Ijin. Find me in the infirmary if anything happens.

Jain's voice sounded in her ears. Her disguise looked perfect. The cadet named Seo Ijin had a similar build and hair color, so her disguise didn't take much magic power either.

— Go in.

Boss nodded and opened the door. Cadets filled the room because the class would begin soon. She had already memorized everyone's faces. Then she walked to the group that Seo Ijin often hung out with. Suddenly...

"Hey! Seo Ijin!"

Someone struck her head. She didn't suffer any injury, but fell in a daze. She thought about what just happened and stiffly turned. A boy she didn't recognize spoke to her.

"Did you study well?"

He looked down at her. She replied just as she had practiced.

"...Un, I did."

"What were you doing yesterday? You weren't respon—"

She sat at her seat before the boy could say anything else.

"Ijin."

A pair of arms wrapped around her neck. It slightly startled her, but she wasn't as shocked as before. She calmly looked at the girl who clung to her back like a huge cicada. A single fist could also kill the girl, just like a cicada.

Drrrrrk—

The door opened, and Boss saw the reason she infiltrated this class. She stared at Kim Hajin, who walked in while yawning and made eye contact. Immediately, he froze.

* * *

...The hell.

I looked at a girl I usually didn't notice. I didn't know her name, but she was in my class. The way she interacted with her friends looked completely normal. However, I could see through her disguise. My gift, Observation and Reading, perfectly unmasked Jain's gift.

That girl wasn't an ordinary cadet, but the Chameleon Troupe's Boss. She probably came here to observe Kim Suho. Still, this never occurred in the original story.

"Hey, why did you stop using social media? Did you find a boyfriend?"

Cadets who didn't know her true identity touched her here and there. The girl she disguised as was a bit of a pushover.

"*Hoho*, boyfriend? What do you mean? I just slept because I was tired."

Boss awkwardly responded, and I broke out into a cold sweat. I felt like their limbs and bones could break with one wrong move.

"Ah, Ijin, your cheeks are chubbier than usual. Did you eat ramen before sleeping?"

One of the girls pinched Boss' cheeks, and her face immediately stiffened. I opened my mouth almost instinctively.

"Hey. Hey."

They didn't hear me as Boss's cheeks extended. I could see her fists clenching.

“HEY!”

I shouted and went overboard with my volume. The classroom instantly fell silent, and everyone looked at me. I didn't care.

“Can you shut up!? I'm trying to study!”

I yelled as I pointed at my notebook on my desk. If Boss exploded, everyone in this room could die.

“...What, you think you can tell us what to do just because you're smart?”

They grumbled unhappily, but stopped messing with Boss. Afterward, Boss gave me an odd look and buried her face into the desk. The rest spoke behind my back.

* * *

I carefully observed Boss disguised as Seo Ijin for the entire week. I didn't just watch her. I even talked to her like a friend, hoping to obtain some SP. She spoke like a generic high school girl trying to sound cute, which didn't suit her, and she even bought me ice cream. I didn't eat it and left it in my refrigerator.

The written exams ended without much trouble. The weekend after felt desolate as cadets who pulled all-nighters focused on returning to their peak physical condition. The weekend went by like a breeze.

“Now, focus!”

Monday finally arrived. The final exam would begin as 1300 first year cadets went to a harbor in Busan, and every class took a different ship.

“We will now inspect your baggage.”

The instructors inspected the cadets as soon as they boarded the ship. Three instructors called for us as I entered a room with one of them and handed him my magic pouch.

“Weight?”

“10kg.”

“What’s inside?”

“Food, tent, frying pan, torch, grill... things like that.”

“I’m opening it.”

Why ask what’s inside if you’re going to open it? I grumbled inwardly as the instructor pulled everything out. He stared in disbelief at the assortment of items.

“Why did you prepare so much?”

“Well, the announcements said that a single exam would last an entire week, so I had a general idea. I prepared accordingly.”

“Clever.”

The instructor grinned, but still carefully checked everything. Then he sent me back. Thankfully, he didn’t find out about Evandel’s seed. I brought it with me since it could hatch at any time. He probably thought it was a slightly big almond or something.

“*Hua.*”

After the inspection, I sat down on a bench near the ship’s bow. I could see an island coming into view. Countless drones flew around like seagulls.

“I’m feeling nervous.”

This exam would be difficult since I couldn’t use my Desert Eagle.

No, I could use it. I just had to avoid those drones by hacking them.

“Now, I will explain how this exam will work.”

An instructor came out to explain after the inspection.

“In 30 minutes, you will split into groups of 10 and land in different areas of that island. You will stay there for five days and survive on your own. We will, however, provide half a day’s worth of food.”

The food had decreased in half from the original story. The ship grew noisy at the instructor’s shocking announcement.

“The exam is rather simple. The number of points you gain will be your grade. Obtaining points is rather simple. Plenty of wild animals and monsters live on that island. You can hunt the wild animals for food, and you will gain points for hunting the monsters. You can gain 1 to 10 points depending on their rank and grade. You should have all received special smartwatches for this exam. Scan their corpses to see how many points they’re worth.”

The instructor continued explaining. In summary, cadets could steal, sell, and buy points from each other. In addition, they could eliminate other cadets and gain an additional 5 points along with all the points the eliminated cadet had obtained. However, cadets could only fight each other after the first 12 hours.

“In addition, exam overseers will carry name tags on their chests. Although I doubt anyone will succeed, you can steal these nametags for 200 points each.”

No one seemed interested despite the huge amount of points.

“Finally, you see that tower in the middle? If your smartwatch is stolen, you will be eliminated. Head to that tower and wait for the exam to end.”

A heavy tension filled the ship after the instructor’s explanation. No one spoke to each other. Soon, the instructors brought out boats. Cadets would now arrive on the island in groups of ten.

“Chae Nayun, Jin Yooyun, Selen, Haize...”

The starting group would determine our potential teammates or enemies.

“Kim Hajin, Jin Seoha, Yoojoong, Wang Shifu, Blen... Rachel, Tara.”

I got on the boat and exchanged awkward looks with the nine other cadets. Rachel was also in my group. Soon, the boat set off. I gazed at the island in thought. Rachel would face the greatest danger in this exam. Lancaster, who already resented her, had become a bigger threat in this world.

“Here’s your stop.”

The boat arrived before I could carefully plan. I spoke to Rachel the moment we landed.

“Rachel, would you like to team up?”

I didn’t expect her to agree as Rachel shook her head.

“I’m more comfortable alone.”

However, I didn’t back down. I gave her my smartwatch’s live coordinates. The exam smartwatch had three functionalities: scanning monsters, trading points, and location sharing. The latter two functions encouraged teams.

“Just in case you change your mind.”

I spoke as I pointed at my watch. Then Rachel smiled and left. Meanwhile, the remaining cadets murmured to themselves about me being rejected. Since these guys didn’t seem useful, I left and ran into the forest.

I opened my laptop after leaning against a random tree and paid a reasonable amount of SP to hack the drones’ servers. The laptop screen split into 60 smaller screens. I could analyze all of them simultaneously, thanks to my gift.

Most of the important cadets acted alone. Chae Nayun was already lost, Kim Suho fought a monster, and Yoo Yeonha was the only one who formed a team. If I recalled, the girl she teamed up with was ranked 15. She already won over a skilled cadet. However, I wasn't interested in them.

“There.”

I discovered a group of five cadets from the repeating class. I had already looked up the faces of potential threats. Only two of those five were djinns in the original story, but all five could be djinns in this world. However, I still had some time before they would act. After all, cadets couldn't fight each other for the next 12 hours. Before then...

“I guess I should find a camping spot.”

Chapter 60

Final Exam (2)

An hour passed since we arrived on the island. I headed back to my camping spot near a river with a mountain on one side. The ancient sages would have called it *back to the mountain, face to the water*.

I was full of cheats with my laptop displaying drone footage in my right hand, and the Book of Truth with a map of the island in my pocket.

I ran into a monster before I reached the camping spot.

The clown monkey had many colorful spots. However, its face looked grotesque, and its human size always surprised people when they first saw it.

“Jesus, it looks horrifying.”

Clown monkeys should be low-intermediate rank, grade 9. The one in front of me looked average. I took out my training handgun. It would be troublesome if I didn’t finish it in one blow, so I aimed for its vital point at the tail. Clown monkeys moved fast, but lost their balance without their tails.

I pulled the trigger without hesitation. The magic bullet pierced its tail as it tried to escape and fell. I fired five quick shots into its head, although the fourth had already penetrated its skull.

“That was easy.”

After scanning the clown monkey’s corpse with my smartwatch, I continued on my way. Finally, a river appeared after about 30 minutes of walking. The source came from the northernmost area, which flowed down and split into eight branches. This river seemed like a tributary, but could reliably serve as a water source. Furthermore, a

rocky mountain stood behind it with a dense forest above, making it the ideal camping spot.

I took out my tent, which looked like a small disk, and opened it with stigma's magic power. The disk expanded into a large tent.

"Wow."

It felt cozier than I imagined with a bed and a small table inside. I decided to sleep since nothing major would happen yet.

"Yaaawn."

I jumped into bed.

* * *

Nine hours after the start of the exam. The blazing sun had set, and darkness descended on the island.

"Haa..."

Rachel sat on a rocky mountain and collected her breath. She set out by herself after rejecting several offers, but now she felt the need to team up more than anyone else because of food.

"Auu..."

Rachel looked at her food supply with mixed feelings. Only half remained. She ate two hours ago, but she became hungry again after scuffling with a monster. Cadets had to look for edible plants or hunt wild animals. Anyone could guess that wild animals stayed near rivers, but even if she hunted them, she didn't know how to cook. Rachel had no experience with butchery.

She could also trade with other cadets since she had already hunted six monsters. However, points were extremely precious. She needed food as fuel to obtain points, so trading points for food didn't make sense. A faint scent of meat tickled her nose as she seriously pondered.

“...”

She looked down the mountain and saw a faint fire in the dark. It smelled like grilled meat.

Rachel swallowed her saliva. Although she still had half of her food, she had to save as much as possible. She would be at a disadvantage if she appeared desperate during a trade.

Rachel jumped and ran down 300 meters in just three minutes. She reached the ground and followed after the smell. Soon, she found five cadets cooking a giant boar. They noticed her and turned.

“Eh?”

The group contained three male and two female cadets. Rachel silently stared at them.

“What do you want?”

They put up their guard as Rachel estimated their combat potential. However, it was still too early to fight other cadets. Rachel pointed at the boar.

“I’d like to buy some.”

“Ah, haha, you’re working alone.”

A male cadet, who seemed to be the leader, stood up. He approached Rachel and held out his greasy hand. Rachel tried to shake it anyway, but the man pulled back.

“Ah, my hand is dirty.”

He laughed heartily and continued.

“You’re welcome to join us. We’re all cadets here. That’s fine with you all, right?”

He gave the others a meaningful look that Rachel couldn't see. Then he turned back.

"Oh right, you must not know our names, but we know yours."

"..."

Rachel silently nodded. He scratched his neck and spoke.

"Well, Rachel is famous. I'm Joo Yeohoon."

* * *

"*Argh*, where am I?"

Chae Nayun wandered in the woods for 14 hours. During this time, she used a bow and a sword to hunt 9 monsters and likely placed herself near the top of the leaderboard.

"There's no end..."

She plowed through vines and tall grass, but couldn't find any water or food. She never even ran into another cadet. Now she felt exhausted.

A faint light appeared when she almost passed out. It looked like a campfire.

"Oooh!"

Chae Nayun ran towards the light and could smell a spicy fragrance. After escaping the endless field of tall grass...

"Eh?"

She saw Kim Hajin munching on a piece of meat. He stared at her with chopsticks in his hand and a plate full of meat.

"...What?"

He tilted his head and asked. Chae Nayun swallowed hard. Although she preferred high-class meals, she had gone 14 hours with little rest or food. She had already finished her rations and had prepared to eat anything.

Chae Nayun observed Kim Hajin and his surroundings. He had a huge, cozy tent behind him. The source of light wasn't a campfire, but a portable grill. He also had a table, a chair, a frying pan, and packaged meat.

“W-What the heck, where did you get all this?”

“I prepared for the exam.”

“What? How did you know to prepare all this?”

“I brought them just in case. Don't you know I'm number 1 in the world?”

Kim Hajin tapped on his head and spoke.

“I'm pretty damn smart.”

“...Yeah, good for you.”

Chae Nayun sarcastically remarked. She swallowed hard at the meat while Kim Hajin wondered if their encounter occurred out of luck. It did seem like points had just walked into him.

“You hungry?”

“...”

Chae Nayun nodded.

“How much food do you have left?”

“...I lost it while fighting a monster.”

She had eaten it all, but lied.

“R-Really, I’m a bit clumsy.”

“*Hmm.*”

Kim Hajin crossed his arms and thought while Chae Nayun held her breath.

“How many points do you have?”

Chae Nayun breathed a sigh of relief. She had killed nine monsters and obtained 35 points, but lied again.

“Twenty... five.”

“Then give me half.”

“H-Half?”

That was expensive for a single meal.

“Yep, but in exchange, you’re sleepy, right? I’ll also lend you a sleeping bag. Just say no if you don’t want to.”

“N-No! I mean, yes! I, I want to.”

Chae Nayun turned on her smartwatch. It could recognize other smartwatches within a 3m radius.

[Kim Hajin] —Point trading —Location sharing

She clicked on point trading. Half of 25 was 12.5, but they could only trade whole numbers. So she sent Kim Hajin 12 points and stealthily sat next to him. Kim Hajin gave her some cooked pork chops after receiving the points.

“Are you okay with just this? They’re pork chops.”

“...I'll have to eat to live.”

Chae Nayun heard this was common in dungeons and towers. She ate the pork chop. Was it because she was hungry? It tasted delicious. Then she saw Kim Hajin dipping his into a sauce. She did the same and it tasted even better.

The two of them silently ate for 20 minutes.

“Ah, now I'm full.”

Chae Nayun felt a bit awkward once they finished eating. She wasn't particularly close to Kim Hajin. Their relationship felt uncomfortable.

Just when she thought about running away...

“Here.”

Kim Hajin handed her a bottle of water. She stared in hesitation.

“It's mineral water, not river water.”

Can he read my mind? Cough. Chae Nayun took the water. *Gulp, gulp, kyaa.* She sighed in satisfaction after consuming half of it in one go.

“By the way, what's that?”

She suddenly spotted a ring on Kim Hajin's index finger.

“...”

Kim Hajin's face stiffened. For a moment, he rubbed it without talking and thought about what to say. Chae Nayun suddenly understood.

“Ah, nevermind, nevermind. I'm not curious at all.”

I might not act like it, but I can take a hint. It must be a family keepsake. Chae Nayun finished her water without waiting for a reply. Meanwhile, Kim Hajin stared at her with the eyes of a dead fish.

“I never said you could drink it all.”

“...Eh?”

* * *

The following morning arrived. Birds chirped, and monsters howled from the forest. I woke up from the noise and got out of bed. I felt a bit stiff, but this was a luxury on the island.

“Auuu.”

I left the tent and basked in the sunlight. However, no sunlight shone.

“Is it a polar night?”

Outside remained dark, probably because of the magicians at the island’s central tower. I saw Chae Nayun still asleep in her sleeping bag on the ground. Last night must have been cold since only her face peeked out. She looked like a caterpillar.

Tong!

Suddenly, the seed on my tent table jumped up. It had already finished its meal and quivered.

“...Why are you so cute?”

I tickled the seed and wrapped it with another bloody gauze. Then I retrieved the tent. I had no intentions of staying in the same place. Chae Nayun still slept in the sleeping bag, but I could just gift it to her.

Now that cadets could fight each other, I planned on going against some dangerous individuals. Of course, I couldn’t kill them. Some didn’t even realize they were djinns. Technically, they weren’t yet. That was the difference between a djinn who contracted another djinn and a djinn who contracted a devil.

In the former's case, their contracted djinn supplied them with magic power. As a result, they could avoid going berserk, and their contracts were less strict. These djinns were often treated as expendable if they failed their mission.

On the other hand, djinns who directly contracted devils like Sven, Yun Hyun, and Lancaster were rarer. Only a cadet named Joo Yeohoon overcame the side-effect of directly contracting a devil on this island.

"I'll have to go higher."

For now, I planned on climbing the world tree located at the island's center. Although it sounded grandiose, it was just a huge tree.

* * *

Yoo Yeonha managed to form a group in just 24 hours. She led a small team of five and efficiently amassed points utilizing their strengths.

"Yeonha, I found someone."

A sharpshooter named Rose whispered to Yoo Yeonha and drew her bow without permission. Yoo Yeonha's whip flew in like lightning and snatched it away before she could fire.

"Eh?"

"Don't."

Yoo Yeonha glared at Rose.

"You can't touch that cadet."

"Eh? I-Isn't he rank 934?"

Every cadet wore a nametag with their rank, and rankings wouldn't change until after the final exam. Most would know that cadet even without a nametag. Rank 934 Kim Hajin was known for his gun-

related gift among other things.

“No, you can’t win against him.”

However, Yoo Yeonha cut her off. Suddenly, Kim Hajin made his move. As if to save her from explaining, he climbed to the peak of a giant 150 meter tree with impeccable movements. In just a few breaths, he disappeared into the dense leaves. The series of unrealistic maneuvers astonished Rose.

Yoo Yeonha spoke in a stern voice.

“See that? I just saved your life, Rose. To that guy, rank is just a number. You would have lost for sure if you released that bowstring. Not only that, but the rest of us would have also been in trouble.”

“Ah...”

“Many hidden dragons exist in this world. That’s why the Hero Association can’t do anything about hunters of the Vast Expanse. Next time, don’t do anything before I give the order.”

Rose nodded like a child scolded by her teacher.

“Also, keep it a secret about that guy being uncharacteristically strong.”

“Eh? Why?”

Rose couldn’t help but ask. Yoo Yeonha briefly explained.

“Because he might become a part of our family. For the record, I like people with heavy mouths.”

Rose shuddered. Essence of the Strait was the world’s second ranked guild. The rank 68 Rose couldn’t believe the offer.

“Ah, yes! I’ll keep it a secret! Until death!”

“Good.”

After smiling at the obedient Rose, Yoo Yeonha stared at the giant tree Kim Hajin had scaled. It looked so monstrous even the most courageous would hesitate to climb it. Just looking up at it made one’s neck hurt, but Kim Hajin reached the peak in mere minutes.

“...*Hmm.*”

Should I modify Kim Hajin’s physical ability rating? Yoo Yeonha thought about her report.

Tiiring— A message arrived on her smartwatch.

“Ah, Ijin contacted us. Let’s go back.”

Cadets who shared locations could also message each other. Yoo Yeonha was likely the first to discover this.

Chapter 61

Final Exam (3)

Chae Nayun opened her eyes after Kim Hajin had left. However, she only got up after confirming he was gone. She had woken up a long time ago, but his words had stunned her.

— Why are you so cute?

“...”

Chae Nayun’s cheeks flushed red. Everyone praised her looks since she was young, but she never expected Kim Hajin to say such a thing.

“Auuu...”

She shook her head to remove those thoughts.

“Whatever, I didn’t hear it. He was talking to himself. There must have been a cat or a dog nearby. Definitely.”

Chae Nayun murmured and crawled out of the sleeping bag. It felt as warm and cozy as a bed.

Should I leave it or take it? Chae Nayun thought. *Since Kim Hajin left it here after saying... saying how I was cute... he must want me to take it.*

She folded up the sleeping bag into a fist-sized ball.

“Was it this small?”

The tiny sleeping bag amazed her. She checked her smartwatch after storing it away. It was 7:20 in the morning, but still dark outside.

“It must be a polar night.”

Chae Nayun stretched and prepared for the day.

* * *

I looked around in every direction from the top of the world tree. My thousand-mile eyes could see everything. Cadets had discovered their preferred methods of survival after a day. Some sold food to obtain points, some hunted monsters, and others concealed themselves while waiting for unsuspecting targets.

“*Mmm?*”

A rather mischievous idea popped up in my head when I spotted someone. A method to blow my nose without my hand. In other words, I could eliminate the stronger cadets without fighting them.

I snapped off a decently sized branch and sharpened one end. Then I inscribed a coordinate and some words on it. Next, I used stigma’s magic power to throw it at *him* in the distance. The branch flew like an arrow and struck the ground after brushing past his face.

The imposing cadet stopped and looked at the branch on the ground. I could only see his back, but I could tell how he felt.

He grabbed it and read the words on the side. Then he turned in my direction. I dodged his gaze even though he couldn’t possibly see me. Now, I just had to wait.

An hour went by as I watched the drone footage and suddenly noticed a change.

“What? Already?”

Rachel headed somewhere with Joo Yeohoon in the dark. I expanded my sight and followed them as they arrived at a wooded cliff where two people waited. One stood out in the open while the other hid in a tree. I didn’t know them, but assumed they were djinns. First, I moved a drone over, but its signal suddenly died. Then an alert popped up on

my laptop.

[Joo Yeohoon – He has made contact with djinns from the Lancaster family.]

“...”

Rachel also accompanied Joo Yeohoon in the original story, but Lancaster never interfered. His goal had to be Rachel. Surprisingly, they planned on fighting in an open area because cadets had occupied the secluded areas for shelter. Furthermore, no one would interfere because the location belonged to that exam overseer.

Still, they had poorly planned.

“They must be the bottom rung.”

These brainless fools represented the lowest djinns blinded by their desires for Lancaster. They didn’t look all that strong. However, three of them together still posed a threat.

I took out my Desert Eagle and transformed it into a sniper rifle. I could see Rachel walking with Joo Yeohoon in the distance. She probably joined their team temporarily for food. In the original story, Kim Suho had rescued her. I shared my location with her to prevent this, but she stubbornly refused.

“Ah, maybe...”

Suddenly, I expanded my vision and checked for Kim Suho nearby.

“Pft.”

I couldn’t help but laugh despite the serious situation. *Did the original story influence them?* Kim Suho slowly headed towards Rachel’s location with Chae Nayun, who must’ve ran into him. Now it would be three on three. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun should be more than enough.

“Tsk.”

However, Kim Suho was Kim Suho, and I had my methods. I attached my rifle's gunstock and aimed at the targets. My eyes could see further than any scope.

* * *

Joo Yeohoon's team offered Rachel their food for free, but she still paid them some points. However, she felt uneasy because she cared about the combat exam grades as much as written exams. She wanted to collect as many points as possible since she didn't know how much would put her on top.

In the middle of her worries, Joo Yeohoon had asked her to join him for a hunt. They had found a grizzly bear monster worth 10 points.

"I'm a sharpshooter, so I'll support you from the back. I only need 3 points, and you can have the rest."

"No, we should split it evenly."

She didn't ask why it was only the two of them. She believed she wouldn't lose in a one-on-one battle even if Joo Yeohoon betrayed her, and would gain more points with fewer people.

"It was here..."

However, a man stood at the cliff instead of a bear. His long hair covered half of his face, and two gauntlets glowed in his hands. Clawlike daggers protruded from the gauntlets' fingertips.

"Who are you!"

Joo Yeohoon put on his best act. He had prepared an escape route in case things went awry. The long-haired man played along and charged at Joo Yeohoon. The man cut Joo Yeohoon's shoulder in the blink of an eye as he screamed and ran away. The man didn't chase after him.

"Haa..."

Joo Yeohoon ran off and disappeared. *What was that?* Rachel sighed as

she held up her rapier.

“Who are you?”

The man coldly smiled.

“_____”

He said something, but Rachel couldn't understand the language. Then he murmured and suddenly charged.

“*Uup!*”

Rachel imbued her rapier with magic power. She clashed with the gauntlets as sparks scattered. Although the man had more magic power, Rachel held on thanks to his rough control. The man struck a few more times as Rachel blocked with ease. Gauntlets vs. rapier. The former had greater destructive power, but Rachel overwhelmed him with technique. She would be victorious as long as she maintained a safe distance.

“*Haat!*”

Rachel spotted an opening and rushed in. She scratched the man's ribs and tried to retreat. However, she couldn't move her feet. Another enemy jumped from a tree and stabbed at her back.

“*Kuaaak!*”

A scream rang out. Rachel froze, but didn't close her eyes. She was still alive and examined the situation. The assassin from the tree writhed in pain on the ground.

“*Eh?*”

She wondered if she had subconsciously attacked, but immediately discarded that thought as five streaks of light pierced the assassin's stomach, limbs, lung, and heart. The assassin scattered into dust.

What's happening?

Rachel didn't have time to think as the man with gauntlets charged. He knew it would become virtually impossible to snipe when the target was close to an ally.

Furthermore, Rachel couldn't distance herself from the man. Her feet stuck to his shadow because of a magic called shadow tag.

Although she couldn't move, Rachel still defended and counterattacked. Her movements appeared like a dance in close quarters. The man became frustrated and tried to stomp when an unidentifiable attack flew in again. It dug through the small gap between them and blasted his shoulder. Rachel stabbed at his flank.

A sword flew in before her rapier could reach and struck the man's shoulder.

"Kuak!"

The man retreated and jumped down the cliff.

"Who was that!"

Kim Suho and Chae Nayun ran up to Rachel.

"Rachel? Who was he?" Chae Nayun asked.

Kim Suho ran to the edge of the cliff and checked. *"Did he disappear?"*

Rachel spoke even though she didn't understand the situation either. *"Yes, he's gone."*

Kim Suho couldn't see anyone in the dark.

It must have been Chae Nayun who helped me. That attack must have been her secret technique, something like invisible arrows. Rachel tried to comprehend what had happened.

“Thank you. You saved...”

The moonlight reflected off of something in the ground that caught her eye. Rachel picked it up.

A bullet?

“Let’s move first. We don’t know if that person will come back,” Kim Suho seriously muttered.

* * *

Tzzz— Tzzz— Rachel examined the bullet at the campfire and thought about Kim Hajin. He saved her before with a shotgun, and today’s mysterious person used a sniper. However, Kim Hajin was the only one who used a gun.

“Hmm.”

She couldn’t understand why. Of course, he was next door during the midterm exam, but he was far away this time.

She had three questions. First, how did he know she was in danger? Second, why didn’t he show himself? Third, why did he help her?

“So you decided to change to a sword?”

Kim Suho spoke to Chae Nayun. Rachel stared at the sword on her waist. Chae Nayun awkwardly scratched her head.

“No, I just didn’t want to rely on only a bow during such a big exam. So, um, it’s a secondary weapon.”

Chae Nayun brought two main weapons. However, since cadets could only borrow one main weapon, she directly purchased a training sword from Cube.

“Oh, rather than that.”

Chae Nayun clapped. She tried to change the subject.

“Rachel, we have a plan. Do you want to come with us?”

Rachel tilted her head.

“It’s like a part-time team. You know, we can do fine even without forming teams. So we’ll each take turns finding food, a place to sleep, and standing guard. Then we’ll go off on our own to hunt and meet back later.”

Rachel thought it was a good idea, but paused and turned on her smartwatch.

[Location Sharing List] — Kim Hajin — Joo Yeohoon

Kim Hajin’s location was still there.

“It sounds like a good idea, but I’ll have to decline.”

Rachel stood up as Kim Suho asked, “Where are you going? Wouldn’t it be dangerous?”

“It’s fine. I’m going to meet up with someone.”

“Then we’ll take you there.”

“No, I can go alone.”

She firmly rejected him. Kim Suho scratched his head and nodded.

“Don’t be so cocky. Do you think every girl in the world loves you?”

Chae Nayun dealt a piercing blow.

Chapter 62

Final Exam (4)

The situation ended with Kim Suho's arrival, but I spent another hour looking around before descending the world tree.

“*Argh*, what a pain.”

I couldn't help but groan as I landed. Even with parkour, the tree was abnormally big. I shook off the numbness in my hands and legs before checking my points.

[22 Points]

That should be a bit below average. I gained 10 from hunting monsters and 12 from Chae Nayun. The first place cadet scored 130 points in the original story, so I needed another 50 points to pass safely. It should be possible if I busily worked today and tomorrow.

I turned around optimistically.

“...”

My body stiffened with goosebumps.

The Chameleon Troupe's Boss, disguised as Seo Ijin, stood before me. She silently approached and stared with her black eyes.

Why is she here?

Cold sweat ran down my back, and my survival instincts roared. I forced myself to calm down. She should be here to observe, not fight.

“What's the matter?”

Unexpectedly, she took out her sword and pointed it at me.

“...”

She looked at me with steady eyes and a chilling light flashed from her blade. I didn't understand why she would pick a fight with me, but I could never win. She would instantly kill me.

“You know what.”

She spoke in a calm voice. This woman was too powerful to be an enemy, like how insects couldn't call humans their enemies.

However, I found a glimpse of hope in this life-or-death situation.

Cadets didn't fight to kill in this exam. All we had to do was take each other's smartwatch. Even if you subdued someone, you hadn't won yet without their smartwatch. Additionally, you would lose even if you subdued them, but lost your smartwatch.

Currently, the smartwatch around her left wrist appeared loose. Maybe she put it on like that, or it couldn't withstand her magic power, or I was simply lucky. Regardless, I could escape this situation.

From my sleeve, I weaved aether into a thread thinner than a spider's. Then I controlled it out of her sight like a worm avoiding a hawk's eyes. It slowly squirmed towards her left wrist.

I continued staring to buy time. Eventually, the aether thread reached her left wrist and took her smartwatch without her noticing. Then she finally spoke.

“Your weapon, take it out.”

“Weapon?”

She simply nodded when I asked. Meanwhile, the aether thread traveled down her wrist and hovered a centimeter off the ground. She couldn't see below because of our close proximity. I yanked the smartwatch into my hand when it finally neared.

“Whew.”

Did I get lucky? Or was Boss too clumsy? I succeeded and sighed in relief.

I reached into my pocket and pretended to take out my weapon, but instead brought out Boss’ smartwatch.

“...You’re surrendering?”

She looked disappointed when she saw the smartwatch. She hadn’t noticed at all. Perhaps the added layer of skin from Jain’s gift dulled her sensitivity. Not to mention, she hadn’t released any of her seals yet.

“Does this look like it’s mine?”

I asked as leisurely as I could, and Boss immediately frowned. I pointed at her wrist with my eyes. She tilted her head in doubt and checked.

“...Eh?”

Her eyes widened. She spun her wrist around in disbelief.

“You know you’re out the moment I crush this, right?”

I spoke as calmly as I could. Boss seemed so shocked she didn’t even hear me. She stared at her wrist as if she had lost her country.

“This... this can’t be...”

Would that reaction give me about 50SP? I feigned a carefree smile before gently grabbing her wrist and putting her smartwatch back on.

“W-What, what are you?”

She acted even more flustered than when I stole it, but I continued placing it back around her wrist. I smiled and bluffed.

“I’ll let you go this one time, okay?”

“...Let me go?”

Her sword still aimed at my neck, but I could feel it had lost its edge. I ignored her and turned away.

“W-Where are you going?”

Boss tried to hold me back, but I left and focused everything into my legs. My body felt numb just looking at her.

* * *

After Kim Hajin left, Boss stared at the smartwatch on her left wrist. She couldn’t understand how Kim Hajin had stolen it. She planned on confirming his ability, but he had shocked her beyond expectations. Even though Jain’s gift took away half of her sensitivity, she never expected such humiliation from a 17 year old cadet.

When did he snatch it? When we first met? When we stared at each other? No, none of the above. Kim Hajin never moved, and his magic power showed no signs of movement either.

Boss looked at her right wrist with a tattoo of a four-leaf clover. Each leaf sealed a portion of her true strength. Boss wondered if she should have released one of them.

“Haaa.”

She asked for help from a witness.

“Jain, did you see?”

—... *Hmm?* See what?

She frowned at the reply. Jain sounded like she hadn’t paid attention.

— Ah, ah, ah, sorry. I got distracted for a moment, but it’s not my

fault! Droon kept bugging me to buy him Legos. So what's up?"

"..."

Boss continued thinking, *Kim Hajin stole my watch in that short amount of time? Even though my power is sealed, his dexterity and craftiness are beyond a cadet's.*

— Tell me. What happened?

"I'll tell you later."

— No, tell me now, you're making me curious. *Argh*, it's all because of that brat, Droon. Boss? Boss?

Boss coldly ended their conversation. She became certain of Kim Hajin's potential. Now, she had to confirm Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak's.

Her smartwatch rang.

[Ijin-ssi, where are you? Hurry up. Didn't I tell you to come back by the half hour mark? ——]

"..."

Boss blankly stared at the message.

Yoo Yeonha. Why did this girl keep ordering me around?

* * *

I found a new camping spot after successfully escaping from Boss. It seemed just as good as the previous one. Honestly, I stopped along the way near a river because I didn't have any strength left in my legs. I thanked my luck once again before setting up camp. I sat down and placed my bullets on the table. I had 14 bullets left for the sniper rifle and 20 for the shotgun. Each bullet cost around 7 SP to modify. Although they significantly boosted my strength, I couldn't waste any.

“I should have at least 20 of each type.”

It would be a disaster if I ran out of bullets during a fight. I opened my laptop.

[Current SP – 1214]

I needed about 2000 to create a decent gift, but my goal kept stretching further because of the bullets. Still, that was better than someone dying. I restocked my sniper bullets and took out my portable grill. Using parkour had made me hungry. Today's lunch would be braised chicken, although it still looked like night outside. I could barely see anything without my thousand-mile eyes. I took out a frozen chicken from my magical pouch.

[You can add magic power to increase the chicken's flavor.]

I imbued magic power into the frozen chicken on the frying pan. I didn't know how, but the chicken suddenly became fresh. When I thought, *I should be able to eat it now...*

Pssss Pssss—

The tall grass rustled nearby. I pulled out my gun and peered through the grass. However, I lowered my weapon and grinned when I saw who it was. Soon, I heard her footsteps as Rachel emerged.

“Rachel?”

I acted surprised. A leaf stuck to her hair, but she didn't notice.

“...”

Rachel silently looked around. Her jaws dropped at the high-tech tent and grill. She reacted no differently than Chae Nayun.

“Ah, I like to prepare thoroughly.”

Rachel snapped out of her daze as I coolly smiled at her. She stared at

the chicken on the grill. It smelled delicious.

“Would you like to join me for lunch?”

“...Can, can I?”

“I’ll take 4 points to be fair.”

I opened another foldable chair for her and handed her a plate with half the chicken on it. Rachel must’ve been hungry as she finished the chicken in just 10 minutes. I cleaned up the dishes when she asked.

“Um, what have you been doing until now?”

“Yes?”

I tilted my head. She must have realized I had helped her. Was she feeling me out?

“Well, I just ran around, trying to get points.”

I pretended to not know because it would have been too embarrassing to say, *I’m the one who saved you.*

“Hmm...”

Rachel looked at me strangely, but didn’t ask any further questions. Instead, she stared at the campfire in thought.

I thought she’d keep asking and planned on confessing when she asked for the third time.

“Oh, did you get hurt?”

I discovered a fairly deep wound near her collarbone. She must’ve received it from the previous fight with djinns.

“Ah, yes. Something happened...”

Evandel's seed suddenly popped out of my pocket.

"Ah?"

The seed bounced towards Rachel and jumped on her collarbone. Rachel shrieked at the unexpected ambush.

"Ah! W-What!?"

"Ah, um, you see..."

I shot up just as surprised.

"Ah, this, what is this!"

Rachel tried to pull the seed off, but it cleverly jumped inside her clothes towards her armpit. I froze as I could no longer do anything.

"You see, it's um... my pet almond... er, not almond, pet seed. Um..."

While I made excuses, Rachel stuffed her hand into her clothes as I quickly turned around. After a fierce struggle, Rachel resolved the situation with a deep sigh. I slowly turned around and saw her tidying her clothes with a flushed face. I dropped my head, not knowing the seed would do such a thing.

"Um, I'm sorry."

Rachel looked back and forth between me and the seed.

"A pet seed?"

"Ah, yes. Yes."

It sounded stupid, but I hoped she would believe me since this world was full of mysterious things. Honestly, I had no better excuse. Rachel sighed again and handed me the seed.

"I think it'll be calmer... if you planted it in the ground."

“R-Right.”

I took the seed and trapped it in a container.

Chapter 63

Final Exam (5)

Rachel offered to team up after the awkward incident with Evandel's seed. She brought up the task sharing that Kim Suho and Chae Nayun also came up with in the original story. I couldn't help but smile.

"You're saying the same thing as Chae Nayun."

"Ah, did Chae Nayun make the same offer?"

"No, it's not that. Anyways, I like the idea."

I didn't see a reason to refuse. After all, it was Rachel. However, she looked like something was on her mind.

"Oh right... um, I somewhat formed a team with someone else."

"Who?"

I already knew since I kept an eye on her.

"Do you know Joo Yeohoon?"

"Don't mind him."

I didn't explain, but I had already taken care of him. To be more precise, I sent an even stronger psycho to deal with him.

"Yes?"

"Don't worry about it. Just team up with me."

I smiled. Even the powerful djinns who contracted with devils couldn't

touch a few cadets. Shin Jonghak was most definitely one of them.

* * *

After offering Rachel to Lancaster's djinns, Joo Yeohoon hunted some monsters before returning to his base.

However, his cozy base had turned into a complete disaster. The grass hut collapsed, and dead animals littered the ground. He briefly worried that he had come to the wrong place.

"What."

However, another cadet arrogantly sat in the center as if to pronounce that he was the culprit. He fiddled with the smartwatches he had taken like an emperor on his throne.

Joo Yeohoon blankly stared at him.

"You're here."

The cadet spoke first with a deep imposing voice. He placed the smartwatches aside and threw a tree branch at Joo Yeohoon. It shot past Joo Yeohoon's face like an arrow and dug into the tree behind him. Joo Yeohoon swallowed hard. His voice trembled as he spoke the cadet's name.

"Shin Jonghak."

Joo Yeohoon had a bad relationship with Shin Jonghak since Military Agent Academy. Shin Jonghak was one of the reasons why he contracted a devil. However, the current situation made him powerless. He still couldn't win against Shin Jonghak. In addition, some of the strongest cadets stood behind Shin Jonghak. The martial arts star Kim Horak, the wave breaker swordsman Jin Hanjun, archer Oh Jihoon...

"Looks like the trash can talk."

Shin Jonghak sneered as he held up his spear. His expression

contorted into a fearsome frown.

“If you got held back, you should’ve stayed in the trashcan where you belong. Why overstep?”

Joo Yeohoon didn’t understand. He glanced at the tree branch Shin Jonghak threw at him. Someone had written the coordinates of his base on the side along with a provocative sentence. Joo Yeohoon clicked his tongue.

“I’m not the one who sent this.”

“I know.”

“What?”

Shin Jonghak had already concluded that someone with a grudge against Joo Yeohoon threw the tree branch to him. However, Shin Jonghak felt displeased that he was being bothered because such trash had provoked someone.

“I don’t care.”

His lackeys slowly approached Joo Yeohoon.

“I just don’t like trash like you. Damn snakes who only flicker their tongues in the shadows.”

Shin Jonghak held up his spear. Joo Yeohoon didn’t stand a chance against all five of them. He turned and ran as Shin Jonghak’s spear flew at him.

* * *

The Overseer Tower stood on high ground slightly north of the island’s center. Exam overseers and eliminated cadets rested there. Overseers examined not only the cadets’ abilities, but also their characters. Cadets fought other cadets to simulate fighting djinns, but they could be penalized for stealing points dishonestly.

“Hmm...”

Yun Seung-Ah, who acted as an overseer, looked out of a window from the Overseer Tower.

“Are eight drones not enough? You’re looking out the window too?”

A Latino man named Vieri approached her.

“Who are you thinking about?”

His Korean accent indicated that he had lived in Korea for a long time. Yun Seung-Ah glanced at him and spoke, “Kim Hajin.”

“Mm? Who’s that? Weren’t you a fan of Kim Suho?”

Yun Seung-Ah smiled. She still prioritized him, that was an undeniable fact. She had only watched Kim Suho until now and even revealed herself to him. However, information that everyone knew couldn’t be considered information. For now, she focused on finding hidden talents.

“I received an interesting piece of information.”

“Information? What is it?”

“How can I tell you? It’s top secret.”

Korea was a small country with numerous guilds. To surpass each other, a fierce battle of information and politics always took place. The same applied to individual guilds like Essence of the Strait with divided factions. Yun Seung-Ah took advantage of their internal power struggle and managed to steal some interesting information.

“That makes me more curious. Can’t you just tell me? We’re in the same guild after all.”

“Who can trust your big mouth?”

Two days ago, Yun Seung-Ah obtained a top secret document called *Yoo Yeonha's Report* that evaluated Kim Hajin even higher than Kim Suho. Of course, she would have treated it as nonsense if it came from an average person. However, it was Yoo Yeonha. She was young, but more clever than a fox and one of the closest to Kim Hajin. Yoo Yeonha might lack experience, but wouldn't have said that without thorough research.

"So? Are you going to go check him out?"

"Mmm... I will later when I have time."

Of course, this information could be fake. However, Yun Seung-Ah had already discovered something strange about Kim Hajin, the magic power of light. She was willing to risk her time.

"So, what are you going to do?"

Vieri asked. Yun Seung-Ah pointed at the nametag on her chest.

[Rank 307 Yun Seung-Ah]

That rank represented her world rank. However, it didn't include her accomplishments from the past year. She predicted it would rise about 50 ranks once the rankings updated in July.

"This is worth 200 points, right?"

"You're going to use that as bait? I doubt anyone will fall for it. They'll just run."

"Really? I guess I'll just hide and watch."

Yun Seung-Ah smirked.

* * *

The perpetual darkness made it difficult to distinguish day from night. Rachel had volunteered for night watch and glanced at the huge tent

beside her. She couldn't see inside, which meant the person inside couldn't see her too.

She rummaged through her pocket and took out a bullet. It sparkled in the moonlight and she couldn't believe such a tiny object had protected her. She placed it back into her pocket and felt convinced that Kim Hajin had saved her. After all, he was the only cadet who used a gun. She wondered why he denied it and how he knew she was in trouble.

Was it because of the cold wind or the pale moonlight? Rachel recalled a memory from long ago. The image of a man smiling when she still lived in England.

— I will protect you no matter what Princess. Of course, I'm sure many more wish to protect you.

However, the man returned as her most fearsome assassin. Her heart ached every time she thought about Lancaster. He must've been behind today's ambush as well.

“...”

Rachel buried her face between her knees. *Should I have died with them back then?* Sorrow filled her heart.

* * *

I woke up in my tent. No sunlight shone through, and outside remained just as dark as before. Was it going to be like this all five days? I yawned as I exited the tent. Rachel sat modestly by the table. Was it because I was half-asleep? She looked like an elf as I stared at her. Rachel tilted her head at my strange gaze.

“...What's today's menu?”

I snapped back to reality at her question. What was I just thinking about towards a character I created?

“Ah, um, let me wash my face first.”

I trudged to the river to wash my face and dried myself with a towel. I had overprepared for the exam with plenty of food. I decided on beef since we would hunt monsters today. I turned to Rachel for her approval, but found her staring at me. No, to be more exact, she stared at my magic pouch with all the food. She looked famished.

“How’s beef?”

“Great.”

She instantly replied. I took out two marinated sirloin steaks and placed them on a hot pan. As I said before, my aunt used to own a barbecue place. I also lived by myself for four years and worked as a cook in the army. In other words, I was quite experienced. After adding some sliced onions and paprika, I added a special sauce with a delicious fragrance.

“Perfect.”

I plated the steak and handed it to Rachel. She stared at it with sparkling eyes.

“Would you like some rice as well?”

Rachel smiled brightly and nodded. I put some rice on her plate before handing it back to her. She waited for me to eat first with a knife and fork in each hand.

“I’m eating.”

We ate as I sliced my steak. It tasted especially good because of the circumstances. Not only was it juicy, it practically melted in my mouth. I bought the steaks out of curiosity because the packaging said, *Grade 1 magic power beef raised in a highly dense mana environment*. It was definitely worth the price.

We finished breakfast after 10 minutes. I rinsed my mouth with some water and checked my smartwatch.

“What’s this?”

For some reason, I had 4 more points than yesterday.

“A monster came while I kept watch. I know I said we should separate tasks and take points for ourselves, but I thought I should split it since you were asleep.”

“Ah, thank you.”

I obtained more free points thanks to her.

“Then let’s split up for now. We should hunt.”

I spoke as we stood up.

* * *

The third day of the exam went smoothly. Thanks to my gift's increased grade, I could hunt monsters even without the Desert Eagle. Aether also adhered to the training handgun and strengthened it. Of course, I still avoided monsters above low-intermediate rank, grade 6. However, I could proceed through the forest and comfortably hunt from a distance

“A lake.”

I discovered a dimly lit lake that looked like a gold mine. The alligator monsters should give bonus points as ambush monsters. I could easily lure them out with a bright light that covered the entire lake. I happened to learn how not too long ago. Strictly speaking, I couldn’t say I *learned* it.

Light Sphere.

The magic Yoo Yeonha said no one else could perform. I created a brilliant sphere of light with stigma’s magic power. The white ball floated up and lit the surroundings. However, I felt a faint movement behind me as I sent it above the lake.

“Who is it!”

I shouted as the presence disappeared. They must've been quite skilled to escape my attention, but they couldn't avoid my eyes. I peered through the tall grass and caught sight of Chae Nayun. She slowly backed off, then stopped. She planned on tailing me again once the situation died down.

Tang. I shot a bullet at the ground in front of her. Chae Nayun's scream echoed throughout the forest.

Chapter 64

Final Exam (6)

Hiik!

Chae Nayun jumped out of the tall grass after screaming. She slowly approached with a sour expression.

“Why were you following me?” I asked with my gun still pointed at her.

“Don’t misunderstand. I wasn’t following you.”

Chae Nayun spoke as she scratched her face.

“Then what?”

“...”

“See, I’m right.”

I placed my finger on the trigger.

“Well, before that, how did you do that just now?”

She asked about the light sphere. My gun must’ve not threatened her enough.

“Tell me why you followed me first.”

Chae Nayun frowned and finally answered, “I wasn’t following you. I was following Seung-Ah unni.”

“Huh?”

I tilted my head. *Why did she suddenly mention Yun Seung-Ah?*

“Seung-Ah? The same Yun Seung-Ah that I know?”

“Yeah, but you should address her more formally.”

“...”

I turned around and pretended to think as I took out my laptop and checked the drone footage. Four drones flew around the area, and I found Yun Seung-Ah sitting in a tree above us.

“Yun Seung-Ah...”

“Hey, can you stop addressing her so casually?”

I knew she would be here as an overseer. She should’ve observed Kim Suho the first two days, and potential talents on the other days. If things went according to the original story, she should be watching Jayden. Could I be on her list of potential talents?

“Hey, now tell me how you made that light sphere.”

“Yeah, I’m the one who made it. Anyways, let’s hunt these together since you’re here.”

“No! I know you made it. I’m asking how?”

Chae Nayun couldn’t continue as the alligator monsters emerged from the lake. Magic alligators were low-intermediate rank, grade 5-7 monsters. They had blue skin and the ability to shoot magic power from their mouths. However, this attack only posed a threat underwater. Their threat levels decreased by half after surfacing. I pointed at the alligators and made an offer.

“Half-half?”

I would have a hard time killing them with a training handgun because of their tough skin. Originally, I planned on using my Desert

Eagle, but now I couldn't because of Yun Seung-Ah.

"First, tell me how you did— Ah, damn it."

An alligator fired a mana ball at Chae Nayun.

Mmm. I felt satisfied that my luck also helped me with such trivial matters.

* * *

Yun Seung-Ah looked down from a tree.

They almost discovered me.

Kim Hajin had surprised her when he created a light sphere. She would have been found out if it wasn't for Chae Nayun. Of course, most heroes could easily cast light sphere. However, the intensity of the light and the fact that he could already use such magic surprised her. Condensing magic power externally sounded easy, but was actually quite a difficult technique that even Yun Seung-Ah only mastered in the second term of her first year.

I knew that kid wouldn't write a baseless report.

Yun Seung-Ah smiled in satisfaction at Kim Hajin, who had effortlessly created a light sphere on such a scale.

I'll have to add a star above Kim Hajin's name.

* * *

I blasted 20 bullets into the alligator's wide-open mouth. *Wadadada.* I emptied the entire magazine in just a second. The alligator writhed in pain. However, I knew that wouldn't kill it. The finishing attack came as a flash of magic power shot out from a sword and severed the alligator. It helplessly slumped after Chae Nayun slashed it. No alligator could withstand more than a single strike from her. She literally split them in half with one stroke, a truly awe-inspiring power.

“Did you start using a sword?”

“...”

Chae Nayun silently sheathed her sword as I noticed her trembling hands and closed my mouth. The sensation of cutting through flesh must’ve felt unpleasant. I didn’t know what that felt like, which made me even more afraid.

“We’ll scan two each since there’s four. I’ll take this one and that one.”

I scanned the two smaller ones with my smartwatch. Chae Nayun scanned her two alligators, and the hunt ended. Now we no longer had a reason to be together.

“You should leave since we’re done here.”

“You really don’t want to tell me, huh. Is it so hard to explain how you made that light sphere?”

Chae Nayun pouted and grumbled. I answered her with a smile.

“You’ll get hurt if you find out.”

“What?”

Chae Nayun frowned. That was the truth. If I wanted to explain stigma’s magic power, I had to explain that this world was a novel.

“What nonsense is that?”

“Just go. I came here first, so you head that way.”

I pointed and went the opposite direction. Chae Nayun glared at my back before stomping away.

* * *

I quickly moved after splitting up from Chae Nayun. With my

thousand-mile eyes, I hunted for low-intermediate rank, grade 7-9 monsters. I obtained 15 points from monsters like wolves, deers, and octopuses in just two hours.

“...”

I stopped after feeling a presence from the tall grass behind me. She revealed her presence on purpose after tailing me the entire time, but she must've finished observing now. I patiently waited as she flew from the trees like a butterfly and landed about 50 meters in front of me.

“Hello.”

Yun Seung-Ah spoke with a bright smile.

“This is the first time since you turned me down, right?”

She brought up what happened at our last meeting. I had cold-heartedly rejected her business card.

“Right, but what is it so suddenly?”

“Ah, I’m sorry. It’s a bit sudden, isn’t it?”

Yun Seung-Ah nodded understandingly and continued.

“You see, I’ve been offering cadets a special event and testing their skills.”

“What? Event?”

“Yes.”

Yun Seung-Ah pointed at the nametag on her chest.

“Would you like to try taking it?”

“Yes?”

Someone could easily misunderstand her words from where she pointed. Yun Seung-Ah continued, unaware.

“The event is simple. I’ll stand here and only use my left arm. You win my nametag if you can make me move a single step or land an attack anywhere other than my left arm.”

“Nametag?”

“Yes, I’ll bet my guild on this promise.”

Betting her guild sounded more like a vow than a promise. I rubbed my chin in thought. That nametag was worth 200 points and would undoubtedly place me first. *What could I gain from first place?* First, I would gain quite the SP from guilds and djinns noticing me. Furthermore, I might encourage Kim Suho, who was supposed to get first place, to try harder. No, no no... I forgot the most important part, which was how to take Yun Seung-Ah’s nametag in the first place.

“I’ll stay here. Make your decision. You can challenge me or turn back.”

Yun Seung-Ah added as though she read my thoughts.

“It’s quite an unexpected event.”

I fired at her without warning, but she instantly struck the bullets down with just her left hand as promised. She treated them like plastic bullets.

“That felt quite prickly, far more powerful than a normal training handgun. Looks like your gift is related to guns.”

Yun Seung-Ah didn’t even coat her hand with magic power. Instead, she struck them down with pure physical ability to confirm their strength. For the record, aether had adhered to the training handgun and enhanced its power.

“Try more.”

I pulled the trigger ten more times as bullets flew at her almost simultaneously towards different parts of her body. However, Yun Seung-Ah struck them all down without moving a single step. She didn't use her magic power either.

"That was fast. I thought they came at me simultaneously."

Yun Seung-Ah muttered leisurely. I might have a chance with such a critical handicap. Perhaps I could try a feint since I also had two daggers.

I took out the two daggers from my waist and attached stigma's magic power around their handles.

"Oh, right. You used a sword before you switched to a gun. Using both at the same time is smart."

Her commentary annoyed me as I threw the daggers. One flew towards her chest, and the other at her face. Then I fired twenty bullets. I wondered how Yun Seung-Ah would deal with it.

Clang!

Yun Seung-Ah struck down the two daggers while blocking the bullets with her left arm. However, the daggers sprung back up and flew towards her heels. She said she would only use her left arm, so she shouldn't be able to reach her heels. To my surprise, she released magic power from her left hand and completely shattered them.

"Wow."

My attack ended in vain, but Yun Seung-Ah looked excited.

"Interesting. You changed the daggers' trajectory with magic power. What technique is that?"

You're like an onion, Hajin! I ignored the last compliment and scratched my neck. This event was impossible unless a lightning bolt or a meteor suddenly struck her. Even my luck couldn't make up for the absurd difference in skills.

I holstered my gun, but Yun Seung-Ah misunderstood as the magic power in her left hand became even sharper.

“What mysterious technique are you showing this time?”

She smiled and held out her hand blade. Yun Seung-Ah was still curious and unsatisfied. I admired her desire to collect talents. However, I turned around after collecting the shattered remains of my daggers. Then I walked back from where I came. Yun Seung-Ah’s surprised voice rang out after I took about five steps.

“Hello?”

I continued walking away as she took a step forward.

“Where are you going?”

Suddenly, I turned around.

“You said you’d only use your left hand.”

“Eh?”

I pointed at her right foot.

“But you just used your right foot.”

“...”

Yun Seung-Ah’s face froze.

“I’m kidding, hahaha.”

I chuckled and turned back. Honestly, I planned on arguing after the joke, but her glare felt too intimidating.

Let’s just go back and eat with Rachel.

“Rachel, stay with me for today.”

I said to Rachel on the fourth day during breakfast.

“...?”

Rachel tilted her head as she ate.

“The exam will end soon.”

An event would occur today. She should have faced it with Kim Suho, but I had to bring her there since she teamed up with me. This event was important because Rachel would obtain a clue towards her enlightenment.

“Everyone will be on edge. It’ll be dangerous alone.”

Today would be the last day to act since the exam ended tomorrow at 9 A.M.

“You have to protect me, Rachel.”

Rachel almost nodded, but suddenly tilted her head again.

“Yes?”

“You didn’t mishear me.”

I grinned and stood up. The butterfly seedling would be extremely dangerous. Thanks to aether, I wouldn’t die if its roots accidentally touched me. However, I would undoubtedly lose an organ or two.

“I need you to protect me.”

Chapter 65

Hatching (1)

The butterfly seedling was an elemental monster that would appear today and cause a mess. It had slowly grown its strength under the world tree's roots. I didn't write an exact reason why, but I would be angry too if over a thousand people suddenly barged into my home.

Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, and Rachel had defeated it together in the original story. It would leave behind an important gift called the butterfly seedling's dust for Rachel and Kim Suho.

"Come here."

I glanced behind me in case Rachel ran away. We only managed to kill four monsters that earned us 6 points each after walking around the world tree. I wouldn't blame her if she ambushed me and took my points.

"..."

Rachel unhappily followed as I tried to find as many monsters as possible. I checked the time.

[1:13 P.M.]

I couldn't remember precisely when the butterfly seedling appeared.
Do I have to keep walking around the world tree?

"I think the monsters are on the outskirts of the island."

Rachel finally spoke. All the cadets hunted near the outskirts too.

"No, I don't think so. "

However, I rejected her suggestion as she pouted. I continued walking until I saw her trying to escape.

“Where are you going?”

“...Just checking if there’s anything nearby.”

She followed me again after a dry excuse. After 30 minutes of wandering around the world tree...

Wooong—

I felt an unusual vibration like an earthquake. I looked towards the epicenter and saw a seedling resembling a butterfly emerge from the world tree’s giant root. Chae Nayun and Kim Suho were also nearby.

“Follow me.”

I guided Rachel with a serious expression.

* * *

Kim Suho walked through the forest with Chae Nayun because she kept getting lost.

“Hey, what do you think about Kim Hajin?”

The forest was still dark. Chae Nayun suddenly asked Kim Suho out of boredom because they couldn’t find any monsters.

“Kim Hajin?”

Kim Suho tilted his head as he stared at Chae Nayun.

“Why? Is he on your mind?”

“No, just that... don’t you think he’s hiding many secrets?”

The light sphere, the archery duel, and what happened in Paris. Chae Nayun thought there was more than meets the eye with Kim Hajin.

“I guess you’re right,” Kim Suho vaguely replied.

“What’s with that reaction?”

“What? You said he’s hiding secrets, and I agreed.”

Kim Suho evasively answered and smiled. He felt fairly certain that Kim Hajin liked Chae Nayun from their conversation in Paris.

“So what’s he hiding?”

— I’ve been thinking about her for far longer than you. And I’ve been watching over her all this time. So I know far more about her than you.

How much did he like her to say something like that? Kim Suho didn’t know because he had no such person.

“Hey, tell me.”

“Why ask me? You should find out for yourself.”

Kim Suho teased Chae Nayun with a smile.

“You...”

Woong—

An unusual vibration rang out. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun stared at each other before running towards the epicenter. They spotted a strange butterfly in an open field under the world tree.

“What’s that?”

It looked like a butterfly with wings. However, its wings were weaved from tree roots, and leaves grew on its face and body. It looked like a

craftsman had carved it rather than a living creature.

“It’s an elemental monster.”

Kim Suho noticed how the spiritual existence absorbed the world tree’s vitality to form a body. He held up his sword as Chae Nayun pondered whether she should use her sword or bow.

“Is it strong?”

“Looks like it.”

Chae Nayun chose the sword. Finally, the butterfly seedling moved. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun flinched from its chilling eyes.

“It looks super strong.”

“...”

Koooong—!

A large tendril tore through the ground. Several roots followed until it reached a dozen in every direction. They wriggled and struck down at Chae Nayun and Kim Suho. The two of them jumped back to dodge the roots.

Koong— Koong— Koong— Koong—

The roots endlessly swung at them.

“Hey! I think we need to cut them off!”

Chae Nayun shouted as Kim Suho nodded in agreement. They swung their sword against the flying roots. Kim Suho’s blade easily severed one, but it was simply too tough for Chae Nayun. Magic power made the giant roots as hard as steel.

As Chae Nayun struggled, a streak of red light shot through the darkness and struck the root. The bullet didn’t physically damage it,

but a fire burned it. Chae Nayun swung at the weakened root and easily severed it. Then a wave of crescent moon sword qi flew towards the butterfly seedling, but it barely dodged.

Chae Nayun turned towards the source of the two attacks.

“Eh?”

She saw the strange combination of an average-looking guy with a princess. Kim Hajin and Rachel had come to their assistance.

Koong!

More roots shot up from the ground. Kim Hajin retreated outside of range while Rachel gracefully dodged.

“When did you guys come?”

“Attack the main body!” Kim Hajin shouted from behind a bush.

“What?”

“The main body! Not the roots! Use your bow for today!”

“What are you doing back there?”

A root struck again as Chae Nayun shouted and hurriedly blocked with her sword.

“Hey! Support me like before!”

Rachel sent a wind blade instead of Kim Hajin and pushed the root back. Chae Nayun’s sword surged with magic power as she slashed the root in half.

“*Oho.*”

Chae Nayun liked the sensation compared to cutting down a living creature. She felt like she could improve. Magic power surged, and her

blade extended to 4 meters. She swung the magic longsword with all her strength.

* * *

“Argh.”

Chae Nayun went wild with her sword when a bow suited the situation better. I instantly emptied an entire magazine to slow down the butterfly seedling. A part of the butterfly seedling’s wings tore off each time a bullet hit. The butterfly seedling didn’t like it even though my attacks couldn’t detach its wings.

A root appeared from its back and swept the ground. I couldn’t react as it shot towards me. The vicious flying root suddenly stopped. A single sword had blocked it. Rachel appeared in front of me like a hero.

“...”

She silently looked back at me as I immediately retreated to a safe distance and more roots popped up. Although Rachel managed to dodge them, they eventually multiplied and surrounded her. A root struck her stomach and sent her flying. Rachel crashed into a tree some distance away and slumped down. I watched as she coughed up blood, but noted that it wasn’t a fatal blow thanks to her qi reinforcement. Still, she wasn’t in good shape.

Tong!

Evandel’s seed jumped out of my pocket as I wondered whether or not to take out the Desert Eagle. It bounced towards Rachel like a rabbit and stuck to her wounded stomach. Rachel writhed in pain and didn’t notice. I reluctantly let it be.

“That damned butterfly.”

I glared at the butterfly seedling flying in the distance. If I could just break those wings, Kim Suho should be able to handle the rest, but I couldn’t take out my Desert Eagle.

“Huuu.”

I had no other choice. I took a deep breath and imbued stigma’s magic power into the training handgun’s magazine to refine the bullets with the fire attribute. Unfortunately, I could only refine three bullets and wondered if that would be enough. I could worry later as I aimed and pulled the trigger. A bullet struck the butterfly seedling’s wing and exploded.

“Huh?”

I muttered in a daze and rubbed my eyes in case I was seeing things.

“What?”

I wasn’t going crazy. The butterfly seedling lost its wings and fell to the ground. Its wings didn’t tear, but completely burned with a single bullet. My magic power couldn’t possibly have such power. I carefully observed the surroundings.

Sure enough, I spotted a woman in the bushes. Boss, disguised as Seo Ijin, held onto a bead-like object and greedily looked at the butterfly seedling.

“Ah.”

It wasn’t my attack, but hers. She made it look like I shot it down and undoubtedly wanted the butterfly seedling’s dust.

Kim Suho charged at the fallen butterfly seedling and severed it in half.

A golden dust suddenly lit the sky like fireworks. However, this wasn’t the butterfly seedling’s dust. Boss had thrown out a sleeping powder. I covered my nose and mouth as I looked around. Kim Suho could resist status effects to a certain degree, but the beautiful sight dazed him. Chae Nayun also appeared half-drunk.

Meanwhile, Boss made her move. I tried to stop her, but an explosion of light suddenly occurred. My jaws dropped.

Rachel felt drowsy under the golden dust sparkling in the sky. She felt sleepier than ever before. It seemed like an elemental's power, but she closed her eyes since they defeated the monster. She couldn't believe that Kim Hajin blew up the butterfly seedling with a single bullet. She felt safe enough to take a break.

Please let me take at least third place if first place is too much to ask...

Suddenly, she felt an intense light even with her eyes closed. She slightly opened her eyes and saw a golden clump of light on her stomach. It shone brilliantly and formed a human shape. Rachel stared at the light embracing her. It wasn't a light, but a child around 3 years old. For some reason, Rachel felt familiar with the child's face. Soon, she realized why. The child looked like her younger self.

The girl warmly embraced her as the injury on her stomach began to heal. Rachel subconsciously stroked the child's hair, who innocently smiled. Rachel smiled back.

However, her face stiffened when the child spoke. She wanted to ask the child to repeat it, but her eyes slowly closed as a golden dust fell.

The child had called her *Mommy*.

Chapter 66

Hatching (2)

The seed suddenly hatched and caught me off guard, but I quickly snapped out of it. The dense golden dust blocked everyone's vision. No overseers or drones could capture what happened, and Rachel fell asleep. I could easily handle everything. First, I took Evandel off Rachel.

"Come here."

"Ah, *aaang*."

Evandel struggled to stay with Rachel, but her eyes widened when she saw me.

"That's right. I'm the one who raised you."

I comforted her in my embrace. She looked like a 3 year old child, but weighed like a feather. Evandel hugged me tightly and muttered.

"Daddy."

"Huh? No, I'm not. Anyways, can you change back to a seed, Evandel?"

"Seed?"

"Yep. Small and circular. You have to hide."

"What about Mommy?"

Evandel spoke as she glanced at Rachel. She surprised me when she called Rachel her Mommy.

“Rachel... um, Mommy is busy. So...”

“*Yaaawn*. I’m sleepy.”

Evandel slowly closed her eyes. Boss’ golden dust must’ve affected her. I panicked since I wouldn’t be able to hide her if she fell asleep. Thankfully, Evandel listened to my request and transformed into a giant seed that floated into my palm.

“*Whew*.”

I sighed and looked around the field full of golden dust. Kim Suho, who resisted, finally fell asleep. The few overseers who watched us from nearby also dropped from the trees.

However, I felt fine thanks to aether’s defense function. My breathing grew heavier, but I remained unaffected since aether formed a filter for my nostrils and throat. I approached Boss with a clear mind.

* * *

Byproducts of elementals like the butterfly seedling’s dust generally fetched a hefty price. Boss didn’t know its function, but she wanted it. She kneeled in front of the butterfly seedling’s corpse and spotted the clump of glowing blue dust from its gaping wound. Then she carefully picked it up.

“Put it down.”

She paused at the young man’s voice and slowly raised her head towards Kim Hajin.

“Hello.”

“That’s not something you can take.”

Kim Hajin’s face distorted. She stared at him and looked around. The sleeping powder filled the surrounding air, but Kim Hajin remained conscious. No one could endure the golden dust, yet he managed.

“...”

She couldn't understand this strange young man and felt the urge to continue observing him.

Black magic power rose from beneath her and formed a sphere that swallowed them into a sealed space. Kim Hajin showed no signs of unease even though she unexpectedly trapped him. No, his hands slightly trembled and his body shook when she revealed her real face.

“You know me.”

“Li Xiaopeng.”

He bluntly replied.

“...”

Who was Li Xiaopeng? Boss momentarily thought. Then she realized it was one of her fake identities and nodded.

“Right. Then why would I be here?”

“To serve as an overseer, I assume.”

“*Hmm.*”

Kim Hajin strangely misunderstood, but Boss didn't correct him.

“When did you find out I was Li Xiaopeng?”

“Just now—”

“If you lie, I'll kill... no, I'll hit you.”

Kim Hajin dryly coughed.

“When I took your watch, I closely observed you and realized

something was off.”

“How?”

Jain’s gift couldn’t be seen through so easily.

“I have great eyes, you see.”

What Kim Hajin said didn’t make sense. Not only had he seen through Jain’s gift, but also her necklace. It couldn’t be explained with just good eyes. Countless thoughts raced across her mind as she considered every possibility and selected the most logical hypothesis.

The attribute of his magic power is anti-magic?

He would indeed see through Jain’s gift with just his eyes if his physique applied the property of anti-magic to his magic power. Then he would only have to concentrate magic power into his optic nerves.

This wasn’t a matter of his gift, but his physique.

She only speculated and needed to confirm with more observation. She couldn’t risk losing him if he had such a physique.

“...”

Boss silently kneeled and grabbed the clump of dust from the butterfly seedling’s corpse. Kim Hajin swallowed hard, but Boss surprisingly handed it to him.

“I will give this to you, but in exchange...”

She paused. Her silence continued for a while because she didn’t know what to say next.

— Don’t say anything strange, Boss.

Jain’s voice sounded in her ears. She properly observed the situation this time.

— If you don't know what to say, just ask for a way to contact him. Don't rush it, and take it slow.

Jain sounded serious, which was rare. Boss took her advice even though the Chameleon Troupe already knew how to contact him.

“...Give me your number.”

* * *

The fourth day passed, and the final exam concluded on the fifth morning. The overseers hadn't expected the butterfly seedling and gave the four cadets who defeated it 20 points each. Cadets turned in their smartwatches before boarding the ship back to Cube. The eliminated cadets already left last night, so only about 700 remained.

The ship sailed through the blue sea as I leaned against the bow's guardrail and admired the beautiful waves. I took out my smartwatch and wondered when the Chameleon Troupe, or Li Xiaopeng, would contact me. I couldn't understand why Boss was interested in me.

“Hey.”

Chae Nayun approached as I contemplated.

“What.”

“How did it end?”

“How did what end?”

“The fight. I don't recall anything after the middle.”

Chae Nayun scratched her cheek as she looked at the sea.

“Kim Suho said your bullet destroyed the monster's wings. He's lying, right?”

“Obviously, how could anyone destroy that monster's wings with a

gun?”

I honestly spoke since it wasn't me who destroyed it.

“Right? That's what I thought too.”

Chae Nayun looked relieved for some reason.

“Why did you use a sword instead of a bow?”

“What? You're the one who told me to switch. How can you be so back and forth? Do you have an illness or something?”

“I mean, you have to be flexible. It's dangerous if you use a weapon you haven't practiced with in real combat.”

I would have felt responsible if she had been gravely injured. After all, I made her switch to a sword.

“I'm not so weak that you have to worry.”

Chae Nayun scowled. I nodded without arguing.

“So, how did a sword feel?”

“It wasn't anything spe—”

“You're still scared, right?”

“What? W-What are you talking about? Why would I be scared?”

She wasn't good at hiding her feelings. I stared at her and grinned. Her eyes shook whenever she lied. The unique setting I gave her remained the same in this world.

“You'll get better if you keep at it. You're a born swordsman.”

We finally finished all our exams. Rachel contemplated life while other cadets spent their weekend enjoying their freedom. She thought about her mystical experience on the island. She even called the English Royal Court's Department of Analysis because she couldn't understand it.

— A tree elemental?

“Yes, I saw something in the pollen. No, I felt it. I think it may have been the power of an elemental. What do you think, Raymond?”

Of course, it might've just been a hallucination. However, the memory felt too vivid and distinct. Not only did she remember the child's face and voice, but the child's warmth remained in her heart.

— *Mm...* that might be possible, but I can't be sure. The power of elementals remains a mystery. We still aren't sure if what Princess saw was an elemental or a fairy.

Rachel nodded, then nervously asked the analyst.

“Do you think an elemental could show the future? Even if it's not the future itself, something like a vision?”

— Ah, something similar has been reported in academia. It caused quite a stir.

Rachel felt her heart drop.

“Really? What was it?”

— *Mm*, it was a plant elemental as well. Someone said they saw their future after being covered in mushroom spores.

“*Huk!*”

Rachel let out a short scream. The analyst lightly chuckled.

— Judging by that reaction, Princess must have seen something too.

“Yes, I saw a child.”

—...

Silence descended for a moment. The analyst remained speechless for three entire minutes.

—... Child?

The analyst barely managed a word.

“Yes.”

— *Mm...* well, it could have been any child.

“She called me Mommy.”

— What?

The analyst let out a short scream as Rachel’s cheeks flushed red from embarrassment.

“And she looked just like me when I was young.”

— Uh...

“Raymond, do you think I saw my future?”

Rachel bashfully smiled and engraved the child’s precious warmth in her heart. She felt like she could smile every time she thought of her. If what she saw was her future, if she would someday have that child... she felt she could finally stop rejecting her life.

Suddenly, she realized the analyst had remained silent.

“Um, Raymond?”

— Ah, sorry. The chances of it being Princess’ future is... very small,

but... I just couldn't ima... imagine it. Did you perhaps see the father as well?

The analyst asked with trembling hands. As a loyal servant of the English Royal Court, he could not accept...

"No, I didn't see anyone like that."

Rachel bashfully smiled again.

"But if I saw my future, I'm sure he's somewhere."

* * *

"Daddy!"

"..."

A child about a meter shorter than me shouted with her arms open as I embraced her. She was incredibly cute, but I couldn't spoil her as a good parent.

"Evandel, you can't call me Daddy, okay?"

"Why?" Evandel tilted her head and asked.

"*Mmm...* because people will misunderstand. You should call me Uncle."

"*Eeeh?* Why?"

"Uh..."

I had no experience raising a child and was thankful we would have next week off.

"*Mm...* why don't we watch some TV? You know what TV is, right? You saw it before when you were young."

By young, I meant when she was still a seed. I left the TV on when I went out in case the seed got bored.

“Un! I like TV!”

“Good.”

I turned the TV to an animation channel with a penguin in glasses and a green dinosaur.

“Woaaaa...”

Evandel turned her attention to the TV with sparkling eyes and sat alone in front of the kitchen table.

“What do I do with this?”

I stared at the butterfly seedling’s dust glowing on the kitchen table. I managed to obtain it, but wasn’t sure what to do.

[Butterfly Seedling’s Dust] — Will attach to a target with magic power and help awaken their hidden potential.

The two keywords, *target* and *potential*, meant the dust could help awaken people and objects.

“Do I have to give it to Kim Suho?”

The butterfly seedling’s dust was supposed to help Rachel gain enlightenment and assist in Kim Suho’s second enlightenment. However, Boss had interfered and neither obtained it.

“Hmm.”

I needed to think more about what to do with this dust. For now, I wrapped it in a cloth and put it in my drawer.

Chapter 67

Guild (1)

Kim Suho headed to Cube's cafeteria after his evening training. Cube had several restaurants and cafes, but cadets could eat for free at the cafeteria. As such, Kim Suho and other non-wealthy cadets frequently ate at this place. Only a few cadets remained because of summer break. Kim Suho ordered a dinner set and headed to a random seat.

"Huh? Why are the both of you here?"

However, he found two unexpected people. Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun whispered among themselves when Kim Suho startled them. They awkwardly dodged each other's gazes.

"O-Oh, you're here."

Chae Nayun spoke up.

"What were you two talking about?"

"Nothing."

Kim Suho sat next to Chae Nayun as she sniffed him. "Did you come from the fitness center?"

"What's the point of sitting around, right?"

"You're obsessed. Can't you take a break for a day?" Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes at him.

"Rather than that, why are you here? I thought you didn't like cafeteria food."

Kim Suho couldn't understand why Chae Nayun was here. She always

ate every meal at restaurants, so no one would've expected her at the cafeteria.

"Well... I realized during the final exam that my pickiness could be detrimental."

Chae Nayun spoke in a grave tone, but Yoo Yeonha jabbed in.

"You stopped eating after three spoonfuls."

"...I wasn't hungry."

Kim Suho lightly smiled as he picked up his spoon. Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun glanced at him, then made eye contact. In truth, they had talked about what one would expect from girls their age. The topic of their conversation was the mysterious Kim Hajin. Suddenly, Yoo Yeonha had a mischievous thought. She tapped Kim Suho's shoulder.

"Kim Suho."

"Hm?"

"Are you close to Kim Hajin?"

Chae Nayun strongly reacted to Yoo Yeonha's question. She frowned and glared at Yoo Yeonha. Meanwhile, Kim Suho answered.

"No, I'm not that close."

"But you're probably the closest one out of all the male cadets."

"Huh?"

Kim Suho tilted his head. Yoo Yeonha smiled as she continued.

"Isn't it weird? Only a few in our class have talked to Kim Hajin. Whether it's a guy or girl, Kim Hajin never approaches them and coldly drives everyone away."

Chae Nayun's face contorted. Yoo Yeonha seemed like she planned on telling Kim Suho everything.

"But Kim Hajin always shows interest towards a certain person. Can you guess who?"

Kim Suho stared at Yoo Yeonha before slightly smiling.

"Of course, I'm not that dense."

"Really?"

"*Haa.*"

Chae Nayun sighed with mixed feelings and massaged her temples. Yoo Yeonha's face filled with enthusiasm.

"Who is it?"

Kim Suho looked at Chae Nayun without answering. They made eye contact, which was enough of an answer.

"*Agh.*"

Chae Nayun clenched her head and leaned against her chair. Then she faced Yoo Yeonha with sparkling eyes.

"Wait, Yoo Yeonha, wasn't Kim Hajin close to you first?"

However, Yoo Yeonha instantly shot her down.

"He approached me because he wanted something."

Kim Hajin had approached her first, but his interest disappeared after receiving the Desert Eagle. Yoo Yeonha wasn't disappointed since she preferred the transparent exchange. Then she asked Chae Nayun again.

"So what are you going to do?"

“Do what?”

Chae Nayun didn't answer because of Kim Suho. She glanced at him and tried to make him jealous.

“Hey, what do you think?”

“About what?” Kim Suho innocently replied.

“Oh yeah, you've been single your entire life.”

“So have you.”

“What? No, I haven't. I'll have you know when I was 7...”

“Oh, you guys are here too?”

Yi Yeonghan appeared out of nowhere and sat next to Yoo Yeonha. She scooted to the side in displeasure.

“Yi Yeonghan, you didn't leave yet?”

“Yeah, and it looks like I came just in time for the interesting part.”

“You should've left.”

“Aren't you being too mean?”

The cafeteria door opened again. Speak of the devil, Kim Hajin walked in. He came from the fitness center like Kim Suho as brushed his wet hair and pulled out a meal ticket. Yi Yeonghan chuckled.

“He's here too. At least he's working hard, right?”

Yi Yeonghan spoke condescendingly, which made Yoo Yeonha irritated since he had no idea.

“You should work hard yourself.”

“Huh? I am! My semester grades are higher than his.”

“Sure, just focus on your grades for the rest of your life.”

Kim Hajin received his food in a to-go box and turned around. He stared at them for a moment before leaving. Yoo Yeonha made a big fuss even though he only looked at them for a split second.

“You see that? He looked at Nayun just now.”

“Okay! I get it! Can you stop talking?”

Chae Nayun yelled, half-embarrassed and half-annoyed. Yi Yeonghan widened his eyes and joined in.

“What? Chae Nayun likes Kim Hajin?”

“What, where did that come from? Screw off, Yi Yeonghan.”

Chae Nayun reacted sensitively since Kim Suho sat next to her. Since Yi Yeonghan was a loudmouth, Yoo Yeonha gave him more fuel.

“No, we think it’s the other way around.”

“Ah, really? Kim Hajin likes Chae Nayun? But didn’t you argue and fight? Oh, is it like what happens in dramas? You know, love sprouting from fighting. Uh, I guess the gap in strength is too far for that, right? Rank 4 and rank 934 are too far apart.”

Yi Yeonghan quickly changed his tune from Chae Nayun’s killing intent.

“Screw off.”

Chae Nayun blurted and glanced at Kim Hajin out of curiosity. Kim Hajin just happened to look at them again, and their eyes met. She quickly averted her gaze and awkwardly scratched her face.

— The gap in strength is too far for that, right? Rank 4 and rank 934 are too far apart.

“What are they talking about?”

I only listened in at the end. I was just glad they didn’t notice I had two people’s worth of food. I no longer cared about what others said behind my back.

I took the to-go boxes and returned to my room. Evandel ran up to me as soon as I opened the door. I quickly shut the door.

“Daddy!”

“Not Daddy, Uncle.”

I placed the to-go boxes on the kitchen table after picking Evandel up.

“I brought food, but let’s test what we practiced before eating.”

“*Un!*”

I placed Evandel on the couch. Although she didn’t need to eat, she loved the taste of food.

“Okay, first, try this one.”

I projected a picture of an adorable cat from my smartwatch. Evandel transformed into the cat. She looked just like it, except for her blonde hair.

“Oh, great. Next is this bird.”

Evandel immediately transformed into a cute crow-tit. She was a bit big, but within an acceptable range.

“Well done!”

I patted her tiny head. Evandel transformed back and giggled.

“Did I do well?”

“Of course.”

Was it because she inherited Rachel’s blood? She was a good listener. My smartwatch suddenly rang as I showered her with praise.

[Guilds have released their selection of cadets for the Guild Experience Program. Selected cadets will be contacted via their smartwatch.]

The program allowed cadets to spend their break observing heroes at work. However, it didn’t concern me. Korean guilds could select three cadets from the first and second years. Most first year cadets had to be in the top 300 to have a chance. No matter how well I performed on the final exam, it wasn’t enough to put me above rank 300. No one would’ve picked me. My smartwatch rang again as if to prove me wrong.

[Kim Hajin – Essence of the Strait] [Contact us if you would like to turn down this offer.]

“Huh?”

Essence of the Strait chose me? Why?

“Ah.”

Soon, I figured it out. A certain girl had a strange fantasy about me.

“It was Yoo Yeonha.”

She had the authority as the guild leader’s daughter. Wasn’t this abuse of power? I hoped it wouldn’t cause trouble for her as the successor.

* * *

I enjoyed the warm weather in Seoul under the blue sky and sun. I only worried about leaving Evandel at home. I sternly told her not to leave the room, but still felt uneasy. Was this how every father felt?

“You’re here.”

I waited at Gwanghwamun Plaza as Yoo Yeonha arrived. She tilted her head at me.

“Wow, this is unexpected.”

“What is?”

“I thought you’d reject the offer.”

I planned to at first, but suddenly grew curious about heroes. I wanted to know about more things I hadn’t set in this world.

“We’re still waiting for one more person, but it’ll be a while. Should we go first?”

“I don’t care either way.”

“Then let’s go.”

A limousine parked in front of us. It looked long and luxurious like the movies. The driver came out and opened the door.

“Get in.”

I got inside with Yoo Yeonha. The car seats felt extremely comfortable. Just sitting in it made me drowsy.

“Let’s go.”

The driver drove off at Yoo Yeonha’s order. The limousine moved without a tremor, and we soon arrived at Essence of the Strait’s guild building.

As expected, the world’s second ranked guild looked spectacular. Each part of the building had been carefully designed with cutting-edge magic engineering and technology.

“Let’s head inside.”

Yoo Yeonha led me into the building. The lobby alone looked as huge as a concert hall.

“Offices for heroes are on the second floor and up, but there isn’t much to see on the first four floors. The real exciting stuff begins on the fifth floor. The first floor has the lobby you see here, a lounge, a training room, and a sparring room. Ah, there’s a sports field too.”

I was utterly absorbed in looking around the first floor, which Yoo Yeonha claimed didn’t have much. The interior looked sleek with marble flooring. I could see the indoor sports field in the distance with a grass lawn the size of a soccer field.

“First, let’s go meet the hero in charge of the program.”

“Oh, right.”

I came here for the Guild Experience Program. I almost thought Yoo Yeonha was the one in charge from her familiarity with everything. We stood in front of the elevator together.

“Ah, by the way, the person who isn’t here yet isn’t Chae Nayun.”

“Huh? Uh, okay.”

What was she saying out of the blue? I muttered thoughtlessly, but Yoo Yeonha looked at me and snickered. *Ding*— The elevator arrived, and we hopped onto the third floor. The third floor had a large circular lobby and office doors spaced out along the walls.

“Follow me.”

Yoo Yeonha guided me to an office labeled A-35.

“Honestly, you won’t be doing anything special. You’ll just look around the building today and interact with other guilds starting tomorrow. You might also shadow a hero exterminating monsters.”

Yoo Yeonha opened the door to a spacious office. The owner of the room seemed like a gentle character with all the flower pots under the window sill and documents neatly stacked on the desk.

“Have you heard of Park Sangho?”

“Uh, I think so.”

“Sangho is a very high rank hero.”

Honestly, I knew him better than Yoo Yeonha. Park Sangho acted as Yoo Yeonha’s right arm, but was sly and devious on the inside. He wasn’t a djinn, but would later betray Yoo Yeonha.

“Oh right, I saw that you did well on the final exam.”

“Please, I only had 67 points.”

“If you wanted to stay around the average mark, you should have given away 20 or so points. Now other guilds are starting to pay attention to you.”

“...”

“You don’t like being the center of attention, right? I’m just letting you know.”

I decided to just ignore the strange things she sometimes said.

Chapter 68

Guild (2)

“Oh, you’re already here.”

Park Sangho walked in as we looked around the office.

“It’s nice to meet you.”

Park Sangho held out his hand with a warm smile. He gave off a good first impression like an older brother next door, but his real self was completely different.

“Hajin, right?”

“Yes.”

I shook his hand.

“I’m sure I don’t need to introduce myself to Yeonha.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled at Park Sangho’s joking words. He hung his jacket on the chair and tapped the stack of documents on his desk.

“I know this is the Guild Experience Program, but we mostly work indoors. That’s why most team leader heroes with A-rank offices have 4 or 5 workers.”

Park Sangho continued in a soft voice.

“Dungeon conquests and monster subjugations require thorough analysis. Our work begins in the office, and we only set out when everything is perfect. However, *mmm...* let’s head out for now. Honestly, the office is a bit boring.”

Park Sangho led us outside. Yoo Yeonha followed as I stared at the safe in his drawer. It should contain condemning evidence that Park Sangho gathered about Yoo Yeonha's family.

"Hajin?"

"Ah, yes."

I hurried out of the room as Park Sangho called me.

"Oh right, there are also periodic deployment orders. You know how monsters have infested the North Hamgyong Province."

Park Sangho continued to speak as we walked.

"About 3000 heroes take turns every month to exterminate the monsters there so a monster outbreak won't occur. You'll also go there about twice a year once you become a hero."

Park Sangho stopped near the end of the third floor hall. We stood in front of a door labeled *Analysis Room*.

"I wanted to show you this place since I heard you placed first in theory."

Park Sangho opened the door. The analysis room looked surprisingly ordinary with tables, chairs, and fancy computers lined up.

"There's a separate conference room on the other side. Huge, isn't it?"

Park Sangho proudly added. Many heroes busily worked.

"Oh, Sangho, the kids are here?" A woman glancing at documents looked up at us.

"Yeah. Hajin, Yeonha, this is Yi Jin-Ah. She's a high-intermediate rank hero."

"Hi. You said two of the three were girls, so you must be Kim Hajin."

“Ah, yes.”

“The world sure has changed. Who would’ve thought rank 934 would visit our guild as part of the Guild Experience Program? I wonder who was behind it.”

Yi Jin-Ah expressed her displeasure in a roundabout way. However, she didn’t target me, but Yoo Yeonha. Of course, Yoo Yeonha didn’t look pleased. Yi Jin-Ah belonged to a different faction within Essence of the Strait. The guild’s vice-leader, Jung Hosuk, led this faction. However, she would eventually switch to Yoo Yeonha’s faction and become the guild’s vice-leader.

“Hajin is rank 1 in theory.”

Park Sangho defended me.

“Haha, rank 1 in theory? That’s amazing, so was I! However, cadets don’t learn much, so don’t be too overconfident.”

Yi Jin-Ah took off her glasses as she snickered. Then she tapped on the document in front of her.

“Now then, rank 1 in theory Kim Hajin. Would you like to take a look?”

“Hey, you can’t show the guild’s internal data so easily.”

“It’s not that important.”

Yi Jin-Ah stood up. She seemed slightly taller than me as I stepped back subconsciously.

“Here. It’s a copy, so you can do whatever you want. Don’t feel pressured.”

Yi Jin-Ah handed the document over. I took it and glanced at the equations and mathematical expressions.

“Take a look, but I doubt a kid can understand much.”

She ticked me off calling me a kid. I knew she didn’t mean my appearance, but I wanted to say my height was average.

“...”

I sat nearby and took out a pen from my cross bag. I also took out my laptop and placed it on the desk. My gift, Observation and Reading, activated. The problems estimated what could occur while conquering a dungeon. Wasn’t this job for ordinary office workers?

The calculation procedures and results appeared in front of me. All I had to do was copy it down. I asked Yi Jin-Ah.

“Do you have a piece of paper?”

“*Pft*, what do you need it for?”

Yi Jin-Ah sneered without giving me any.

“It’ll be difficult, Hajin. That’s not a normal exam problem.”

Park Sangho gave me the paper instead. I felt motivated because of her bitchy attitude.

I lightly clenched my teeth and wrote down the calculations. Yoo Yeonha suddenly spoke as I worked.

“*Um*, the other cadet just arrived on the first floor.”

“Oh, really? Let’s go together.”

Yoo Yeonha left with Park Sangho, but I stayed and continued to write. In academia, it was standard procedure to show every step.

However, Yi Jin-Ah snatched the paper and flipped it over when I almost finished.

“Listen, kid, stop wasting your time and screw off. Can’t you see? The other two already left.”

“...”

She looked scary with a frown. I stood up since the situation felt futile.

“I’ll leave my solution here, so feel free to look it over.”

“Don’t even try to waste my time, *tsk*.”

Yi Jin-Ah shooed me away and practically kicked me out.

“What a crazy bitch.”

I didn’t finish the last step, so she better not ask about it later!

I went back to the elevator and came down to the first floor. There, I saw the third cadet who just arrived. Chae Nayun shouted in surprise when she saw me.

“W-What!? Hey, why is he here?”

“Who knows?”

Yoo Yeonha playfully smiled. I also said something to her.

“You said Chae Nayun wasn’t coming.”

“Did I?”

Yoo Yeonha’s smartwatch buzzed. Her expression stiffened, so I wondered who it was.

“You two can go ahead. I need to use the restroom.”

She stealthily left.

Private Broker Yoo Jinhyuk. Under a worn neon sign, Yoo Jinhyuk stared in a daze at a document. This thin document contained a summary of an incident that occurred 16 years ago.

“Haha.”

He suddenly chuckled. He had explored Kim Hajin’s past for almost a month, but couldn’t find much because there were too many people tangled up in it. However, his interest increased along with the difficulty and he finally discovered a crucial hint.

[Kwang-Oh Report] [Casualty: 96] [Special note – the death of a woman in her last month of pregnancy.]

The *Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter Massacre* occurred when monsters flooded the Kwang-Oh Fortress and killed 87 ordinary civilians along with the 9 heroes who defended the evacuation shelter. The government and association concluded that djinns had planned it, but Yoo Jinhyuk knew the truth. The Yoo clan had kicked him out because he tried to uncover the truth a long time ago. Simply put, this 16 year old tragedy wasn’t the doing of djinns.

“...”

Yoo Jinhyuk knew the actual perpetrators. Unfortunately, most wouldn’t dare to name such influential figures.

First was Kim Sukho, then President of South Korea. Second was Chae Joochul, President of Daehyun conglomerate. Third was Yoo Taeho, Yoo Yeonha’s grandfather and Yoo Jinhyuk's own father.

Of course, they had only killed a few bugs from their perspective and employed a secret organization to prevent anyone from ever finding out. The three of them probably didn’t even remember this incident.

However, if there was a survivor... if Kim Hajin’s parents were victims of this massacre, and if his mother was the pregnant woman written in the report...

“Huuu.”

Of course, he hadn't verified the theory yet, but Yoo Jinhyuk wondered why his niece wanted to dig up this boy's past? Yoo Jinhyuk sighed and called Yoo Yeonha. She picked up almost instantly.

“Hello?”

— Yes, Uncle.

“You sound prettier now, kid.”

— Nevermind that, what happened to my request?

Yoo Jinhyuk casually glossed over it.

“Oh, that. I haven't been working on it. I've been too busy.”

— W-What? You're joking, right. Uncle?

Yoo Yeonha's angry voice stung his ears. However, Yoo Jinhyuk tried his best to sound lighthearted.

“Hahaha, I mean, why are you trying to find his parents anyway?”

— That's none of your business.

“What about him? Does he want to find them?”

This was an extremely important question. Everything would be fine if he didn't want to find out and just live normally.

— Yes, most likely.

“...And how do you know that?”

— *Hm*, what's up with all these questions?

“You know information is gold! I can finish faster if I know how he became an orphan.”

He seemed to have persuaded Yoo Yeonha. Soon, she whispered in a serious voice.

— You see, I think his parents were victims of a crime. He has the list of wanted criminals memorized.

Yoo Jinhyuk couldn't help but gasp. “He memorized the entire list?”

— Yes. I think he reached a certain point in his own investigation.

“...Right, you said he was smart.”

— He's rank 1 in theory. I heard he didn't miss a single problem on the midterm and final exams.

If he was that smart, he could've discovered the Kwang-Oh Incident. Thankfully, he took a wrong turn. The perpetrator wasn't some wanted criminal, but true nobles who still held significant influence over the country.

“*Hmm...*”

Yoo Jinhyuk sighed once again. He had to end this matter for his own safety. It would be bad if he dug too deep and that old codger noticed him. That old man was one of the strongest in Korea who fell just short of the Nine Stars. He was the second generation successor and the true owner of Daehyun, Chae Joochul the Immortal. Yoo Jinhyuk wouldn't be able to handle him.

“Ah, I just got a call. Let's talk later!”

The Yoo clan had grown, but used to serve as the Chae clan's hunting dog. Chae Joochul would abandon his hunting dog without hesitation, so he wouldn't mind the death of that hunting dog's children.

— Wait, Uncle, when will you be done with...

Yoo Jinhyuk hung up before Yoo Yeonha could finish.

* * *

“Why were you late, Nayun?”

Park Sangho asked Chae Nayun as they waited for Yoo Yeonha to return.

“Ah, well, I visited Grandfather.”

“Nayun’s grandfather? That must be... his honor Chae Joochul.”

“Yes, I haven’t seen him in a while, so it took some time. Sorry.”

“No, no, it’s only natural. I presume he’s doing fine?”

Park Sangho made a fuss since her grandfather was one of the strongest in the world. Every hero looked up to him.

“Ah, sorry, I’m done now.” Yoo Yeonha came back from the restroom.

Chae Nayun jokingly blurted, “Why does it take you so long to take a dump?”

“I didn’t. Anyways, Sangho, what’s our next schedule?”

Yoo Yeonha sounded somewhat irritated.

Chapter 69

Break (1)

We would experience deployment next in the Guild Experience Program. Deployment referred to heroes intercepting monsters that invaded civilian territory. However, such occurrences were rare in Seoul, so we took a portal to Essence of the Strait's Gangwondo branch.

“Park Sangho here. I just arrived in Chuncheon. Let me know first if there's any incident nearby. Ah, I have cadets with me, so anything above intermediate rank, grade 4 will be difficult.”

Park Sangho informed the branch of our arrival and turned to us with a big smile.

“Let's eat while we wait. I know a good restaurant nearby.”

Park Sangho took us to a fancy, traditional Korean restaurant.

“Four people, please.”

The employee led us inside. While we waited for our food, Park Sangho glanced at me and asked.

“Hajin, how tall are you?”

“Me? I'm 174.”

“So not that different from me,” Chae Nayun interjected.

“What? I'm a lot taller than you. You're 166.”

Chae Nayun was exactly 166.3 according to my setting. I needlessly attached a decimal unit because I was 174.3. Most main characters

had 0.3 attached to their heights.

“What.”

Chae Nayun reacted strangely to my thoughtless statement. She narrowed her eyes and asked, “How do you know my height?”

I froze at her question and couldn’t explain how I knew without being a stalker. I had blurted it out because she poked at my pride.

“Ca, cadet profiles are public.”

“Yeah, but still...”

Drrrk—

The door opened and interrupted our awkward conversation. The server placed several dishes on the table. Korean braised short ribs, grilled fish, steamed egg, octopus sashimi... my jaws dropped at this royal lunch. Everyone else looked completely indifferent.

“Now, let’s eat.”

I picked up my chopsticks at Park Sangho’s words and savored every dish while the other three leisurely talked.

“Do you have a girlfriend, Sangho?”

“I don’t. What’s your ideal type, Nayun?”

“I... like tall guys, so he would have to be at least 185.”

Chae Nayun’s words struck me hard, but I didn’t think it was any different from how guys liked beautiful women. Except for one problem...

“Yeah, my ideal type is someone tall.”

She kept staring at me as she spoke.

“He would have to be at least 15cm taller. *Mmm...* yeah, 15 cm... 20cm would be too much.”

What did she want me to do about it? Chae Nayun looked away when I frowned. A voice rang out from Park Sangho’s smartwatch in the middle of our meal.

— Deployment order for high-intermediate rank hero, Park Sangho. The coordinate is...

“Let’s go.”

Park Sangho stood up. Yoo Yeonha, Chae Nayun, and I quickly followed after him. We ran out of the restaurant without even paying as Park Sangho kicked off the ground and stormed away. Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun similarly chased after him. However, I quickly fell behind even though I ran as fast as I could.

“Is this a wuxia novel? They’re inhuman!”

They practically flew as I realized my lacking stats. It was impossible to catch up to their decades of hard work in just six months.

“*Huu... huu...*”

I ran without stopping. Thankfully, my thousand-mile eyes kept track of them, so I didn’t get lost. A fight broke out after three minutes. Five limestone golems shot up from the middle of the street. Limestone golems were at least low-intermediate rank, grade 5. They posed a great threat to civilians and smashed the buildings with their huge arms. However, Yoo Yeonha’s whip flew in to restrain them. The golems grew angry as they failed to cut off her whip. Meanwhile, Park Sangho charged in with his spear and thrust at a golem’s core.

“*Huk... huaa...*”

I continued running to the scene.

After 10 minutes, I finally spotted them with my naked eyes. A short golem around 2 meters tall approached Chae Nayun. She put away her

bow and pulled out a sword. Perhaps she thought she could take it on with her sword since it was shorter.

However, limestone golems had a special ability called self-compression. They became sturdier and stronger the smaller they transformed.

Koong—!

Chae Nayun's sword clashed with the golem's fist as dust scattered in the air. She fought normally and aimed for the golem's weak point after parrying its fist to the side. However, the golem intelligently responded by kicking Chae Nayun.

"Uk!"

Chae Nayun covered herself in qi reinforcement, but still flew back and grabbed her stomach. However, the golem gave her no time to rest as it bolted towards her and slammed its fist down. Chae Nayun froze from the fear of close range combat and her lack of experience. Something grabbed her by the waist when the golem's fist almost made contact.

It took me a moment to realize that aether coiled around her waist and pulled her towards me. It must have read my mind, which screamed, *I need to help her!*

"..."

I found Chae Nayun in my embrace before I could fully comprehend what happened. I silently stared at her. Honestly, I couldn't think. Aether... did the right thing. Chae Nayun would've been critically injured, but... aether did things a bit awkwardly.

— Gulp.

Chae Nayun swallowed hard. I felt like I had to say something.

"Don't go near the enemy if you're going to freeze up."

I wasn't in any position to say that since I chose a gun out of fear of close range combat.

“Just fight from afar. Your sword can grow longer than a spear.”

Chae Nayun's gift was Sea of Magic Power. It increased her innate mana capacity by several tens of times compared to an average hero. Of course, it took a long time to fill up her mana, and she was also limited by how much she could use at once. However, this limit disappeared when she used a sword as a conductor for magic power. That was the true reason why Chae Nayun had to be a swordsman.

“...Let, let me go.”

Chae Nayun pushed me away. She tucked her hair behind her ear and held up her sword once more.

“It just caught me off guard. Take a good look.”

Chae Nayun confidently spoke. Suddenly, I felt someone watching me. Somewhere... above. I looked up and saw a girl looking down at me from the roof of a nearby building.

“...”

Our eyes met and I felt like I knew her. She looked just like how I imagined.

“*Huaaaaap—!*”

Chae Nayun charged forward with a strange shout. Startled, I turned and the girl had disappeared by the time I looked back. I felt sorry for her since she was the antagonist who was supposed to be the original owner of aether, Tomer.

“Hey! Help me!”

I heard Chae Nayun shouting.

“The heck.”

Chae Nayun severed one of the golem’s arm and leg, but it grabbed her with its other arm as she dangled like a piñata.

“H-He, help! Ah, *uwaaat!*”

Chae Nayun screamed for help, but the golem flung her away before anyone could react.

* * *

“*Kuuuuu*. I’m so exhausted.”

Meanwhile, Yi Jin-Ah stretched after two hours on her computer in Essence of the Strait’s analysis room. Then a colleague approached her.

“Hard, right? You should just make the office clerks do it.”

Yi Jin-Ah analyzed the dungeon’s mana density based on its formation and monsters. She needed to find where the mana density suddenly changed, as well as the traps. It required an entire week even with a team.

“I just need to estimate one last variable. Plus, I’m smarter than them.”

Heroes were superior to ordinary people in every aspect. Yi Jin-Ah believed it was because of superior genes. She was also highly regarded when it came to analysis.

“You said it was a large scale dungeon, right?”

“Yep.”

“And you’re doing that alone? You’re really something.”

The colleague nodded and turned back. Then he spotted a piece of

paper on her desk.

“Hey, what’s this?”

Yi Jin-Ah glanced at the paper.

“I don’t know.”

“Isn’t it yours? Ah, but you don’t usually do calculations with a pen.”

“What are you talking about?”

Her colleague curiously scanned the paper. Yi Jin-Ah snatched it out of his hands. It contained several calculations and sentences explaining procedures.

“Oh, he wrote this.”

“Who?”

“Some kid who’s apparently rank 1 in theory. *Ha*, looks like he managed to write something.”

“You should take a closer look. It looked pretty good.”

“Oh please.”

She snorted as she read the paper to feel a sense of superiority. In her mind, countless cadets thought they were special, but were only mediocre.

However, Yi Jin-Ah’s face stiffened as she continued. The calculations were clean and concise, and every deduction was flawless and persuasive. What caught her attention most was his creativity in approaching the problem.

“The hell.”

She could only utter those two words because the final conclusion was

missing. It felt unpleasant, like being interrupted before the song's highlight.

"Where's the rest?"

Yi Jin-Ah flipped over the paper knowing nothing was there.

"Let me see too."

Her colleague reached for the paper.

"Go away."

Tak. Yi Jin-Ah shoved his hand and carefully folded it into her pocket.

"Hey, you said it wasn't yours. I found it, so it's mine."

"Please, I requested him to do it."

* * *

"Ah, I'm so exhausted."

I returned to the dorm around 9 P.M. Evandel slept on the couch after watching TV. I picked her up and tucked her in bed with a blanket.

"*Hmm.*"

I thought about showering and sleeping early, but suddenly remembered something important. I headed to the kitchen and took out the butterfly seedling's dust from the drawer. It still glowed with a brilliant, blue light. There was more than I thought, probably enough for three usages.

"It might be okay for me to use some."

I divided it into three clumps. As expected, each clump should be enough for its role. I already knew what to use it on. It would be a waste on me because my laptop could already view my status, and I

had no hidden potential. However, I could use it on aether.

I condensed aether into a ball and placed it on the table. Next, I grabbed a clump of the butterfly seedling's dust and sprinkled it on with anticipation. Just like snow, the blue light fell onto the ball and melted into it. Soon, the dust shone in aether's transparent core. Now, I just had to wait until the light fully spread.

Ding—

My smartwatch rang.

[Hey, thanks for today. By the way...]

It came from Chae Nayun. I stared at her message and waited for her to finish. She didn't say anything for ten minutes, so I messaged her back.

[What.]

[What.]

Chae Nayun replied instantly.

[What.]

I also replied instantly.

She said the same thing.

[What.]

“Sigh.”

[Just go to sleep.]

[lol No you.]

The conversation ended just like that. I felt somewhat moved by the string of messages. I managed to come this far after starting as an extra with no connection to the main story. If I had to describe myself now, I was undoubtedly one of the supporting characters. A supporting character that could change at any moment with no defined role.

—*Ding*

I received another message while feeling sentimental.

[There will be a shareholder meeting for Packhorse Master next Friday.]

“Looks like they’re going to announce their next move.”

It wouldn’t be long until I was swimming in money after Packhorse Master conquered the Suwon Royal Devil’s Nest.

—*Ding*

I received another message from an unknown number.

“What’s up today? I’m getting flooded with messages.”

I frowned when I read it. It came from a certain rude individual.

[Um, cadet Hajin? This is Yi Jin-Ah, you saw me during the day. Can we talk?]

Would you if you were me? That’s what I wanted to write, but she immediately called me. I didn’t pick up. Then I received another message.

[Ah, right, you’re coming to the guild tomorrow anyways. Let’s talk then.]

No, a day was enough to see how a guild operated. I had other things to do, like looking after Evandel and preparing for the story’s next arc. I pulled out Park Sangho’s business card and messaged him.

[Sangho, I'll be quitting the Guild Experience Program.]

[Huh? Why?]

Park Sangho immediately replied. I was about to say it was for personal reasons, but had a better idea. I could be petty.

[Someone told me to quit because I'm only rank 934. I thought I should allow another cadet the opportunity if I was only going to be berated. Sorry.]

Chapter 70

Break (2)

Yoo Yeonha diligently worked on her computer late at night. She analyzed the Guild Experience Program from earlier in the day and uploaded a job post on Violet Banquet. She had worked on this for a long time.

[Information Guild Falling Blossom – Now Hiring] [We are a new information guild looking for elite agents.]

She founded a new information guild. Of course, Essence of the Strait had its own information team, but that wasn't enough. Yoo Yeonha wanted independent shadows who specialized in it. She worked to establish it for the past year, and now she only needed to find members.

"I'll look into it myself rather than wait for that lazy bum."

She suddenly thought about Yoo Jinhyuk and growled.

Meow—

Yoo Yeonha's smartwatch meowed. She had personally set that ringtone and immediately checked the message from Chae Nayun.

[Hey, did you see the footage of our fight with the limestone golems?]

As expected, Chae Nayun asked about something completely random.

[Yeah, why?]

[Well, you see] [Um] [How do I say this] [Today...]

Chae Nayun bombarded her with messages.

Yoo Yeonha sighed. She knew what Chae Nayun wanted to ask.

[Are you talking about Kim Hajin saving you? The drones beautifully recorded it. He practically embraced you.]

[What... Why are you looking at that?]

[Because I have to write a report.]

Nowadays, drones arrived faster than heroes. They would be immediately deployed from the nearest hangar to verify incoming reports. Heroes only moved afterward. As such, drones had recorded the scene of Kim Hajin embracing Chae Nayun in high definition.

[Argh, don't you dare spread it.]

[I won't, hehe. So? Did you like it?]

[As if. Anyways, I'm going to a seminar next Tuesday with Kim Suho. Do you wanna come too?]

Chae Nayun quickly changed the subject. Yoo Yeonha briefly answered.

[No.]

[Shin Jonghak's coming too.]

[Fine, I'll go.]

Suddenly, a lion's roar sounded from her smartwatch. A call came from Park Sangho. Yoo Yeonha casually picked it up.

“Yes, Park Sangho.”

— Um, Yeonha.

Park Sangho spoke in a hurry. Yoo Yeonha frowned as she listened to his explanation.

— *Um*, it looks like Jin-Ah messaged Hajin. Hajin said he's quitting the Guild Experience Program because of it.

"What? Okay, I'm hanging up for now."

Yoo Yeonha bit her lips and fumed.

That damned woman must've finally gone mad. We should be sweet-talking him to join us, but this is what she does?

Yoo Yeonha felt enraged for the first time in a while. Yi Jin-Ah always criticized her for every little thing, but Yoo Yeonha endured it because Yi Jin-Ah was competent. Yoo Yeonha didn't act hostile since Yi Jin-Ah would eventually work under her. However, what she did today was unforgivable.

"I didn't want to resort to this."

Yoo Yeonha took a deep breath. She prepared her heart to maximize the effectiveness of this method. Just thinking about it made her blush, but she thickened her skin. *Huuuuu*— Yoo Yeonha took three more breaths and made a call. The receiver picked up almost instantly. She twisted her tongue as much as she could.

"...*Um*, Daddy. Were you sleeping?"

* * *

The next morning, Yi Jin-Ah stood with a straight back in front of vice-leader Jung Chulsoo. She looked upset as she explained what happened.

"Well, no, you see, vice-leader, I did message him after he left, but..."

"So it's true you privately messaged him. How did you even get his number?"

"Well, I have a friend who works in Cube as a vice-instructor."

The vice-leader sighed.

“What a mess.”

“No, vice-leader, I swear I didn’t mean to threaten him.”

Yi Jin-Ah almost exploded from frustration.

“I didn’t explain in detail, so he might’ve misunderstood, but...”

— Um, cadet Hajin? This is Yi Jin-Ah, you saw me during the day. Can we talk? —Ah, right, you’re coming to the guild tomorrow anyways. Let’s talk then.

Yi Jin-Ah thought back to her message. It seemed the cadet misunderstood her intention.

“Then why were you trying to talk to him in private?”

Yi Jin-Ah hesitantly muttered.

“...I wanted to talk about a scholarship.”

“Shut it. The guild leader is going to meet with you in private.”

Yi Jin-Ah’s face distorted at a private meeting with the guild leader. An outsider would think that was a lighter punishment than a demotion or a reduced salary. However, no punishment was more fearsome than Essence of the Strait’s guild leader. Yi Jin-Ah swallowed hard.

“S-Spare me just this once.”

“I’d love to, but I have no choice. It’s an order from the guild leader.”

“No, please...”

Yi Jin-Ah desperately begged. She was only 25. The last thing she wanted was to meet the guild leader, which supposedly made one age

by five years.

“It’s already decided. Go back.”

However, the decision was final. Yi Jin-Ah made a last-ditch effort.

“B-But come on! That kid isn’t up to our standards! He’s rank 934 for god’s sake! Even if he’s rank 1 in theory, he wouldn’t be here without his connection to Yoo Yeonha. A mere cadet shouldn’t be allowed to interfere with a guild’s administration!”

On the surface, everything she said sounded correct. Honestly, even the vice-leader doubted why they selected a rank 934 cadet.

“...Huuu.”

However, Yoo Jinwoong had cleared his doubts yesterday.

“You’ve heard of the mountain tyrant, correct?”

“Of course, do I look like a rookie?”

“Then you should know that we have the mountain tyrant’s vital point in our database.”

“Yes, although you wouldn’t tell me even if I asked.”

They kept data on high rank monsters like the mountain tyrant top-secret. Even within Essence of the Strait, no more than ten people had access to this information. Furthermore, those who knew were bounded by a magic contract.

“Come here.”

The vice-leader gestured with his hand as Yi Jin-Ah stiffly walked up to him. He whispered into her ear and she appeared dumbstruck.

“...Is that true?”

“Yes. Kim Hajin was the one who provided that information.”

“H-How?”

“This isn’t the first time we’ve seen an oddball among Cube cadets. I’m sure he analyzed it himself. It’s not like there aren’t videos of mountain tyrants. Didn’t you say so yourself? He’s rank 1 in theory.”

Yi Jin-Ah shut her mouth. It wouldn’t be impossible for someone so outstanding in problem-solving to find a few monsters’ vital points.

“Listen, this is why I always tell you not to judge people by their ranks. Ranks can’t fully encapsulate a cadet’s abilities.”

“...”

Last hiring season, you told us to reject anyone below rank 100. Yi Jin-Ah pouted, but didn’t dare voice her thoughts.

“Just accept your punishment.”

“Ah...”

A private meeting with the guild leader meant a hellish, week-long training. This *meeting* didn’t violate the law under the pretense of training. Anyone would be happy to train under an expert like Yoo Jinwoong, so you couldn’t complain about it either. Yi Jin-Ah wouldn’t be against it if she could become stronger. However, she would only serve as a punching bag because of their wide gap in skills.

“...uck.”

“What uck?”

“...Nothing. I’ll be on my way.”

Yi Jin-Ah bowed and turned around.

“I hope to see a new you in a week.”

“...”

“I’m only doing this because I care. You might be afraid now, but it’s better than having it on your record.”

The vice-leader admonished her.

“Also, don’t even think about contacting him again.”

“I won’t.”

“Good. You can leave now.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

The vice-leader spoke one last time as she grabbed the doorknob.

“Ah, make sure you apologize to him before you leave for training.”

* * *

[You have obtained 89 SP!] [A lucky bonus has been applied! You have obtained 12 additional SP!]

“What now?”

I nervously looked at my laptop when an alert popped up. I didn’t know what happened, but I always welcomed more SP. However, I didn’t have time to celebrate.

“Huu.”

I sighed and refocused my attention. Currently, I planned on spending around 1500 SP to create a new gift. It wasn’t a gift related to physical abilities or magic power. I realized from my fight with the golems that my physical stats would always fall behind. I would rather invest in equipment than my body.

I wrote the following gift.

[Random Consolidation System] [Low rank] [Spirit attribute] — Scanning: Will scan the designated equipment. — Random Consolidation: Will enhance the scanned equipment by 1-100%. The consolidation will last for 24 hours, after which the boost percentage will be randomized once again. — Growth: You may spend SP to strengthen the gift, Random Consolidation System.

The gift would fully utilize my incredible luck stat. Enhancing a gun would strengthen its accuracy, recoil, rpm, firepower, and stability. Consolidating a vehicle would strengthen its sturdiness, speed, fuel consumption rate, and maneuverability among other things. It might seem completely reliant on luck, but my luck stat surpassed the human threshold. This gift would be extremely efficient.

“Let’s go.”

I felt more nervous than when I enhanced my equipment in games.

“May Lady Luck shine on me...”

Tap. I hit *[save]*. A message popped up.

[You do not have enough SP. The gift will be modified accordingly.]
[An incredible luck has been applied! A portion of the gift has been restored.]

[Random Consolidation System] [Low rank] [Spirit attribute] — Scanning: Will scan up to five designated equipment at once. — Random Consolidation: Will enhance the scanned equipment by 1-44%. The consolidation will last for 24 hours, after which the boost percentage will be randomized once again. You may cancel an equipment consolidation, and it will return to normal in one hour. — Growth: You may spend SP to strengthen the gift, Random Consolidation System.

I wasn’t too happy, but my luck had already preserved some of its original effects. That meant the original was too strong, and I should be content with this.

“Hmm.”

I had racked my brains to come up with a new gift because of the message on my smartwatch.

[The Traveling Club will be heading to England next Friday.]

The next main story event had arrived. I picked up the magic sword from my drawer.

* * *

Rachel enjoyed the summer break in her room at the English Royal Court. She spent the entire day sleeping without studying, training, or facing any dangers.

“Uuun.”

The morning sunlight felt pleasant after 14 hours of sleep. Every day seemed brighter after seeing her future.

Tok tok—

Someone knocked on her door.

“Come in.”

Henry, the old butler of the English Royal Court, walked in. His hair had turned grey, but Rachel still felt more comfortable around him than her father.

“How was your time at Cube?”

“It was fine.”

Rachel replied with a smile. However, Henry knew the fears she suppressed in her heart.

“You don’t need to worry from now on. We made an agreement with Cube and will be sending a trustworthy agent.”

Rachel felt relieved and praised him with a gentle smile.

“Ah, about the cadet that saved Princess...”

He brought up the request she had personally made as soon as the final exam ended. Rachel’s ears perked up.

“The Royal Court will contact him soon.”

“Good.”

Rachel nodded in satisfaction. Of course, the English Royal Court wasn’t worth much compared to Korea. However, it was still competitive and had fairly distinguished heroes. It wasn’t a particularly enticing choice for the top 100 cadets, but Kim Hajin wasn’t in the top 100. He ranked strangely low at 934. However, his true strength was beyond that. Rachel recalled what happened that day. A single bullet blew away the assassin she struggled with.

Kim Hajin hid his true strength for some reason. Rachel felt happy since that meant fewer guilds would approach him. The English Royal Court held a special privilege that allowed them to recruit cadets before graduation. They could make recruitment offers without breaking the law.

“Thank you, Henry.”

“You’re welcome. Please rest Princess.”

The butler left Rachel’s huge room. She didn’t have many fun things to do. The many Welsh Corgis in the garden seemed to hate her. Rachel went back to rolling around on her bed. Suddenly, she rubbed her belly. Her stomach felt flat with well-defined abs, nowhere big enough to carry a life. However, one day... one day... A shy smile bloomed on her face.

Chapter 71

Break (3)

My summer break consisted of hellish training. I decided to invest in equipment, but that didn't mean I gave up on my body. I formed a workout routine from posts on Hero Community, and put my perseverance stat to use.

A week quickly went by. My physical growth felt stunted, but aether finished awakening.

[Aether - Awakened] [Mystic – Formless] [Evolving] A corporeal, yet formless weapon. Will adhere to and strengthen its master or a weapon. A mystical elemental's power has awakened a portion of its potential.

Master Selection: Will not adhere to another being once its master is chosen. — Physical Body Reinforcement: Will increase all variable stats by 0.7 points. — Weapon Reinforcement: Will adhere to its master's weapon and strengthen the attack power. Aether itself can form a weapon. (Current weapon-form aether rank – high rank) — Detail Materialization: Aether can manifest various colors and textures (cannot be too complex). — Evolving Weapon: All of the above functions will evolve along with its owner. Other functions may develop depending on the state of aether's awakening.

To summarize, my variable stat boost increased from 0.6 to 0.7, and it awakened a new function called detail materialization.

I liked this new function because aether could only appear as white or blue. Its weapon form was too noticeable, but detail materialization would now fix that.

An ordinary knife, hammer, or gun? It couldn't be too complex, so maybe a gun wouldn't work.

“Would it?”

It didn't hurt to try. I thought about forming a gun as aether squirmed around. Something went wrong and it ended up looking like a croissant.

"So it doesn't work."

Next, I easily formed a knife with aether. It had a 35 cm blade with a black plastic handle. I grabbed it and felt its texture. It felt no different from an ordinary knife. The keyword here was ordinary.

"Evandel, Uncle is heading out for a bit."

"Un."

"I'll bring back yummy food, so don't play with that for too long. If you get sleepy, just sleep."

Evandel molded her magic power around like clay. Her instinct as a witch told her to make ghosts. I felt glad that she played well by herself.

"Un."

"Make cute animals, okay?"

Please don't make humans.

"I know, I know."

Evandel covered her ears and shook her head. She didn't want me bothering her. It felt like she already started resembling Rachel. I stroked her head and left.

Cube felt empty because of summer break. Only a few rooms had their lights on. I enjoyed the scenery and entered a nearby forest. I stopped and held my aether knife in the middle of the forest. Then I quietly murmured.

"Scan."

The number 31 flashed on the blade before disappearing. It didn't look any different, but aether's output should be 31% stronger.

“...”

I stared at a large boulder about 200 meters away.

“*Huup!*”

I threw the knife at it. The streak of light went through without stopping and split the boulder in half. The knife continued flying until it returned to my hand at a thought.

“*Oho.*”

Detail materialization enhanced aether's power to a considerable extent.

“Not bad.”

The extraordinary appearance of weapon artifacts always befitted their power. However, the weapon in my hand was different. It looked like an ordinary knife even though it could penetrate a boulder. I didn't know if it could break a qi reinforcement, but an ordinary appearance induced carelessness that could lead to a lethal blow.

* * *

The traveling club gathered under the blazing sun at noon. We planned to meet at the Seoul portal station. Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, and Yoo Yeonha had already arrived.

“God, it's so hot. When are they coming?”

Chae Nayun grumbled as she fanned herself with her hand. Yoo Yeonha muttered from next to her.

“Who told you to wear the cadet uniform?”

“...”

Chae Nayun wore her cadet uniform instead of a 3 million jacket with temperature control because she thought Kim Suho would do the same. Instead, Kim Suho wore a white shirt with black slacks. It suited him so well she couldn't even get angry.

“Oh look, here comes another cadet uniform.”

Yoo Yeonha pointed into the distance. Chae Nayun turned and spotted Kim Hajin. He also wore a cadet uniform with a black jacket on top.

“How is he not burning in that thing?”

Kim Hajin felt great contrary to what Chae Nayun thought. He wore the cloth armor from Rachel, which contained temperature control. Kim Hajin walked up to them.

“Hey, Hajin.”

Kim Suho waved at him.

“Yeah.”

Kim Hajin nodded. Chae Nayun smirked as she looked between them. They acted so awkwardly. Suddenly, Oh Hanhyun yelled and clapped.

“Now that Hajin is here, let's go!”

* * *

We arrived in London after checking in our passports at the station. The scenery looked crowded, yet beautiful.

“As you all know, we will be going to Clancy Islet today.”

Clancy Islet served as a gathering place for the European upper class. It was well known for gambling, shopping, fine dining, and entertainment like America's Las Vegas.

“Hmm, good, very good.”

Chae Nayun sounded excited as she clenched her fists.

“We have free time, right?”

“Yes, until 7:00 P.M. There’s a big event at Clancy Islet tonight. They happily said yes when I contacted them.”

Like Oh Hanhyun said, a big event would occur tonight. It would draw all sorts of unwanted flies. No, they were too strong to be called flies. Perhaps they should be called beasts.

“Alright, let’s go.”

We walked along the Thames River for about 10 minutes and spotted an island floating in the sky. It looked about 4 square kilometers in size and floated around 700 meters in the air.

Clancy Islet, the floating island, had been created with the English government’s buoyancy stone. This island generated close to 30% of England’s tourism revenue.

“Wow, it’s been so long. I must have been 11 when I last visited.”

Chae Nayun looked nostalgic, but her face quickly darkened. Her older brother must’ve been with her last time.

“It’s my first time here. Are you going to guide us?”

Kim Suho asked. Chae Nayun cheered up and replied, “Of course!”

Everyone continued chattering as I listened half-heartedly.

“Hajin, have you been here before?”

Kim Suho suddenly asked me.

“No.”

“Oh, then the two of us are newbies.”

“I guess we are.”

We arrived at Clancy Islet’s entrance as I chatted with Kim Suho. A portal on the Thames River led to the island and stricter security surrounded it.

“Here’s my cadet ID and an invitation from Jamie Kim.”

Oh Hanhyun approached one of the guards in front of the entrance.

“Wait here.”

The guard left to confirm the invitation letters and quickly returned to let us in. Of course, we went through baggage inspection and a body scanner to make sure we didn’t carry any weapons.

“How strict.”

Clancy Islet offered everything in regards to money: casinos, dueling arenas, auction houses, academic seminars, lectures, corporate keynotes, etc. It wasn’t an exaggeration to say Clancy Islet was why England remained the second most powerful country in Europe.

“We can go to the casino, right?”

Chae Nayun asked because she couldn’t wait.

“Yes, Cube cadets are treated like adults here.”

Being a Cube cadet allowed minors to do things they normally couldn’t. Furthermore, the country would take responsibility if a problem arose. Of course, that didn’t mean we could commit crimes.

“Nice!”

Chae Nayun clenched her fists. However, her excitement would disappear in just three hours. She brought 300 million won today,

which was half the amount she had saved up from allowances. She should've budgeted 15% for gambling and the rest for shopping, but she would blow it all. Even as the original author, I couldn't fathom whether it was more absurd to have 300 million won in allowances or to lose it all in three hours.

"Huu."

I tried to stay calm, but I also felt nervous. Casinos were like gold mines to me. I didn't plan on going overboard, but I didn't intend on leaving empty-handed either. I planned to make as much as I could before tonight's incident.

"Let's go in."

We walked into the portal.

The scenery changed in the blink of an eye.

A giant fountain, a flamboyant casino hotel, an auction house, a fancy restaurant, and fleeting clouds. It looked like paradise on earth.

"Casino! Who wants to go to the casino!"

Chae Nayun shouted excitedly. Yoo Yeonha and Kim Suho tagged along with no other choice. I also planned on going to the casino, but I didn't follow them.

"Hajin, where are you gonna go? Kim Suho asked me.

"I'm tired, so I'll rest in my hotel room and grab lunch after."

* * *

I headed straight to the casino after I dropped off my bag. My first time at a casino felt more amazing than I imagined.

"Ooh."

The sound of spinning slot machines resounded in a large area without mirrors or clocks. Various languages went back and forth.

What should I do? The slot machine? Or one of the tables? Ah, I have to get some chips first.

First, I headed to the currency exchange with 10 million won in cash.

“Can I see your ID?”

The cashier spoke in fluent Korean with a bright smile. I gave her my cadet ID and she converted my money into chips without batting an eye. I casually asked her.

“How long have you been working here?”

The cashier, or rather Jain disguised as the cashier, replied with a smile.

“It’s been six years.”

“It’s been a while.”

“Yes.”

I took my chips and left.

* * *

Do I go for a slot machine jackpot? Or do I empty a dealer?

“Ah, so close!”

Chae Nayun’s voice rang out as I contemplated.

“You lost by an inch.”

Chae Nayun sat at a seven-card stud table. The casino had many

different poker tables, but only three of the seven-card stud variant. She only knew how to play seven-card stud.

“Man, I almost had it...”

“You were close, haha.”

The man next to her comforted her.

Close my ass. Anyone could spot a pushover like Chae Nayun. All four people at the table with her worked together to scam her. She lost 10 million won from the last pot and stood up.

“I’m leaving.”

“Haha, see ya. I feel bad taking money from a kid. Here, I’ll give you 25% back.”

The leader of the four provoked her. Bert, the scammer, was a tall Caucasian man who rarely lost in my novel.

“What? It’s only pocket change. I can make it back whenever I want.”

Chae Nayun sat back down as her competitive spirit burned. Bert bared his teeth and handed a stack of chips to Chae Nayun.

“Come on, don’t be like that. Here, just take this and go. I’m just being nice, young lady.”

“Screw that, let’s go again.”

Chae Nayun fell into their trap just like that. She won the next two pots and earned 3 million won, then lost 8 million on the third. She earned 2 million on the fourth, then lost 20 million on the fifth and sixth.

“Ah, so close.”

Bert lost on purpose on the eighth. Chae Nayun laughed, not knowing

he only pretended.

“Please, I was obviously going to win that one,” Chae Nayun overconfidently replied.

“Maybe?”

Bert was a scammer, but he didn’t cheat. Casino cards were specially made artifacts that no hero could see through (except for me) or tamper with.

Bert only read the faint changes in Chae Nayun’s expressions to read her hands. She didn’t stand a chance since players held more cards in seven-card stud.

“*Sigh*. I fold.”

The rounds continued until the eleventh. Chae Nayun folded with two pairs. Bert had one pair, and his teammate held a high queen.

“I fold too.”

However, Bert folded to provoke Chae Nayun. Then he asked his teammate with a crafty smile.

“Hey, can I see your hand? I’m curious what you had.”

“Haha, it wasn’t my pot to win.”

Chae Nayun’s face turned red when his teammate revealed a high queen.

“Aw, come on!”

No one could stop Chae Nayun now. She would lose all her money in two hours and hole up in her hotel room crying. Of course, I didn’t care about Chae Nayun’s grievances. However, I was interested in Bert the scammer. I slowly approached their table and tapped on her shoulder.

“Hey, stand up. I’ll play.”

“W-What, when did you get here?”

The scammers’ faces stiffened when I tried to replace Chae Nayun. They quickly acted.

“Ah, I got a phone call. I’ll stop here.”

One member stood up and pretended to pick up a call. Bert spoke with a smile.

“Looks like there’s an open seat.”

“Can I join?”

I sat down, pretending not to know what he was doing. Bert welcomed me with a big smile.

“Of course.”

“Hey, are you sure you have the money? The minimum bet is 100,000 won,” Chae Nayun worriedly asked me.

“I’m fine, just play.”

The game resumed as the dealer dealt us three cards each. Everyone checked their hands and picked one to reveal.

“*Hmm?*”

However, I left my cards exactly where the dealer placed them. I didn’t bother checking them at all.

“Hey, aren’t you going to look at your hand?”

One of Bert’s team members asked. I smiled and nodded at the bald man with an intimidating face.

“No, I’m not.”

I could see what was on them without flipping them over. Two queens of hearts and a three of spades.

“You know the rules, kid?”

“What, you think I would be here if I didn’t?”

Eeny, meeny, miny, moe. I sang as I flipped over the three of spades. Veins bulged on the man’s temples.

“What’s your problem?”

“What’s yours?”

“What?”

“Hey.”

Bert quickly cut in.

“Haha, can’t you see what he’s wearing? That’s a Cube cadet uniform. Let’s be respectful, yeah?”

Bert looked a bit stiff himself. Even the almighty Bert didn’t expect someone to not look at their hand.

Technique in gambling only went so far. Luck reigned as king.

* * *

“Reporting. Six djinns from Evil Society, three heroes from the association, and some random scammer. Oh, and there’s one person from the Vast Expanse. It looks like he’s here to sightsee.”

Jain reported her findings. All sorts of people flocked to this huge event. She only reported what she had confirmed, but more undoubtedly lurked in the shadows.

“Oh right, also Kim Hajin who Boss likes.”

Jain ended her report with Kim Hajin.

— Standby for now. Also, I do not like Kim Hajin.

“Really? I didn’t know.”

Jain ignored the latter part of Boss’ sentence.

“By the way, Kim Hajin saw my face. Do you think he noticed?”

— He needs to concentrate magic power into his eyes to see through your gift. There’s no reason he would use magic power while looking at an ordinary person.

“I guess so. I didn’t feel any magic power either.”

Chapter 72

White Crystal (1)

Seven-card stud had simple rules. The dealer dealt three cards each to the players. Each player chose one of the three cards to reveal while keeping the other two hidden. Then the players would bet as the dealer provided each with a new open card. The betting would cease when the number of cards reached seven, and the player with the best hand would win.

“This bastard really won’t look at his hand. Look at your hand for god’s sake! How can you be so confident?”

“You’ll read my face. I’m not confident in my poker face.”

The bald guy kept pestering me. However, I only glared at Bert. To be exact, I glared at the obsidian bracelet on his left wrist. Bert had obtained it through one of his scams, but he didn’t know it was an artifact. I wanted his bracelet instead of his money.

We played our twelfth round. Chae Nayun remained in the negative as my chips multiplied to 60 million won.

“*Tsk.*”

Bert looked understandably angry. I would be angry too if a random kid barged in on my scheme and took 50 million won. However, he currently had the best hand. The dealer had already dealt five cards, with two left. Bert would complete a full house with another ace.

“Next hand.”

The dealer dealt the sixth round of cards. Bert picked up an ace of hearts and completed his full house.

The chances of an ace-high full house were 0.144%. That hand would only lose against a four of a kind, a straight flush, or a royal flush. The chances of a four of a kind when someone else already held a full house were lower than winning the lottery. Bert showed no signs with a perfect poker face.

“Hmm.”

My luck still gave me the advantage because an opponent with a full house wouldn't fold. That said, I still hadn't completed my four of a kind. I had the deuce of diamonds, the deuce of hearts, and the deuce of clubs. I needed the deuce of spades. However, I trusted my luck.

“Call”

Bert calmly betted.

“I raise!”

The bald man increased the pot with a terrible hand. He must've received a sign from Bert.

“Call.”

Chae Nayun also carefully called. She played terribly.

I also called just like Bert wanted. The maximum betting limit for this table was 500 million won. I made quite a bit, but paled in comparison to the richer players at the table. I went all-in with that last call.

“Here's the final card.”

Deuce of Spades. I completed my four of a kind.

“Ah, kid, you already went all-in, so you can't bet anymore, huh.”

I ran out of money with one round of betting left.

“Why don’t you bet that ring on your finger instead?” Bert casually asked. He noticed the ring on my finger wasn’t ordinary. As expected, he had good eyesight for a scammer.

“What!” However, Chae Nayun strongly reacted. “Is this guy crazy? Hey, let’s just leave!”

“What, the game isn’t even over yet. Just stay put.”

“It’s fine, I’ll give you the money you would’ve lost—”

“Just sit.”

What’s up with her? I grabbed Chae Nayun’s wrist and made her sit.

“Fine, I’ll bet this priceless ring, so you bet that too.”

I pulled off my ring and placed it on the table. Then I pointed at the obsidian bracelet on his wrist. Bert took off his bracelet after thinking for a moment.

“Deal.”

Chae Nayun whispered in my ear with a worried expression. “Hey, are you really okay with that? That’s your family keepsake—”

“I won’t lose, so just stay put. I would’ve folded if I didn’t stand a chance.”

I didn’t even hear what Chae Nayun said.

“Now then.”

The pot size increased to 300 million won, but the real value was much higher with the two artifacts.

“What will the others bet?”

Bert’s teammates immediately folded when I asked.

“...I also fold.”

Chae Nayun also backed out and fell silent. Only Bert and I remained.

“Then shall we show our hands?”

“Sure.”

“I’ll go first.”

Bert revealed his ace-high full house.

“Full house?”

Chae Nayun’s face stiffened. She seemed to care more about this match than I did.

“Haha, sorry, kid.”

Bert grinned and proceeded to sweep the chips like the stereotypical person about to lose.

“Hold on, I haven’t revealed my hand yet.”

“...What?”

I grabbed the loser’s wrist like in the gambling movies and stopped him from taking the chips. Then I slowly revealed my hand. All four cards with the number 2.

“Four of a kind. It’s my win.”

Bert’s expression immediately darkened. Chae Nayun clasped her hands and shouted, “Wow! Four of a kind! H-How!”

She expressed her shock and excitement. I already knew I would win, but it still felt ecstatic.

Bert made a big scene and called me a scammer. However, Chae Nayun subdued him before the security guards could even arrive, and I grabbed all the chips along with his obsidian bracelet.

[Athenian Citizen's Obsidian Bracelet] [Magic Artifact] A bracelet with magic seals.

Magic Seal (1/4) — Shock Absorption & Automatic Recharge: When its wearer takes damage, a certain amount will be converted into magic power and stored in the bracelet. Will slowly recharge magic power when exposed to air.

The wearer couldn't use the stored magic power directly as it only lingered inside the bracelet. That was why Bert didn't realize the true worth of this bracelet until a year later. Of course, that occurred in the original story. He would never find out now that I had obtained it.

The bracelet could simply be used if you engraved another magic seal onto it. This bracelet could store up to four magic seals. For now, I planned to add seals that enhanced my physical attributes.

"What were you going to do if you lost?" Chae Nayun asked from next to me.

"Jump off a bridge."

I meant it as a joke, but she looked serious.

"Don't say that. You have to live your life to the fullest."

Her serious tone surprised me.

"What is it all of a sudden? You want your money back?"

Of the 300 million I won, 100 belonged to Chae Nayun.

"No, you keep it. You won it fair and square. I'll consider it as a lesson

to never gamble again.”

Chae Nayun walked away while grumbling. She planned to leave the casino.

“Oh, by the way.”

She faced me and spoke after slightly hesitating.

“You were pretty cool today.”

She turned back and left.

“...I guess I was.”

Of course, I had no plans to leave yet. I stood in the middle of the casino floor and breathed in the heated atmosphere.

Trrrrr—

The sound of a spinning roulette struck my ears. I could hear people screaming at a baccarat table. Slot machines tempted more gamblers with their addictive tunes. Dealers laughed and tables stacked with chips and cards.

In this casino, where luck decided fortune, I reigned as king.

“...”

I clenched my fists and picked a target. The first would be roulette. I walked up with conviction and placed down 100 million won.

“1 to 12.”

The spectators curiously glanced at me.

Chweek—

The roulette spun. Its destination landed on... number 12.

“Oooh!”

Everyone cheered as my money increased to 130 million won. I confidently smiled and tried all sorts of games after that.

Blackjack. Indian Poker. Baccarat. Texas Hold'em. Even Go-Stop.

My money multiplied like a colony of bacteria every time I moved to a new table.

* * *

The traveling club met 50 minutes before the event at 6:10 P.M. Everyone waited at the appointed location except for Kim Hajin.

“Ah, Hajin is here.”

Kim Suho pointed into the distance.

“Finally, why is he always la...”

Chae Nayun couldn't finish her sentence. Kim Hajin had changed significantly compared to a few hours ago. His shaggy hair was neatly brushed up, and he now wore a brand-name suit. His luxury dress shoes also made him 6 centimeters taller as he confidently walked up.

“...”

“...”

“Oh, Kim Hajin! What happened?”

Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha stood with their jaws dropped as Kim Suho asked. Kim Hajin grinned and his white teeth glistened under the sunlight.

“What, did you get your teeth whitened too?”

Chae Nayun asked dumbstruck.

“*Hm?* Ah, something like that.”

Kim Hajin had checked whether an antique shop carried any useful items with his laptop. Then he found a 300 year old toothbrush which supposedly increased the charm stat by 0.01 points. It also included teeth whitening.

“Your clothes... did you buy them?”

“Yeah.”

Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun scanned him from top to bottom. Kim Hajin confidently crossed his arms and even put on sunglasses.

Suddenly, a soft voice spoke.

“Oh, who’s this?”

The group turned and spotted Kim Junwoo, a hunter of the Vast Expanse.

“Chae Nayun?”

Kim Junwoo looked at her and waved. Chae Nayun’s eyes widened.

“Ah! Why are you here, Oppa!”

“Nothing much, just hanging out.”

Kim Junwoo scratched his head and modestly smiled. Yoo Yeonha approached him with sparkling eyes.

“Could you be... Kim Junwoo from the Vast Expanse?”

“Yup, that’s me. Looks like my name is still worth something, haha.”

“It’s nice to meet you.”

Yoo Yeonha shook hands with him. Then Kim Junwoo turned towards Kim Hajin and seemingly recognized him.

“Ah! You’re the kid making bank at the casino! You are Nayun’s friend? Nice to meet you, man. I’m jealous, I only lost money.”

“Making bank?”

Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, and Kim Suho simultaneously tilted their heads.

“Yeah, I think he made around... 2 billion?”

“2 BILLION!?!?”

The three of them all shouted. Even for Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun, 2 billion won was worth a lot. Kim Junwoo rubbed his chin and spoke.

“I think so. A bunch of big guys in suits dragged him out after a while.”

“They didn’t drag me out. They gave me a key to the hotel’s best suite and even guided me there to take a break.”

“Oh, is that what happened?”

Kim Junwoo nodded with a smile. Then he glanced at Kim Suho. He chuckled like an old man and whispered into Chae Nayun’s ear.

“Who’s he? Your boyfriend?”

“W-What are you talking about?”

Chae Nayun glanced at Kim Suho, then at Kim Hajin.

“He’s not.”

Kim Junwoo mischievously smiled at her reaction.

“Don’t tell me, you’re hunting two rabbits at the same time?”

“W-What are you talking about!”

“Polyandry should be okay for someone like you, Na— *Uk!*”

“Stop!”

She elbowed Kim Junwoo’s solar plexus as he held his stomach in exaggeration and surrendered.

Meanwhile, Evil Society’s Bermund hid and watched the rowdy scene. His strength measured around the middle among everyone attending today.

“Kim Junwoo doesn’t seem to know. Yes, I’ll join up soon.”

He turned back after finishing his report.

“...!”

A woman enveloped in darkness appeared. Immediately, Bermund became breathless. Long black hair and deep dark eyes that seemed to devour him. She stared at Bermund before calling someone.

“Jain.”

“Yeah, I’m here.”

Another woman appeared beside her as Bermund felt his death.

* * *

A limousine parked in front of the Thames River leading to Clancy Islet. Countless reporters and cameras surrounded the limousine as the door opened. Rachel stepped out in a beautiful silver dress. The cameras busily flickered as the princess and pride of England

appeared.

“Do you have any thoughts on tonight’s event?”

“According to rumors, you lost your first place in theory at Cube. Do you have any comments?”

Rachel smiled and continued walking. She wasn’t accustomed to wearing high heels, but proceeded more perfectly than any model. Rachel met with a businessman in front of the portal.

“Thank you very much for personally visiting us today, Princess.”

Zelen, the CEO of the multinational Roton Corporation, greeted her. Today, he would personally reveal how to effectively utilize the *[White Crystal]* in Clancy Hall. The object contained tens of thousands of concentrated magic power. Roton Corporation had asked the English Royal Court to attend and increase the event’s prestige. Rachel couldn’t refuse since Roton Corporation was their greatest sponsor.

“Have you increased security?” Rachel asked Zelen.

“Haha, of course.”

Events on this scale rarely occurred because djinns or bandits would always interfere. However, Roton did not want to give up the potential stocks and astronomical profits. Of course, they thoroughly prepared and chose Clancy Islet as their venue for that very reason. They also hired numerous mercenaries, and even lobbied the Hero Association to dispatch high rank heroes.

“You can look forward to it, Princess.”

Zelen's eyes scanned over her. Rachel disliked his lustful, snake-like eyes.

“Roton only promises to elevate the guild’s status as the Royal Court’s greatest sponsor.”

Clancy Islet's largest hall filled up thirty minutes before the event. Everyone wore luxurious clothes as part of the upper class. However, I didn't lose out to anyone with my 300 million won suit. It also functioned as cloth armor and a partial artifact that transformed me into an Asian millionaire.

"Mm."

I sat alone in a cool posture and looked around. Yoo Yeonha busily networked while Chae Nayun went to the bathroom.

"You're here too."

Someone's voice sounded from behind. I turned around and saw the Chameleon Troupe's Boss disguised as Li Xiaopeng.

"Oh, you came too, Xiaopeng."

"Right. As a hero in charge of guarding... what bullshit."

However, Boss suddenly cursed. I also heard what Jain whispered in her ear thanks to my gift.

— You finally met your crush, Boss. Congratulations.

"Cough. Cough."

I cleared my throat.

"Ah, s-sorry. My colleague said something strange through my earphone."

Boss made an excuse as she tapped her earphone.

Chapter 73

White Crystal (2)

Around 6:40 P.M in Clancy Hall, Boss sat next to me and snacked on chocolate. Her eyes lit up as she happily ate. I looked at her from the corner of my eyes and thought about how to respond.

They would soon reveal the white crystal. It definitely couldn't fall into the djinns' hands. However, I couldn't prevent them with my strength and didn't want to draw unnecessary attention. Roton Corporation was one of the most corrupt corporations. Although none of their executives were djinns, many were so vile djinns might've been better. The Chameleon Troupe should take the crystal like in the original story.

"Waiter."

Boss called the waiter. What did she want now? I focused on her actions as the waiter politely spoke.

"Yes, madam."

"Do you have any more of that chocolate from before?"

Boss smacked her lips.

"Yes, here you go."

"No, not one. I'll be satisfied with about three."

"Yes?"

Chae Nayun and Kim Suho returned as Boss ate her chocolates. They tilted their heads at me.

“Hajin, who’s that next to you?”

“Who?”

Kim Suho and Chae Nayun didn’t know the Chameleon Troupe’s Boss yet.

“Ah, she’s someone I know. Her name is Li Xiaopeng. She’s a high-intermediate rank hero I met coincidentally.”

I pretended to be friends and placed my hand on Boss’ shoulder.

“*Nyam. Ah, mm.* I’m Li Xiaopeng.”

“Ah, yes, it’s nice to meet you.”

Chae Nayun awkwardly greeted her as Kim Suho respectfully bowed.

“This is Chae Nayun, and this is Kim Suho.”

“I already know. They’re famous cadets.”

It would be strange for anyone in this business not to know them. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun sat next to us.

“You’re all here too?”

Kim Junwoo walked up to us. He smiled as his gaze fell on Boss. Boss also looked at him as they seemed to gauge each other’s strength.

“This is?”

Kim Junwoo pointed at Boss, but she didn’t answer. Chae Nayun spoke up instead.

“This is senior Li Xiaopeng, a high-intermediate rank hero acquainted with Kim Hajin. By the way, Li Xiaopeng, how do you know Kim Hajin? You’re really pretty, so how did Kim Hajin...”

“You’re right, she’s a beauty. *Um*, may I ask how old you are?”

Kim Junwoo interrupted Chae Nayun. Boss was surprisingly only 24, seven years older than Kim Suho and younger than my actual age. However, Boss had a complex about her young age.

“No.”

“*Mm*, yes, well, I’ll take my leave. Bye kids. Call me if anything happens.”

“Okay, see you later oppa. Let’s grab some food after.”

Kim Junwoo quickly withdrew.

“I have to go on guard duty, so...”

Boss also stood up and left. Yoo Yeonha and Oh Hanhyun came over and replaced her.

“By the way, are the other club members not coming anymore?”

“Probably not. They’ll be third years soon. The second semester is the busiest time for them. I’m sure they’re busy preparing.”

I thought about the major djinns that would participate today. First was Neide, who would carry the crystal. Second was Silasen, who also participated in the Paris masquerade party. And finally, the leader of Evil Society’s artifact retrieval team, Kim Hakpyo.

The lights in the hall went out as complete silence descended. The curtain over the stage lifted. *Tap, tap*. The sound of boots rang out. Roton’s CEO, Zelen, appeared in the middle of the stage.

* * *

“It’s an honor to have you here tonight.”

A hero respectfully bowed as Rachel arrived at Clancy Hall’s VIP

balcony. Rachel faintly smiled and sat in her seat. Multiple heroes then circled her.

Rachel looked down at the first floor's VIP seats to see if she knew anyone. She couldn't clearly see from the top, but noticed one particular face.

Kim Hajin?

He looked entirely different than when he was at Cube. He wore a full, brand-name luxury suit with the partial artifact jacket she gifted him. Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, and Yoo Yeonha also sat next to him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I am Zelen, the CEO of Roton Corporation, a leader in innovative technology.”

Rachel's classmates caught her off guard as Zelen appeared on stage.

Zelen recited his opening remarks and pointed to the second floor balcony.

“Before we begin, let me introduce everyone to the English Royal Court's jewel—”

A spotlight fell on Rachel. She couldn't even open her eyes at the brightness, but still stood up and gently smiled at the audience. Applause rang out from the VIP seats. Soon, the spotlight turned off, and Rachel sat back down.

“Now, everyone, what is the power that forms the origin of all things?”

It slightly bothered Rachel that Zelen presented in Korean instead of English. However, they also provided a real-time English translation.

“That's right, it's mana! Somewhere in this world, mana naturally coalesces into treasures. Even among these treasures, white crystals are especially precious and fully deserving of the phrase, *humanity's blessing*.”

A beautiful crystal appeared on the big screen behind the stage. The white crystal had formed from the natural accumulation and condensation of mana. It was a priceless treasure full of nature's life energy. Just by existing, a white crystal increased the atmospheric mana density.

"Currently, 480 crystals have been discovered. However, we have not found a way to properly utilize it yet."

Zelen paused and smiled.

"Roton Corporation will now present the method of using the white crystal."

A staff pushed a cart onto the stage. Without delay, Zelen lifted the cloth covering the object.

A white crystal floated inside a cubic glass tube. The audience gasped at the crystal's beauty. However, Zelen focused on the cubic glass tube.

"This vacuum cube... ah, don't mistake it for Korea's Cube."

The audience laughed at his dry joke.

"This cube's origin dates back to the Persian Empire. It was originally an earthenware, but as a leader in the partial artifact industry that dismantles and reforges artifacts, we decomposed this earthenware into sand and reformed it into a glass tube."

The audience immediately stirred. However, Zelen's announcement wasn't the only reason why. From above, Rachel could sense irregular movements. Black figures appeared from the pathways on both sides of the VIP seats. Rachel thought they were guards, but their movements looked strange. She spoke to the heroes guarding her.

"I'm fine, so keep your eyes on them."

The heroes left minimum personnel behind as they went downstairs. Suddenly, Rachel noticed that Kim Hajin also stood up. She recalled

the past when he always showed up during trouble. Even now...

“Wait just a moment.”

She left Clancy Hall without her guards as they tried to follow her, but she activated her necklace’s magical effect called shade. Her presence disappeared, and any noise she made became silent. Rachel headed downstairs like a shadow. However, Kim Hajin came up.

“*Hiik!*”

She quickly hid behind a wall. He wore a pair of sunglasses and climbed up the central staircase. His steps looked calm and unhurried. Rachel waited before chasing after him.

Eventually, she reached the rooftop.

However, guests couldn’t just enter Clancy Hall’s rooftop. Only engineers accessed it 3 to 4 times a year for repair and maintenance. As such, the door was firmly locked and wouldn’t open without a key.

Click, click —

Kim Hajin tried to open the door, but it didn’t budge. He tilted his head and took out a hammer. It looked like an ordinary shabby hammer. Weapons couldn’t be brought onto Clancy Islet, so he probably had no choice but to sneak in an old hammer.

“...?”

Kim Hajin prepared to break down the door with the hammer. However, that would be impossible since the iron door was made from mana alloy. A mere hammer couldn’t possibly... Kim Hajin smashed the door with the hammer. *KWANG!* A thunderous sound erupted.

“...”

Rachel became speechless. The old hammer completely obliterated the iron door as though a truck crashed through. She stared at the opened entrance.

Did he cover the hammer in magic power? No, he hadn't, but if it wasn't magic power, what was it? Only brute strength to break an iron door made from mana alloy?

Rachel crouched and tried to comprehend what just happened.

—*Kyaaaak!*

However, a scream rang out from below and she snapped out of her daze.

* * *

— I have confirmed Roton's internal document. The item in Clancy Hall is the real one.

Kim Hakpyo grinned as he received the report.

"It doesn't matter what these insects do, the result will always be the same."

Kim Hakpyo wasn't sure whether Roton Corporation would bring out the real crystal. However, Zelen had done it with his craze for money.

Of course, it wasn't a bad idea. Clancy Islet was a floating island and they had strictly vetted all the entrants. In addition, artificial portals couldn't be created because the island was made with magic power. However, they couldn't have imagined that Evil Society would use an aerial carrier.

"Begin."

Kim Hakpyo ordered his men. Immediately, a dense black fog welled up beneath his feet. The VIPs thought an event was occurring, but the screams proved otherwise.

Kuak! Uk! Aaak!

The VIPs lost their composure as they heard the screams.

Kyaaak—

The entire hall broke out into pandemonium. Kim Hakpyo smiled as he sat in his seat. He always welcomed confusion and chaos. Now, everything would be taken care of in pitch-black darkness.

Chapter 74

White Crystal (3)

The 22 elite members of Evil Society quickly went to work. They blocked off the pathways to the stage and attacked the security. They didn't distinguish between security or civilians and cut down anyone in their way. The hall turned into hell as Team 1's executive, Neide, led the assault. The association had labeled him as a grade 1 wanted djinn on the violet list.

"Heroes! Over here! Here!"

Zelen called for the heroes in despair. Neide shut his mouth and let his underlings deal with the heroes. He snatched the cube containing the crystal, but a man suddenly walked up to him.

"Where are you going? Let me introduce myself. I'm a high rank hero, Jin Xiangchen."

The man spoke in poor Korean. Neide stared at him, but didn't plan on fighting. With a smirk, Neide's body multiplied into 8 clones.

"What a troublesome ability."

Jin Xiangchen prepared to fight all eight simultaneously, but Neide ran away in different directions.

"Y-You motherfucker."

Xiangchen wondered which direction he should choose? After slightly hesitating, he chased the one running east. Meanwhile, Boss stared at the stage through the darkness. She walked north instead of east when Neide's clones split up.

"*Hmm.*"

A man observing the situation slowly stood up. He walked through the darkness and grabbed the wrist of a djinn who was about to cut down a civilian.

“Kuak!”

The man twisted the djinn’s arm as the weapon dropped. Then he grabbed the djinn’s neck until the djinn bled from all orifices and died. Kim Junwoo tossed the corpse aside and grabbed the djinn’s weapon off the floor. He cut down every djinn he came across as he made his way to Chae Nayun’s party.

“Oppa!”

Chae Nayun and her friends ran up to him. Without a word, Kim Junwoo tossed the djinn’s sword to Kim Suho as he smiled at them.

“Shall we fight together?”

* * *

Neide split into eight and escaped like in the original story. I spotted which Neide had the crystal from the rooftop.

To the east, a hero chased after Neide, but that one didn’t have the crystal. To the south, Jain accompanied Neide while disguised as a djinn. However, that Neide didn’t have the crystal either. To the north, Boss should be chasing the one with the crystal like in the original story. I closely observed that direction.

“Stop!”

Twelve djinns intercepted Boss as she unleashed her magic power, a tiny black ball that looked quite ordinary. However, that tiny ball effortlessly sucked all twelve djinns and twisted them into unrecognizable shapes.

Void Sphere.

That destructive ability was only a small display of Boss’ gift. Boss

continued chasing after Neide. She would easily steal the crystal from Neide as I looked at him.

“What?”

I shook my head. This Neide didn’t have the crystal either. The Neide in the north didn’t have the crystal?

“How?”

I quickly turned on my laptop. However, no alerts popped up. If it wasn’t because of a settings change, then what happened? I broke out into cold sweat. My head felt numb, and my heart began to beat faster. I scanned the hall, but I couldn’t find the crystal with so many people running around.

“...”

Suddenly, I had an idea. I never tried it before, but I couldn’t waste any more time as I concentrated stigma’s magic power into my eyes. The magic power moved according to my will so it should be possible to strengthen my thousand-mile eyes.

The scope of my vision transformed. Everything entered into view like a satellite looking down. Civilians escaping the hall, heroes fighting djinns, strange monsters summoned by djinns, and... the white crystal. I easily spotted it inside a fast-moving sedan with only one person.

Thwak—

My vision narrowed as my blood vessels burst.

“...!”

I grabbed my eyes and knelt from a pain so intense I couldn’t even scream. However, I didn’t have time to writhe in pain. I took out the Desert Eagle to snipe the sedan, but I couldn’t aim properly. Without a choice, I jumped from the rooftop thanks to parkour.

I looked for something to ride as soon as I landed. Luckily, I spotted a

black motorbike nearby. It looked quite expensive. I had ample experience driving a motorcycle since I worked delivery as a part-time job before the army.

“Everybody, stay calm as you evacuate!”

I heard Chae Nayun’s voice. She held onto a stick condensed from magic power. I felt somewhat sorry for her and shouted.

“Hey!”

“Uh, what, Kim Hajin!? Where have you...”

I took out the magic sword from my magical storage and tossed it at her.

“Be careful not to get hurt.”

Then I ran to the bike. All car keys in this world were digital, so I just had to hack into it with my laptop. I sat on the saddle and muttered.

“Scan.”

The result was... 40%. *Jackpot*. The number 40 flashed on the bike. The Random Consolidation System worked perfectly on vehicles.

“Hey, where are you going!”

Chae Nayun asked as I started the engine without answering. *Vroooaaang—!* The engine roared like a beast.

“Whoa!”

The bike sped away the moment I stepped on the accelerator. Its sheer speed surprised me beyond my expectations.

I made up for my driving skills with my acute dynamic vision. I stormed through the roads towards the southeast. The bike streaked through like a beam of light as I reached my destination in just three

minutes. I spotted the back of the sedan after my supersonic charge. I planned on doing something quite daring as I surrounded the bike in aether and slammed on the accelerator. A piercing wind struck my body, and the air pressure prevented me from breathing. Even so, I didn't let up as the bike rammed into the sedan.

KWANG—!

The motorcycle should've been blown away. However, the collision shot the sedan up instead. It overturned like a tin can and barreled through the air until it slammed into a tree.

"Haa."

I stopped the bike and finally breathed.

* * *

"..."

Chae Nayun stared blankly at what just happened. She focused on where the bike zoomed away and became a tiny dot. Honestly, she always dreamed of such a scene. Coolly driving away on a bike at lightspeed...

"Kyaaak!"

A desperate shriek snapped her back to reality.

"What?"

Chae Nayun stared at the magic sword.

Where did he get something so expensive? He said he won 2 billion won, so did he buy it with that money? To give it to me? No, that can't be...

Regardless, it would undoubtedly help her. With a grin, she imbued her magic power into the sword.

Wiing—

A sharp blade shot out from the hilt.

“Huuup.”

Chae Nayun continued imbuing her magic power into the sword. The blade grew longer until it reached 4 meters. It burned clearly without a single blemish and displayed the true power of her gift.

“Someone save me!”

“I’m coming!”

Chae Nayun shouted with the sword in hand.

* * *

I approached the overturned sedan. Magic power flowed out of stigma and formed the Desert Eagle. *Drkk*— The driver’s door popped open as a djinn crawled out with a suitcase.

“Crazy bastard...”

The djinn cursed as he glared at me.

“You’re dead.”

Where did his confidence come from? An object flashed in the distance. An aerial carrier under stealth flew towards us. The djinn’s face brightened. However, I casually took out my laptop.

“O-Over here! Comrades! Over here!”

The djinn even shot a flare gun to announce his position, but I didn’t bother to stop him. I didn’t need to. Instead, I connected to a *[peripheral server]* with my laptop. I needed 100 SP to access the *A0936-B Carrier*. I slightly regretted it, but it would be worth it. *Tak*. I closed the laptop and the carrier suddenly retreated.

“A-Ah, w-where are you going? Over here, I said! HEY! WHERE ARE YOU FUCKING GOING! I mean, where are you going, sirs? Guys?”

The djinn coughed up blood and went insane. A terrifying wind pressure blew by, and something huge fell from the sky. *KOONG!* Shockwaves shook the area as a rock crushed the djinn’s head. I stared at who just landed.

“...”

A giant over 2.2 meters gave off an overwhelming presence. A man who could be called the strongest in close range combat – Cheok Jungyeong. However, he had a girl in his hands like a pet.

“L-Let go! Let me go!”

Rachel struggled as much as she could, but Cheok Jungyeong didn’t even flinch.

“Let me go! This is England’s territory, and I am England’s princess...”

Cheok Jungyeong spoke with a grin as I stared at her.

“Oh, this girl? It looked like she was following you, so I brought her.”

Rachel and I made eye contact as she clenched her teeth. I picked up the suitcase. Then Cheok Jungyeong spoke.

“Put that down.”

I briefly replied, “You first.”

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong didn’t respond. He only stared at me with dead eyes. I pointed my gun at the suitcase. Immediately, Cheok Jungyeong’s expression changed.

“Eh? Hey, hey, do you know how much that’s worth?”

I transformed the Desert Eagle into a shotgun without answering.

“Fine, you want to try me? Let’s see who’s faster. Me ripping off this girl’s head, or you drilling a hole through that suitcase.”

I put my finger on the trigger. The confrontation continued until Cheo Jungyeong sighed and gave up.

“Fine, you little bastard.”

Then he threw Rachel at me.

“*Kyaa!*”

Rachel fell at my feet. I was curious why she was here, but now wasn’t the time. Cheok Jungyeong spoke in a heavy voice, “Now, put that down.”

“...”

I couldn’t handle this crystal in the first place. Ideally, I planned to give it to Rachel and the English Royal Court, but it was impossible with Cheok Jungyeong.

“Fine.”

I threw the suitcase without hesitation. Cheok Jungyeong picked it up. It looked like a small purse in his hands. *Wiiing*— A fly landed on my nose and distracted me for a second.

Suddenly, a fierce wind blew towards me. All the hair on my body flew backward. I couldn’t even think as I saw the head-sized fist in front of me. Cheok Jungyeong smiled in satisfaction. He had charged towards me in the blink of an eye. Just 3 more centimeters and he would’ve crushed my head.

“Looks like you aren’t so bad.”

Cheok Jungyeong seemed satisfied with my calm response. His heavy

steps resounded as he left. My body couldn't move until he completely disappeared and my head felt blank.

Chapter 75

Short Break (1)

A huge forest surrounded the outskirts of Clancy Islet to protect it from crashes. I leaned against a random tree.

Sigh.

My heart began to beat again. I felt my chest and recalled what just happened, but quickly refocused on the present. I should forget for the sake of my sanity. I looked around the dark forest with the overturned sedan in a ditch and my bike lying in the distance. The bike seemed fine because of the 40% consolidation combined with aether. I slowly walked up and raised the bike. If I could, I wanted to take it back with me. Suddenly, I felt someone's gaze.

“...”

Rachel stared at me while sitting down. I forgot about her because of the shock from Cheok Jungyeong.

“Are you okay?”

I asked even though she didn't seem hurt. Rachel nodded in a daze with her mouth half-open. I could see the front of her teeth and couldn't help but laugh.

“Why did you follow me?”

“...”

Rachel closed her mouth and simply stared. I didn't avoid her eyes as bright moonlight lit up the dark forest and Rachel seemed to glow. She looked at me for a long time before pulling something out of her pocket. I tilted my head at the bullet without a casing. *What was that?*

“Hajin.”

She suddenly called my name. I thought I misheard, but she definitely said my name just now.

“Ah, yes?” I hurriedly replied.

“This belongs to you, right?”

“...”

I stared at the bullet. I couldn’t distinguish it from just its shape, but it looked like a bullet for the Desert Eagle.

“Yes, I think so.”

I reached out to grab the bullet, but Rachel placed it back into her pocket.

“Um, where did you get...”

“I found it during the final exam.”

“Huh?”

I finally understood. She must’ve found it when I helped her by sniping the Lancaster djinns.

“I thought something similar might happen, so I followed you.”

Rachel scratched her cheek as she pulled out a sword from her waist. It wasn’t Cube’s training rapier, but the legendary sword Galatyn that belonged to one of the twelve knights of the Round Table. However, Rachel still wouldn’t have stood a chance against Cheok Jungyeong.

“Ah.”

“By the way, Hajin...” Rachel sounded serious.

“Back then, why did you help me?”

I didn't know how to respond, so I simply stared back. Rachel hadn't finished.

“During the midterm and then the final exam. You were always there, *uup!*”

A cold wind blew as her hair curled into her mouth. I barely held back my laughter as she tied her hair and cleared her throat.

“*Cough*. The first time could've been a coincidence, but the final exam... no matter how much I thought, I concluded that you must've been watching me.”

I scratched the back of my neck. Rachel was an important character who always faced dangerous situations. The story would greatly change if she got injured or killed, so I kept an eye on her. However, I couldn't explain that so I made up a simple excuse that could convince her.

“I'm your fan.”

“...?”

Rachel's eyes widened as she tilted her head.

“I'm your fan. I'm even a member of your fan café.”

Rachel's fan café did exist. England's fan café had about 500,000 members, and even the Korean one had about 10,000. I checked it before when I didn't have anything better to do.

Rachel turned silent at the absurd excuse. *Whiish*— The wind blew and shook the leaves around us. The awkward silence continued for about five minutes until Rachel asked with a quivering voice.

“Does that mean... you like me?”

“...What?”

* * *

Cheok Jungyeong returned with the crystal to the hotel suite where everyone else waited.

“Hahaha, that’s right, I’m back.”

Cheok Jungyeong burst into laughter as four members of the Chameleon Troupe stared at him.

“Haha, it’s almost like I’m the main character.”

He pushed his hair back as though embarrassed and set down the suitcase. Jain snatched it up.

“This better be the real thing.”

She swallowed her saliva and slightly opened it. A brilliant white light shone through.

“...It is.”

Jain smiled and closed the suitcase in satisfaction.

“Well done.”

“Haha, it was a piece of cake.”

“Wait, why are you so happy? Don’t tell me you killed him?”

Boss’ eyes coldly flickered.

“No, I didn’t. *Ah*, I was planning to at first.”

Cheok Jungyeong smiled. At first, he wanted to blow up Kim Hajin’s head. Cheok Jungyeong probably wouldn’t have stopped if Kim Hajin

tried to dodge or showed any signs of fear. However, Kim Hajin simply stared at his fist without being flustered. He observed Cheok Jungyeong's movements and showed a warrior's fearlessness. Cheok Jungyeong liked his manliness.

"Are you sure he didn't freeze from fear? Did you check his pants?"

"Jain, you might regret it one day if you underestimate him."

"*Tsk.*"

Jain frowned as Cheok Jungyeong murmured, "Just kidding, just kidding. I purposely charged in a little slower, but he faced me directly and didn't bat an eye."

To demonstrate, Cheok Jungyeong pushed his fist towards Jain. His tiny movement startled her.

"See, strong people and people who will become strong have a different mindset."

Cheok Jungyeong spoke as he proudly beat his chest.

"Courage, boldness, and fearlessness... all of these are impossible without a strong heart. Closing your eyes when your sword clashes is the same thing as having your neck cut—"

"Be quiet." Droon interrupted Cheok Jungyeong's passionate speech.

"*Tsk.* Brat, don't cut in when an adult is talking."

However, he couldn't do anything to Droon. Although he loved fighting and killing, he never broke one absolute rule.

"Try that in three years and see what happens."

He would never touch or hurt children.

Although they failed to capture Evil Society's executives, England's heroes quickly suppressed the chaos in Clancy Hall without too many casualties.

"Sigh."

Heroes and paramedics busily ran back and forth from broken-down buildings and battered roads. Yoo Yeonha sat on the ground and stared at her dirty hair. She sighed and wondered how much it would take to restore her hair at the beauty salon? *Dammit*. Yoo Yeonha continued sighing as Chae Nayun walked up to her.

"Hey, did you see that?"

Chae Nayun asked without any explanation. Yoo Yeonha became slightly annoyed, but swallowed her complaints.

"See what?"

Yoo Yeonha had seen many things. First was Kim Junwoo's overwhelming might as he tore apart countless djinns with his bare hands. As expected of a hunter from the Vast Expanse. Next was Kim Suho whose talent also stuck out like a sore thumb. The metal attribute covering his sword could cut through anything. His final sword dance as he slashed through fireballs remained in her mind.

"Kim Hajin. He went off on a bike."

"Ah."

Yoo Yeonha also saw that eye-catching scene. She had to do a doubletake if bikes could go that fast.

"Yeah, I saw him, but where did he go?"

"I don't know, but where do you think he got that bike? I want to buy one too."

Chae Nayun's eyes flickered as she smacked her lips. Kim Hajin hadn't accomplished anything special in today's incident. However, Yoo

Yeonha grew suspicious about his driving skills. He seemed too experienced for a mere cadet. Kim Suho hastily walked up to them.

“What’s wrong?”

“The princess is missing. Have either of you seen Rachel?”

“Huh?”

Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha looked around the area. The incident had been settled, but the heroes began to stir once again. The word *Princess* continued to emerge with urgency. Yoo Yeonha felt a chill down her back as she shockingly muttered.

“Their goal was the princess?”

“What? Really?”

“It makes sense since Rachel is England’s most precious treasure. If they kidnapped her...”

A black bike came towards them as it made clunking noises. Yoo Yeonha focused on her deductions as everyone turned towards the bike. Rachel wore a helmet and trembled as she drove the bike.

“If they kidnapped her to take her hostage, England wouldn’t hesitate to hand over the rights to Clancy Islet. Their goal must’ve been the entire country, not just Roton Corporation. Those evil bastards...”

“Hey, stop murmuring to yourself and look over there.”

Chae Nayun nudged Yoo Yeonha’s shoulders.

“What, I’m busy right... now... Eh?”

Yoo Yeonha felt drained as Chae Nayun murmured seriously.

“That’s the bike Kim Hajin ran off on.”

“...!”

Yoo Yeonha’s face turned serious once again. Her head spun as she continued her detective work. Kim Hajin ran off on a bike while the attack in Clancy Hall distracted everyone. However, Rachel returned on the same bike. Did that mean Kim Hajin defeated all those djinns by himself and rescued Rachel? Impossible, not even Kim Hajin could be so fearless.

* * *

Rachel and I split up after the awkward incident.

— Does that mean... you like me?

I denied it, but she didn’t seem to believe me. She said she understood, but I felt she misinterpreted.

I returned to my hotel room alone. If I returned with Rachel, I would’ve obtained a lot of SP. However, receiving too much attention could be poisonous. Currently, Evil Society’s djinns filled Clancy Islet. They failed their mission, so no one knew where they would direct their fury. The Chameleon Troupe could withstand them, but my future would turn bleak if they chose to vent on me.

“Anyways, this place is amazing.”

The free hotel suite was beyond my imagination. The casino manager told me to rest and upgraded my room for free after I won 2 billion won. I sat down on the comfy couch and made a video call on my smartwatch. A cute child popped up on the screen.

— Hajin!

“Hey, have you been doing well?”

Evandel was a quick learner. She already learned how to use basic electronic devices, and even called me by my name because I told her not to call me Daddy.

— *Un*, look at this!

Evandel showed me a cat ghost she made. It looked small and cute.

“Wow, good job. It’s so cute I want to pet it.”

— *Heehee*, right, right?

The internet said it was important to praise a child.

— By the way, when are you coming back?

“Tomorrow morning. I’ll be there as soon as I can. Wait just a bit more.”

I wanted to return right away, but the entire island was undergoing a vetting process.

“I’ll bring back something delicious. What do you want to eat?”

— Fried chicken!

“Alright, got it.”

Wiing—

I received a message from Chae Nayun.

[Hey, are you busy? Everyone is going out to eat.]

Chapter 76

Short Break (2)

Rachel returned to the Royal Court under the protection of numerous heroes. Her parents, the Queen of England and her consort, had worried sick that Evil Society abducted her. Rachel clarified that she had left of her own accord. Naturally, she informed them of the giant who took the white crystal. Their worry turned to anger as they scolded her.

Their nagging continued for 30 minutes. They warned her not to do something so reckless ever again, and that she would be transferred to the England Academy if something similar occurred. She returned to her room after their lecture and felt like her ears were bleeding. She buried herself in bed from all the fatigue.

“Haa.”

Many things today caused her to sigh. Zelen had fainted and was taken to the hospital. Roton Corporation’s stocks would surely plummet once the market opened tomorrow.

What happened wouldn’t hurt England since Zelen had vowed under contract not to blame them if anything occurred. However, Roton Corporation served as the Royal Court guild’s biggest sponsor. The Royal Court guild would surely suffer if Roton retracted their support.

“...”

Rachel put aside such concerns and thought about what happened two hours ago. Kim Hajin had used some unknown method to find the djinn who fled with the crystal and then chased after him. He almost succeeded when a mysterious giant intervened. They lost the crystal in the end.

However, Kim Hajin bashfully confessing that he was her fan

remained in her mind.

Then other thoughts emerged.

He had left many hints. The biggest was in theory class. Everyone knew Kim Hajin never shared his knowledge and she also heard slanderous rumors about him.

But... he always treated me differently. He answered all my questions and shared his location during the final exam. He expressed his desire to be with me, but I refused. Even then, he watched over me from a distance and helped me when I was in danger.

At first, I couldn't understand, but now everything makes sense. If he didn't act on reason, but feelings, then everything makes sense.

“...!”

A flash of insight struck Rachel. The Royal Court guild needed someone strong in both theory and combat like Kim Hajin. He could raise their prestige.

If I could lead his feelings towards me in that direction... No.

Rachel shook those horrible thoughts away. Manipulating someone's feelings wasn't right. *Tak*. She even smacked her own head.

* * *

I came to the first floor of the casino hotel at 10 P.M. I thought the traveling club members would be waiting, but Chae Nayun was the only one. She tapped on the ground with her feet as she waited.

“Yaawwn...”

Chae Nayun felt drowsy until she noticed me and grinned.

“Why are you staring?”

“...”

I shrugged without answering.

“Where are the others?”

“They went ahead. Why are you always late?”

I ended up late because of the video call with Evandel.

“Sorry, I had something to do.”

“*Hmm.*”

Chae Nayun took out the magic sword I gave her.

“Anyways, thanks for giving me this. It helped a lot.”

“No problem.”

I didn't need it, but I took it anyway and put it in my pocket. Chae Nayun pointed to the front and exclaimed.

“Let's go. I'll pay for the food.”

She stomped away excitedly as I followed her outside. Beautiful lights lit up the night. Other places operated like usual because today's trouble only occurred at Clancy Hall.

“Hey.”

Chae Nayun suddenly tapped my shoulder as we walked.

“What?”

“Isn't that yours?”

“What... Huh?”

She pointed at the motorbike I drove earlier. I sneaked up to the bike. I wanted it, but it seemed the owner was a hotel guest. Chae Nayun smacked her lips and asked, "Can we ride it there?"

"It's not mine. I borrowed it back then."

"Really?"

We both walked away reluctantly. *Tak, tak*. I turned on the smartwatch GPS since I couldn't trust Chae Nayun to guide me.

"Hey."

Chae Nayun initiated a conversation as I turned towards her. She smiled coolly under the dim streetlight. Then she suddenly asked, "Don't you think we can be friends?"

I came to a halt. *Friends*. It never crossed my mind as I blankly stared at her. She played with her hair and pretended to be indifferent. I didn't know why she suggested that. However...

"No."

I coldly cut her down.

"I don't think so."

We could never be friends. I would eventually leave this world, and I would also kill her most precious person. I couldn't become her friend.

"..."

Chae Nayun stood still, seemingly taken off guard. Soon, she sighed with a stiff expression and forcefully smiled.

"S-Screw you. Fine, if you don't wanna be friends, then screw off."

She smacked my shoulder and ran off.

“...”

I rubbed my shoulder.

“That freaking hurt.”

It felt like a hammer struck me.

* * *

I went shopping the next day and picked out two more items at another antique shop.

[Horse Saddle] [Antique] A horse saddle used by a nameless cavalryman 500 years ago. You will ride better if you sit on this saddle.

[Horn Flute] [Antique] A flute used by a wandering minstrel of Joseon. Your voice will become clearer for three hours if you blow this horn.

They could serve practical purposes outside of combat. I liked the horse saddle. It would come in handy soon.

“Let’s go.”

We stood in front of Clancy Islet’s portal at noon. We didn’t need to undergo further investigation since they confirmed our statuses. A group of five waited for their turn behind us. I tried my best not to stare at them. Jain’s gift had disguised each Chameleon Troupe member.

We used two portals in total from Clancy Islet to England, then England to Seoul.

“We encountered unexpected trouble yesterday, but we should get used to it as aspiring heroes.”

Oh Hanhyun spoke after we arrived at the Seoul portal station. Everyone nodded with bitter smiles.

“Now, let’s all go home. Well done everybody, both yesterday and today!”

We left after Oh Hanhyun’s encouragement. Then everyone other than me froze at the reporters bustling outside.

— Ah, they’re here!

— They’re back!

Cameras flashed and blinded us.

— Is it true that Princess Rachel was abducted yesterday on Clancy Islet?

— Just what happened?

— There have been reports that cadet Kim Suho performed spectacularly during the incident.

The reporters bombarded us with questions. Videos must’ve already spread to Korea, and Kim Suho’s outstanding performance made headlines.

The other club members stood in a daze, but I knew they weren’t interested in me.

I sneaked away to a restaurant known for its fried chicken. I had to buy food for Evandel.

“Give me two... no, three.”

“Three, got it.”

I returned to the portal station after buying three fried chickens. The interview continued as Yoo Yeonha, who liked the attention, spoke to the reporters with her hair fluttering in the wind. I ignored them and headed towards the portal to Cube.

“Hua.”

Cube’s familiar scenery felt like home. I walked through the central park as I felt the East Sea’s cool air. Soon, Dorm 1 appeared and I reached my room conveniently located on the first floor. I placed my thumb on the fingerprint scanner. *Tiririk*— The door opened with a tone. I slammed it shut as soon as I entered. Evandel ran up to me with all the animals she created.

“Hajin!”

I hugged Evandel who ran into my embrace. She joyfully rubbed her face against my chest. My heart instantly calmed. I wondered if I would feel like this when I had kids in the future. Evandel looked at me with twinkling eyes and asked.

“Did you buy chicken?”

“Yeah, I bought a lot.”

I held up the plastic bag full of fried chicken.

* * *

I thought I had quite a fruitful break with three days left before the second semester. I hunted, trained hard, and added another function to my laptop called *smartwatch link*. It felt annoying having to open the laptop every time something happened. I only put it off because I didn’t want to spend the SP.

[An incredible luck has been applied. You have escaped from certain death!] [Narrow Escape from Death (3/9) – A special stat, accumulation of luck, has partly unlocked!] [You have obtained 193 SP!]

I made the change with the 193 SP I gained from Cheok Jungyeong. I wondered why I delayed such a convenient function until now.

— Oh, Hajin, what’s up?

I called Park Soohyuk with my upgraded smartwatch.

“Hyung, did you get what I wanted?”

Last week, I asked Park Soohyuk to buy me a motorcycle. I called him to check how it was going.

— Yeah, I looked up the motorcycle with the best specs like you wanted, but it costs 150 million won. I think it was called Augusta?

“Is that including all the additional functionalities you can put on it?”

— No, it gets even more expensive with things like mana coating and engine reinforcement. The final cost will be way more.

“Do it anyway. I won a lot at the casino.”

I won 2 billion won. Plus, it wouldn't be long until Packhorse Master conquered the Suwon Devil's Nest, and I would become rich.

— Okay, I'll put in an order, but where are you going to ride it? Such a high spec motorcycle doesn't suit Korea.

“It's fine.”

I could improve my driving skills with aether and the horse saddle. I could also activate bullet time in an emergency.

— Okay, I'll order it under our company, so come pick it up later.

“Thanks. Oh right, is the company doing well?”

— Haha.

Park Soohyuk replied with a laugh.

— We have 13 hunters with us now. You don't have to worry.

“Ooh, what an improvement.”

— Haha, it's all thanks to you. We're preparing to expand and move to a better place soon.

“Then I'll invest more. As I said, I won a lot at the casino.”

An alert popped up as I excitedly spoke with Park Soohyuk. My face stiffened as I hung up to confirm the content from Violet Banquet. Someone commissioned the Truth Agency for the first time in about a month.

[Please find this person.]

Although the sentence was short, it came with detailed information and a picture of the man. His name was Fernin Jesus.

“Eh?”

I knew this man. Fernin Jesus was Tomer's father, the man she loved and hated more than anyone.

Chapter 77

Attraction (1)

The Hero Association labeled the top djinns as the Nine Evils to unite humanity against them, but the djinns happily accepted it as the highest praise.

“It’ll be a waste of time again.”

This secret base belonged to Wicked, rank 3 of the Nine Evils. It had been constructed from a deep cave in South Hamgyeong Province’s mountain.

[Truth Agency] — We will answer anything.

In this sanctuary, a djinn named Tomer looked at a computer. She had brown Latino skin and a healthy figure. However, no one gave her lewd glances.

Tomer was special among ordinary djinns. She didn’t care about missions and only pursued strength. A few djinns even doubted she was a djinn.

“What wind blew to make that woman stay in the office?”

Another djinn muttered as he peeked at Tomer. It was uncommon to see her working at a desk.

“Someone told her about an information agency on Violet Banquet.”

“Who?”

“Probably Seth. That guy’s crazy about women.”

A field agent walked into the office. The two gossiping djinns quickly

buried their faces into their desks. The field agent looked around the office and called her.

“Tomer.”

What now. Tomer slowly stood as she murmured to herself. The field agent heard her complaint, but frowned without a word. Tomer was only 20 years old, but skilled enough to be an elite.

“There’s a mission.”

“A mission?”

“Yes, an observation mission.”

The agent handed Tomer a thick stack of documents. She frowned as she received them.

* * *

“*Hmm...*”

I stared at my laptop and pondered about Tomer. She became a djinn for one reason. To kill her father. She sold her soul for this because her father killed her mother and abandoned her when she was seven. At first glance, he could be considered human garbage, but he also had his reasons. I implemented this setting to bring Tomer to Kim Suho’s side. However, I had stopped serializing before I ever reached that part.

With Wicked’s help, she would eventually find her father without my help. She swore her loyalty to Wicked after achieving her goal. Before I went on hiatus, she became one of Wicked’s executives. For the record, Wicked’s executives were on a much higher level than ordinary executives. Wicked’s executives were only inferior to the Nine Evils themselves. They could be considered the future leaders of djinns.

“*Hmm.*”

Would I be able to recruit Tomer if I found her father? Probably not, but if I used the plot device I created for Kim Suho...

I brought out the Book of Truth. I didn't know the location of Tomer's father, but I considered all the information she gave me and willed the book to reveal his present state of affairs. Two streaks of stigma instantly disappeared. My left arm felt numb, and an intense headache shook my head. It felt like my vision had turned white.

“Argh.”

I collapsed to the ground, unable to endure the pain. The throbbing lasted for a minute before subsiding. I raised my head and looked at the Book of Truth. With two streaks of stigma, I found out about Fernin Jesus' current status, but I couldn't find his location.

[Fernin Jesus changed his name to Agus Benjamin, and has retired after undergoing plastic surgery.]

* * *

I visited Seoul's magic tower the Sunday before school to engrave magic seals on my obsidian bracelet. Materialistic snobs filled the magic tower, so I wore the luxury suit I bought on Clancy Islet.

“Kim Hajin. Welcome.”

A guard checked my name and allowed me entry. Classical music calmly flowed as many others also waited. A magician approached me as I looked around.

“Kim Hajin?”

“Ah, yes.”

“Nice to meet you. I'm Jin Yohan, a 4 star magician. You made a reservation for magic seals, correct?”

A 4 star artificer was the highest ranked magician I could meet. I nodded as Jin Yohan scanned me up and down with a smile.

“Follow me. Let’s head to the office.”

We arrived in his office on the 33rd floor. His secretary brought him a cup of coffee as he sat in his chair. Jin Yohan took a sip and cut to the chase.

“What kind of magic seal are you looking for?”

“Physical ability enhancement, or do you have any physical defense magic?”

“Ah, yes we do.”

Jin Yohan projected a hologram into the air.

“First is this speed boost.”

Most were fairly mediocre such as speed boost, strength enhancement, barrier, blood circulation, etc.

“Do you have any that use more magic power?”

Most artifacts couldn’t use anything above speed boost like haste. However, this obsidian bracelet didn’t have such restrictions. I preferred a powerful, high-cost magic seal even if I could only use it once a week.

“For example, qi reinforcement or momentary awakening.”

“...”

Jin Yohan gave me a strange look before nodding.

“It’s possible, but it will be very expensive.”

I left 30 minutes later after making another reservation. I needed to wait longer until I could obtain the magic seals. At least until Packhorse Master finished conquering the Suwon Devil’s Nest. Summer break ended as other cadets returned from their vacations

while I spent my time training and raising a kid.

“That picture you took in Japan came out so good.”

“Ah, I wanted to visit Spain. If only my portal pass didn’t expire.”

Cadets returned to Cube with bright faces after enjoying their break. I found out about what they did through their social media. Most went on vacations abroad, and some posted pictures of themselves training.

[Enduring a hard day, hoping for a better tomorrow.]

Shin Jonghak uploaded a clear set-up shot with his sweaty face leaning on his spear. I had to admit he looked like a model.

I often checked the major characters’ social media like this.

Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha didn’t post much, and the English Royal Court managed Rachel’s social media. As for Chae Nayun, she hadn’t posted anything since the casino incident.

[Too complicated. #FirstTime #ClancyIslet #Flustered #Annoyed #CubeCadet]

She took a picture of Clancy Islet’s night scene along with a short phrase and string of hashtags. Chae Nayun’s last post seemed like a typical attention-seeking post from a high schooler, but her audience reacted explosively.

3982 likes. Uyeonha [Don’t think too much.] Orange2574 [What? π π Did something happen?] Jonghak2 [Call me] Aeoeao [Unni, why aren’t you posting anything nowadays?]

“She has so many likes.”

Chae Nayun had many followers as expected of a celebrity. I felt ostracized, so I went back to looking at stocks. It shouldn’t be long until Packhorse Master skyrocketed.

Kim Soohyuk walked into the classroom at 8:00 A.M. He loudly knocked on his desk and gathered everyone's attention.

"Today is the start of the second semester. As you all know, big changes will occur. We have updated your rankings and new cadets will also join the class. Maybe some of you went to the welcoming ceremony yesterday."

Magicians who wished to become heroes transferred to Cube from the ten magic academies. Each class received 20 magicians for a total of 200. I already took note of who would play important roles.

"These transfer students will join us starting today. Please enter."

The instructor and cadets began to clap. Then the front door opened and 20 black-robed magicians walked in. At first, I stared without much thought. One, two, three... Suddenly, my eyes widened.

"What."

Someone shouldn't have been there among the twenty magicians. She lightened her skin and dyed her hair darker, but I definitely spotted Tomer. She grew up in Korea since she was 10 and entered Gangwondo Magic Academy. Although she quit after 4 years, her past admission would have verified her identity. She was the perfect candidate to infiltrate besides the few djinns among Cube's executives.

"Everybody take a seat."

The magicians filled in the empty seats.

"Now I will announce the new rankings."

Tomer sat in a middle seat as I checked my smartwatch for any alerts.

[Tomer – Although she plays an important role, her appearance and strength were too sudden. It would be better to establish a connection between her and the other major characters from the beginning.]

"Tsk."

Doing useless things again.

“Rank 1, Kim Suho!”

Kim Soohyuk only announced the top 10 and posted the rest on a wall poster.

*Rank 1 Kim Suho Rank 2 Shin Jonghak Rank 3 Rachel Rank 4 Chae
Nayun Rank 5 Shen Yu'an Rank 6 Yoo Yeonha... Rank 11 Yi Yeonghan...
Rank 17 Kim Horak... Rank 334 Kim Hajin...*

My rank went up by 600. *Mmm*, such an average rank satisfied me.

* * *

The first outdoor class consisted of training with the new transfer students. They called it the *dangerous hike*.

“There aren’t any dangerous monsters on this mountain, but...”

Kim Soohyuk held up his index finger with a scary expression.

“Many replicas of terrifying djinn traps are hidden throughout. You might end up hospitalized, so stay on your toes.”

Kim Soohyuk divided the 120 cadets into 10 groups of 12. The groups began to climb the mountain from different starting points.

“Alright, everyone, let’s go!”

Chae Nayun belonged to Group 3 with Kim Suho.

“Oh, Chae Nayun.”

“Hey.”

Chae Nayun and Kim Suho led two magicians and eight cadets to the foot of the mountain. Not long afterward, goosebumps appeared on their arms. The wind grew chilly and their surroundings turned dark.

For the record, it was only 10:30 A.M. The environment spooked them enough, but all kinds of traps also sprung up like flames from the ground and tentacle-like tree branches. Even ghosts appeared.

“My heart almost stopped.”

All the cadets fell to the ground when a creepy female ghost appeared. Was Cube trying to give them nightmares to celebrate the new semester? Chae Nayun deeply sighed as she placed a hand on her heart.

“Geez, this is too scary.”

Even Kim Suho murmured in cold sweat. Looking at him, someone else suddenly popped up in Chae Nayun’s mind. A person she constantly thought about who made her feel complicated.

“Hey.”

“*Hm?* What?”

Kim Suho tilted his head as Chae Nayun looked around. The other cadets weren’t paying attention to them. She nonchalantly brought up something irrelevant.

“Hey, you’re my friend, right?”

“What? Why are you asking that all of a sudden? Are you sick?”

“Just answer me.”

“Well, of course I am.”

Chae Nayun smiled bitterly at his immediate answer. As expected, Kim Suho thought of her as a friend. Perhaps this was the normal reaction. However, Kim Hajin clearly stated that he couldn’t be friends. Unlike Kim Suho, he acted more forward about his intentions.

“What was that?”

“It’s nothing.”

A bush on the right suddenly rustled, and a familiar face popped out. Speak of the devil, Kim Hajin’s Group 6 appeared.

Chapter 78

Attraction (2)

Besides Kim Hajin, Group 6 also had rank 41 Simon Delick and rank 20 Yi Jiyeon. They coincidentally met Group 3 and took a break together.

“Illusion barrier?”

Group 6 had an easy time with only a few wild animals until they entered an illusion barrier.

“Yeah, we must’ve been lost for an hour or so, but that guy suddenly told us where to go with a frustrated face.”

Simon Delick pointed to Kim Hajin sitting by a tree. Chae Nayun glanced over and saw him looking at his smartwatch.

“At first, we didn’t know who he was, but then he instantly found the exit.”

Chae Nayun nodded.

“Oh right, did you decide on your team for the upcoming challenge?” Simon Delick changed the topic. The team challenge was a traditional joint training exercise at Cube.

“No.”

Chae Nayun shook her head. The teams had to be fair so top cadets like Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, Yoo Yeonha, and Shin Jonghak couldn’t be together. Most teams consisted of a single-digit rank, a double-digit rank, two triple-digit ranks, and one low rank magician or two double-digit ranks, two triple-digit ranks, and one upper rank magician.

“I’m thinking about asking Kim Hajin.”

Yi Jiyoona suddenly interjected and caught Chae Nayun off guard. Kim Suho laughed and chimed in, “Hajin? He’s a good choice.”

“Kim Suho, you’re close with him?” Yi Jiyoona asked with a smile.

“Uh... yeah.”

He nodded although their relationship felt a bit vague. Yi Jiyoona’s face brightened.

“As expected, Suho has so many connections.”

Chae Nayun felt displeased at how Yi Jiyoona flattered people like a sly fox.

“Why Kim Hajin? He’s surrounded by bad rumors.”

Simon Delick said in a slightly jealous tone. Kim Hajin had a horrible reputation. On the other hand, Yi Jiyoona was quite popular. Many guys liked her pure and innocent image. Her gift also made her one of the best supporters.

“Everyone wants to have you on their team, Jiyoona.”

She could shoot magic arrows that contained exceptionally strong buffs. Most guilds had their eyes on her.

“Kim Hajin is the best candidate among triple-digit cadets. He’s smart and his combat prowess is exceptional. Remember his fight with Kim Horak?”

Yi Jiyoona glanced over at Kim Hajin in the distance. No one knew if he heard Yi Jiyoona as he scratched his cheek. Then Yi Jiyoona turned towards Chae Nayun.

“Nayun, what do you think?”

“Eh?”

Yi Jiyeon and Chae Nayun were stereotypical social media friends that only exchanged likes and comments. Chae Nayun brushed her hair and nonchalantly replied.

“Well, you can team up with him if you want. Why ask me?”

Although she said that, she also felt that Kim Hajin was too good for someone in the 300s. No, he shouldn’t even be at rank 334. Both Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun acknowledged this fact.

“Really? Then I should ask him today.”

“Wait.”

Chae Nayun hastily spoke as Yi Jiyeon prepared to leave.

“He’s really picky. So *um*, he might not say yes.”

“Eh?”

“That’s... *um*, you might get hurt, Jiyeon. He’s a bit cold.”

“Nayun is right. Haven’t you heard the rumors?”

Simon Delick chimed in. He recited some of the bad rumors about how Kim Hajin goes to Seoul every weekend to visit brothels and nightclubs, how he receives money from gangs and other violent organizations, and even that he has several sugar mommas.

“Do you believe that nonsense?”

“Hey, Delick, have you personally even talked to him?”

Chae Nayun and Kim Suho simultaneously interrupted him. Delick felt so shocked his eyes trembled.

“W-What, am I wrong?”

Chae Nayun glared at him and stood up. Kim Suho clapped his hands to change the atmosphere.

“Alright, let’s get going. Otherwise, we’ll be late.”

* * *

Yoo Yeonha prepared for a video call late at night. She completely covered her face and changed her voice as well.

“*Cough.*”

The information guild she established, Falling Blossom, would meet for the first time today. She cleared her throat to prevent any voice cracks.

— *Tiriring.*

Soon, the video call began and the three team leaders of Falling Blossom greeted her.

“It’s nice to meet you all.”

— It’s an honor, Master.

Their respectful tone satisfied her. Yoo Yeonha had personally evaluated and recruited each member. She snatched up anyone with potential regardless of their resumes. Yoo Yeonha divided the 21 founding members into three teams.

Members of the first team served as spies. They would gather information on rival guilds. She called members of the second team hawks. They would locate new dungeons or monsters above high-intermediate rank. Finally, she referred to the third team as shadows. They would take care of Yoo Yeonha’s private requests.

“Team 1 should prioritize information on rival guilds like Creator’s Sacred Grace and Desolate Moon. Team 2 should...”

Yoo Yeonha spoke in a formal manner that made it hard to distinguish even her gender. She ended her call with Team 1 and Team 2 after handing out their orders.

Now, only Team 3 remained. Yoo Yeonha had carefully chosen the elite members of Team 3. They would thoroughly work in the shadows from background investigations to tailing, kidnappings, intimidation, and even assassinations if necessary. They served as her secret weapon.

“I command you to thoroughly investigate the following individuals’ backgrounds. However, you are forbidden from hurting them or being discovered.”

Yoo Yeonha gave Team 3 information on five individuals. However, four of them served as decoys. She only wanted to know about one.

[Kim Hajin – 17 years old] — From Seaju Orphanage. — When he was 9, a periodic orphanage inspection discovered him and enrolled him in Military Agent Academy. — Currently ranked 334 as a first year Cube cadet. — Supplied Essence of the Strait with information worth hundreds of millions of won.]

— Understood, Master.

Team 3’s leader left as Yoo Yeonha nodded in satisfaction. Then she jumped into bed.

* * *

Beep— Beep—

The alarm woke me up at 6:30 A.M.

“Mmm.”

I noticed something light stuck to my side. *Puu, puu.* Evandel let out tiny breaths as she slept. I grinned and put a finger over her nostrils. One, two, three seconds... Evandel quivered and shook my hand away.

“Huhu.”

A smile bloomed on my face as I stroked her soft hair for five minutes before getting up.

“You’re awake too?”

The cat that Evandel made sat on the living room couch. It jumped and walked to my feet, but growled when I tried to pet it. This cat wasn’t an illusion or spirit. It was a real cat made from Evandel’s ability that would become strong enough to help me in the future.

I put on my clothes to go bring back breakfast from the cafeteria. Of course, I could conveniently eat outside and head straight to class, but I felt happier eating with Evandel.

I put on slippers and headed out. Someone approached me as I walked to the cafeteria while yawning.

“Where are you going so early?”

Yoo Yeonha wore a comfortable tracksuit for a morning jog. I briefly replied.

“The cafeteria.”

“Hmm.”

Yoo Yeonha walked along with me. “Anyways, I noticed your ranking went up by a lot.”

“Yeah, I think it’ll stay like that for the future.”

“Mm...”

Yoo Yeonha nodded.

“Have you thought about your future?” she asked as the cafeteria came into view.

I wasn't too sure, so I half-heartedly replied, "I still have a lot of time."

"A lot of time? It's only a year and three months. Once we're in our third year, we'll be too busy with hero internships and deployments."

Third years were no different than real heroes. They only attended Cube once or twice a week and spent the rest as apprentice heroes in different guilds. Yoo Yeonha continued.

"How about Essence of the Strait?"

She tried to recruit me. Honestly, they would definitely succeed. Although they currently ranked second, they would reign supreme once Creator's Sacred Grace failed the Tower of Miracle. This wouldn't change even as Kim Suho joined Creator's Sacred Grace and brought it to new heights.

"I was thinking about becoming a hunter of the Vast Expanse."

I was half-serious. The Vast Expanse was a hunter group founded by Kwangwon, someone as powerful as the Nine Stars. They operated like mercenaries, but on a completely different scale. Their main customers consisted of large guilds and corporations. Only multimillionaires could afford to employ them. Hunters of the Vast Expanse could freely act, which suited me.

"Although I'm not sure if I can become one."

"..."

Yoo Yeonha remained silent as I glanced at her. She contemplated with a serious face.

"I'll change your mind."

She said with determination, "I'll bring you what you've been looking for and change your mind?"

"..."

And what's that? I furrowed my brows as Yoo Yeonha snickered and changed the topic.

“Oh right, remember Yi Jin-Ah who bullied you? She got harshly scolded. I even have a video. Do you want to watch it? She’s crying like a baby.”

Yoo Yeonha walked strangely when she felt good. She clasped her hands behind her back and hopped like a little princess. Then she suddenly shot backward. As expected, some cadets showed up in the distance.

“I’ll see you later.”

Yoo Yeonha quickly disappeared.

* * *

“Alright, attention!”

Kim Soohyuk loudly made the morning Wednesday announcements.

“You will need to form a team of five.”

I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth. I would have to do rather annoying things for the team challenge like conquering a miniature tower, capturing artifacts against other teams, or going on a team trip. Thankfully, team challenges only lasted until the midterms in six weeks.

“Form your teams according to the requirements and submit your list by the end of next Wednesday. I will place you in teams myself if you don’t have one by then.”

“Huu.”

Outcasts like me would have a sad time. However, I might be the best choice among triple-digit cadets as Yi Jiyeon mentioned.

Tap, tap, tap.

“...?”

I turned around towards the seat behind me. Rachel anxiously tapped on her desk. Both of us had no friends. The others ostracized me while Rachel naturally felt aloof. It might be beneficial to team up since I also had something to give her.

The butterfly seedling's dust.

Originally, Rachel had obtained a hint of her enlightenment through it during the final exam. If I delayed it any longer, her basic specs might remain lower than in the original story.

“Huu.”

I took a deep breath and nervously sent her a message.

[Rachel, would you like to team up?]

However, someone approached her before she could check my message.

“Would you like to team up?”

Tomer, the robed magician, asked Rachel.

Chapter 79

Attraction (3)

Tomer's boldness attracted the entire class. Rachel stared at her puzzled, but Tomer even reached out her hand. I wondered why she approached Rachel. Wicked's djinns operated like mercenaries. Lancaster might be the mastermind behind her mission if she approached Rachel.

"I'll think about it. There's still a lot of time."

Rachel postponed her decision. Then she checked her smartwatch and saw my message. She glanced over and we made eye contact. *Sssk*. Rachel quickly turned to the window and pretended not to see me. I guess two offers made her happy since she began to smile. I turned towards the front of the class. She replied after about 10 minutes.

[I'll think about it.]

I hoped she would pick me since we already had somewhat of a friendship. I stopped thinking about the team challenge and focused on a more important issue. I stared at Kim Suho's back. Summer break had gone by, so it was almost time. Kim Suho should be preparing for a dungeon. He planned to solo it like a typical protagonist.

It was a small dungeon with weak minions, but a powerful boss called the Swordsman of Destruction. A high-intermediate rank hero would still struggle, but not Kim Suho. Even Evandel could easily answer who would win between a swordsman and a sword saint. Kim Suho's magic power would easily shatter the boss' sword, and only a single tree branch would remain. This branch would become Kim Suho's weapon.

Its divine name was Misteltein, aka the god-slaying branch. Many tales described this legendary weapon as a branch, a sword, or even a spear. I had set its unawakened form as a branch, and it would

become a sword as it awakened.

However, Kim Suho wouldn't know at first because of its ordinary appearance. The butterfly seedling's dust caused its first awakening and transformed it into a black branch. I found it funny how this branch would later beat powerful monsters like king ogres and sea kings. I couldn't help but chuckle as I thought back to the Kim Suho in my novel.

I had to join his dungeon conquest. After all, I had the butterfly seedling's dust, but that wasn't the only reason. Frankly, I worried if Kim Suho could beat the dungeon alone. This world wasn't as easy as the one I created. Also, the dungeon might provide me with something useful.

"Now, you may proceed to class."

The morning announcement ended as we left for class.

"Ah, Hajin, where are you going?"

A girl I had never seen before clung to my side.

"What?"

I'm going to class, where else would I be going?

"Well, you see, I was wondering if you had—"

"Hajin!"

Jin Hoseung cut in before the girl could finish. He was on my team last semester.

"I got tickets to the French Artifact Museum. Napoleon's rifle will be on display tomorrow."

I ended up accepting the ticket, but it didn't end there. A bunch of cadets, some I knew and some I didn't, all started bribing me. I

accepted their gifts without declining.

* * *

I returned to my room after classes and pondered on the couch. Evandel slept on my thigh like a pillow, so I couldn't move.

"How should I handle it?"

I thought about how to appease Tomer. Currently, she hadn't fully assimilated with the djinns. I felt like I could bring her to our side as long as I found her father. However, the Book of Truth couldn't find him for some reason.

I had no choice but to employ other methods. Yoo Jinhyuk was undoubtedly the best, but he cost too much. Yoo Jinhyuk also restricted his range to Korea. It would be a huge waste if Tomer's father wasn't in Korea.

"Oh right."

I suddenly recalled someone. A trustworthy informant who knew Kim Chundong. The chubby boy I first met at the entrance ceremony. *What was his name? Kim... right, Kim Hosup.* Of course, we hadn't talked to each other since then, so I didn't know his phone number. However, I could easily find out. I opened the Book of Truth and asked for Kim Hosup's number.

"Argh."

Just looking up a single phone number consumed 30% of my magic power. Was the Book of Truth too costly? Or were two streaks of stigma not enough? I immediately called him. *Tururu— Tururu— Three little pigs—* He had a strange ringtone, but quickly picked up.

— Hello?

Kim Hosup had an unexpectedly deep voice.

"Hey, Hosup. It's Hajin. How have you been?"

— *Ah*, Hajin. It's been a while!

His tone quickly changed.

— What's up?

“*Um...* Hosup.”

— *Un?*

“What have you been up to lately?”

— Me?

The way he dragged out his sentences annoyed me, but Hosup would serve an important role. Although everyone mistreated him because of his appearance and strange personality, Yoo Yeonha would notice his talents in 7 years.

— I'm... doing okay. Why did you call me?

He sounded meek. *Tsk*, it seemed some seniors at his workplace had bullied him. Unfortunately, I didn't have time to comfort him.

“Nothing much. Just... I'm wondering if you can help me find someone.”

— A person?

“Yeah. I'll send you a supercomputer as payment.”

A good computer would amplify his gift.

— A supercomputer? Aren't you poor?

“I have a lot of money now. I'll send it to you this week. Can you do it?”

— It should be possible if you have his background information.

“Perfect. I’ll send it to you right away.”

I sent him Fernin Jesus’ fake identity and the picture from Tomer.

“Alright, I just sent it. Also, Hosup.”

— *Hm?*

“If you’re going to quit your job...”

Kim Hosup might not be an altruist or a philanthropist, but he was a good person. He would be more helpful if Yoo Yeonha discovered him earlier.

“There’s a new information guild called Falling Blossom. You should join. They only care about your ability, so they’ll treat you well.”

I told Hosup about the workplace where he would shine in the future.

* * *

Kim Suho trained alone in a dark forest at 10 P.M. *Shwik*— His sword caused the air to undulate. He followed with a spinning slash after a light jab and several small slashes. His movements perfectly flowed as if the sword always protected him. His technique looked flawless and as light as a feather. Kim Suho reflected on his sword technique every night to maintain his knight mindset. Nowadays, he also devoted himself for another reason. That was...

“Are you training?”

Someone startled him as he turned around.

“Kim Hajin?”

Kim Hajin leaned against a tree while watching the sword training. Kim Suho sheathed his weapon.

“Are you also here to train?”

Kim Suho asked him as Kim Hajin approached with a smile and shook his head.

“No, I’m just on a walk. Anyways, it’s still early in the semester, but you sure work hard. If someone saw you, they would think you’re trying to conquer a dungeon alone.”

“...”

Kim Suho’s body slightly shook. Kim Hajin continued to smile as he chattered uncharacteristically.

“No way, am I right?”

“...No.”

Kim Suho denied it with a smile. However, Kim Hajin’s eyes narrowed at him. Kim Suho slightly shrunk back from Kim Hajin’s eyes, which seemed to see through everything.

“You went out last week, right? To Kamak Mountain. I saw you on my way back.”

“...”

Kim Suho stared at Kim Hajin. He had felt the resonance of a sword from Kamak Mountain. At first, he climbed the mountain to feel its life energy. However, a sword qi inside the mountain called to him. This strange call attracted his attention, and he found an unidentified dungeon at the epicenter.

“How did you know?” Kim Suho carefully asked.

“I saw you coincidentally. You know how I go out a lot. Not to brag or anything, but my eyes...”

Kim Hajin tapped his eyes. “If I climb Kumgang Mountain, I can see

up to Seoul... no, Uijeonbu.”

Kim Suho continued staring at Kim Hajin. Silence usually made people anxious, but Kim Hajin seemed completely at ease.

“Let me join if you plan on conquering a dungeon. I’m pretty useful outside of Cube.”

“...”

“We’ll split the loot 9:1. If you get a tree branch, I’ll only take a few leaves.”

* * *

A week passed in the blink of an eye as Monday came around. The team submission deadline would be in two days.

“*Hmm...*”

Chae Nayun looked at her notebook in thought. She had one spot left on her team and needed a cadet outside of the top 100. A team with a lower average rank also received bonus points. Naturally, a cost-effective cadet would be best, which meant... Kim Hajin. She peeked over at his seat.

Kim Hajin’s name often popped up in the classroom group chat for the team challenge. However, Chae Nayun felt confident that he would choose her if she asked.

She hesitated to ask for one reason. She worried that he would misunderstand. She only wanted him for the team challenge without any ulterior motives.

“*Hmm...*”

“What, are you having trouble forming your team?”

Shin Jonghak asked from behind her. He already made his team with

Kim Horak and three others. The other three were way below average with rank 2 and rank 17 on the same team. However, Shin Jonghak would find a way to squeeze out their potential.

“No, I’m just thinking—”

“Let me see.”

Shin Jonghak suddenly reached forward and stole Chae Nayun’s notebook.

“Ah, HEY!”

“Hazuki, Raymond, and... Kim Hajin? Kim Hajiiin?”

He loudly repeated Kim Hajin’s name. Immediately, the class’ attention fell on her. Naturally, Kim Hajin also stared at her. Chae Nayun felt her face growing red like a tomato.

“Eeee, ee...”

“Didn’t you say Kim Hajin—”

“Shut your mouth!”

“Uk!”

Chae Nayun struck Shin Jonghak in the solar plexus. Her sudden attack caught him completely off guard as he slumped into his desk and endured the pain.

“...uuu... uuuu...” Shin Jonghak groaned periodically.

“Don’t steal and look at other people’s stuff. Hey, Kim Suho.”

Chae Nayun quickly changed the subject with Kim Suho next to her.

“Who are you teaming up with?”

“...”

Kim Suho remained silent as he tapped on his notebook with a pen.

“Kim Suho?”

“Huh? Oh.”

He finally turned around when she called again. Chae Nayun peeked at his notebook.

“What, you’re asking Kim Hajin too?”

He had written down Kim Hajin’s name.

“Huh? Oh, I guess so.”

“Everyone’s asking Kim Hajin.”

“A fitting... combination...” Shin Jonghak barely muttered from the pain. “Two... trifling commoners...”

“Shut it. Yoo Yeonha, what about you?”

Yoo Yeonha stared at her smartwatch and raised her head.

“Me? My team’s already decided.”

Yoo Yeonha formed her team with people she could easily manipulate. Although she also coveted Kim Hajin, she felt more comfortable with people she could easily handle.

“*Hmm...*”

The theory instructor finally walked in. He placed a thick textbook on the podium and took attendance.

“Oh, by the way, there will also be team challenges for theory

classes.”

The instructor announced. Chae Nayun immediately made up her mind. *Bless Kim Hajin.*

* * *

“That’s it for today. Make sure to review before the next class.”

Chae Nayun snapped out of her daze as class ended. She quickly chased after Kim Hajin.

“Hey.”

She grabbed his shoulder as Kim Hajin asked what she wanted with just his eyes. She felt a bit nervous.

“Um, about your team...”

Someone walked past her when she almost asked. The blonde hair and delicate fragrance belonged to Rachel.

“Team?” Rachel asked with an innocent expression.

“Huh? Oh, it doesn’t concern you.”

“Hajin decided to team up with me.”

“Eh?”

Chae Nayun’s expression became stiff. She swallowed hard and turned to Kim Hajin. He nodded somewhat regretfully.

“Oh, really? I didn’t think you had anyone to team with, so I thought I’d save you. You know, as a fellow traveling club member. Right... well... good luck.”

Chae Nayun had no idea what came out of her mouth and turned around after smacking his shoulder. She felt dazed as she walked

away, but suddenly grew annoyed and turned back around.

Coincidentally, she made eye contact with Rachel who nodded at her. Chae Nayun clenched her teeth. They had opposite personalities, but similar grades except for theory. Chae Nayun considered Rachel her rival second only to Kim Suho. No, nowadays, Rachel had surpassed Kim Suho as her sole rival.

Why her of all people?

Chae Nayun stomped away like an angry bison.

Chapter 80

Teamwork (1)

Rachel paused in the middle of walking. I also stopped since she had a serious expression. She stared at me and spoke.

“I already submitted the team list.”

Team Rachel consisted of the following: Rachel, Jin Hoseung, Yi Bokgyu, Kim Hajin, and Tomer. Rachel ranked the highest with Jin Hoseung and Yi Bokgyu at rank 108 and 173 respectively.

“...So you can't go somewhere else.”

She seemed worried because of Chae Nayun.

“Of course.”

“Ah, they're over there!”

Jin Hoseung, Yi Bokhyu, and Tomer all arrived.

“We're in the same team now. Let's go get some food.”

Jin Hoseung excitedly spoke. Was it because he was on Rachel's team? I glanced at Rachel who nodded.

“So where are we going?”

“Mm... well, what do you want to eat, Rachel?”

“I'm fine with anything.”

Rachel wasn't particularly picky, but she did have a preference.

“Let’s go to Hangyujung, the Korean restaurant.”

“Uh, sure.”

Yi Bokgyu and Jin Hoseung didn’t mind as Rachel coughed in satisfaction. Only Tomer had no reaction.

“Are you okay with that?”

“...Yeah.”

Rachel briefly replied, “Great.”

They had decided.

“Oh right.”

We headed there with a GPS as Jin Hoseung approached me.

“Hajin, about the ticket from before, it’s in two days. Do you want to come with me?”

“To France?”

Rachel’s eyes flickered. France and England had a similar relationship to Korea and Japan. An artifact scramble had occurred between them about 20 years ago.

“No, I’m fine.”

Honestly, Napoleon’s rifle interested me, but I didn’t want to go all the way to France.

“Why? Who knows, maybe Napoleon’s rifle will become yours.”

“Napoleon?” Rachel muttered.

“How? I’m rank 334.”

“Well, it’s better than keeping it in a museum. By the way, did your voice change Hajin?”

“*Cough*. Did it?”

I had used the flute I bought from Clancy Islet’s antique shop.

[Horn Flute] [Antique] A flute used by a wandering minstrel of Joseon. Your throat will become clearer for three hours if you blow this horn.

I used it for the first time before visiting Kim Suho because a deep voice sounded more reliable. I’ve used it often ever since. I liked my clearer voice, and it felt great to open up my throat in the morning.

“Yeah, is it puberty?”

“...”

Thankfully, I didn’t have to answer his nonsensical question as we arrived at the Korean restaurant. Rachel entered first while smacking her lips.

* * *

After nine months, the Chameleon Troupe gathered at their hideout in an abandoned factory in Suwon. Droon finally figured out how to use the white crystal.

“Kid, do I really break it?”

Cheok Jungyeong asked again with an artifact sword in his hand. Droon frowned and urged him.

“Yeah, do it.”

“*Tsk*, don’t blame me if anything goes wrong.”

Cheok Jungyeong grumbled as he wrapped his fist in a dense magic power. *KWANG*. His fist clashed with the artifact sword and shattered

it like glass.

“Happy?”

“Yep.”

Droon picked up a fragment of the shattered sword and placed it on a stone table.

“I’ll initiate it now.”

Woong — The white crystal began to resonate and unleashed magic power that condensed inside the cube. Then it radiated towards the sword fragment. The white magic power clung to the fragment and formed a crystal sword.

“*Oooh.*”

Cheok Jungyeong applauded while the rest of the Chameleon Troupe members looked shocked.

“Just like that, a tiny sword fragment became a partial artifact. According to my tests, it’s as strong as a low rank artifact. A single artifact can produce about 30 partial artifacts. Taking the crystal’s magic power into account, we’ll be able to make about 600 more.”

“We can sell each partial artifact for around 700-800 million won. Amazing.”

A simple calculation revealed a profit of at least 500 billion won. Each member would earn approximately 20 million won even after the black market and money laundering fees. The risk had been worth it.

“Yeah, but it’ll take at least 5 years to sell it all.”

“That’s fine. Oh, by the way,” Jain suddenly interjected. “Packhorse Master began their conquest of the Suwon Devil’s Nest.”

The members’ eyes flickered.

The Chameleon Troupe treated Packhorse Master like prey that finally appeared.

* * *

“Look, if you do this...”

Evandel busily played with clay at 9:00 P.M. when she should’ve been asleep. She spent too much magic power creating spirits, so I gave her some clay.

“Tada.”

Evandel made a penguin with glasses that she often saw on TV.

“Wow, what’s this?”

I looked surprised as Evandel proudly puffed her chest.

“How did you make it? Are you a genius?”

“*Hihi*, want me to tell you?”

“No, I won’t be able to do it even if you told me.”

My smartwatch suddenly rang as I praised the smiling Evandel. It came from Kim Suho.

[Can you come out to the forest we met last time?]

So you finally decided. I stood up with a smile.

“Evandel, I’m going out for a bit.”

“*Un?* Where are you going?”

“*Uh...* to buy some snacks before bed.”

“Snacks? I want cake!”

“Okay.”

“Cake, cake!”

“I’ll buy some, don’t worry.”

I went outside with cake as an excuse. I repeated *cake* so I wouldn’t forget as I headed to Kim Suho.

Cube’s night felt chilly even during summer because it was an island in the East Sea. I rubbed my shoulders every time the wind blew until I arrived.

Kim Suho stood with a serious expression in the middle of the dark forest. His usual gentleness had disappeared under the heavy atmosphere.

“Yo, Kim Suho, why’d you call me?”

Kim Suho turned around as he heard me. He stared for a long time before sighing.

“Do you remember what you said to me last time?”

“Huh? Oh yeah, what about it?”

“...I recently found a dungeon.”

I smiled since I already knew.

“It must’ve formed recently since it’s small, so I thought about challenging it alone.”

“However, it’s still a dungeon and risky to conquer by yourself.”

I leisurely crossed my arms and interrupted him. Kim Suho calmly nodded.

“Yeah, I’ve been thinking the same.”

Kim Suho suddenly threw down his jacket. “I’ll need to verify your skills if I’m going to trust my back to you,” he murmured as he stared at me.

“Huh?”

The situation turned out a bit differently than I expected.

“I know the dungeon’s exact location, so it’s okay if I determine whether you’ll be a help or a burden, right?”

“Right. *Cough.*”

My arms began to tremble. Honestly, I wouldn’t be able to defeat him even if Kim Suho became blind and left-handed. Not to mention, he was a swordsman while I was a sharpshooter.

“You’re right, but you haven’t considered one thing.”

“What’s that?”

I racked my brain to avoid fighting. Should I show him the Desert Eagle’s power? He should understand my attack power if I shot a tree trunk.

“It’s not fair for a sharpshooter and a warrior to fight one-on-one in an open field. Plus, the difference in my attack power varies depending on the type of gun.”

“You don’t have to beat me.”

Kim Suho cut me off.

“And the weapon doesn’t matter. I’m not trying to test your weapon’s power.”

“Really?”

“Yes, I’ll stop when I’m satisfied.”

I couldn’t say anything as Kim Suho took out his sword. Not a cadet sword, but a wooden sword for sparring. However, a sword’s quality didn’t matter for Kim Suho. My bullets wouldn’t work the moment his magic power surrounded that sword. Anti-magic also wouldn’t change a thing. Kim Suho’s magic power existed on a higher dimension and could cut even anti-magic.

A good idea popped into my head.

“Oh, but I forgot my gun.”

“What’s that on your waist?”

I looked down and saw the cadet handgun in my belt holster.

“Oh... I brought it... I forgot...”

I took the gun out without any other choice.

“Will it be okay? I won’t be able to control my strength.”

“It’s fine.”

“Also, this isn’t my real weapon. I’m using this since Cube prohibits personal weapon, but...”

I racked my brain to buy time and looked around for something to trigger my luck. I checked the surrounding forest, the dark sky, and the cool wind. Kim Suho’s hair fluttered, and the jacket he threw flapped on the ground. *The jacket!* I needed my SP and luck for Kim Suho to recognize me.

“Are you ready?” Kim Suho spoke as I stared at the ground.

“Hold on. Someone sent me a message.”

I wasn’t ready yet as I fiddled with my smartwatch. I busily tapped on

the holographic keyboard for two minutes.

[Cadet Jacket] A jacket created by Cube. — Trap Transformation: When someone steps on this jacket, a strong and unknown force will push that person off. This effect lasts for 10 minutes and will disappear after one use.

[25 SP will be consumed. Would you like to save?]

I needed less SP than expected for a one-time use that wouldn't deal any damage.

"I'm ready."

I turned off the smartwatch and took a deep breath.

"Then let's start."

"Yeah."

The man who would become the world's strongest stood in front of me. I felt immense pressure as I held my breath. Then Kim Suho charged with unbelievable speed.

However, I could react with bullet time. I clearly saw his wooden sword even though he moved much faster than me. I glanced at the jacket after barely ducking the slash. I only needed four steps.

Whish— Kim Suho's wooden sword swung past my eyes. I fired at his foot as he dodged by lightly jumping. Then he swung his sword while moving backward and grazed my shoulder. A burning pain overwhelmed me, but I managed to take two steps. However, Kim Suho's sword already rose again.

My instincts roared that I couldn't dodge it. How could I avoid a sword that came towards me five times per second?

I used aether with no other options.

Aether shot up from my feet and pushed me aside. Only a single step

remained from the jacket. Kim Suho seemed surprised that I avoided his consecutive strikes. However, he chased after me without giving me a chance and aimed for my shoulder. However, before his sword could hit... He stepped on the jacket.

“...!”

Kim Suho's body disappeared from view. The trap sent him flying without a scream. He couldn't properly land because it caught him off guard as he fell and rolled about 50 meters away. My bullet struck first next to his head as he tried to stand.

“In a real fight, that wouldn't have missed.”

His qi reinforcement would've blocked it anyways. I trudged up to soulless Kim Suho, but a smile emerged on his face as I reached out.

Chapter 81

Teamwork (2)

Kim Suho walked to his room under the faint moonlight. He suddenly burst into laughter on the dark road. The previous fight flashed before his eyes. Kim Hajin had easily blown him away when he closed the distance. Even now, he couldn't understand what attacked him. Was it a physical attack or instantaneous magic power? Either way, a mysterious force had struck him, and Kim Hajin dealt a valid blow.

I thought I was the only one hiding my power.

Abnormally high strength attracted unwanted suspicion. As such, Kim Suho only revealed enough to maintain first place for his family.

So someone else thought the same as me.

Kim Suho didn't go easy against Kim Hajin. Still, Kim Hajin had managed to avoid his attacks. Even now, Kim Hajin's movements felt completely mysterious. It appeared mindless and lacking in foundation. He looked slow and full of openings. However, Kim Suho could only graze or miss as Kim Hajin escaped with incomprehensible acrobatics. It seemed like an easy victory, but he couldn't close out the fight and couldn't even gauge Kim Hajin's true strength. Kim Hajin perfectly hid his power.

"Hmm?"

Kim Suho heard a sword cutting through the wind. He could also hear a small shout. The sound came from the park near the dorms. He curiously headed over and spotted Chae Nayun swinging.

"What are you doing?"

"Hyak!"

Chae Nayun threw the sword away in surprise. It flew like a baseball bat and struck a window. Thankfully, the window didn't break, but the cadet inside turned on the lights and woke up.

"Wh, what!"

"Why are you so surprised?"

"..."

Chae Nayun glared at the uninvited guest.

"Were you practicing the sword?" Kim Suho smirked and asked.

"Just stamina training."

Chae Nayun unleashed her magic power and the sword flew back into her hands. She dusted off the dirt and pointed at Kim Suho.

"Where are you coming from?"

"Me? I met with Kim Hajin," Kim Suho honestly answered.

Chae Nayun's eyes widened. "Kim Hajin?"

"Yep."

"What for?"

Chae Nayun asked as she tucked her hair behind her ears, pretending to be unconcerned. Kim Suho had a mischievous thought.

"We talked about you."

"Wha, wha, what. Bu, bullshit."

She reacted rather strongly. Her face flushed to her ears, and she couldn't stop fidgeting. Kim Suho shook his head while laughing.

“I’m joking. We sparred.”

“Sparred? You and Kim Hajin?”

“Yeah.”

“Who won? No, you must have won. But why?”

“You don’t need to know that.”

Chae Nayun frowned. Then she turned around and focused on her sword practice. *Whish. Whish.* She swung her sword with too much strength. Kim Suho stepped in, unable to bear it.

“You can’t hold a sword like that.”

“What.”

“You won’t be able to properly cut your target if you grip it so tightly.”

Kim Suho pulled out his wooden sword and demonstrated. He held it lightly, yet firm enough to change his grip at any moment. Kim Suho swung and drew a clean arc in the air. The wind touched Chae Nayun’s hair and scattered. Her unenthusiastic attitude immediately changed. She carefully watched and copied Kim Suho.

“Like, like this?”

Her lesson with Kim Suho continued until midnight.

* * *

Chae Nayun video called Hazuki when she returned to her room to finalize their team. She made Hazuki vice-leader and selected an average supporter and sharpshooter. Two warriors, one support, one sharpshooter, and one magician. The higher ranked magician from Seoul Magic Academy would help balance the team. Furthermore, Chae Nayun could act as both a warrior and sharpshooter. Her team

could undoubtedly be considered one of the best.

— *Ah...* then is Hajin not joining us?

However, Hazuki murmured regretfully on the video call.

“*Uh*, well, I can bring him if I wanted, but then I’d feel bad for Rachel’s team. Everyone on that team is only average besides Rachel.”

Chae Nayun loudly replied. Team Rachel wasn’t particularly outstanding. Their team consisted of three warriors and no supporter. The magician named Tomer also seemed below average.

— But...

“Let’s not think about them. I’m going to submit the final team list, okay?”

— Y-Yes.

Chae Nayun hung up and jumped in bed, but she didn’t feel sleepy. Frankly, she felt frustrated and annoyed. She would’ve asked Kim Hajin earlier if she knew this would happen. They would’ve obtained a good score in theory too. Rachel ended up taking him because she kept hesitating.

“Am I going to lose again?”

She still remembered her defeat during the midterm. Her loss then also contributed to her changing weapons. Chae Nayun recalled the bitter memory under her blanket and suddenly shot up. She simply couldn’t sleep. She picked up the helmet next to her bed and played some games to relieve her stress.

[Gladiator of the Century]

This famous virtual reality game frequently aired on public broadcasts because it helped with image training. Heroes and cadets enjoyed it all over the world. The media always featured the rank 1 player of each season.

[Nayunjajangman] [98 wins 17 losses]

Chae Nayun felt extremely proud of her win rate.

“Hm.”

Unranked matches seemed better than ranked matches for relieving stress. Chae Nayun found a suitable opponent nicknamed Extra7. He belonged in the platinum league with 43 wins and 43 losses. It would be an easy victory.

[You have challenged Extra7 to a duel.] [Extra7 has accepted your challenge.]

“This guy is quite bold.”

Chae Nayun grinned as she focused. This game didn’t have any stats or items. Only battle sense and superior control determined victory or defeat.

[Start!]

The duel began. Chae Nayun wanted to take things slow and test the waters. However, the opponent acted unexpectedly. Before she could adapt, her character floated up and consecutive strikes tore her apart. Her vision turned red before she realized what happened.

“Eh, what? A-Ah!”

She seriously tried, but her HP fell too low. She lost after just three minutes. *[Defeat]* Chae Nayun blankly stared and frowned.

“Argh, this sly piece of crap!”

* * *

[Victory]

I won again in a game called *[Gladiator of the Century]*. It felt quite

realistic in terms of graphics and movements, so I've been playing it recently to image train.

“So it works on this too.”

The number 37 flashed on the console helmet. The Random Consolidation System also applied to it.

[Random Consolidation System] [Low rank] [Spirit attribute] — Random Consolidation: Will enhance the scanned equipment by 1-44%. The consolidation will last for 24 hours, after which the boost percentage will be randomized once again.

My enhanced game console became something else. Not only did the console's performance increase, but the speed of my thoughts and feelings also increased by 37%.

“I won seven times in a row.”

Thanks to my new gift, I defeated a veteran seven times in a row. Of course, the unranked matches didn't affect my ranked stats.

[Nayunjajangman requests a rematch.] [Nayunjajangman requests a rematch.] [Nayunjajangman requests a rematch.]

“This kid sure is tenacious. Well too bad for you, I have to sleep now.”

I turned the game off and put away the helmet. I caught Evandel in the corner of my eyes.

“Yummy. So yummy.”

She fell asleep when I got home, but soon woke up when I started to play the game. Now she fully woke up and munched on the cake. She had eaten half of it. Was she allowed to eat that much? I felt a bit concerned, so I confiscated the cake.

“Ah, aan! W-What ish it!”

“Let’s save the rest for later.”

“Why, why!”

“It’s not good for your health.”

Evandel hopped and tried to grab the cake. However, I coldheartedly put it away on the fridge’s topmost shelf. Evandel placed her hands on her waist and frowned. It looked like she was disgruntled at the entire world.

“I want more! I want more!”

She had even learned how to complain. I placed my index finger over my lips.

“*Shh*. You should only eat a little after meals. Also, you can’t be loud at night.”

“...”

Her tiny hands trembled even though she quieted down. I held her up.

“You can eat the rest of it tomorrow, okay? I’ll buy even more delicious food.”

“Really?”

“Of course. Have I ever not kept a promise?”

She seemed appeased as I stroked her head. Not long afterward, Evandel fell asleep and I tucked her into bed. I noticed that Kim Suho sent me a message two hours ago.

[Second week of August on Friday. Let’s meet then.]

“*Whew*.”

It seemed like he recognized my skills, all thanks to the modified

cadet jacket. Kim Suho didn't seem to suspect anything either. Of course, he had no reason to suspect his own jacket. Moreover, an unknown force had pushed him. Kim Suho would never figure out what happened.

* * *

Today's Wednesday class would be the first since teams formed. We would undergo a combat training called dungeon investigation. Normally, heroes would dispatch an advance party first after they discovered a dungeon. The advance party would scout and gather information about the dungeon's interior. In this combat training, cadets would act as the advance party.

"Ah, it's so cold."

"Auuu, aren't you cold, Hajin?"

My team had entered a dungeon covered in ice. The five of us shivered as we walked forward. The road suddenly forked into five branches after about 20 minutes.

"It's here."

Tomer suddenly pointed at the rightmost path. I stared in the direction she pointed. As expected, it contained a trap.

"No, that's the wrong direction."

"What? No, it isn't."

Tomer wanted to lead us into a trap. I didn't think a djinn waited there, but it must be life-threatening.

"In a dungeon investigation, it's common sense to listen to your sharpshooter."

"..."

Tomer stared at Rachel. Too bad for her, Rachel was also on my side.

“Let’s go as Hajin says.”

“Don’t regret it later.”

Tomer acted like a sore loser.

“There’s a yeti up ahead.”

A yeti slept on the path I chose. We advanced with our guard up. Tomer continually tried to lead us, especially Rachel, into a trap. However, I always prevented her.

“I think it’s this way, for real this time. If you see the traces of ice around there...”

“No, it’s not.”

“No, just trust me this once. Rachel, come with me. Wouldn’t it be more efficient to split into two groups?”

“No, we can’t.”

I had to commend her constant efforts, but that didn’t mean I could allow her to do as she pleased. I grabbed Rachel by the wrist and led her. Tomer grew more irritated as time passed.

“Um...”

My thousand-mile eyes pinpointed the shortest path through this maze-like ice dungeon. We didn’t experience any obstructions or difficulties. Finally, we caught a glimpse of the instructor at the exit. Rachel spoke uncomfortably.

“Um... Hajin.”

“Yes?”

“This...”

Rachel glanced at her wrist. I held onto her, thinking Tomer might take her away.

“Oh right, sorry.”

“No, you don’t need to be...”

“Team Rachel!”

The instructor shouted as he spotted us. We ran up to him.

“Your findings?”

“Yes. A yeti, snow beast, white calamity, white drake...”

Rachel recited the results of our investigation. The instructor listened as he compared it to a list. Then he faintly smiled.

“Based on the monsters’ ranks, the dungeon boss is likely to be at least intermediate rank, grade 3.”

“Good. Team Rachel, perfect score.”

Rachel’s face lit up along with the other team members. They happily celebrated our perfect score.

“Dammit.”

Meanwhile, Tomer kicked a rock out of frustration.

Chapter 82

Teamwork (3)

“Sigh.”

Tomer returned to the magicians’ dorm.

[Tomer, why is the mission being delayed? Are there other variables?]

Her boss sent her a grumpy message. Tomer had to injure or weaken Rachel and needed to disrupt her daily activities somehow. She thought she could quickly handle this with the help of spies, but a heckler kept obstructing her.

“Do I have to take care of him first?”

Nowadays, she felt bitter just seeing Kim Hajin. Every time she tried something, he appeared out of nowhere and foiled her plans. Kim Hajin refused to leave Rachel’s side.

“Tsk, doesn’t he know his place?”

Tomer couldn’t understand how a rank 334 could act so straightforwardly. She already investigated his background. He didn’t have any parents, much less a proper backing. Did he believe he could win a beauty’s heart with courage?

“Wait.”

A flash of insight struck Tomer. Kim Hajin felt strongly towards Rachel. However, Rachel seemed uncomfortable with his advances.

He kept making moves one-sidedly. Tomer could easily spread malicious rumors. You could bad-mouth someone behind their back, or you could exaggerate already existing rumors. However, she didn’t

need such complicated schemes. She just had to exaggerate what she witnessed. First, she would have to get close to Kim Hajin and Rachel... no, the entire team.

Tomer messaged her boss.

[Is the mission just to separate this girl?]

[That's right. The agent we dispatched will take care of the rest.]

Good, it's time for a change of plans. Tomer laughed maniacally. Suddenly, her smartwatch vibrated. The intense vibration signaled that it came from Violet Banquet. Tomer quickly turned on her smartwatch.

[Truth Agency] [We have accepted Jamie Jamer's request.]

"They're replying now?"

She had forgotten about the Truth Agency because she made the request 2-3 weeks ago. *Did they just have too many clients?* She would be satisfied as long as she could find that bastard.

* * *

"Next week, each team will select a small-scale dungeon and present how to best conquer it."

The professor handed out their team assignments just before Friday's theory class ended. Cadets immediately groaned. However, Jin Hoseung and Yi Bokgyu didn't worry at all. They turned around and happily looked at me.

"We believe in you, Hajin."

The other cadets enviously looked over.

"Have a good weekend."

The professor left as our team stood up.

“There’s a team leader meeting next Wednesday. Don’t forget to come to the auditorium if you’re a team leader.”

The class president, Yi Yeonghan, loudly shouted. I looked at Rachel as she put away her writing utensils. I spoke as we made eye contact.

“Let’s go to the café today and divide the work.”

“Alright.”

Tomer answered instead of Rachel. I turned to the side.

“Let’s go to the café.”

Tomer wore a bright expression.

“What’s up with you?”

“What do you mean? Everyone, Rachel, let’s go. We don’t have time.”

Tomer stepped in and urged the other members. I stared at her in a daze. What was she scheming this time? Did she set a nuclear bomb at the café?

We arrived at the café 10 minutes later. I peered through the roof and floor, but I couldn’t find any traps. Although I remained suspicious, I began to divide our work among the members.

“Hoseung and Bokgyu can look up the data on the dungeon. Jamer^[1] and Rachel can calculate the mana density.”

We discussed our plans for 30 minutes. They would send their results to me, and I would assemble everything into a PowerPoint.

“That sounds good.”

“I agree.”

The team members all looked happy. Rachel suddenly grabbed my sleeve as I prepared to leave.

“Um, Hajin.”

“Yes?”

“Didn’t the English Royal Court contact you?”

“Eh? Um, what contact?”

Rachel slightly frowned.

“Um, the English Royal Court guild...”

“...?”

I tilted my head. Although I didn’t remember anything, I checked my email just in case. I had 1097 unread emails. I searched for *royal court* and found one email.

“Ah, they emailed me. Sorry, I don’t often check my email.”

“They emailed you?”

I didn’t know why, but Rachel seemed a bit angry as she pouted.

“Try reading it when you go home.”

“I’ll just read it now.”

I clicked on the email. They wrote it in Korean, so I could read it. They offered a 100 million won salary with additional benefits. It wasn’t a particularly good offer for a pre-contract.

“Can I take a look?”

“Sure.”

Rachel peeked at the contents. Her eyes busily moved, then she frowned.

“What kind of a contract is... never mind, don’t read this.”

Rachel stood up, fuming. Then she rushed out of the café with the angriest face I’d ever seen since I entered Cube.

“What, why is she so mad?”

The rest of the members watched her leave in a daze.

* * *

I reserved Sunday nights for recovering my sanity. I focused on playing a game called *[Victory]*.

I won once again.

[How did you do that combo just now?]

The loser, Nayunjajangman, messaged me. We became friends since the last time we played. We often logged on around the same time and played against each other. Thankfully, the Random Consolidation System always gave me numbers like 37, 40, and 39, so I haven’t lost a single game yet.

[You must remain calm.]

[How are you so good? Are you an active hero?]

[No, not at all.]

The enhancement increased my understanding of the most efficient combo to use and even boosted my sense of time and movement within the game. Although my skills varied depending on what I rolled, I always played like an expert.

[By the way, why are your ranked stats 43 wins and 43 losses? Did you

lose on purpose?]

[Yes, because I didn't want to become attached to mere numbers.]

I lied without even batting an eye.

[Ah... I see. You're amazing. I can't sleep properly if I lose a ranked match. Do you log on around this time every day?]

[Yes.]

[Can I ask you to teach me around this time?]

I couldn't help but smile. He acted surprisingly polite.

[Gladly. However, I'll be logging off now. I have to go work out.]

[Oh! I was about to go work out too. Jinx!]

I didn't reply and removed my helmet. I carefully opened the door so I wouldn't wake Evandel. Then I headed to the fitness center. I arrived after about five minutes of walking and ran into Chae Nayun as I came out of the changing room.

"What, you're here to work out too?"

"Huh? Yeah."

"Alright, work hard."

Chae Nayun walked past me into the girl's changing room. I headed to the treadmill without much thought. Suddenly, it crossed my mind. *Nayunjajangman. Nayun. Chae Nayun.*

"Mm... no way, right?"

I found it unlikely since Chae Nayun didn't like jajangmyeon^[2]. She wouldn't use that as her ID. Not to mention, Nayunjajangman spoke like a man.

I set the treadmill speed to 20 km. I couldn't have imagined it in the past, but I didn't find it so difficult now. I ran on the treadmill for the next 30 minutes and was soaked in sweat by the time I finished.

“Huu...”

I took out a sports drink from the fridge. Chae Nayun came out of the gravity room and slowly approached me.

“Hey.”

I silently stared at her. She fidgeted around, trying to buy time.

“What? Say something.”

“You see, my team got the hongcheon mantis dungeon.”

Chae Nayun worried about her team challenge since insect dungeons were some of the trickiest.

“Do, do you know anything about it?”

“How did you choose the most difficult one?”

“I know, right? The annoying magician in my team kept telling me to choose it.”

The magician in her team was Oh Junsik. I had recorded him in my settings book. Although he was skilled, he acted like an ass because his aunt was a 7 star magician. He probably wouldn't bend to Chae Nayun either.

“He thought he could get bonus points with a difficult assignment, but he'll probably ruin the presentation. He'll stutter and make you facepalm yourself.”

“I know, I wanted to overlook it, but now... *Sigh*, I've never met

someone more headstrong than me.”

At least she knew she also acted stubbornly.

“If possible, let someone else present. Unexpectedly, Hazuki is a good choice.”

“I want to, but I doubt that bastard will agree. *Cough.*”

The atmosphere suddenly turned awkward. We both distanced ourselves as we remembered our relationship. After all, we weren’t friends who could chat so amicably.

“H-Have fun exercising. I’m going back to the gravity room.”

“*Uh*, yeah, I’ll go lift some weights.”

* * *

At dusk on Tuesday, a sharp sword resounded throughout the area.

“Hey, didn’t I improve?”

Chae Nayun, who wielded a sword, asked with a bright face. Kim Suho nodded with a laugh.

“Yeah, you stopped closing your eyes.”

Only a week had passed since Kim Suho began teaching Chae Nayun. She grew at an incredible pace and stopped fearing close range attacks to a certain extent.

“I think playing that game helped me.”

“Game?” Kim Suho tilted his head.

“Yeah, I met someone even better than you. A super expert who only does close range combat.”

“Ah, Gladiator of the Century? But you don’t move your body in that game.”

Gladiator of the Century used brainwaves and iris movements as controls. Of course, you could play with a keyboard and mouse, but that would significantly lower your reaction time.

“Yeah, but an ordinary person could never pull off what he does. He’s my mentor!”

“Oh, he must be an expert then.”

The prideful Chae Nayun had acknowledged her mentor as superior.

“Yeah, he has a great personality too. He matches his win-loss ratio because he doesn’t want to be attached to mere numbers. Isn’t that cool?”

Most people played ranked matches to win, which resulted in boring matches. Each side would test out the waters with small maneuvers, and the outcome would be determined by which side dealt more blows. Like a boxing match, except one side would never be KO’ed. However, Extra7 played differently. He directly charged at you almost recklessly. Each of his movements could potentially be lethal, which helped Chae Nayun overcome her fear of close range combat.

“He must be an active hero if he’s that good, right?”

“No, I asked him, and he said... *Eh?*”

Kim Hajin suddenly appeared in the distance wearing flip-flops.

“Oh look, Kim Hajin’s here.”

Kim Suho had already told her that Kim Hajin would meet with him and that he could only teach her until Kim Hajin arrived.

“*Hm?* Oh, you’re right. Then I’ll be going now.”

Kim Suho stood up.

“Yeah, take care.”

“Don’t overwork yourself either, okay?”

Chae Nayun watched them together. It felt like they had gotten close recently, but how?

Now that I think about it, Kim Suho jokingly said they talked about me. Was it because of me?

Kim Suho and Kim Hajin walked away as they chatted. Chae Nayun strained her ears.

— How’s your condition?

Kim Hajin asked.

— Pretty good.

Kim Suho replied.

— Don’t overwork yourself. Friday’s right around the corner.

— Of course.

— Oh, and how’s Chae Nayun?

Chae Nayun’s heart skipped a beat. She couldn’t hear the most important part as they walked farther away.

“...The heck.”

She stared at them with a complex emotion.

1. Jamer is the fake name Tomer is using as a student, but this is the

first time the main character is referring to her aloud to others so he's referring to her as Jamer. It's confusing because he always refers to her as Tomer in his head and the author refers to her as Tomer too, but in reality, the other characters only know her by her fake name as Jamer. 🤔

2. Jajangmyeon is Korean black bean noodles. 🤔

Chapter 83

Scout (1)

We came to a rice soup restaurant called Grandma's Flavor. Cube had all sorts of restaurants, but this was the only one open 24/7.

“...”

I became lost in thought as Kim Suho ate a bowl of rice soup. Kim Suho was at least as strong as an intermediate rank hero, but this world still had many undiscovered secrets.

Among these, some would fall into the antagonists' hands. I wouldn't dare seek out items like Lucifer's Feather or the Snaketooth of Beginning, but I might be able to prevent them from falling into the antagonists' hands with Kim Suho's help.

Kim Suho suddenly became much more attractive. He looked like a true main character. The rice soup must've been delicious since he didn't notice the grain of rice on his mouth.

“You have a grain of rice here.”

I wiped it off with a napkin.

“Ah, thanks.”

Kim Suho smiled.

“By the way, are you presenting for your group?”

“Yep.”

“Aren't you nervous? I would be.”

“I’ll eat a serenity pill before, so don’t worry.”

I learned long ago that it was foolish to not use medicine. Although I quit college to write, I attended until sophomore year. I had ample experience with 4-5 group projects. I also planned on investing some SP into the serenity pill to meet my members’ expectations. It should be a breeze if I also add a persuasion effect to the horn flute.

“Anyways, the dungeon is near Suwon, right?” I asked Kim Suho.

“Yeah, we should be careful.”

Suwon was the most dangerous of the three capitals that also included Seoul and Incheon. During Outcall, more than half the region terraformed into a horrifying mountain zone. The public could not enter west of Suwon. Kamak Mountain was at the border of this restricted zone.

The restaurant door opened and someone entirely clad in black walked in. She wore a big hat, a black mask, and a long, full-body coat. This person could easily be mistaken for a criminal.

“Um, I just called.”

The woman in black quietly notified the staff. Then she glanced at us, the only other customers. Suddenly, her shoulders trembled.

“Ah, wait just one moment.”

The staff went into the kitchen. I smirked and turned towards her. She froze like a statue.

“Oh, who’s this?”

Along with hamburgers, rice soup was also one of her favorites.

“Yo, Yoo Yeonha.”

“...”

She pretended not to hear me. She must've wanted that rice soup since she didn't run away. I stood up and approached her.

"Why don't you join us since you're here?"

"Y-Yes? Who, who might you be? I don't know anyone like you."

She desperately tried to change her voice, but it sounded too obvious.

"*Eh?* Yoo Yeonha? You're Yoo Yeonha?" Kim Suho exclaimed in surprise. Yoo Yeonha began to tear up under her big hat.

"N-No, no, I'm not. I don't know anyone by that name."

"Here you go."

The staff came out and handed her a packaged rice soup. Yoo Yeonha quickly snatched it before running away.

"*A-Ah*, wait! You need to pay!"

The staff shouted, but Yoo Yeonha had disappeared. Then the staff slowly turned towards me. I took out my card without a choice.

"I'll pay for it."

"Yes, thank you."

For the record, Yoo Yeonha couldn't meet my eyes for the next three days.

* * *

The day of their presentations finally arrived on Friday. Chae Nayun felt terrible. Her team had presented first and it ended disastrously. Like Kim Hajin predicted, Oh Junsik stuttered throughout the entire presentation and ruined it.

"*Ah*, I felt too nervous. Sorry, I'll do better next time."

Chae Nayun wanted to smack his head, but she held back as the class continued.

“Next team.”

Team Rachel would present next. Kim Hajin sat in front of Chae Nayun and stood up. He wore a pair of round glasses and walked to the podium.

“Hello, I am from Team 3. We will present about the Walsin Dungeon. This dungeon is located at the foot of Gangwondo Snow Mountain, but because Desolate Moon hasn’t released any information...”

Kim Hajin’s presentation proceeded smoothly. His voice sounded soft, and he didn’t seem nervous. He explained their data and calculated the dungeon’s internal structure. He even prepared a cross-sectional map. Chae Nayun stared in a daze as she rested her chin on her hands. His voice sounded slightly different, and his occasional smiles carried a sense of ease. He felt like a real professional. Chae Nayun thought a smart guy was surprisingly cool.

“Wait, I have a question.”

“Yes.”

“How can you estimate the counterflow of magic power with such a small amount of data?” The professor interrupted with a question.

“Ah, about that, if you look at the calculations here...”

Kim Hajin effortlessly explained. Chae Nayun fell into a trance at his intellectual side. The professor backed down with a smile as the presentation concluded.

“That’s it for our team’s presentation.”

Kim Hajin pushed his glasses up and returned to his seat next to Rachel. Chae Nayun stared at them with regret and envy as they high-fived.

I returned to the dorms with Rachel after class. The other members wanted to celebrate, but Rachel and I didn't participate. I had another appointment, and Rachel always refrained.

We walked together and talked about today's team challenges. Chae Nayun's team bombed the presentation and Shin Jonghak presented so intimidatingly.

"Oh right, here."

Rachel handed me a piece of paper when we reached the crossroad between Dorm 1 and Dorm 2.

"What's this?"

"Are you perhaps interested in the English Royal Court guild?"

"Huh?"

Rachel continued speaking before I could properly answer.

"Honestly, I asked the Royal Court guild to contact you, but it seems they made assumptions based on your rank."

I looked at the paper. Indeed, this contract had better conditions than the one in the email. I would've never imagined such treatment back on Earth.

"Please consider it."

Rachel lightly bowed before walking away. I watched her leave quietly.

I headed to the bus stop near Suwon Station after playing with Evandel for about 30 minutes. Kim Suho had already arrived.

“Hey Hajin, your presentation was amazing.”

Kim Suho wore light clothing. He didn't have much money, so I volunteered to take care of food and equipment.

“Everyone praised you.”

“Really? Well more importantly, which way should we go?”

“Follow me.”

Kim Suho took the lead. We hiked deep into Kamak Mountain and carefully proceeded to avoid the powerful monsters.

“It's here.”

Finally, we arrived at a dead end. Kim Suho pointed at the wall in front of us covered in moss and vines.

“So this is why it hasn't been discovered.”

It would be difficult even if you knew. All sorts of vegetation covered the narrow entrance. It only looked like a tiny gap at first glance.

“It won't be easy to escape once we enter. Are you ready?”

“Of course.”

I took out the Desert Eagle.

“This is pretty strong.”

I prepared a light bullet just in case. The Swordsman of Destruction should be a high-intermediate rank monster. The difference between intermediate rank and high-intermediate rank was immense. Even this light bullet, which cost 70 SP, would only distract it for a moment. However, a moment was enough. Kim Suho would take care of the rest.

“Then let’s go.”

Kim Suho and I jumped into the narrow gap. It widened as we walked and eventually became a tunnel. However, inside was completely dark. Instead of a flashlight, I guided Kim Suho by the hand since any light could provoke spirit monsters.

“It’s kinda creepy.”

“Tell me about it. Hold on.”

I suddenly stopped and widened my eyes. Another pathway appeared from the other side. If we started from the right that meant the left also had another entrance. Was it like this in the original story? No, I didn’t think so. Two people appeared from the other pathway.

— Where is this?

— A hidden stage I’m guessing?

I didn’t recognize them, but they didn’t look kind considering their face tattoos.

“Wait, be quiet for a second.”

I checked my smartwatch. As expected, an alert had popped up.

[Criticism – The Kamak Mountain Dungeon that Kim Suho conquered is too small considering its reward.] [Solution – The Kamak Mountain Dungeon has become a hidden stage in Suwon Devil’s Nest.]

Suwon Devil’s Nest became connected to the Kamak Mountain Dungeon. Coincidentally, today was August 14th when Packhorse Master would conquer Suwon Devil’s Nest. Those two men should be djinns from Packhorse Master.

“Why?” Kim Suho whispered. I clenched my teeth. Packhorse Master’s djinns were fairly powerful. They disguised as heroes and were at least intermediate rank in power. Even Kim Suho would struggle against them.

“There are other people in here.”

“Damn.”

For now, I closely watched their movements and eavesdropped.

— Let’s go back first. It’ll be better to conquer it together rather than arguing with the rest about what we received.

— Yeah, you’re right.

Thankfully, they left after confirming the hidden stage's location.

“Let’s finish this fast.”

I concentrated magic power into my thousand-mile eyes. My vision expanded as the dungeon’s internal structure entered into view. We would reach the Swordsman of Destruction after proceeding straight and taking two right turns. The Swordsman of Destruction slept inside the boss room.

* * *

[Suwon Devil’s Nest]

The medium-scale dungeon was located in the Suwon Mountain Range’s valley. The Chameleon Troupe’s blue seat, an African American man named Khalifa, looked around at the Packhorse Master members. He had infiltrated their guild. Seven of the nine members in the dungeon raid sat on the ground to catch their breath.

“James, Johong, did you find anything?”

The guild master contacted the two scouts with a communication device.

— Yes, we discovered a hidden path. It seems to be a hidden stage.

“Oh, is that so?”

Khalifa quietly listened in.

— We're on our way back so we can conquer it together.

"No, we'll come to you guys. Continue your investigation."

— Yes, understood.

"You hear that? It's time to get up!"

Two men were currently missing. Now was the best time as Khalifa tapped his ears and sent a signal. Then he unleashed his magic power, which formed a door. It was an ability called phase shift that connected one space to another, so long as the locations were close enough. This was part of Khalifa's gift.

"Cullen, what are you doing? Who told you to open a portal?"

Most people mistook it for an artificial portal, but Khalifa didn't bother to correct them.

"Cullen, close the portal."

"..."

Khalifa silently put on a pair of sunglasses.

"CULLEN!"

He even put on earplugs because of the guild master's annoying voice.

"You son of a bitch..."

The guild master walked up to the portal as a black blade shot out.

The blade cleanly severed him in two as the guild master scattered into black dust. Silence descended as the other djinns stared at the portal. They couldn't move or speak. Soon, a woman walked out. She had an average height, but a beautiful appearance. A deep abyss

sucked their consciousness when they saw her. One, two, three, four... six djinns collapsed like lifeless dolls.

“We’ll have to keep one for the sake of the stock prices.”

Boss stared at Khalifa and coldly murmured. Khalifa grinned.

“You’re right. Now then, should we head to the hidden stage?”

“You wait here.”

“What?”

Khalifa tilted his head as Boss briefly replied, “The two people inside the hidden stage are candidates.”

“Ah.”

Candidates referred to individuals the Chameleon Troupe had selected with the qualifications of joining them.

“Is it a... test?”

Boss liquified her body without answering. Her body turned into a black liquid that quickly scurried away on the ground.

Chapter 84

Scout (2)

Monster filled the path to the boss room. I took care of them with my gun instead of Kim Suho so I could pretend that I helped.

Currently, six ghouls around low-intermediate rank, grade 9 stood in front of me.

I aimed at their swollen right eyes in front of their tiny brains and pulled the trigger. Six bullets shot out and pierced their vital points. A blue light flashed as the ghouls collapsed.

“Oh, as expected...”

Kim Suho exclaimed in awe. I simply operated on the principle of acting strong against the weak. Although I could slaughter an army of weaklings, I wouldn’t stand a chance against a single expert. No, I would run away from someone slightly above me.

“Let’s hurry. We don’t have time.”

We ran through the cave. Monsters appeared around every corner, but I easily took care of them. We arrived at a giant stone wall after about 10 minutes. It seemed like a dead end, but the wall had strange symbols written on it. This ancient language only existed in dungeons. Thanks to modern technology, a smartwatch could translate it. That’s what Kim Suho did in the original story. I took out my smartwatch to scan the symbols.

— This and that always accompany each other. — Observed closely, this and that feel simultaneous. — But from afar, this comes before that. — What is this?

Kim Suho glanced at the riddle on my smartwatch.

“Ah, it must be a riddle. I heard some dungeons had these.”

In the original story, Kim Suho texted Yoo Yeonha for help. She contacted an information guild and received the answer after five minutes. However, we didn't have time. I half-heartedly created this riddle. The answer was simply lightning. This was lightning, and that was thunder. Although lightning and thunder appeared simultaneous, light traveled faster than sound.

“Lightning.”

I muttered, and the stone wall reacted. The symbols glowed blue before disappearing into particles. The wall rumbled and sunk underground.

“What? The answer is lightning?”

“Yeah.”

“How did you figure that out so fast? Wow, you really are a genius.”

Kim Suho looked at me like I was a sage.

“I'll tell you how I found out later. For now, let's clear the dungeon before anyone else arrives.”

I pushed Kim Suho into the boss room.

* * *

“...”

Boss stared at Kim Hajin in awe. His decisiveness, drive, and intelligence surprised her. They proceeded through the hidden stage in just 10 minutes. No one else could easily pull that off.

“Truly extraordinary...”

She blurted out subconsciously. She had heard the same words from

her master, the Chameleon Troupe's previous boss. She always wondered, *What did Master see in me to say that?*

She sighed. Today had made it certain. She wanted Kim Hajin, but he had to meet a few conditions before that could happen. She had to know whether he could kill a human being without hesitation.

— *Argh*, it's a maze. Why is a hidden stage so complicated?

— Quiet.

Boss looked behind her. Two djinns from Packhorse Master wandered around. Kim Hajin wouldn't know they were djinns, so she decided to make use of them.

* * *

The Swordsman of Destruction sat on a throne in the middle of the cave. He wore black armor and stared at us as though he had just awakened from his slumber.

However, his eyes suddenly burned blue as he smiled at Kim Suho. He seemed to recognize Kim Suho's strength.

— What an interesting kid.

A chilling voice resounded. Kim Suho froze from nervousness. A monster capable of speaking the human language wasn't ordinary. High-intermediate rank monsters and above usually had intelligence on par with humans. However, only some humanoid monsters could speak.

“...”

Kim Suho silently unsheathed his sword. I somewhat understood what he was thinking. After all, I had written it.

[He emitted extraordinary hostility and spirit. I felt he was at least high-intermediate rank and worried if I could defeat him. Soon, I felt fear. However, when the Swordsman of Destruction pulled out his sword, an

unknown sense of confidence surged within me. My gift was Sword Saint. I was someone who would stand at the peak of swordsmanship. I would never lose against another swordsman.]

“There should be no reason for you to lose.”

I emphasized his last thought. Kim Suho stared at me in surprise.

“His real body is his sword.”

“Sword?”

Kim Suho stared at the crimson sword qi that swirled around the black blade.

“The voice just now came from that sword. The body is just a corpse.”

In the original story, Kim Suho figured this out while exchanging blows with the Swordsman of Destruction. However, I couldn’t wait since intruders could arrive at any moment. The Swordsman of Destruction slowly raised his sword.

— Come. It’s been a while since I last obtained a body.

Kim Suho stepped up as I took out my gun.

“You don’t need to attack his body. Just hit the sword. I’ll support you from behind.”

“I trust you.”

Kim Suho unsheathed the high rank sword that he purchased with loans. A Sword Saint’s magic power increased depending on the sword.

The Swordsman of Destruction rushed in and swung down as Kim Suho raised his sword to block.

KWANG!

The two swords clashed as the Swordsman of Destruction pulled back and repeatedly struck as if he wanted to break Kim Suho's sword. However, not even a single scratch appeared. Normally, the Swordsman of Destruction's strength should've destroyed it multiple times. However, a Sword Saint's magic power wouldn't lose to another sword.

I slowly raised my gun. I couldn't use a shotgun since that might injure Kim Suho. A sniper rifle at close range would also lack accuracy. I simply went with the handgun.

Clang. Kwang. Koong. Kwaaaang!

I aimed at the swordsman's shoulder and fired when he clashed with Kim Suho.

Shuuuuu—

The light bullet left a white trail and dug into his rotten body. He stopped moving for a fraction of a second as Kim Suho immediately counterattacked. Kim Suho unleashed his magic power like a tornado. His sword shone golden as he unleashed a powerful technique that shot up like lightning and delivered consecutive strikes that could sever rivers.

The Swordsman of Destruction held up his sword to block. However, a crack appeared on its blade each time their swords clashed. His movements also slowed from the light bullet.

Kim Suho followed my advice and only attacked the sword. The swordsman didn't last long as its body began to crumble.

"Huaaap!"

Kim Suho dealt the final blow. The sword finally shattered and the swordsman's body turned into dust. All that was left was a single branch.

"Eh?"

Kim Suho stared at the branch.

“W-What’s this?”

He looked around the room just in case he missed something. However, he couldn’t find any other weapon or armor. The Swordsman of Destruction’s sword had turned into dust, and its armor also disappeared. The only reward was a single branch.

“This is it?”

Kim Suho slumped to the ground in disappointment. I smirked and walked up to him.

“Hey, this branch is...”

I was about to tell him about Misteltein.

“Who are you?”

A deep voice rang out as I quickly turned around.

“Shoot.”

I bit my lips. The two djinns from before had arrived. One held a greatsword, and the other held a giant double-edged axe. *Didn’t they say they were going to go back? How did they come back so quickly?*

“Oy, we just asked who you guys are. How did you get in here?”

The axe-wielding baldy scowled, but the sword-wielding Caucasian man stopped him. He spoke more politely.

“Our Packhorse Master guild has an official notice for this dungeon. Who are you guys?”

I kicked the branch to the corner of the cave.

“Ah, is that so? We didn’t know. We came from another pathway in

here.”

“Another pathway?”

“Yes.”

“...”

The Caucasian man’s expression stiffened.

“What did you do here?”

“We hunted a monster.”

“And the reward?”

“As you can see... nothing.”

I raised my hands and smiled. Then the baldy next to him whispered. He pointed at Kim Suho on the ground.

“Wait, isn’t that... Kim Suho? You know, the rank 1 cadet at Cube?”

“*Hm.*”

The Caucasian man messaged his comrades.

“Yes, this is James. Yes, something came up. There are two Cube cadets here. One of them is...”

A clear command rang out before he could finish his sentence.

— Kill them.

* * *

“*Huaa...*”

Rachel finished her 4 hour training session at the fitness center. Her day finally came to an end as she sighed and murmured, "I'm sleepy."

Let's go back, take a shower, and sleep. I should be able to sleep in tomorrow since it's Saturday. Right, I should sleep until 3 P.M. That sounds good.

Suddenly, she overheard two cadets gossiping as she was about to enter the changing room.

— Did you know Kim Hajin likes Rachel?

Rachel's shoulders shook.

— What, really? No way.

— Can't you see how he's been following her around lately? People are saying he's going to confess soon.

— What? Confess? I don't believe it. Someone like him?

Rachel let go of the doorknob and slowly backed away. She felt a bit dizzy. *Confess? So suddenly? How did they know this?* Then she bumped into someone.

"Ah!"

Rachel quickly turned around as Chae Nayun frowned at her.

"What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

"No, not nothing. You're stepping on my foot."

Only then did Rachel notice.

"Ah, sorry."

“Tsk.”

Chae Nayun clicked her tongue and grabbed the doorknob.

“Ah!”

Rachel flinched. She didn't want more people to overhear their gossip, but Chae Nayun walked in before Rachel could stop her.

“Hello? Rachel?” Yoo Yeonha approached her.

“Yes?”

“Aren't you going in?”

Rachel scratched her cheek. *“No, please go ahead.”*

“Hmm.”

Yoo Yeonha gave Rachel a weird look before walking into the changing room. Rachel strained her ears once again as the door closed.

— Oh hey! Nayun, Yeonha, have you heard?

— What.

— I hear Kim Hajin is going to...

“T-Those girls!”

She couldn't allow these rumors to spread. Rachel quickly barged in and interrupted them.

“W-What? What about Kim Hajin?”

Chae Nayun didn't even glance at Rachel as she urged the two cadets to speak.

“I-It’s nothing!”

They quickly ran away as Rachel sighed in relief.

“*Whew.*”

Yoo Yeonha watched Rachel with interest and smiled as she recalled something.

“Oh right, Rachel.”

“Yes?”

“You’re in that person’s team, right?”

Rachel tilted her head.

“That person?”

“She’s talking about Kim Hajin. For some reason, she can’t call Kim Hajin by his name.”

“Yes I can.”

Yoo Yeonha dryly coughed. “Anyways, how is he?”

“Huh? What do you mean by...”

Yoo Yeonha appeared somewhat angry. “Aren’t you looking down on me too much? I know the English Royal Court guild made him an offer. Everyone knows.”

Rachel’s expression stiffened. “That... I don’t know anything about...”

“That can’t be. The English Royal Court guild is only given two chances per year to contact cadets. What fool would spend one on a rank 334 cadet?”

Yoo Yeonha cut Rachel off and continued to speak.

“Unless you witnessed what that rank 334 cadet is hiding.”

Yoo Yeonha coldly glared at Rachel. However, she soon put on a bright smile.

“I’m kidding, but I don’t think you should use the Royal Court guild so easily. It’s a special privilege between two countries, so it might create unnecessary conflict.”

Yoo Yeonha advised her, but it felt more like a warning.

“...”

Rachel sharply glared at Yoo Yeonha, who didn’t back down from her gaze.

“What, what are the both of you talking about?”

Chae Nayun didn’t understand even though she heard everything.

Chapter 85

Scout (3)

— Kill them.

I overheard their conversation and a chill ran down my back.

“Are you sure?”

The Caucasian man asked again. However, the answer remained the same. He calmly nodded and gripped his greatsword. The baldy grinned as he raised his double-edged axe.

“Blame your curiosity.”

Our surroundings suddenly changed as the Caucasian man muttered and darkness engulfed everyone. Kim Suho disappeared and I was left with the bald barbarian in this isolation barrier.

“Haha, big bro always leaves me with the boring work.”

He obviously referred to me, but I couldn't refute him. His leather armor depicted two golden axes on the chest. This symbolized a hero's rank. Two golden weapons meant intermediate rank. Since nothing else accompanied the two golden axes, that meant a grade 9 hero.

“Why is an intermediate rank hero doing something like this?”

I asked even though I already knew. The baldy smiled and collected his magic power. A powerful current surrounded his axe and began to heat up the air. Sweat formed on the tip of my nose and dripped down my back. I couldn't win against this guy. His axe could easily split me in half, but I also couldn't run because of the barrier.

Suddenly, I had a flash of insight. He seemed like the prideful and

reckless type who usually looked down on their opponents. A typical cliché character that always appeared in the novels I read and wrote.

“Huuu.”

I sighed and pretended to pick up a rock from the ground. Instead, I molded the rock completely from aether. I spent 95% of aether to form the rock and used the remaining 5% to form a transparent thread that wrapped around my wrist to the rock. Then I muttered.

“Scan.”

The result was 30%. Although that was above the average, I could’ve been luckier.

“What are you going to do with that?”

The baldy looked at the rock as I thought. *Should I just throw it at him? Or tick him off a little?*

“I just thought this would be enough.”

I chose the latter. Immediately, his veins popped and my lips dried. *Is he going to angrily charge? Or will he carefully approach?*

“Why are you so confident?”

The baldy stood on guard. He looked for hidden weapons, but he couldn’t sense any magic power from me.

“You little brat.”

I stared at him and fiddled with the aether rock. The baldy stood with his axe and wondered what I would do.

“I’m going to throw this.”

I would gladly attack first. I threw the rock with all my strength. However, he leaned slightly to the side before it could reach his head.

The rock flew by as he smiled. I had expected this. He dodged it since I acted like the rock was special. Now he would let his guard down.

I saved stigma's magic power for this exact moment.

“*Huup!*”

I poured all of stigma's magic power into the aether thread and yanked it with all my strength. Stigma's magic power shot through the transparent aether thread. The baldy's smile instantly disappeared as he felt the burst of magic power. He quickly prepared a qi reinforcement. However, the rock returned with even greater power and struck his head like lightning. *Thwack!* The light disappeared from his eyes. *Thud.* And his muscular body fell to the ground.

“...”

I staggered towards him. He wasn't dead yet since djinns had abnormally high regeneration. I aimed a light bullet at the back of his head. I didn't have enough magic power to switch into a shotgun, but I pulled the trigger without hesitation. *KWANG!* The light bullet directly struck his head. *Psssh...* However, his dense skull blocked it from piercing through. The baldy suddenly raised his head.

“*GAAH!*”

He roared and a huge shockwave struck my stomach even though aether formed a barrier to protect me. It sent me flying into a wall. My vision faded from a mere sound attack and my organs felt like they had ruptured.

“...You son of... a bitch...”

The baldy staggered up as he cursed. His face didn't look human anymore. His skin had turned black and his eyes glowed red. Most importantly, sheep horns grew out of his head, which signified his devil transformation. I closed my eyes and sighed. This would be my end despite my luck. I should've ended things, but I couldn't.

“I wasn't going to use this, but you...”

Suddenly, I heard the sound of something cutting through flesh. I opened my eyes in surprise. A black blade had pierced through the baldy's chest.

"What?"

The baldy stared at the blade piercing through him and collapsed. He turned into dust before his body hit the ground.

"..."

I stared at the Chameleon Troupe's boss in a daze. She coughed and spoke.

"Nice to meet you."

"What?"

Boss calmly looked at me. I somewhat understood why she was here. The Chameleon Troupe had interfered with Packhorse Master's conquest, but I didn't understand why she kept appearing in front of me.

"We're running into each other rather often, huh."

"Of course," Boss answered somewhat sarcastically. "I was watching over you."

"What?"

Boss handed me a business card. It wasn't a guild card belonging to Li Xiaopeng this time.

[Jeronimo Mercenary – Yi Saeyeon.]

It was a mercenary group second only to the Vast Expanse. In reality, it served as a cover for the Chameleon Troupe.

"Jeronimo?"

My eyes widened. I was truly surprised. An important event unfolded before me, but had diverged from the original story.

[She stood before Shin Jonghak. He already knew her as they had met multiple times before.]

“Nice to see you.”

She appeared out of nowhere and greeted him. Shin Jonghak laughed.

“Aren’t you showing up too often?”

“I couldn’t help it.”

She slightly smiled.

“I was watching over you.”

She handed Shin Jonghak a business card that read Jeronimo Mercenary. Shin Jonghak’s eyes glimmered when he saw it.]

* * *

“...”

In Dorm 6’s penthouse, three people sat in a circle and silently watched each other. None of them wanted to lose, which led to this situation. It all started when Yoo Yeonha casually asked.

Since we ran into each other, would you like to come for a night snack at my place?

She had said these empty words out of formality. However, Rachel accepted the offer.

The table in front of them only had a single bag of chips.

“Would you like some juice?”

“No thanks.”

Yoo Yeonha could no longer endure the awkward atmosphere, but Rachel refused. Another 10 minutes of silence passed. Chae Nayun grew bored and sprawled on the couch as she scratched her belly half-asleep.

“I’m curious,” Yoo Yeonha spoke to Rachel. “How did you find out?”

Rachel knew what she vaguely referred to. She was asking about Kim Hajin.

“I found out naturally.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled scornfully at Rachel’s nonchalant reply.

“But you don’t know why that person is hiding his power, right?”

“...”

Rachel closed her mouth. She honestly didn’t know. Chae Nayun woke up from her sleep and interjected, “Hey, what are you talking about?”

Yoo Yeonha smiled triumphantly. “Well, that’s not something easily found out.”

Rachel glared at her, annoyed. Yoo Yeonha leisurely stood up and brought some orange juice over. Then Rachel asked, “Does knowing change anything?”

“It changes everything. Isn’t that obvious? Like how Essence of the Strait is bigger than most government guilds.”

“No, what I’m talking about is...”

Rachel wasn’t too concerned about Kim Hajin. However, she didn’t want to lose to Yoo Yeonha.

“Rather than finding out by myself, it’s better to wait for that person

to tell me.”

Yoo Yeonha’s face immediately stiffened because she had privately investigated Kim Hajin. He didn’t ask for it, and it didn’t serve any public interest.

“At least, that’s what I think.”

With that, Rachel stood up. “Then I’ll be off. It’s getting late.”

Rachel walked to the door as Yoo Yeonha glared at her.

“Wait, why am I the only one out of the loop? Hey, Yoo Yeonha, are you sure you’re speaking in Korean?” Chae Nayun grumbled in frustration.

* * *

“Huu...”

The barrier finally shattered as Kim Suho appeared with a haggard expression. James laid unconscious on the ground while Kim Suho held onto a branch. I knew Kim Suho would win. Of course, Misteltein was still amazing even without awakening. That djinn perfectly suited Kim Suho since he also used a sword.

“You won?”

“So did you.”

We looked at each other and laughed. Then Kim Suho put on a serious face.

“I don’t think this is an ordinary branch.”

“Oh yeah? To me, it looks amazing at first glance.”

“Really? How?”

“Take a seat.”

First, I sat him down. I could hardly stand from the physical and mental exhaustion.

Chapter 86

Words Without Legs (1)

I told Kim Suho the reward couldn't just be a simple branch. It must be special. Then I pretended to think about folktales and legends until I recalled one about a branch.

“The only branch that comes to mind is Misteltein.”

The branch that slew Baldur, the Nordic God of Light. Kim Suho's eyes widened as I continued explaining.

“As you know, a divine weapon needs to awaken before revealing its true form. This branch must be the unawakened Misteltein.”

I stared at the ordinary-looking branch on the ground.

“That's why it looks so simple.”

“Ah, I see. Then we should figure out how to awaken it, right?”

“About that...”

I stared at the unconscious Caucasian man on the ground. Of course, Kim Suho hadn't killed him since he looked human. Djinns who infiltrated human society considered their devil transformation a secret technique. The baldy only used it as a last resort.

“Why don't we get out of here first?” I spoke as I pointed to the Caucasian man. We didn't know when he would wake up.

“Yeah, that sounds good.” I didn't tell Kim Suho they were djinns since the stock prices might tank. After all, I had invested all my money into Packhorse Master.

“Oh right, what happened to the man you fought?” Kim Suho suddenly asked.

“He ran away.”

“Oh, then what should we do about that one? Shouldn’t we report him to the association?”

“No, we don’t have any evidence. Plus, this place was their dungeon’s hidden stage. We might be punished instead since we interfered.”

Of course, I lied to protect my wealth. We walked out of the dungeon while talking about various things. Outside already grew dark, but the moon lit up the mountain as wild animals cried out. I didn’t have enough strength to continue, so I sat on the ground to rest.

“Auuu.”

My entire body ached, especially my upper arm. It throbbed in pain because I used up all of stigma’s magic power at once. I couldn’t even move my left arm anymore as Kim Suho sat next to me. I pointed to the branch in his hand.

“Put that branch down for a minute.”

“Sure.”

I took out the butterfly seedling’s dust with my right arm.

“Take a look.”

I showed him the blue dust that glowed like a treasure.

“What’s this?” Kim Suho asked in surprise.

“This is...”

I stopped in the middle of my sentence. Then I looked into his eyes, which shone with curiosity. This dust was supposed to belong to him,

so I would use it to gain his favor.

“It’s a family keepsake.”

“What? Keepsake?”

“N-No, it’s not a keepsake. I meant it’s important to me.”

I quickly corrected myself. A family keepsake sounded too overboard.

“Anyway, this mystical dust can act as a catalyst for awakening objects and humans. It came from an elemental. You’ve heard of elementals, right?”

I’m using this precious item on Misteltein, so be grateful. My plan seemed to work as Kim Suho looked serious.

“Something should change if I put this on Misteltein.”

It would undergo its first awakening and transform into a sword that grew alongside Kim Suho as it absorbed more demonic energy.

“I’m going to apply it.”

“Wait.”

Kim Suho grabbed my wrist and looked at me.

“Are you sure?”

“About what?”

“Didn’t you say it was important to you?”

“Ah.” I laughed subconsciously.

“It’s important, so it should be used at times like this. Where else would I use it if not on a divine weapon like Misteltein?”

“But still...”

“Just shut up and take it.”

I shook off his hand. Kim Suho scratched the back of his neck. He seemed half-grateful and half-regretful. I could tell that my gesture deeply touched him. Making a big deal out of it turned out well.

I carefully sprinkled the butterfly seedling’s dust on Misteltein as a blue light flowed through the branch and its surface turned black. It no longer looked like ordinary. A leaf also sprouted from the tip and fell to the ground. *Was it like this in the original story too?*

“See, I was right.”

“Yeah.”

Kim Suho looked at Misteltein in awe. He could feel the hidden power of this black branch now.

“Then, as promised...”

I gave Misteltein to Kim Suho and picked up the leaf.

“You take the branch, and I’ll take the leaf.”

“Hajin... are you sure? Why don’t we share this weapon? You can use it whenever you want.”

“Please, I’m not a swordsman. I’ll just die if I fight with a sword.”

Kim Suho backed down as I checked my smartwatch.

[Misteltein’s Leaf] — A byproduct of the god-slaying branch after its awakening. A tea brewed with it will increase your health, or you may grind it into a legendary weapon.

I felt more than satisfied as I smacked my knees and stood up.

“Alright, let’s head back now.”

“Yeah.”

Kamak Mountain was too dangerous to stay overnight. Kim Suho took the lead as I followed behind. Then something suddenly tangled my foot.

“...”

Thud. I fell to the ground with a strong sense of déjà vu.

Don’t tell me...

As expected, I had tripped on a root.

I carefully dug it up and swallowed hard. It had several roots attached to a thick body. Although it looked slightly smaller than the last one, I had undoubtedly found ginseng. *Jackpot.*

I placed it into my bag before chasing after Kim Suho.

We finally arrived at the portal station after 30 minutes of hiking. We barely made it in time at 1:53 A.M. since the portals closed at 2:00 A.M.

“Hajin.”

Kim Suho faced me in front of the portal station. “Let’s split up here.”

“*Hm?* What about you?”

“I’m going to visit my family since I came all the way here.”

Kim Suho smiled. “And thanks for today.”

The moon shone down on him and revealed his clear eyes. His appearance stirred something inside me. I remembered something I had forgotten. Kim Suho was this world’s main character. Someone

who only walked the path of righteousness and never compromised or abandoned his beliefs. An ally of justice with conviction stronger than steel, and a seeker of truth who always treaded the right path. An existence that became extinct in the modern world, but one that I always hoped for. A righteous hero that I could trust.

That was why I named him Suho (守護). [1] He would save and protect this world.

“Yeah.”

I spoke as we separated. “See you later.”

* * *

I returned to the dorm. Evandel seemed to have woken up as I entered and trudged into my arms. I carried her to the couch. I felt exhausted, but still had one more thing.

[Jeronimo Mercenary]

I looked it up on the internet.

[The peak of mercenaries, Jeronimo. Mission success rate: 99.7%]

Jeronimo Mercenary consisted of 23 members. The site displayed their profiles along with photos. However, these 23 members were all disguises between 5-6 Chameleon Troupe members. Jain's gift, Camouflage, made it possible.

“...”

I took out the business card.

Boss had scouted me instead of Shin Jonghak. I didn't know why she wanted me to fill the Chameleon Troupe's empty seat.

Then I noticed someone messaged me four hours ago.

[Yo] [Can you help me study?] [I'll buy you food] [Answer me] [You gonna ignore me? ——] [Oi ——]

They all came from Chae Nayun. I thought about her older brother, Chae Jinyoon. My thoughts connected back to the Chameleon Troupe. I might be able to kill Chae Jinyoon with the Chameleon Troupe's help.

* * *

Everything had been taken care of with regards to Packhorse Master. Boss and Jain watched a video of Kim Hajin at the Suwon Devil's Nest.

"A simple rock contained that much power? Indeed, he's full of potential. You were right, Boss."

Jain laughed as she finally admitted it. It wasn't easy to create such destructive power with just a rock even though he used magic power. Above all, Jain liked his mercilessness. The enemy would've instantly died if he wasn't a djinn. Kim Hajin had attacked with killing intent without knowing his enemy was a djinn.

"Boss, why aren't you watching until the end? I want to see his devil transformation."

"This is enough. I don't want to see that."

"Why?"

Jain tilted her head. Boss pouted before murmuring.

"It's gross."

* * *

The weekend flew by as Monday arrived.

"As you all know, class competitions will begin this Friday. Would anyone like to volunteer for events? Everyone will have to participate

in at least one.” Yi Yeonghan announced before the start of class.

“Oh right.”

I recalled the class competitions that would take place before the midterms. Not only would we compete in combat events like duels, timed dungeons, and magic battles, but also entertainment events like gaming, singing, and soccer. It resembled a school festival. Naturally, cadets chattered about which events to choose.

“What are you going to do, Rachel?”

I asked from next to her. She slightly flinched before replying with an awkward smile.

“I’m... planning on doing the quiz event.”

“Oh, the quiz event. Maybe I should do that too.”

“The quiz event is already full.”

Jin Hoseung cut in. I turned towards him, then faced Rachel again. She nodded.

“Y-Yes... it’s already full. Unfortunately...”

“Oh, I see.”

“Now, now, calm down everyone. Soccer and basketball are all taken up.”

I couldn’t help but wonder how these superhumans would play sports.

“We need someone for singing and archery.”

Yi Yeonghan paused and glanced over. I thought he was looking at someone else, but then he grinned. Soon, the other cadets also turned towards me. I coughed and spoke up, “I can handle archery.”

“Perfect.”

Yi Yeonghan wrote my name down. Not just in archery, but also singing.

“Wait, hey! What are you doing? Erase that!”

“Alright, thank you everyone! We’re done!”

Yi Yeonghan hit enter and submitted the participants.

1. His name means “to protect.” 🤔

Chapter 87

Words Without Legs (2)

Tomer naturally fit in among the cadets after class. She had worked hard for the past two weeks and controlled her temper. She gradually grew close with them and everyone saw her favorably now. She even personally invited them to the café.

“Wow, Kim Hajin likes Rachel? Really?”

The female cadets gossiped after ordering their coffee and favorite pastries. Tomer stealthily brought up the subject.

“They’ve been pretty close lately, but aren’t they just on the same team?”

Many male cadets secretly admired Rachel, but no one ever approached her because of her background. Once Rachel graduated from Cube, she would enter the Royal Court guild and become its youngest executive.

“I guess Kim Hajin suits the Royal Court guild since he rose to rank 334.”

The English Royal Court ranked 60 in the world. Cube cadets in the 400-500 ranks would fantasize about joining such a guild. However, no powerful cadet would be blinded enough by love to join the Royal Court guild, and Rachel wouldn’t be satisfied with anyone around the 400-500 ranks.

“No, no, I’m in the same team. Trust me, you would say the same if you saw his eyes. How do I describe it... his eyes turned into hearts!”

Tomer tenaciously incited them.

“Oh yeah, isn’t Kim Hajin singing in the upcoming class competition?”

One of the cadets widened her eyes. “He’s not going to confess, is he?”

“*Kyaaak!* Just thinking about it gives me goosebumps. I’m going to stab him to death if he does!”

“*Eh?* Stab him to death?”

Tomer seriously thought these cadets sounded like djinns.

* * *

“Singing?”

I sighed and murmured in my room. I often went to karaoke back on Earth, so I knew how to sing. However, that didn’t mean I was good. I wasn’t bad either, just average.

“*Argh*, why do I have to sing?”

I could use the horn flute to sound better than average. However, volunteers from the other classes would undoubtedly be good. Furthermore, I’d never sung in front of a crowd before.

“Should I eat another serenity pill?”

“Singing? I can sing the Pororo song!”

Evandel shouted as she worked on making a nightingale. I replied with a grin.

“Really? Let me hear it later.”

“*Un!* But why singing?”

“*Ah*, well... I got done in by a villain, so I have to sing now.”

“A villain!”

Evandel’s eyes widened as she twisted the nightingale’s neck. She reacted strongly because of her superhero cartoons.

“Villain! Villain!”

“Ah, no, I misspoke. Let go of that nightingale. It’s going to die.”

“Huh? Ahh!”

She looked at the nightingale that had already begun to melt.

“Sniff sniff...”

Evandel began to tear up after working on the nightingale for so long. I took her into my arms.

“Don’t worry. You’ll learn not to make the same mistake next time.”

I consoled her and turned on my laptop.

“Let’s see...”

It’s been a while, but I planned to hack Tomer’s smartwatch. Last night, she approached me at the convenience store to say hello, but she wore a personal smartwatch instead of the cadet one. Others might not have noticed, but I did.

[80 SP will be used. Would you like to continue?]

“Really?”

It took quite an amount because of the security. I held back my tears and confirmed.

[Tomer, you’ll have to pick up an item during Wednesday’s class. It’ll be helpful for your mission. I’ll tell you about the details tomorrow.]

An unknown person had messaged her today. I read through her other messages and confirmed that her target was indeed Rachel. Another message arrived.

[Wednesday's class will be a mock artifact scramble. The item will be left at an administrative center in the B-3 zone on the lowest floor. The administrative center will be empty from 11:00 to noon, so take it then.]

Lowest floor. B-3 zone. I repeated the location as I received a message on my smartwatch.

A picture of a problem along with a few lines of text. I thought it came from Rachel.

[Can you please teach me how to solve this problem?]

However, Chae Nayun had sent it.

* * *

The library only contained the sounds of pencils scratching paper and pages turning.

“...”

Chae Nayun stared at a reference book in this atmosphere. She tried to study, but failed and twirled her hair.

[It is important to calculate the density of a dungeon's magic power. This is one of the most important skills for a hero because a dungeon's magic power density can suddenly change depending on what happens inside. Take a look at the following formula... Example 1) Suppose that a magic power explosion occurs in a small dungeon with six cobalt kobold goblins...]

“Why do I have to learn this?”

Chae Nayun murmured as she leaned back. She couldn't even solve the first example. She could memorize stuff, but couldn't calculate anything for phenomenon realm analysis.

“...”

She glanced to the side in despair. Rachel sat with an empty seat between them. Honestly, Chae Nayun sat here on purpose to peek at Rachel.

From the side, Rachel appeared sullen. She rested her chin on her palms and seemed worried.

I guess she has her own troubles.

Rachel suddenly turned on her smartwatch. Then she hesitated before shaking her head and turning it off.

“What’s up with her?”

Chae Nayun turned back to her reference book.

[Example 1) Suppose that a magic power explosion happens in...]

She stared at the words, but nothing came to mind. Then she held up her smartwatch to take a picture of the page.

Next, she looked through her contact list for someone who could help her... *Kim Hajin.*

[Help me with this.]

She typed a message, then erased it. It didn’t sound respectful enough.

[Can you help me with this? I’ll buy you food]

“No, this one doesn’t feel right either.”

[You’re a genius if you can solve this! ㄹ ㄹ ㄹ]

“This sounds a bit stupid...”

After much thought, she asked as courteously as possible.

[Can you please teach me how to solve this problem?]

Then she put down her smartwatch and waited: 1 minute, three minutes, five minutes... Time passed by. *Is he not going to reply?* Her smartwatch finally rang when Chae Nayun already packed her book away.

“Ooh!”

She quickly checked the content. Kim Hajin sent a very kind and detailed solution.

“Heehee.”

Chae Nayun smiled and took her reference book back out. She also received another message from Yi Yeonghan for everyone in Veritas class.

[On Wednesday, we will have a mock artifact scramble. Be prepared everyone!]

* * *

“Today’s combat training will be a mock artifact scramble!”

It occurred according to Tomer’s message and Yi Yeonghan’s announcement. The training would take place from 9 A.M. to 2 P.M. as we competed for artifacts. All 125 cadets of Veritas class gathered at the underground plaza’s first floor.

“Heroes experience artifact scrambles at least once a year.”

Real artifact scrambles always occurred outside of government jurisdiction because artifacts found inside a country belonged to that government by law. In this world, numerous countries had collapsed during Outcall, and many of their territories remained ownerless to this day. Monsters overran most of Africa, and djinns dominated central Asia. In these regions, artifacts belonged to whoever found

them.

“It will be a massive site with a brawl concept. You will not know the enemy’s command structure, nor will you have a way to contact your allies. You will also not know the artifacts’ locations!”

Mock artifact scrambles often used the brawl format. Artifact scrambles also occurred between guilds, especially 20-30 years ago when laws regarding them weren’t in place yet. However, artifact scrambles mostly occurred against djinns nowadays.

“We will divide you into Team White or Team Black. Team White will defend while Team Black will attack. Remember that the concept is brawl! In addition, you may shout surrender at any time.”

Until the 90s, humans held an advantage due to their efficient command structure and organizations. However, a single djinn named Bermut disrupted this with his gift, which randomly distributed everyone in an area. This destroyed human formations and gave djinns an advantage in one-on-one battles due to their devil transformations.

“Now, we will take away your vision.”

My vision suddenly turned dark as a few cadets shrieked.

“It’s an instructor’s magic. Stay calm. You don’t need to resist.”

A high-intermediate rank hero could easily blind 125 people. Of course, that didn’t apply to me. I could clearly see when I opened my eyes again.

“We will now guide you to your designated locations.”

Artifact excavation sites contained multiple floors and even a residential area. Most artifacts took at least 2 to 3 weeks to excavate from deep underground. That didn’t mean they looked like caverns or tunnels. Excavation sites looked more like futuristic bunkers thanks to technicians with extraordinary gifts.

“Hey, hey, don’t step on my foot.”

“Ah! Somebody hit me.”

The cadets went underground with 15 placed on the first floor and 25 on the second floor. Chae Nayun continued to the third floor with Rachel on a nearby balcony next to the third floor’s residential area. They would inevitably fight. As for me, I continued to a small room on the fourth floor. Unfortunately, I couldn’t find Shin Jonghak and Kim Suho.

“Eh?”

Yoo Yeonha was in the room next to mine. We would cross paths to reach the hall. In addition, I was in Team Black and she was in Team White. A loud voice rang out from the speaker above.

— NPCs will hold onto or move the artifacts. Team White must protect the artifacts while Team Black attempts to steal them. We will now begin the countdown.

The doors all closed as the countdown began: 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. The blinding magic disappeared as soon as the countdown finished. I checked the training handgun’s magazine. I needed to get to the B-3 zone on the lowest floor.

— I heard a sound next door...

Yoo Yeonha’s voice rang out. I turned towards her direction. *Tak, tak.* Yoo Yeonha intentionally walked forward with loud footsteps. Then she knocked on the door of my room.

— I know you’re in there. Are you in Team Black or Team White? For the record, I’m in Team White.

I remained silent. Yoo Yeonha happily hummed as she grabbed the doorknob.

— No answer? I’ll assume you’re in Team Black. How unfortunate, you must’ve been looking forward to class today. Consider yourself

unlucky...

Ssss—

Yoo Yeonha opened the door with a bright face. Then her eyes met mine.

“...!”

She turned stiff except for her trembling lips. We would have to fight, but she looked afraid.

Gulp. Yoo Yeonha swallowed hard. Her hands faintly shook, and I could see the sweat on her forehead. My neck felt itchy, so I moved to scratch it. However, she overreacted to this simple movement.

“Stay, stay away!”

“What?”

I tilted my head. *You came to me!*

Chapter 88

Words Without Legs (3)

Yoo Yeonha couldn't decide whether to fight or run. She confidently entered the room, but didn't expect to meet such a powerful enemy.

“...”

Kim Hajin stood still, unaware of her worries. His relaxed demeanor made Yoo Yeonha even more nervous. She couldn't meet his gaze. This was the first time she ever felt like this. Suddenly, Kim Hajin raised his hand. In reality, he only tried to scratch his neck.

“Stay, stay away!”

However, Yoo Yeonha shouted without knowing this. Kim Hajin stared at her and dropped his hand. He already held his gun. Not the Desert Eagle, but the training handgun that had still destroyed Kim Horak's qi reinforcement.

“...”

Kim Hajin raised his gun as Yoo Yeonha felt the sweat flowing down her face. First, she calmly examined her surroundings. It would be difficult to escape his gun because of the narrow, straight hallway behind her. She only had two choices: to fight or lose.

Yoo Yeonha looked at the whip in her hand. Then she suddenly thought of something.

Perhaps this is my chance to confirm his skills. My estimate only comes from observation. I should be able to glimpse his real power if we fight.

However, she also had a more cowardly thought.

I'll likely be the first one eliminated if we fight. I don't want that, but struggling for my life doesn't suit me either. It's not because I hate the pain.

Yoo Yeonha weighed her options and sighed. She opened her eyes with determination and glared at Kim Hajin. Then she swung her whip. It moved like an extension of her limb and grabbed the gun.

Shweeek!

She snatched it away and stared at the gun as it fell into her hand.

“I, I did it! Ha, haha!”

I never thought I'd succeed! Ahahaha!

Yoo Yeonha proudly laughed. *Maybe this person isn't so amazing after all!*

“Even if it's you, without a weapon...”

The gun instantly flew back into Kim Hajin's hand.

“Ah, aah! W-Where are you going!”

Yoo Yeonha tried to grab the gun in midair, but Kim Hajin retrieved it with the aether wire he secretly shot out. The aether wire appeared invisible unless someone imbued their eyes with magic power. Yoo Yeonha guessed that Kim Hajin's magic power had caused this phenomenon.

“...”

The smile on her face quickly disappeared. She grew even more nervous than before and could only endure whatever came next since she made the first move. Yoo Yeonha swallowed hard.

“Haa.”

Kim Hajin sighed and aimed as Yoo Yeonha shuddered. Her mind

blanked in front of the steel muzzle.

How should I dodge? Will it hurt? Maybe I can dodge it?

All sorts of thoughts flashed in her head, but Kim Hajin didn't fire. He smirked and holstered his gun.

What?

Then he walked up and tapped her shoulder as she stood in a daze.

"It's still early, so let's take it easy."

Kim Hajin left after murmuring incomprehensible words. Yoo Yeonha watched him in confusion.

* * *

"Argh, it still hurts."

My right wrist felt sore. Yoo Yeonha's whip only lightly grazed me, but it tore my skin and turned it red. My bones would've broke if she directly hit me. As I thought, Yoo Yeonha was quite strong.

"Sigh, what a relief."

I safely bluffed my way past Yoo Yeonha and entered the fourth floor lobby. It looked huge, but sounded too quiet. I couldn't hear any voices or notice any presence. *What's going on? Did everyone leave?* I turned on my smartwatch.

All cadets in the mock artifact scramble wore life-detection devices. They accurately measured every cadet's HP and eliminated those who received critical damage. My smartwatch connected to my laptop, so I could check everyone's coordinates. Ten cadets remained on this floor, including me and Yoo Yeonha. Six of these ten already formed teams.

"Tomer..."

I checked Tomer's coordinates and found her in a bathroom on the seventh floor. She planned on killing time there and showed no signs of movement. I also grew curious about the other cadets. A fight broke out on the third floor above me, but Chae Nayun and Rachel had yet to meet.

The fifth floor lobby contained a match that anyone would want to see. Shin Jonghak faced off against Kim Suho as the two cadets represented their respective teams.

— I knew this day would come, Kim Suho.

Shin Jonghak muttered in a serious tone.

—...

Kim Suho remained silent.

— Come. I'll show you the difference between us.

Kim Suho pulled out his sword and attacked first. He charged in and swung as Shin Jonghak stepped back to block. Sparks flashed as they utilized the strengths and weaknesses of their weapons.

Someone suddenly shot past me towards the stairs. *Stomp, stomp, stomp*— I glanced up and spotted Yoo Yeonha running away faster than anyone I'd ever seen.

“Oh right.”

I snapped back to reality thanks to Yoo Yeonha. I didn't have the time to leisurely watch this marvelous match. I headed to the emergency stairs instead of the central lobby staircase to avoid any enemies.

* * *

“I, I surrender!”

A male cadet shouted in front of Chae Nayun's sword. He became

blind again the moment he surrendered and would be transported to the elimination lounge.

“*Whew*, that was easy.”

Chae Nayun proudly murmured as she wiped her sweat. She already had three kills.

“It’s only been three months since I switched to a sword, but I’m already this strong. I must be talented.”

Chae Nayun surged with confidence as someone shouted.

“Nayun!”

Chae Nayun turned and spotted Yi Jiyeon wearing a white uniform.

“*Whew*, thank god.”

Yi Jiyeon clung to Chae Nayun and sighed in relief.

“Did you hide this entire time?”

A supporter like Yi Jiyeon couldn’t fight alone. An attack-focused supporter like Yoo Yeonha could shine depending on the situation, but Yi Jiyeon served as a pure supporter.

“No, I managed to defeat someone with my debuffs.”

“Oh, that’s good. Anyways, it’s nice to see you.”

Chae Nayun welcomed her since Yi Jiyeon could strengthen warriors. She provided various physical buffs that turned them even more superhuman.

“*Ahh*, I thought I would die.”

Yi Jiyeon finally calmed down and suddenly recalled something.

“Oh yeah, Rachel’s on this floor.”

“Rachel?” Chae Nayun’s eyes widened.

“Yeah, she surprised me! I barely managed to escape since I ran the moment I saw her.”

Stomp, stomp, stomp— Someone came up from the stairs.

“Wait.”

They nervously looked at the staircase. Yi Jiyeon held up her bow as Chae Nayun pointed her sword. However, Yoo Yeonha showed up and belonged to the same team. She sighed in relief when she saw them. Chae Nayun tilted her head.

“Yoo Yeonha, why are you sweating so much?”

“*Huh? Uh*, it’s nothing.”

Yoo Yeonha looked haggard and unlike her usual self.

“Who’s downstairs?” Chae Nayun asked.

“Kim Hajin,” Yoo Yeonha softly replied.

“Kim Hajin?” Yi Jiyeon and Chae Nayun both exclaimed.

“*Un*.”

“Oh, then he must be eliminated,” Yi Jiyeon innocently said. Yoo Yeonha shook her head with a bitter smile.

“No, he didn’t get eliminated.”

However, I almost did. Yoo Yeonha couldn’t continue out of embarrassment.

“Really?”

Chae Nayun scratched her cheek and pretending not to care. Then she casually asked.

“So, *uh*, what’s he doing?”

“I don’t know,” Yoo Yeonha half-heartedly replied, but then Yi Jiyeon smiled.

“Maybe he’s looking for Rachel?”

Chae Nayun tilted her head at the remark. “*Eh?* Why Rachel?”

“Because Kim Hajin likes Rachel.”

“*Huh?*”

Both Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha looked confused.

“What are you talking about?”

“*Eh?* The both of you didn’t know?”

“K-Know what? What about Kim Hajin?” Chae Nayun stuttered as she asked.

“You don’t know? I thought everyone heard the rumors by now.”

“Then it’s just a stupid, groundless rumor.”

Yoo Yeonha firmly spoke. She could care less right now when the mock artifact scramble held a great weight over their grades.

“Anyways, did any of you find the artifacts?”

“*Ah*, yeah, I found one from an NPC on my way here.”

Yi Jiyeon took out a small box from her pocket. Yoo Yeonha's face lit up.

"I'm glad. Let's take this to the first floor."

"Yeah."

"And Yi Jiyeon, you're mistaken. That rumor probably spread because Kim Hajin and Rachel are on the same team."

Yoo Yeonha felt the need to correct her.

Arrows suddenly rained down while Chae Nayun murmured to herself. Yoo Yeonha swung her whip to defend against them.

"Who is it!" Chae Nayun shouted. The ambush irritated her even though Yoo Yeonha had blocked all the arrows. The three of them turned towards the balcony and spotted Rachel with other cadets from Team Black.

"Rachel! How dare you ambush us like cowards!"

Chae Nayun roared as Rachel calmly unsheathed her rapier.

"I'm going in."

The members from Team Black all moved as Rachel spoke.

Chapter 89

Fake and Real (1)

Two archers shot from the balcony while four warriors charged forward. Rachel also attacked as the core of this ambush. She entrusted Yi Jiyeon and Yoo Yeonha to the other three warriors and dealt with Chae Nayun herself. Rachel felt confident since Chae Nayun had only recently switched to the sword.

“Dammit.”

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth as they exchanged blows. She could feel the difference in skill and experience. Rachel swung twice every time she swung once. Furthermore, she couldn’t parry similar attacks that Rachel easily parried. Chae Nayun and Rachel fought one-on-one since everyone else focused on Yi Jiyeon and Yoo Yeonha.

Clang! Clang! Chae Nayun felt like every clash tore apart her hands. As expected, Rachel’s thin rapier carried immense strength. Chae Nayun could only block.

“Dammit!”

However, Chae Nayun didn’t want to lose. Not against Rachel at the very least. Her magic power erupted from her unyielding desire to win. It formed a giant sword that soared into the air.

“...!”

Rachel flinched at the giant sword’s imposing appearance. Chae Nayun swung with all her strength. However, her large movement left an opening. Rachel simply dodged to the side as Chae Nayun’s sword hit the ground. However, something unexpected happened. *KOONG!* The floor collapsed and Rachel suddenly fell through. *Thud.* She landed on the fourth floor and stared at the hole above her. *Did the floor collapse that easily?*

“Where did you go?”

Chae Nayun roared from above. Rachel quickly stood up since her teammates couldn't handle Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun without her.

However, someone else appeared in front of her. Kim Suho wore a white uniform and held up his sword. He had defeated Shin Jonghak on the fifth floor and climbed to the fourth floor. Rachel bit her lips. Kim Suho charged the moment he confirmed she belonged to Team Black. Rachel's rapier clashed with his sword. Power on a completely different level pressed down on her.

* * *

I stopped in front of the sixth floor bathroom.

“Is there an artifact around here?”

I pretended to look for artifacts to trick the administrators as I double-checked Tomer's message.

[The item will be left at an administrative center in the B-3 zone on the lowest floor. The administrative center will be empty from 11:00 to noon, so take it then.]

The lowest floor meant floor 7, and the B-3 zone referred to room 3 of sector B.

“Artifact, are you here?”

I checked the time as I entered the bathroom. I still had about 15 minutes since it was 10:45 A.M.

“Eh? What's this?”

I found a holographic man in a toilet stall with something in his arms. The NPC flinched as he saw me. I also raised my gun in surprise.

“I actually found an artifact here?”

I grabbed the artifact from NPC who ran away and placed it in my pocket. Then I looked just below me where Tomer waited in the seventh floor bathroom.

“Hm.”

I had to eliminate Tomer if I wanted the item, but how? I looked around and found a vent connecting this bathroom to the seventh floor bathroom.

“Perhaps?”

I could use stigma’s magic power in more ways than imagined.

Become a magical smoke that can put Tomer asleep.

I instantly consumed 1.5 streaks of stigma as a grey smoke rose from my upper arm. Surprisingly, it moved according to my will.

“With this...”

I sent the smoke through the vent and observed with the thousand-mile eyes as it danced in front of Tomer’s nose. She frowned and tried to wave it away, but inevitably inhaled it. Tomer coughed and soon her eyes drooped. She yawned and checked her watch. *I can’t fall asleep.* She mumbled and tried to stand, but fell asleep on the toilet.

“Whew.”

Now I could safely head to the administrative center. I arrived on the seventh floor at 11 A.M. and headed to the B-3 zone. A decorative flower bed hid the secret pathway to the administrative center.

“No one’s here.”

It contained about twenty monitors like a security room. I approached the large desk in the center with a black box on top.

[Awl of Weakening] [High rank – Enchant] [Poison attribute] An awl that

weakens the pricked target. Enchanted with the high-rank magic, weakening.

The black box contained a special awl.

“Wow, what’s this?”

Its high rank enchantment surprised me and could easily fetch 1.5 billion won.

“*Cough.*”

I looked around the room.

“From now on this is mine.”

I slipped the awl into my pocket and left after deleting the CCTV footage by hacking into the server. Then I went back up to the sixth floor.

“*Hm?*”

I found Rachel not too far away.

“What happened to her?”

She looked exhausted with a tattered uniform as I ran up to her.

“Rachel.” I called her.

“...!”

She jumped from the slightest noise. Her shoulders trembled as she turned towards me.

“I’m on the same team.”

“*Ah, whew.*”

Rachel sighed in relief. I approached with a smile.

“Did something happen? You don’t look well.”

“I tried to ambush the enemy, but failed,” Rachel briefly replied.

“Oh.”

“Then I met Kim Suho and lost,” Rachel continued speaking in a weak voice.

“Oh.”

She sullenly dropped her head.

“I barely escaped from Kim Suho, but Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha found me afterward. Some magicians also attacked me after I escaped from them.”

Rachel recounted what happened with downcast eyes. Then she suddenly asked, “How many cadets did you eliminate?”

“None.”

Cadets earned points based on the number of artifacts acquired and how many cadets they eliminated. Both of us would rank near the bottom at this rate. I would be fine since I found an artifact and didn’t mind scoring near the bottom. However, Rachel wanted first place and it would be difficult if she didn’t score well on this artifact scramble.

She stared at the floor with devastated eyes. Then kicked a poor rock across the room. I rummaged through my pocket.

“We still have time. It’s not over yet.”

Rachel slowly raised her head as I took out the artifact from my pocket.

“Here. You can have this.”

Rachel's eyes immediately widened.

“Please take it upstairs since you’re faster than me.”

“No, this is yours—”

“Just take it.” I cut her off since I felt like helping her out.

“Do you see the emergency staircase on the right?”

I examined it with my thousand-mile eyes. A few cadets blocked the way, but they belonged to our team.

“It should be fairly empty.”

I smiled and told her where to go.

“Over there!”

Someone shouted as Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha arrived with other members from Team White. Six of them instantly surrounded us like in a movie.

“Kim Hajin.”

Chae Nayun pointed her sword at me. Then she discovered the artifact in Rachel’s hands.

“Ah, she’s holding an artifact! Who did you steal that from?”

“Quick, run away. I’ll delay them as long as possible.”

Rachel hesitated, then murmured as I urged her.

“Yes, thank you.”

She ran as an archer shot at her. *Hmph. As if I’d let that happen.* I predicted the arrow’s trajectory and struck it down with a bullet. The

archer stared at me in shock.

“Junyoung and I will chase after Rachel.”

Two cadets from Team White wanted to ignore me. However...

“No.”

Yoo Yeonha stopped them.

“Stay on your toes. He’s a tough opponent.”

She tightened the grip on her whip. I looked around the room to determine if I could run away with parkour.

“What, you want to fight six of us alone? Are you crazy?” Chae Nayun asked. I shrugged without answering. For now, I would just buy time.

“Why should we be afraid of just one guy with a gun! I’m going in!”

A warrior with an axe suddenly charged. I fired several times to delay him as Yoo Yeonha’s whip and an arrow flew towards me.

I activated bullet time. Immediately, my sense of time slowed. I could clearly see and predict the whip and arrow’s trajectory. I fired at the arrow and dodged the whip. However, something unexpected happened. My bullet changed the arrow’s course and turned it into the warrior’s chest. His HP must’ve been low since it eliminated him on the spot.

“Ah, fuck! Watch where you’re shoot—”

The axe-wielding warrior turned blind and muffled before he could finish. *Uuuup, uuuup!* He pitifully struggled, but the arrow that struck his chest counted as a critical blow. It happened purely by luck.

“He changed the arrow’s trajectory.”

Yoo Yeonha thought I had intended it.

Rachel safely joined the other members of Team Black.

“Rachel stole an artifact!”

The six members cheered, but Rachel felt complicated because of Kim Hajin.

“...”

She stared at the artifact in her hand. Kim Hajin had given it to her with a smile, and she could still feel his warmth.

“*Haa*,” she sighed.

I shouldn't have accepted it.

She wasn't deaf. She heard the rumors going around, but told herself it was only gossip. However, she had to admit after today that Kim Hajin's feelings felt real. She should've noticed since he always stayed near her after they became teammates.

The rumor that Kim Hajin would confess came to mind. However, she shook off such thoughts. She couldn't have feelings for someone else. She had long given that up for her country, her parents, and the Royal Court guild.

Perhaps she was just making excuses. She recalled that her parents once told her true love meant throwing everything away to be with that person. However, Rachel had never felt such emotions. She didn't want to give up her goals.

“*Ah*, right!”

She became frantic since she left Kim Hajin with six people.

“Let's go! We need to save someone!”

“Eh? Where are we going?”

“Follow me!”

Rachel ran to the sixth floor with the other members of Team Black.

Chapter 90

Fake and Real (2)

Rachel returned to the sixth floor with the other members of Team Black. They asked for the situation, but Rachel ran without explaining.

“What.”

They spotted three cadets from Team White on the ground when they arrived. Someone had tied their hands and feet together as they wriggled like caterpillars.

“Um, what’s this?”

The bizarre scene confused Team Black. Rachel’s mind also turned blank until she realized what happened. She thought even Kim Hajin couldn’t handle six cadets, but he proved her wrong.

“Um, Rachel?”

“Ah, it looks like someone took care of the situation.”

Rachel replied somewhat in awe. A spearman walked in from the other side of the lobby.

“Ah, it’s Shin Jonghak! Jonghak!”

Yi Kyungrak, one of Shin Jonghak’s lackeys, ran up to him. Shin Jonghak smiled. He lost to Kim Suho, but avoided critical damage and escaped to the sixth floor.

“Nice to see you.”

Shin Jonghak greeted the other team members. Rachel slightly bowed as Shin Jonghak nodded.

“Jonghak, do you know what happened here?”

Yi Kyungrak pointed to the cadets on the ground. Shin Jonghak calmly replied, “I do. I eliminated two of them.”

Rachel frowned. She thought he was trying to steal Kim Hajin’s achievement. In reality, Shin Jonghak spotted Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun fighting with some nimble guy and used that opportunity to ambush two cadets.

“*Cough*. Then from now... I’ll take command.”

Shin Jonghak spoke as he glanced at Rachel. She looked at the other members. They seemed more comfortable with Shin Jonghak as the leader. However, Rachel didn’t want to be with someone who stole someone else’s achievement.

“Then I’ll take my leave here.”

“*Ah*, you should come with us.”

Yi Kyungrak tried to dissuade her, but Rachel made up her mind. She walked east towards the emergency staircase as Shin Jonghak and the other members headed to the central staircase.

The mock artifact scramble continued at a quick pace. Shin Jonghak gathered the surviving members of Team Black and managed to steal two more artifacts. Rachel also contributed with her guerilla tactics. Team White successfully protected most of the artifacts despite Rachel chasing after them. Kim Suho displayed outstanding leadership as they safely transported five artifacts to the designated locations. Finally, Team White came out victorious thanks to Kim Suho and Chae Nayun. Rachel and Shin Jonghak also received satisfactory grades.

For the record, Kim Hajin miraculously survived Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha. Then he spent the rest of his time hiding in the fourth floor bathroom.

“Yaaawn.”

Tomer woke up in the seventh floor bathroom and blankly stared at the ceiling.

“Oh right, the mission.”

She suddenly recalled and checked her smartwatch.

“Huh?”

She fell into a daze when she saw that the time was 3:02 P.M. She thought it broke and rummaged through her pockets for the cadet smartwatch.

Mock Artifact Scramble Results: [Final survivors – Team Black: 12 / Team White: 11] [Artifacts – Team Black: 3 / Team White: 5] [Team White MVP – Kim Suho, Chae Nayun] [Team Black MVP – Shin Jonghak, Rachel] Team White Wins

“What?”

Tomer slapped her cheeks to wake herself up. However, the smartwatch remained the same. She slapped herself even harder, but nothing changed.

“No way, no way, no way...”

She ran out of the bathroom. The class had ended and all the lights had turned off.

“Ah...”

Tomer collapsed to the floor devastated.

* * *

All the cadets sat on a grass field after the combat training. Some frowned as they consumed potions while most talked about the

artifact scramble.

“Is Jamer not out yet?” Kim Soohyuk called out Tomer’s fake name.

“*Tsk.*”

Chae Nayun sat alone and picked on the poor grass. She felt unhappy about many things. They had won, but she didn’t finish her fight with Rachel. They also couldn’t defeat Kim Hajin in a six versus one scenario even though Shin Jonghak interfered. Most importantly, what Yi Jiyeon said bothered her.

“*Hmm.*”

Yoo Yeonha approached her with a grin.

“Are you bothered?”

“What do I have to be bothered by?” Chae Nayun bluntly retorted as Yoo Yeonha nodded.

“Oh really? I just thought what Yi Jiyeon said might’ve bothered you.”

“W-What, are you crazy? Why would I be bothered by that? I don’t even remember what she said.”

“But still...”

Yoo Yeonha stared at Kim Hajin. He sat with his team and Rachel under a big tree. Yoo Yeonha spoke straightforwardly, “He might get taken away at this rate.”

“Wh, what? Taken away? Can you stop spouting bullshit? He never belonged to me in the first place.”

Her actions contradicted her words as she clenched her fists. Yoo Yeonha looked at her before continuing.

“Well, I don’t believe in those rumors either, but he might be

searching for someone else since you keep pushing him away.”

Chae Nayun slowly looked towards Kim Hajin. She saw Rachel next to him and frowned before looking away.

“He isn’t my type to begin with if his feelings change so easily.”

“Pft.”

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t help but laugh at her excuse. Chae Nayun wanted to rebuttal, but Yoo Yeonha continued, “Nayun.”

“What now?”

“Who is it between Kim Suho and Kim Hajin?”

“You—! It’s not like that!”

Chae Nayun shouted with a red face. The nearby cadets looked over, but Yoo Yeonha couldn’t stop laughing.

“Then is it Jonghak?”

“Are you crazy?”

She reacted much colder. Yoo Yeonha felt somewhat relieved since it couldn’t be Shin Jonghak.

“I’m jealous,” Yoo Yeonha blurted out feeling a bit bitter.

“About what?”

“I have no one, but you get to choose from three.”

“Ueek.”

Chae Nayun shook her head and didn’t bother to answer. Then Shin Jonghak confidently swaggered towards them. He felt through the

roof after racking up nine eliminations and stealing two artifacts.

“Yo, Chae Nayun.”

“Oh, Shin Jonghak. Your team lost. How do you feel?”

Chae Nayun snickered as she made fun of him. However, Shin Jonghak felt satisfied as his team’s MVP.

“It couldn’t be helped since Team White had you.”

“*Hm*, I guess you’re right.”

Tomer finally walked out of the excavation site. Chae Nayun glanced over as Kim Soohyuk approached Tomer with a scary expression.

“Jamer, why did you come out so late?”

“...”

“I checked your smartwatch GPS. It looks like you stayed in the seventh floor bathroom the entire time.”

Tomer looked completely lost and couldn’t even reply.

* * *

I returned to my room after the scramble. My body ached all over. Perhaps I should’ve eliminated myself, but I stayed until the end because I never wrote about it in detail.

“Hajin. Hajin. Hajin.”

My fatigue melted away as Evandel ran up with a bright smile. I held her up and looked around at a nightingale, a crow-tit, a dog, and a cat. Evandel had made all sorts of animals.

“You didn’t forget to keep them inside the room, right?”

“Un!”

Evandel replied as she checked my hands and pockets. However, I didn't bring anything back. Next, she peeked over my shoulder and even checked my back. I didn't have any food there either as she looked at me confused.

“Hajin, you didn't bring anything?”

“Ah, sorry. I am tired, so I forgot.”

“...”

Evandel closed her mouth. Her sparkling eyes filled with disappointment as she began to tear up. I stopped her from crying with just one sentence.

“But I ordered chicken and pizza. It'll arrive soon.”

Her expression immediately brightened.

“Aha! I see. I see.”

Of course, I lied. I would have to order them while I pretended to use the bathroom.

“I need to use the bathroom.”

I set her down and went to order a chicken and pizza set on the toilet. Then I checked the most recent news.

“Oh!” I exclaimed at the trending front page.

[New guild Packhorse Master conquers Suwon Devil's Nest!]

It had been a while, so I worried that something might've gone wrong. However, I felt relieved now. I quickly entered the guild stock market.

As expected, my 1.5 billion won had turned into 10.3 billion.

“Bravo.”

I felt happy, but also slightly worried. *Should I sell this now or later?* The stock price should multiply by ten, but it currently only jumped by seven. Perhaps I should check again tomorrow. Of course, I could still receive 10.3 billion won if I sold it now and comfortably live the rest of my life. However, the money would disappear once I returned to my world.

“...”

Suddenly, a strange feeling filled my heart. I couldn't quite describe the mixture of bitterness with a heart-wrenching emptiness.

“Ah, rather than that...”

I slapped my cheeks and shook away such thoughts. I needed to worry about something else.

“Singing, singing... Yi Yeonghan, you son of a bitch.”

No enemies would infiltrate Cube until the end of the next midterms, so I only had to worry about singing. *Yi Yeonghan, you fuck.*

“Ah!”

I suddenly remembered about arts and accessed my laptop.

[Art (1/3)]

I could create up to three arts. Currently, I only had parkour, but I would have to be crazy to fill one of these precious slots with singing unless I could delete it later. I tried deleting parkour just in case.

[Parkour will be deleted and 200 SP will be refunded. You will not maintain the level you achieved.]

“Oh geez.”

I immediately canceled. Thankfully, they could be deleted, and even a portion of SP returned. I might consider singing. I projected the hologram keyboard and tried creating an art.

[Master Singer] — Will allow you to masterfully sing.

“It’s only singing. How expensive can it be?”

I tried hitting save.

[Master Singer] [Practical] — Will allow you to masterfully sing and clearly convey your emotions.

[500 SP will be used. Would you like to save?]

It cost more than I thought. This art made someone sing at an artistic level.

“I don’t need to sing that well.”

I didn’t intend on shocking the crowd with high notes and becoming a singer. I only wanted to avoid a one-time embarrassment. It would be enough to sound like a good ballad singer.

“Is it possible?”

I tried to change the content.

— Will allow you to sing beautifully.

[150 SP will be used. Would you like to save?]

I could accept that even though it wasn’t cheap either. The crowd would contain at least 4000 spectators. Singing in front of such a large crowd would probably net me around 60-70 SP.

“Yi Yeonghan, you son of a bitch.”

I cursed the source of this evil once again, then hit save.

“Ah, aaah, aaaaaah. Oho oho, oho oho.”

I made different noises as I pressed my neck.

“Hyohyohyo, yohyohyohyo, yohyohyo. Yodelei, yodelei.”

I couldn’t notice any differences. *Tok, tok*. Evandel knocked on the bathroom door.

— Hajin, someone knocked on the door. *Hehe*, I think the chicken is here.”

Evandel began to drool already.

“Uh, yeah, I got it.”

I ran out to receive the chicken and pizza. When I came back, Evandel modestly sat in front of the kitchen table with plastic gloves. I placed the chicken and pizza on the table before opening them up.

“Make sure to chew.”

“Un!”

Then I went back to practicing. *Ah, Aaah, aaaaaah. Woong—*
Suddenly, my smartwatch rang.

[Hajin, you have to sing, right? Don’t you need to practice?]

Jin Hoseung messaged our team’s group chat.

[Wanna go karaoke? What do you think, Rachel?]

Yi Bokgyu sent a suggestion. I secretly looked forward to Rachel’s reply. I felt confident now thanks to my new art and the hornflute.

[I have to study. I want to go, but... I don’t have the time π.π]

Rachel seemed unavailable.

“Damn.”

Then I had no reason to go either. *Why would I go karaoke with a bunch of guys?* I said I couldn’t make it too and took off my smartwatch.

* * *

Jain stared at a monitor in Jeronimo Mercenary’s office located in Seoul. She wore the face of the world’s rank 58 mercenary, Yohan Zestiops.

“This will do.”

She searched for a suitable apprentice mercenary mission. The mission had to involve killing someone, an evildoer who deserved death. She contacted Boss after finding a mission that met all the criteria.

“Yeah, Boss. I found one.”

— What is it?

“An Italian Mafia. He’s apparently a djinn. No, he’s *like* a djinn.”

— Not bad.

“Ah, but are you sure he accepted the offer?”

Jain wasn’t sure whether Kim Hajin had decided to join Jeronimo Mercenary.

— I received a positive reply.

“Really? What did he say?”

— *Mm...* hold on.

Boss went silent as she searched through her messages.

— He said, *I'll contact you soon when I have time*. I think this sounds very positive.

Jain felt a slight headache the moment she heard Boss' words.

"Boss, you... when did you receive that message?"

— The day I gave him our business card.

"That was two weeks ago."

— Yeah, so he should be contacting me any moment now. Make sure you have that mission ready.

Boss said what she wanted and hung up as Jain sighed. Was it because Boss never experienced a normal life? Or was she like this naturally? She acted too dense.

"*Tsk*. I have no choice, but to do as I'm told."

Jain placed the mafia assassination in the confirmed folder.

Chapter 91

Fake and Real (3)

“Hmm.”

I stood in front of Dorm 2’s entrance on Thursday after class. I would’ve never expected to visit the girls’ dorm. I had no choice since class competitions began tomorrow, and everyone would be busy with midterms in two weeks.

I walked into Dorm 2 after taking a deep breath. Then I ran into someone unexpected. She wore comfortable clothes on her way to the library. I greeted her.

“Rachel!”

She stopped and swallowed hard when she saw me. I approached her since she didn’t move.

“Are you going to the library?”

“Y-Yes... what are you doing here?”

“Ah, I have something to do.”

I replied with a smile. Then I carefully examined her. She looked a bit different during exams. Her hair seemed more disheveled. She always pushed herself to compete with me.

“Oh right, you haven’t been asking me any questions lately.”

“I thought I should try solving them by myself first. Also, you’re probably busy studying too.”

“You can always ask if you have any trouble. I’m fine with it.”

Rachel silently nodded. I wanted to accompany her to the library, but I didn't have time.

"Then you should get going. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yes."

Rachel seemed to be in a hurry to the library. *Did she want to study that much?* I headed further to the pavilion near room 201. I walked up to her as she lightly waved.

"You're here."

Yoo Yeonha spoke with a smile. As always, she wore casual black clothes. Her white skin suited the black blouse and skirt.

"Yeah."

"Why did you call me?"

Yoo Yeonha stared with interest. I came to her because of the ginseng I recently found with Kim Suho. I thought about how to use the five year old ginseng since I had more than enough money now. It would be best to produce medicine. However, I didn't have the connections or equipment. I tried using stigma's magic power, but two streaks were nowhere near enough.

"You made a pharmaceutical firm, right?"

"..."

Yoo Yeonha flinched at my straightforward question, but anyone could've found out. Most in Cube already knew she operated a business.

"It's been about two months. My close acquaintances all know. What about it?"

Yoo Yeonha's pharmaceutical firm would definitely succeed. Hosup

did a quick background check for me and found that they weren't performing so well. She lacked materials even though she had the necessary researchers and equipment. Yoo Yeonha struggled to find a proper ginseng digger because most already had exclusive contracts with bigger pharmaceutical companies. These companies wouldn't flinch at Essence of the Strait's name.

However, Yoo Yeonha would never give up. Eventually, her firm became one of the top three pharmaceutical companies. It only took ten years thanks to all the connections she had built.

"Here."

I threw her the ginseng. Yoo Yeonha received it with a confused look. Her jaws dropped once she identified it. I hoped to become one of her connections.

"T-This..."

"It's a five year old ginseng. Use it for research. You can pay me back later with high-quality medicine."

If I remembered correctly, the person in charge of Yoo Yeonha's pharmaceutical firm had a gift called Researcher. With this gift, he never forgot a technique. I wouldn't wait long until I received high-intermediate rank medicine. Yoo Yeonha looked back and forth between me and the ginseng before putting it away.

"Where did you get this? Ginsengs don't often appear on the market."

She suddenly flinched since she realized she had referred to Violet Banquet, the black market. She began to sweat as I smirked.

"It's possible, right?"

"Ah, yes, of course. I'll pay you back with interest. It'll take a while though."

"That's fine."

I gave her a thumbs up. Yoo Yeonha stared at me before mischievously smiling.

“By the way, have you prepared for the singing competition?”

“Yeah, I picked a song and even went to a rehearsal this morning.”

“This morning?”

“Yeah, that’s why I wasn’t in class for the morning announcements.”

Cube had even hired professional musicians for the class competitions. They all had gifts related to music and arranged the song I chose in under an hour.

“*Huhu*. Can I look forward to it?”

Yoo Yeonha laughed at the thought of me singing, but I confidently replied, “Yeah, look forward to it. It’ll go beyond your expectations.”

Suddenly, her smartwatch vibrated. She glanced at the call and looked at me.

“I’ll take my leave now.”

“Yes, thank you. I’ll return today’s favor two... no, threefold in the future.”

Yoo Yeonha picked up the call on her earphones as I turned to leave. However, I grew curious and strained my ears.

— Yes, I’m at Daehyun hospital. Nurses are saying that Chae Jinyoon’s finger just moved. I stopped by to check if it was true.

My feet suddenly stopped when I overheard the news. I quickly turned around to face Yoo Yeonha.

“Really?”

— Yes, but...

“Ah, hold on a minute.”

Yoo Yeonha put the call on hold and glanced at me. I asked without being tactful at all.

“What is it for?”

“Uh, well, just networking.”

“I see.”

“Um... what’s up with that face?”

I turned around without answering. I felt a stinging pain in my head as I walked away in a daze. *Chae Jinyoon’s finger moved.* Of course, the nurses might’ve made a mistake or it could’ve just been a simple convulsion. Regardless, the news made my heart beat faster.

“...”

I came across a bench and sat down. I needed to know when the seed would germinate. I immediately opened the Book of Truth.

When will the devil seed in Chae Jinyoon germinate?

The Book of Truth didn’t answer, which meant stigma’s magic power wasn’t enough. I broadened the scope of the question and asked again.

Give me an approximate estimate of how much the devil seed in Chae Jinyoon has developed.

This time, it consumed all two streaks of stigma. Then 89% appeared on the book’s page. I had roughly half a year left assuming the seed took five years. I didn’t have much time before winter ended and spring began.

I held up my smartwatch. *When will you contact me?* Boss had

messaged me.

* * *

— Cube's first year class competitions will now begin!

The first day started with a soccer tournament. Everyone from Veritas class went to cheer for our eleven classmates. Most cadets rejoiced that we didn't have our usual phenomenon realm analysis class.

"Wow."

I watched the match for twenty minutes and felt glad I didn't participate. Cadets couldn't use magic power, but their physical abilities transcended humans. These monsters could run 100 meters in 3 seconds and didn't play soccer normally. The ball flew back and forth along with the players. I watched it like a movie. Then Rachel suddenly poked my shoulder from the side.

"Hm?"

She looked at me and mumbled, "Um..."

"Yes?"

"Today's singing..."

"What about it?"

"What song..."

"What song am I singing?"

Rachel nodded. She seemed a bit worried and also scared. *Was she that worried I would fail? How kind.* I replied with a smile.

"Have you heard of a song called 'If'?"

"Hm?"

It didn't seem like she knew. I couldn't blame her since it came out in 2008. Real singers also existed in this world perhaps because I mentioned them in my novel. I chose a song from a female artist because I empathized with the lyrics, especially the line, *I'm afraid to meet because of the future goodbye.*

"You probably haven't heard of it. It came out in 2008."

"2008?"

"I think so."

I had to lower the key, but the Cube musicians made all the necessary arrangements. They even praised me as a great singer.

"Whoaa!"

The crowd cheered as Kim Suho made a goal. Now that I think about it, I had created the class competitions to make Kim Suho shine.

"..."

I spotted Chae Nayun in the front row happily cheering. A part of me felt uneasy. *Did she hear the news? Did she know her older brother would wake up in half a year?* Chae Nayun turned around and met my eyes. I gave her a weak smile and turned away.

The 90 minute soccer match came to an end as our class won. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak scored three goals and two goals respectively. The opponent didn't score a single one thanks to Yi Yeonghan's miraculous saves and Kim Horak's defense.

* * *

The outdoor competitions continued until 5 P.M. Afterwards, cadets moved to the indoor auditorium to watch today's final event, the singing competition. The auditorium had a maximum capacity of 4000 people. The second and third year cadets also came to watch.

"Oh right, class competitions are only for first years."

Chae Nayun looked around and wondered why so many upperclassmen showed up.

“Yeah, our second year seniors can’t participate even if they wanted to, so they’re spectating instead,” Yoo Yeonha briefly replied.

“Is Kim Hajin really going to represent our class?”

Chae Nayun couldn’t find him since participants stayed in the waiting rooms. She couldn’t help but worry since Kim Hajin didn’t look like the type who could sing. He looked like a stereotypical tone-deaf person. *Wouldn’t he just embarrass our class?*

“He looked confident. He told me to look forward to it, so I am.”

Yoo Yeonha snickered and turned towards the stage. The emcee appeared and started the singing competition at exactly 6 o’clock. A female American cadet named Neilee from World class took the stage.

— I chose a song called “Promise.”

Neilee sang an R&B song.

“Oh, I know this song.”

Chae Nayun grew excited because she liked the song. Neilee met Chae Nayun’s expectations and turned up the atmosphere with her explosive voice.

“She’s gotta be the first place winner.”

“Yeah, she’s great,” Kim Suho replied from next to Chae Nayun. He had approached her before she noticed.

“Kim Suho? When did you get here?”

“Just now. When is Hajin coming up?”

“I don’t know.”

A Chinese cadet named Jin Harim from Cultivation class went next. He sang a song called “Sad Day,” filled with high notes. Every cadet afterward also sang songs filled with high notes and a powerful climax. The competition continued and eventually reached the ninth stage.

“*Auu*, my ears.”

Chae Nayun and many in the audience grew tired of hearing the same songs. *Tak, tak*. Then Kim Hajin walked up to the stage dressed nicely in his black jacket and jeans. He seemed taller than usual as though he wore shoe inserts.

“*Ooh*, look at Hajin.”

Kim Suho smiled brightly like a fan as Kim Hajin appeared. Chae Nayun seemed dumbstruck at Kim Suho’s reaction.

— Please introduce yourself.

The audience busily talked perhaps because the eighth contender sang too good. However...

— I’m Kim Hajin from Veritas class.

A single sentence silenced the crowd. His voice sounded surprisingly pleasant.

— I prepared a song called “If.”

— “If?”

— Yes. I don’t think many people have heard of it since it came out in 2008.

The audience began to stir.

“What?”

“2008? Is it trot?”

“Is he an attention whore?”

Most first year cadets were born in 2008. They considered music from almost two decades ago old-fashioned. However, Kim Hajin remained unbothered.

— Then I'll start.

The lights turned off except for a single spotlight on Kim Hajin. The piano accompaniment began as Kim Hajin's breath melted along with it.

— If I were to go...

The first line rang out and ended the audience's complaints. His soft vocals continued to embrace the auditorium. It grew quieter as the song progressed and only his voice could be heard.

— Because I'm such a fool, I can only watch you from afar...

Kim Hajin recited the lyrics with his eyes closed as if he was savoring them. He didn't sing a single high note or use any fancy technique. However, his beautiful voice captivated the audience. It felt heavy, delicate, sweet, and temperate. Everyone held their breath as they savored the moment.

“His voice.”

Chae Nayun murmured in a daze. Goosebumps appeared on her arms as she stared at Kim Hajin. His voice seemed to flutter in front of her. It shone so brilliantly that she felt she could touch it if she reached out just a bit.

— Because I'm afraid of the pain and sadness that comes after.

The cold falsetto of the final line perfectly melded into the atmosphere. The audience felt dazed even after the song ended as though they had just woken up from a dream. Soon, they applauded.

However, Chae Nayun remained frozen as the lyrics lingered in her ears.

“Thank you.”

Kim Hajin bashfully smiled as he bowed. He spotted Rachel in the audience with teary eyes.

This song is pretty sad.

Kim Hajin lightly smiled, but his smile disappeared when he saw Chae Nayun behind Rachel. He turned around uncomfortably.

Soon, he received an alert on his smartwatch.

[You have obtained 98 SP!] [A lucky bonus has occurred! You have obtained an additional 15% SP!]

Chapter 92

Worry (1)

The singing competition ended and the results quickly came out. Kim Hajin didn't win first or even second place. He placed fourth. His choice of music and voice sounded great, but the judges still graded contestants based on high notes. However, everyone undoubtedly talked about his performance. Cadets had already uploaded it onto social media.

"Ah, it feels like I went to a concert."

"Right? Who was your favorite?"

"Kim Hajin, Neilee, and Harim. Kim Hajin caught me off guard. I heard he goes out a lot. Maybe learned how to sing at karaoke."

Rachel remained in the audience and eavesdropped on the other cadets' conversations. She needed some time to organize all her thoughts.

Kim Hajin showed a good performance today. He didn't confess to her like many people said he would. She had trouble sleeping lately because she had nightmares about it. She felt glad that it was over now.

However, the song that Kim Hajin chose kept bothering her. His voice felt sincere, and the lyrics said he wanted to grow closer, but feared rejection.

Perhaps he realized I kept avoiding him. Now that I think about it, I've been avoiding him too obviously these days. Did he notice?

Rachel felt sorry and sighed.

“What are you doing here?”

“...?”

A voice interrupted her thoughts. Rachel slowly turned and saw Chae Nayun.

“Aren’t you leaving?” Chae Nayun pointed to the exit.

Rachel finally noticed her surroundings. Everyone had already left.

“Ah.”

Rachel began walking towards the exit. Chae Nayun followed her with a strange look. It was already 10 and dark outside. Rachel looked worried as Chae Nayun glanced at her from the side. Then Chae Nayun joined up with her friends.

“Chae Nayun, where are you going next? *Yaawn*.”

“Back to my room.”

She briefly replied and looked around.

“By the way, where did he go?”

“Who?”

“Kim Hajin.”

“That person went that way. To the church,” Yoo Yeonha answered.

“Church?”

“Yep.”

Cube also provided religious facilities to support cadets from various backgrounds. Most religious cadets were Protestant, and some devout

cadets even wanted to become priests.

“Why the church?”

“I don’t know. Does it bother you?”

“Oh please,” Chae Nayun replied indifferently as she glanced at Rachel walking towards the dorm in the opposite direction of the church.

“Well, I’m going to bed if you aren’t doing anything else. *Yaawn.*”

Shin Jonghak had participated in three competitions today: soccer, the dungeon speedrun, and duels. Chae Nayun waved her hand as if to say, *I don’t need you.*

“Yes, please go to sleep.”

“*Hm.*”

Yoo Yeonha watched Chae Nayun’s odd behavior.

“Nayun, what are you going to do?”

“Nothing. I’ll just go back and play some games before sleeping.”

“*Mmm...* you’re not going to the church, right?”

“W-Why would I go there? I’m not religious.”

Chae Nayun grumbled uncomfortably.

* * *

I sat on a worship chair as the wood creaked beneath me and stared at the cross in front of me. The moon shone through the stained glass as I looked at the colorful art and thought about this holy place for confession. I reflected in this huge chapel and waited for an unknown holiness to embrace me.

“...Well... there’s nothing special.”

I scratched the back of my neck. I didn’t have any grand reason to come here. Main characters often visited a church when they felt anguished. Then they would suddenly be enlightened.

“Yaawn”

It seemed that only occurred in movies. Or maybe I was just an extra and not the main character. The silence made me sleepy as I checked my smartwatch again.

[You might have to kill someone.] [But you will receive a hefty reward.] [You won’t have to worry about your identity. As Jeronimo Mercenary’s apprentice, we guarantee it will remain a secret. We can also extend this guarantee when you become an official mercenary.]

Boss responded when I asked, *How much is the pay?* I only asked to play along since she only knew how to appease people with money.

“Mercenary...”

Anyone could become a mercenary by law. They could even hold the position while working another job. Many heroes worked as part-time mercenaries for money. Around 50 to 100 Cube graduates, and probably half the dropouts, became mercenaries.

The Chameleon Troupe participated in huge events like artifact scrambles and the Tower of Dimension. I wouldn’t have to worry about straying from the main storyline if I joined them. Most importantly, I would be able to kill Chae Jinyoon without difficulty. The security around him should’ve grown lax after 5 years.

“Huu.”

However, the thought of killing someone weighed on my conscience. The Chameleon Troupe would continue to kill many people. The only difference between them and Evil Society was that they didn’t kill needlessly.

Could I commit such crimes? I felt uncertain. This world was no longer just a novel.

The door creaked open as I pondered with my eyes closed. I slowly opened my eyes as the footsteps came closer and someone sat next to me.

“Are you Christian?”

The voice echoed inside the church. I glanced to the side and grinned.

“No. What about you?”

“*Hmm...*”

Kim Suho looked at the cross as he responded, “No, me neither.”

Despite what he said, his eyes carried a hint of nostalgia.

“Then what’s up with that look?”

“Oh, I didn’t notice.”

“You looked like a devout believer. I would’ve believed you if you wanted to become the Pope.”

“*Pft*, it’s not like that. I just remembered something from the past.”

The past. Indeed, Kim Suho’s past was quite special. I smiled.

“You used to go to church?”

“No, but something like that.”

“Catholic?”

Kim Suho shook his head.

“Buddhism?”

He smiled without answering, which meant no.

“Mormonism? Zoroastrianism? Hinduism? Islam? Greek Orthodox? Confucianism? Taoism?”

“Hahaha, no, none of them. I was never a faithful believer.”

I nonchalantly threw out a sentence after listening to him.

“Then what, is it a religion from another world?”

“...”

For a moment, Kim Suho’s eyes widened. I threw a tiny stone into his heart, but pretended to be oblivious.

“Please.”

Kim Suho laughed and shook his head. He suddenly turned serious.

“But Hajin...”

His voice filled with longing.

“Do you think other worlds exist? You know, like *Lord of the Rings*.”

Tolkien died in 1973 around the time Outcall occurred. His work stood firmly in this world as a timeless masterpiece. I looked at the cross in front without meeting Kim Suho’s eyes.

“Outcall occurred 50 years ago. Throughout human history, no monsters had ever appeared in this world.”

I faced Kim Suho.

“Rather than saying monsters suddenly appeared on Earth, it would

make more sense that they crossed over from other worlds.”

“...”

Kim Suho remained silent. I wondered what he thought. Honestly, we had similar circumstances. However, he came to this world at a young age and obtained another family. Unlike me, he wasn't alone and probably only missed his original family every once in a while.

Kim Suho slowly spoke, “Then do you...”

“That's part of the *Otherworld Theory* presented by Dr. Jerus.”

I shrugged and cut him off. Kim Suho laughed.

“Ah, is that one of the theories explaining Outcall?”

“Yeah. It's criticized for being groundless, but I find it convincing. Outcall happened out of nowhere. It's stupid to try and explain something illogical with logic.”

“I guess so.”

We became silent, but it didn't feel uncomfortable. Then I grew curious.

“Oh right, are you using Misteltein well?”

“Of course. I've been hunting monsters like you suggested. I feel it's growing stronger.”

“Haha. Then let's find better equipment together in the future. By the way, you don't have an agent, right? I'll introduce you to one.”

Kim Suho had to grow stronger even faster than in the original story. It didn't have to be me. Even if I died, Kim Suho could continue and complete the main story.

Kim Suho interrupted my thoughts.

“An agent, *huh*. By the way, what could be better than Misteltein?”

“Who knows? The world is full of artifacts.”

I stood up since I had spent enough time worrying here.

“I’ll leave first.”

“Oh, okay. I’m going to stay a little longer.”

“See you later.”

I left Kim Suho at the church.

* * *

“*Huu...*”

[Victory]

I breathed a sigh of relief. I would’ve lost if Random Consolidation System had been just 3% lower.

— Wow, you’re amazing, hyung. I went all out this time too.

Jajangman messaged me.

— I almost lost. You’re growing stronger by the day. I might not win anymore after a couple of months.

I couldn’t sleep, so I put on my helmet to play a match or two. Jajangman happened to be up, so we ended up playing seven matches.

— True, I’ve been getting stronger lately.

Jajangman and I grew close enough to call each other brothers because I could act my original age (26) online.

— Why are you up so late?

I changed the topic. It was 3 A.M. on Saturday now. I had already beat him seven times and grew sleepy.

— Oh, well, something happened today and I can't fall asleep.

— What happened?

— It's nothing much.

Oh? It sounded like a relationship problem. Well, Jajangman was still a teenager. Half of his life should be about friends and the other half about girls. I felt slightly jealous. After all, I had to worry about killing someone or figuring out a way back home.

— Tell me. I'm 8 years older than you, so I have more experience.

— Well, it's just that, um...

— Yeah?

— It's like... you don't want it, but you don't want someone else to have it either.

Aha, I get it. This son of a bitch, he's the popular type!

— So you're the one on the receiving end?

— *Cough*, well, I can't say I'm too experienced.

Why does he sound like a dick today? I smirked and replied.

— What happened so suddenly?

— Nothing, it's just been on my mind recently.

— On your mind?

— Yes. A little.

— Well, you've gotta have a reason, right?

I started to grow interested.

— Yes, so um... that person sang in a talent show today. I think the song was meant for me.

— Whoa...

A girl appealing to a guy with a song? She must be quite assertive. Or maybe Jajangman was that handsome.

— Then can't you just accept her feelings?

— No, I don't think that's right.

— Why not? What if someone steals her away? You might regret it later.

I spoke from experience. As a 26 year old, I knew girls who had crushes on me, but rejected them because I wasn't interested. I always felt sour when I saw them dating other guys later. I even remembered thinking, *That girl used to like me.*

— Wow, you're saying the same thing as my friend, but I don't think I'll regret it.

— Of course, you don't feel that way right now, but you will later. Didn't you say she was on your mind?

— Just a little bit. No, a tiny bit.

I could feel he was the prideful type who didn't like losing. He was still too young. You had to lose once in a while to learn from your regrets.

— Doesn't the fact that you're staying up contradict what you're

saying?

— Yes? Uh... no... right?

— Trust me. I've been through the same thing. From today, you'll suddenly only see her good points. It'll be too late once she gets a boyfriend.

I waited for his reply for 1 minute, 3 minutes, 5 minutes...

“Did he fall asleep?”

Damn, I wondered what he would do.

I checked the time. It was already 3:40 and time for me to sleep. I took off the helmet and lay in bed.

Chapter 93

Worry (2)

Saturday's class competition began with archery as a large crowd gathered at the range. Many people wanted to watch because they considered archery an extreme sport in this world. Archers didn't just shoot targets in the distance that ordinary people couldn't even see. Instead, they included all sorts of magic effects and summoned monsters that hindered the archers. These effects made it more thrilling for audiences. Naturally, a professional archer received great wealth and honor.

"Mm."

I sat in the waiting room and watched the match outside. The rules sounded simple. Two archers stood in a 75 meter-wide lane with only one life to score the farthest distance. However, they didn't use a tournament format since each match cost a surprising amount of money. Archers would only participate in one match, but their scores would determine the first to twelfth place rankings.

— The match between Acceptance class and Cultivation class has ended. Currently, Eustass Haim holds the first place record at 320 meters.

The fifth match finally ended. However, the first place record only remained at 320 meters for several reasons.

"The last match will take place between Veritas class and Virtue class. Archers, please come out."

A staff called for me and a French cadet named Baire Moren. I knew Moren since he was one of the top sharpshooters in Cube and would later join Creator's Sacred Grace. He constantly opposed Kim Suho, but they would work together in the end. He surpassed Chae Nayun in terms of pure archery skill. I glanced at Moren and checked my gift's

proficiency.

[Master Sharpshooter] [Intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving — Grade 6] [Proficiency EXP 27%]

Its growth stagnated at grade 6 and hadn't progressed much. I slightly worried, but felt confident enough.

"Yes, the representatives are now appearing. Cadet Kim Hajin and cadet Moren, please head to the field."

I left the waiting room with a bow on my back.

* * *

The sunlight shone with no shade at noon. Chae Nayun sat with a bag of popcorn and a can of Coke.

"Why are there so many magicians?"

Chae Nayun murmured as she looked around the archery range. She spent most of her morning loitering around until Kim Hajin's competition. The robed magicians surprised her.

"They're probably here to see the 8 star magician today."

Yoo Yeonha pointed at the VIP observatory.

"Oh, magician Ah Hae-In?"

Ah Hae-In was a French 8 star magician who became a naturalized Korean citizen at the age of 11. Only 300 magicians at the 8 star level existed in the world, and she was quite young and beautiful. Every magician admired her like an idol although her personality was a bit strange.

"I heard she was visiting. No wonder I felt the earthquake from so far away."

Competitive archery commonly featured earthquakes. Chae Nayun also looked forward to the summoned monsters and traps. She couldn't wait to see Kim Hajin suffer.

— Next is Veritas class' Kim Hajin v.s. Virtue class' Baire Moren.

"Oh, it's our class now."

Chae Nayun looked at the archery range with popcorn in her hand as Kim Hajin and Baire Moren came out side by side. They shook hands before heading towards their respective lanes.

"*Hmm...*"

Yoo Yeonha observed Kim Hajin's movements with a hand on her chin. Kim Hajin walked up to the archery plate full of confidence.

"Looks like we have nothing to worry about."

Cadets took a lot of pride in the class competitions. Veritas class felt bitter every time they lost because everyone expected them to win. It felt like an international competition between nations instead of classes.

"By the way, what's he mumbling?"

Chae Nayun frowned as Yoo Yeonha looked at the two competitors. Indeed, Baire Moren had said something to Kim Hajin.

"Trash talk, I guess? Baire Moren is known for being sly and ill-tempered."

"Oh really?"

Yoo Yeonha rarely gave false information, so Chae Nayun fully believed her.

It does seem like he's provoking Kim Hajin. I see, Moren is a piece of shit.

Ah Hae-In sat in the VIP observatory adorned with all sorts of decoration and food.

“Grand Duchess Ah Hae-In, is that child your nephew?”

A 5 star magician who volunteered as her attendant carefully asked.

“Unofficially, yes. Officially, I’m the founder of the Ah clan, so I have no relatives.”

Ah Hae-In grinned as she looked down at the archery range. She came to see her nephew who grew up well. He stood out next to some average-looking guy. The 5 star magician admired Ah Hae-In and spoke in a trembling voice.

“Ah, it’s starting.”

“Is it?”

Ah Hae-In placed her hand on an orb.

“I just need to continue what I did before, right?”

“Yes, you can start with a light earthquake.”

“I can do whatever I want after 350 meters, right? Since no one has managed past that yet.”

“Yes, but the obstacles have to be the same for both lanes.”

Ah Hae-In laughed at the 5 star magician’s admonishment. Then she shot back at him.

“Would I be able to do that? Don’t you know how much I cherish my nephew?”

“Ah...ahaha... Well, it’s not a test, but a small festival for cadets. Do

as you wish, Grand Duchess. Cadets will feel honored by just your presence.”

The subordinate magician showed excessive loyalty since 8 star magicians could be considered nobles among nobles. Only 87 of them existed in Korea. A single archery event as a bribe wouldn’t cause any problems. It would be a huge boon if the Grand Duchess became a guest lecturer.

“If you say so.”

Ah Hae-In smiled in satisfaction.

* * *

“Damn.”

The first place cadet only reached 320 meters for a reason. I passed 250 meters just now, but my legs already felt sore because of the earthquakes.

“Wow, you’re pretty good. I guess it’s true you have a specialized gift.”

Moren relaxingly spoke from next to me. Naturally, I grew suspicious of the competition. The magic effects and obstacles looked completely different in my lane compared to his lane.

“Tsk, you sure are relaxed.”

“Are you sure you don’t just lack training?”

“Sigh.”

He provoked me with an irritating smile. I stared at the observatory with the magician in charge of the magic effects and spotted a western woman. Her red hair perfectly suited her fair skin as eight golden stars shone on her black cape. Another magician flattered her from the side.

“Hm...”

I only knew one such person with those features. The 8 star magician named Ah Hae-In. I tried recalling if she knew Moren and stealthily turned on my smartwatch. *Aha!*

“Hey, your aunt is over there. Are you gonna go say hi after?”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

Moren tried to act oblivious, but the corner of his mouth slightly curled up. *That son of a bitch definitely knew.*

“Your aunt keeps harassing me.”

“What do you mean? Are you making excuses since you’re going to miss? Just hurry up and shoot, please.”

“Tsk.”

I raised my bow at the 300 meter mark as an earthquake shook beneath me. Suddenly, hail also hammered down from the sky.

The hail blocked my vision and struck my hands and shoulders. It felt cold and painful, but my desire to win grew stronger. I focused all my senses on the bow and target. *TANG!* The arrow shot forward and hit its mark.

“Huu.”

“Wow, congrats.”

Moren went next. However, only soft and small hail fell on him. He hit his mark without difficulty.

“It’s your turn.”

“...”

The favoritism continued to escalate. I forcefully smiled and pushed forward to 350 meters.

— Both sides have surpassed the first place record! The target will move 50% faster and the participants will switch turns! Baire Moren will now go first!

Moren looked nervous as he raised his bow. Huge vines suddenly shot up from the ground as I wondered about the next obstacle.

“*Whoa! What’s this?*”

Moren shouted in surprise. The 10 meter vines swallowed the entire lane. A few swirled around Moren and slammed the ground next to him. *KWANG!* However, Moren remained poised since all archers cultivated patience and calm. The vines wouldn’t attack unless he stepped off the archery plate. Not to mention, they acted almost kindly towards him as they swayed back and forth like reeds to cool him off.

“*Ah!*”

Moren still failed. He couldn’t hit the target that suddenly moved 50% faster under the constant earthquake and hail. He had reached his limit.

— *Ah!* Moren regrettably misses!

Honestly, I also felt worried as I raised my bow. As expected, the damned vines grew even fiercer. They freely swayed during Moren’s turn, but now they violently whipped about.

“...”

I stopped thinking. Anyone could see the favoritism, but I could just tear through it. I also had an incredible backer called Lady Luck.

I nocked an arrow and pulled the bowstring. The vines angrily lashed out like a girl dumped by her lover. I could feel the rage behind them. I should get serious now too.

I activated bullet time and the world instantly slowed. The target shot up from 350 meters away. I couldn't hit that target no matter how I thought about it. The angle simply made it impossible. The target flew through the air as the monster vines completely blocked the path. Time was running out. The target would disappear at any moment.

I tightened my grip and bit my lips. Would I be able to precisely shoot an arrow through those vines without magic power? I thought about giving up, but a thought suddenly flashed in my mind.

“Scan.”

I murmured. The numbers 40 and 41 flashed on my bow and arrow. Everything about the two objects strengthened including the bowstring's elasticity and the arrow's flexibility. I widened my eyes and peered through the vines to the target. I accurately traced the trajectory and leaned my arrow slightly to the right. Then I released the bowstring.

Shwiiik—!

The arrow flew forward and bent in a strange manner. It flew right and dodged all the obstacles before curling left and flying straight like a bullet towards the target.

— Veritas class' Kim Hajin! He succeeds on the 350 meter mark!

“The hell, how did that arrow bend?”

Moren uttered in complete shock at my arrow.

“Did you use magic power?”

“You think your aunt wouldn't have noticed if I did?”

“Then what...”

I chucked my bow in front of me. I wanted to make things clear after winning through such blatant favoritism.

“This is the difference between us.”

I turned around and checked my smartwatch. I felt something just now. I had to have received a gift.

“I knew it.”

Several alerts popped up on the smartwatch.

[You performed a curving arrow. Master Sharpshooter's proficiency has increased by 15%.] [Low rank gift, Curve Shot, has been added to Master Sharpshooter.]

Curve Shot — Long ranged attacks may curve according to the shooter's will. (The extent of the curve will change depending on the gift's grade and the weapon.)

“...”

The corner of my mouth twitched. My gift's greatest strength was its scope. The proficiency earned from a gun also applied to a bow. Likewise, a gift obtained from a bow could also be used with a gun. Now I could also shoot curving bullets.

Chapter 94

Initiation (1)

Ordinary people might've missed what happened because of the angle. Giant vines had covered the sky and Kim Hajin's arrow looked like a needle. However, every cadet saw what happened. Kim Hajin's arrow clearly curved. Magic arrows commonly curved, but Kim Hajin hadn't used any magic power. They could hardly believe what they just witnessed. His arrow felt more like a well-trained raptor cutting through the tiny gap to chomp down its prey.

"Whooa!"

Chae Nayun squeezed her bag as popcorn rained down on the person in front of her.

"Ah, fuck, what is it!"

"Fucking hell, who did... Oh, it's Nayun."

"Ah, sorry. You guys can eat that."

"Huh? Oh... Uh, sure."

The cadets in front of her began to munch on the popcorn. Chae Nayun stared at them before turning towards Yoo Yeonha.

"Hey, you saw that, right?"

Yoo Yeonha grinned at Chae Nayun's awestruck voice. "Looks like he didn't want to go easy this time."

"Huh? What are you talking about?"

Yoo Yeonha continued staring at the archery range. Chae Nayun

followed her gaze towards Kim Hajin who threw down his bow. He seemed somewhat angry.

“It looks like the harsh favoritism annoyed him.”

“Yeah, he has quite a temper surprisingly. The tampering seemed too obvious ever since the halfway mark. Is the magician discriminating against him because of his looks?”

“Hu, huhum.”

Yoo Yeonha could barely hold back her laughter. She didn’t think Kim Hajin looked that ugly, but he was uglier than Moren.

“It’s not because of his looks. Grand Duchess Ah Hae-In must’ve intervened since Moren is her nephew.”

The Magic Tower Association had bestowed Ah Hae-In with the title, One Man Army. She was the greatest expert in summoning magic. A master rank magician who could summon seven high rank monsters with their own intelligence.

“Didn’t Grand Duchess Ah Hae-In become a naturalized Korean citizen a long time ago? How can she have relatives?”

“Her older sister still has French citizenship. Moren is her older sister’s son.”

Grand Duchess Ah Hae-In held an S rank grade in Yoo Yeonha’s talent book. Naturally, Yoo Yeonha knew all about her family background.

“How do you know all this?” Chae Nayun curiously asked since Yoo Yeonha seemed to know everything.

“You should take some time to study too.”

“I’m too lazy.”

Chae Nayun briefly replied before staring back at Kim Hajin. The

judge asked him if he wanted to continue, but Kim Hajin shook his head. Then he turned towards the crowd and suddenly made eye contact with Chae Nayun. He quickly averted his gaze, but Chae Nayun still felt an odd feeling.

“...”

She carefully placed her hand over her heart and felt it beating differently. Chae Nayun couldn't help but recall what her mentor told her. She would begin to only see his good points.

“No way, I'm not crazy.”

Chae Nayun laughed it off as the host shouted.

— Veritas class' Kim Hajin achieves the first place record at 350 meters!

Clap, clap, clap—

The competition ended with applause from the crowd. Chae Nayun saw Kim Suho heading to the waiting room and asked Yoo Yeonha, “Hey, wanna go to the waiting room?”

“No.” Yoo Yeonha stretched and stood up. “I'm busy. I have to work.”

The analysis of Kim Hajin's ginseng would arrive in the afternoon, and Falling Blossom would also meet. She hoped to learn more about Kim Hajin's past to repay her gratitude.

“How do you have so much work as a cadet?”

“I know, right?”

Yoo Yeonha headed back to the dorm.

“...”

Waiting room, dorm, waiting room, dorm. Chae Nayun hesitated before

walking back to the dorm with a sigh.

* * *

“Uh...”

The archery competition finally ended. The 5 star magician became speechless. Kim Hajin won despite the excessive favoritism towards Baire Moren. How was he supposed to react? He couldn't punish that cadet for defeating the Grand Duchess' nephew.

“Pft.”

Contrary to his expectations, Ah Hae-In only smiled.

“Why do you look so afraid? It's only natural my nephew lost against someone like him.”

Only then did the 5 star magician begin to relax.

“Ha, haha... is, is that so?”

“Of course. Anyways, I'm jealous. So that's a specialized gift.”

She dreamed of becoming a hero when she was young. However, her body wouldn't develop despite her efforts. Her gift and physique specialized in magic, and she became a magician instead.

“Tell my nephew I want to see him for lunch.”

“Yes, understood.”

Ah Hae-In stood up as the 5 star magician bowed. She barely reached 164 cm thanks to the heels hidden by her cape, but her real height was only 151 cm (a rumor stated that she was even shorter, and had tiptoed during her official physical measurements). Furthermore, her small face didn't contain a single wrinkle, and her eyes sparkled like a child's.

The 5 star magician secretly doubted Ah Hae-In was 30 years old. *Who would think she was the One Man Army at first glance? Weren't most Caucasians tall? Why was the Grand Duchess so short?* Even the 5 star magician's fourth grade son seemed taller.

Ah Hae-In suddenly turned around. Her sharp eyes pierced the magician.

"What were you thinking just now?"

"Y-Yes? Ah, n-nothing. I just thought the golden stars on your cape looked beautiful..."

"Tsk."

Ah Hae-In clicked her tongue as the magician felt a mysterious chill. Ah Hae-In's magic power subconsciously seeped out and cooled the temperature.

"Don't stare at me when I'm standing. I don't like it."

Ah Hae-In left after admonishing the magician who stood in a daze.

"Uh..."

He flattered her all day and even allowed her to tamper with the final match, but all his efforts had gone to waste.

* * *

Rachel opened her eyes at 3 A.M. on Sunday when most should've been asleep. Her eyes hurt from shutting them too tightly to try and fall asleep.

She sighed and raised her body. The penthouse room entered into view. It looked huge, but empty. She had no talents for decorating, so she left the room as she received it. It only contained the standard furniture: a couch, a bed, and a TV.

“Sigh.”

Lately, she suffered from insomnia. Of course, she couldn't sleep well ever since that incident, but it grew more severe lately. Anxiousness and apprehension coiled around her every time she lay down to sleep. Embarrassing moments from the past few days rose in her mind, especially the mock artifact scramble. She never expected to lose so helplessly against Kim Suho. Furthermore, she also considered her fight against Chae Nayun a loss since Chae Nayun only recently switched to a sword. Rachel might've lost her rising star title if not for Kim Hajin.

She turned on her smartwatch. She only had 37 contacts and lived most of her life without any friends. Then she entered her only group chat with 153 unread messages.

[Kim Hajin, you were amazing today, you little bastard. How did you make that arrow curve?]

[I know right? The singing competition and now archery. Hajin hard-carried the two events he participated in.]

[Oh right. Jamer, are you here??]

[What.]

[Why aren't you talking?]

[I'm sick. Don't talk to me.]

[Oh look, there's an official video of Hajin's performance. It already has 10000 likes!]

The talkative Jin Hoseung sent a link in the group chat.

What is it?

Rachel grew curious and pressed on the link. A hologram video suddenly popped up over a social media page. The title read:

[Cube's rising star cadet. Live performance – If]

“Ah.”

It's the song Kim Hajin sang. Rachel's finger moved to stop the video, but then she paused. The lyrics felt slightly overbearing, but the song sounded good enough for another listen.

“Cough.”

Rachel resumed the video as Kim Hajin's sweet voice rang out after a calm piano melody.

The music filled the space in her huge room. Rachel went under her blanket and closed her eyes as she listened to the calming music.

He sounded much better live. Should I buy a Bluetooth radio tomorrow? Bluetooth... blue tooth... that reminds me of Rome... et tu, Brute...

Rachel's random thoughts drifted away as she fell asleep.

* * *

The class competitions finally ended on Sunday after the dungeon speedrun. Veritas class naturally won with all the top cadets, but that didn't mean they won overwhelmingly. The other classes won the majority of non-combat events like gaming, drawing, dancing, and cooking. The difference between first and second place was only about 30 points. In any case, they held a big celebration sponsored by Shin Jonghak.

“Yummy, yummy.”

Of course, I didn't participate and spent time with Evandel instead. She munched on a chicken wing next to me as I examined a document.

Apprentice Mercenary Mission [Difficulty: D] [Reward: 300,000,000 Korean won or an item of equivalent value] [Goal: Assassinate Siemens, the advisor to the chief of Colaion Mafia's Southern Torino Branch.

[Siemens is a notorious mafioso known for committing murder, rape, blackmail, and human trafficking. Some say he is a djinn.]

Jeronimo Mercenary had sent me this document.

“Colaion.”

The Colaion Family would later play a role in the middle of the main story.

“An apprentice mercenary is supposed to do this?”

I slightly regretted accepting the offer after looking over the document. I told myself I would write my own story, but wasn’t the difficulty too high?

The mafia in this world was dozens of times more dangerous. Especially in Italy, the mafia grew much more powerful after Outcall since monsters had lessened the government’s crackdown on them. The advisor to a Mafia branch’s chief had to be as strong as a low rank, grade 1 hero.

“A djinn...”

I would feel less guilty if he was a djinn. Furthermore, assassination would likely become my specialty since I could attack from 2 km away with the Desert Eagle’s sniper mode. However, I would have to fire within 1 km or my attack power would drastically decrease. In any case, I had no plans to immediately accept this mission. The world outside of Cube was like the wild. You could never be fully prepared.

“Let’s see.”

[Physique (0/3)]

For now, I planned on creating a physique.

Chapter 95

Initiation (2)

A physique was an innate physiological trait similar to gifts. It wouldn't be wrong to call them the body's gift. All kinds of physiques existed like regeneration, increased mana absorption, or superior organ functions. However, I planned to create a more complex physique.

[Magic Dysfunction Physique] Magic Dysfunction — This physique prevents the body from emitting magic power and traps mana inside the body.

A body that can't use magic power. It seemed like an undesirable physique. However, I couldn't naturally use magic power anyways, so I wouldn't suffer any losses. Stigma's magic power functioned separately from mine. Adding this huge restriction to my physique would cheapen the cost of an equally powerful effect.

Energy Conversion — The mana stored in your body will not disappear. Instead, it will be converted into energy that may double your physical stats when full. The energy will be depleted with every movement when used.

My physical stats would increase up to two times if I just ate and slept well. However, the stored energy would decrease with physical activity, so I would grow weaker as the fight dragged on. Still, my doubled stats could prevent me from dying.

I thought of this physique to protect myself from ambushes. I could only rely on my luck to a certain extent. After all, my stats were just too pitiful.

*[Strength 2.570] [Stamina 2.580] [Speed 3.265] [Perception 4.220]
[Vitality 2.670] [Magic power 1.930]*

Nothing had increased over 0.2 points since a month ago. At this rate,

I would only be in the 4-5 range in 10 years. I wouldn't survive the main story with a low rank hero's stats. This physique could help bridge the gap. Without hesitation, I clicked on...

"Wait..."

I changed my physique just to see how much a better one would cost.

[Mana Affinity Physique] [You do not have enough SP.]

"Can't you tell me how much I need?"

A reply quickly came.

[Approximately 5500 SP is required.]

"Fine, fine."

I changed it back to the magic dysfunction physique and hit save.

[500 SP will be consumed. Would you like to save?]

It required much less SP because of the huge restriction. I had about 350 SP left. My singing performance spread throughout social media and occasionally raised my SP. I hit enter.

"Huh?"

A golden light suddenly erupted from the screen and several messages popped up.

[Your special stat, accumulation of luck, has activated!] [Golden characters rain down into words!]

A new low rank physique appeared.

Blessing in Disguise — A tiny portion of your stored energy may permanently increase your stats. (The probability is determined by your invariable luck stat.)

“The heck.”

This seemed like a weaker version of the Getting Stronger Everyday gift I thought of long ago. I didn't complain since I received it for free. Even a 0.001 increase per day would be a net gain.

“Nice!”

I hugged Evandel in joy as she munched on a chicken leg next to me.

“Ak, what is it?”

Evandel continued eating in my arms. *Nom, nom, nom, nom*. She sped up thinking I would steal her food.

* * *

Cube suddenly became desolate after class competitions because of the exams in two weeks. Cadets went back and forth between the fitness center and the library. They looked even more dreary during class. Naturally, they felt less energetic during team challenges.

“*Huu.*”

The days went by and Thursday arrived. I stood in front of Cube's portal station after class. I wanted to visit Seoul before the next main story. A voice rang out from my right hand as I checked my wallet and cadet ID.

“Hajin, Hajin.”

“You're not allowed to talk.”

“It feels stuffy.”

“...”

Evandel had thrown a tantrum, so I had no choice but to bring her along in a pet cage.

“I want to get out of here.”

She had transformed into a short-haired Pomeranian with long golden hair. She looked much cuter and more high-class than a regular dog.

“I’ll take you out once we arrive, so wait until then.”

“...”

Evandel whimpered instead of talking. I nervously coughed as I approached the portal worker.

“Oh? A star is here.”

I tilted my head at her words.

“Yes?”

“Haha, I was just listening to your performance.”

The portal worker laughed and showed me her watch.

[Kim Hajin (Singing Competition vers.) – If.mp3]

“There’s an mp3 version of it?”

“It’s extracted from the video. Many people downloaded it, you know.”

“Oh... really?”

“Yes. You sounded great.”

The portal worker smiled as she wrote my name down.

“Take care. Though, I don’t know where you’re going with your pet.”

“Ah, yes, thank you.”

[Athenian Citizen's Obsidian Bracelet] [Magic Artifact] A bracelet with magic seals once used by an ancient Athenian noble.

I went to the Seoul magic tower to retrieve the obsidian bracelet. They engraved a new magic seal on it called magic power reinforcement that functioned similarly to qi reinforcement.

— You will only be able to use it once, so save it for when it's absolutely necessary.

The artificer didn't realize the bracelet featured an automatic recharge function. Still, his honesty impressed me. I made a mental note to recommend him to Yoo Yeonha's future magic tower.

Next, I went to SH Agency's office to pick up something from Park Soohyuk. The size of their new office surprised me.

"We already have 11 employees and 5 hunters with exclusive contracts. Ah, this office is thanks to Lady Yoo's investment."

Park Soohyuk spoke proudly about Yoo Yeonha.

"That's great. You didn't forget what I invested, right?"

"Of course not. I'll return it tenfold."

"Oho."

I looked around the office in awe. The interior design looked sleek, and they even had a café. The surrounding environment also matched.

"Let's head downstairs. What you ordered is in the parking lot."

Park Soohyuk smiled as he led me downstairs to the bike.

"Oh, is that it?"

A shiny motorcycle took up two parking spaces.

“By the way, where did you get this puppy? She’s adorable.”

Park Soohyuk smiled like a dad at Evandel in his arms. She returned a bright smile and leaned into his chest. Little did he know, Evandel looked even cuter in her human form.

“Uh... try a pet adoption center.”

I replied half-heartedly and examined the bike.

[Agusta Vigilante] [Masterpiece] [High rank Mana Frame] — Weight Reduction: Will reduce the vehicle’s weight and increase its speed. — Reinforcement: Will prevent strong impacts. — Mana Booster: Will use mana for instantaneous acceleration.

It was considered a masterpiece despite being a manufactured product. The price felt worth it, but its size would be cumbersome.

“Ah, Hajin, I have to go now. My employees are looking for me.”

“Oh, okay, I’ll see you later, hyung.”

“See you.”

Luckily, Park Soohyuk had to leave. He set Evandel down and quickly ran off. I looked around the parking lot and spotted several security cameras.

“Tsk.”

I picked Evandel up and got on Agusta. Then I slowly drove to a nearby alley to add a new setting to the motorcycle.

Portability — It may transform into a suitcase using stigma’s magic power.

[100 SP will be consumed.]

I only needed 100 SP since it required stigma's magic power. I desperately needed a vehicle for the next main story, and also for future work. I hit save without hesitation.

"Let's see..."

I tried imbuing stigma's magic power into the bike. It creaked, then dismantled into a suitcase as I picked it up. It felt heavy, at least 20 kg, but it shouldn't be a burden with my current strength.

"This is great."

I held the suitcase and muttered in satisfaction. Evandel stood on her hind legs and asked.

"Hajin, Hajin, where are we going next?"

"Let's go eat. How's steak?"

"Steak?"

Oh right, she's never eaten steak before.

"It's really yummy."

"Yummy?"

"Yeah, but first... transform back into a human. I think it's okay now."

* * *

For the first time in a while, Yoo Yeonha walked down the street of Seoul Cheongdam-dong intersection with her mother, Jin Yeojung.

"Take a good look. All of this will become yours one day."

"Don't worry. I've already thought about how to use it."

This neatly arranged intersection belonged to Jin Yeojung, one of Korea's top real estate chaebols and an extraordinary businesswoman who transformed her farmer father's money into billions of won. Not only did she own Essence of the Strait's guild building, but she also owned the buildings of all their businesses like Essential Armory and Essential Insurance. Yoo Jinwoong the Berserker acted like a child in front of his wife for a reason.

"Yes, I believe you Yeonha. You're not a kid like your father."

"Dad isn't that bad. He's gotten better lately..."

Yoo Yeonha paused in the middle of her sentence and sniffed the air. She smelled a delicious scent and glanced at her mother before slowly looking around the intersection. In a nearby alley, a food stand sold spicy rice cakes, sausages, and tempura.

Ah, I know that place. A TV show featured it for being delicious. I want to try it. I want to try it...

"Yeonha?"

Jin Yeojung's cold voice rang out. Yoo Yeonha turned back to her mother in surprise. Her mother frowned at the food stand.

"Yeonha, don't tell me you haven't quit yet."

"Yes? *Ah*, sssp, of course. I'm not a child... ssp. I already graduated from that a long time ago."

Yoo Yeonha nonchalantly shook her head.

"Then why are you drooling?"

"Yes? *Ah*, my mouth has been dry lately."

Yoo Yeonha quickly averted her gaze elsewhere. Then her eyes suddenly widened.

“Eh?”

She saw someone familiar.

“What are you talking about. We have many things to do today like inspecting the area and meeting the occupants. You’ll inherit this place, so you need to know what’s going on.”

“Mother, there’s something I need to—”

“Quiet. Follow me.”

Jin Yeojung snatched Yoo Yeonha’s wrist.

“Ah, Mom... Aaah...”

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t resist as her mother dragged her away.

Chapter 96

Initiation (3)

Evandel and I arrived at a famous steakhouse jam-packed with people.

“May I help you with your order.”

“Ah, yes, can we get eight of the most expensive steaks.”

“Yes?”

The waiter tilted his head. Evandel and I could easily finish eight dishes. Three for me and five for Evandel.

“Eight?”

“Yes, and all medium rare please.”

“Uh, yes.”

After ordering, the other customers looked at us strangely. Evandel’s appearance naturally drew attention even though many foreigners lived in Seoul. I didn’t take off my sunglasses, so they would think she was the child of a Western noble that I served.

“This is the garlic steak.”

Our first order came out as Evandel’s eyes sparkled. I cut the steak into bite-sized chunks before giving it to her. Evandel’s hands trembled in excitement as she stabbed with her fork and brought a piece to her mouth.

“...!”

She quivered in ecstasy. Afterward, her hand busily moved from piece to piece. I stared at her and waited for the right moment.

“Evandel, do you think you could stay home alone for the weekend?”

She suddenly stopped chewing and silently looked at me. I felt uneasy that she actually stopped eating. She’s not going to cry, right?

“In exchange!”

I spoke before my suspicion could come true.

“I’ll buy you lots of toys today.”

“Lots?”

“Yes, lots.”

I would buy anything and everything to keep her company. Evandel nodded with a half-sulking face. She stopped eating and almost set her fork down when...

“Next is the tomahawk steak.”

The waiter brought a gigantic piece of meat as big as Evandel’s head.

“*Uwhoa!* What’s this!!”

Evandel quickly regained her energy.

* * *

We went to the New World Shopping Mall after our meal. I planned to take her to the toys, but she fixed her attention elsewhere. She stared at a white cat in the pet store and wouldn’t respond when I called her.

“...”

Evandel exchanged looks with the cat. Admittedly, the white kitten looked adorable. I quickly calculated the size of my dorm room. Two rooms with 60 square meters in total. It could fit a child and a cat. I've always wanted a pet anyways.

"Hajin, Hajin."

Evandel pulled on my sleeve after staring at the cat for a long time.

"I want to play with Hayang." [1]

Evandel pointed to the cat she had already named.

"Hayang? You mean that cat?"

"Un!"

Evandel replied with a bright smile. I glanced at the cat. *Meow*— It raised its tail when our eyes met. I couldn't help but smile. I got on my knees and looked into Evandel's eyes.

"If we raise Hayang, what are you going to do about your ghost friends?"

"Ghost friends?"

"Yeah. They might fight."

Evandel had made ten or so animals. She fell into thought before speaking.

"I'll make sure they don't fight."

"You promise?"

I raised my pinky and Evandel clumsily raised hers to promise me. I rubbed her squishy cheeks and stood up. Then I went into the pet store and asked the employee.

“Hello, how much is that cat?”

* * *

The next day, I opened the door and looked back before leaving.

“Hayang, you... why did you bite this! Do you want me to scold you!”

Evandel tried to train our new cat with a stern expression. I wondered if you could train a cat, but it did cost 6 million won. The cat should understand a few human words at least. It wouldn't be strange if it could talk.

“Evandel, I'll be back soon. Have fun with Hayang, okay?”

“We're not having fun.”

Evandel corrected me with a glare.

“Uh, right, don't scold it too much. I'm leaving.”

“Un.”

Evandel didn't pay much attention and only focused on Hayang. I felt much better now that Hayang would keep her company.

I went to Cube's portal station.

“To Seoul.”

“Yes, cadet Kim Hajin, confirmed.”

After arriving in Seoul, I took the portal connecting Seoul to Torino. I presented the worker with a fake passport provided by Jeronimo Mercenary since international portals required further identification. As expected, it worked flawlessly. I arrived in Italy in just 30 minutes.

“Interesting.”

Southern Torino looked completely unfamiliar. Italy was a rather special country because of the mafia.

Its government only acted anti-mafia on the surface. In my setting, Italy's mafia didn't just simply consist of organized crime syndicates. They cooperated with the government if a monster outbreak occurred, and a few large families operated publicly as guilds. They operated within the law with a few exceptions every now and then.

The mafia formed its headquarters in Torino and Milano, far away from the central government. Important characters included the Colaion family and the Fermun siblings. The Colaion family was the largest in Milano and Torino, and they had groomed two elite soldiers known as the Fermun brother and sister.

I had to kill a member of Italy's biggest mafia family. This mission could have come from the Colaion family itself. After all, my target used his position to sully the family's reputation.

"Little apprentice, over here."

Someone called me as I stealthily moved to the hotel. I turned towards the deep yet lethargic voice and spotted Boss.

"Eh?"

She raised her hand like a child waiting for the traffic light.

* * *

"Ah, I'm so tired."

Chae Nayun collapsed on the floor of Cube's martial arts training room. Kim Suho had just sparred with her and didn't know where to look. Her training uniform stuck to her skin and highlighted too much of her breasts. However, Chae Nayun didn't notice and glanced sideways at Yoo Yeonha sitting nearby with a serious face.

"Yoo Yeonha, what are you doing? I even went out of my way to find a sparring partner for you."

“...”

Yoo Yeonha averted her gaze and briefly replied, “I’m just thinking about something.”

Yoo Yeonha thought back to last night when she spotted Kim Hajin with a child. *Who was she? His daughter? No, a 17 year old couldn’t have such a grown-up daughter. Then was she his niece? No, an orphan couldn’t possibly have a niece. Then could it be that he’s a... lolicon? No way, Kim Hajin wasn’t such a person.*

“Ehhh? It doesn’t look simple. Is it Shin Jonghak again?”

Yoo Yeonha flinched when Chae Nayun mentioned Shin Jonghak.

“W-What about Jonghak?”

“Uh, nothing, I just wondered if you got rejected.”

Yoo Yeonha clenched her teeth and felt anger suddenly rising from her heart. She already felt annoyed since Shin Jonghak rejected her offer to study together. Yoo Yeonha blurted out, “Oh right, Nayun. Kim Hajin says he doesn’t like you anymore.”

“What? What are you talking about? Are you crazy?”

“Oh, is that true?”

Even Kim Suho showed interest. Yoo Yeonha shrugged.

“Of course. He says he likes Rachel more now. You’ve heard the rumors, right? I would like Rachel more too if I were him.”

“W-Wha, what? Are you crazy?”

Chae Nayun shot up. However, Yoo Yeonha continued with a bright smile.

“I’m just saying. It’s not like it matters, right? You said you didn’t like

him.”

“...”

Chae Nayun became speechless and didn't know how to respond. After all, she had said that.

“*Tsk.*”

Chae Nayun glared at Yoo Yeonha and sat far away from her. Yoo Yeonha didn't look at her either. An awkward atmosphere came over them.

“Hey, don't be like this you two. You got along fine until just now. Yoo Yeonha, do you want to spar? I'll help since you came to train too, right? You too, Chae Nayun. *Ah*, where did Yi Yeonghan go?”

Kim Suho helplessly muttered between the two of them.

* * *

I took out my bike in a deserted alley of Torino. The bike popped out of nowhere and surprised Boss as she curiously rubbed her face.

“Did you come to help?”

“No, I won't be helping you.”

Then she got on my bike. I stood next to her and tilted my head.

“What are you doing?”

“Come, little apprentice. I want to go for a ride.”

“...”

I got on in front of her and grabbed the handles. *Woong*— The engine softly hummed as I drove onto the road.

“Little apprentice, let’s go around Torino just once. We still have a lot of time,” Boss whispered.

“Sure.”

[Horse Saddle] [Antique] A horse saddle used by a nameless cavalryman 500 years ago. You will drive better if you sit on this saddle.

The saddle I bought in Clancy Islet made the ride much more comfortable. I glanced back and saw Boss’ hair fluttering in the wind.

“Tonight at 9, there will be a fellowship party at Torino’s Leolen Mansion.”

Boss spoke as I drove.

“Your target is the party’s host. If you arrive around 8:30, he should be preparing at the mansion’s garden. It’ll be a golden opportunity to attack.”

I carefully listened to Boss’ advice.

“Next to the mansion is a forest with an abandoned church. The steeple should be perfect to snipe from high ground.”

I turned on the bike’s navigation system and searched for the abandoned church near Leolen Mansion. Then I set it as my destination and turned the handles. It didn’t take long. The road had disappeared, but I drove through the forest without a problem.

I parked near the church inside the forest. Moss and vines had covered it, but the steeple should present a clear view of the mansion. I got off and checked the time.

[8:10 P.M.]

Boss suddenly asked, “Little apprentice, may I watch you work?”

My answer was obvious.

“I’d feel uncomfortable.”

“Then I won’t.”

Boss grumbled and got off the bike. She was about to leave when she spotted my ring and bracelet. She stared at the two items.

“Oh right.”

I recalled that Boss liked pretty items regardless of their function. I remembered writing that she loved sparkly items to death.

“...”

Boss raised her head and made eye contact. She looked somewhat envious. I silently stared back as she smacked her lips.

“What are those accessories? They look nice.”

“It’s a normal ring and a normal bracelet.”

“I’m okay with the bracelet, but that ring... do you want to—”

“It’s not for sale.”

I sternly replied as Boss narrowed her eyes and leered at me.

“I never said I’d buy it. I have many items prettier than that ring in my vault. For example, Persian King Darius’...”

“I’m jealous.”

I cut her off and jumped to the top of the church’s steeple. My movements looked smooth and nimble now that I had gotten used to parkour. I looked down from the steeple and saw Boss unhappily glaring at me.

“You can leave now.”

“I was planning to.”

She left as I checked the time again.

[8:30 P.M.]

I peered at the mansion about a kilometer away with the thousand-mile eyes. Most heroes could cover this distance in about 30-40 seconds. I predicted that I had about a minute before they figured out my location after the assassination. I would only have one minute to escape.

“Huu.”

I took a deep breath and took out the Desert Eagle. Then I fused it with stigma’s magic power and aether as it transformed into a vicious anti-material sniper rifle.

“Scan.”

I activated Random Consolidation System three times. First on the Desert Eagle, aether, and then my bullet. The numbers 25, 31, and 22 flashed respectively.

“Today’s luck isn’t that good, huh.”

I had also prepared a modified bullet to erase any evidence by adding a property that vaporized the bullet after penetration. A single bullet combined stigma’s magic power should finish the job.

[8:35 P.M.]

I covered my face with a mask and looked over the mansion. Waiters, champagne, food, and music filled the garden. My target also stood among them.

“...”

I held my breath and raised my gun. The Caucasian man had well-

defined facial features with a handsome beard. He shouted at a group of waiters.

— Andiamo! È una mossa veloce, bug!

I didn't understand, but I had to kill him before the party began. I focused on his figure and placed my finger on the trigger.

1. Hayang means white in Korean. 🤞

Chapter 97

Initiation (4)

The two Fermun siblings, Paolo Bettina Fermun and Vanessa Jeriel Fermun, looked out the window of the Leolen Mansion's hallway. They saw Siemens yelling at the waiters below.

"I hope it goes well."

Vanessa Fermun had requested for Jeronimo Mercenary to assassinate Siemens. She didn't want a cockroach like him tarnishing her godfather's honor.

"I'm sure it will. They're Jeronimo after all."

"No, I think we didn't provide enough compensation. What if they do things half-heartedly?"

The assassination of an Italian mafia member would be trivial for the infamous Jeronimo Mercenary. However, Venessa Fermun didn't offer that great of a reward. They had considered taking matters into their own hands, but changed their minds when they realized the risks. Murdering a member of their family would be considered the most heinous crime. Siemens had also gained the branch chief's trust.

"What does Uncle Ezio see in that man?"

Venessa muttered with her teeth clenched. Then she made eye contact with Siemens as he looked at her with a lustful smile. His snake-like eyes grossed her out.

"Tsk. I hope Jeronimo shows no mercy."

Vanessa inwardly prayed.

“May he burn to ashes.”

* * *

“...”

I didn't pull the trigger because I spotted a faint blue light surrounding the garden. It should be a mana barrier that blocked outside attacks. It would've been strange if they didn't have any security for a mafia party.

The barrier didn't look particularly strong. They probably lowered the intensity to save mana since the party hadn't started yet. The anti-magic attribute should easily penetrate that mana barrier.

“Haa...”

I poured almost all of stigma's remaining magic power into the bullet to add an anti-magic property. Then I took a deep breath.

I couldn't go back once I pulled the trigger. I would be killing someone who might be a djinn or a human.

However, I had resolved to remain in this world for at least the next ten years. I would need to kill many more, so I had to become bolder. Today's experience would serve as the starting point.

I clenched my teeth and aimed at the target. *Was he a human or a djinn?* I hoped he was a djinn, but was there a difference? *Were djinns more deserving of death?* *Was I killing a character in my novel, or was he a living, breathing human?*

All sorts of thoughts emerged in my head. I closed my eyes and opened them again. A correct answer to this problem didn't exist. I couldn't waste any more time questioning my morals or the state of reality.

I placed my finger on the trigger and slowly pulled until it clicked. I only heard the sound of leaves rustling in the wind as the bullet shot through the air.

There was a tiny delay between the moment I fired and the bullet's impact. However, the target wouldn't be able to escape. The bullet crushed the mana barrier and shot through the standing target with his eyes still open.

* * *

Boss watched the scene from afar. Kim Hajin's bullet had shattered the mana barrier and pierced the target's head. The mana barrier fell like snow on the corpse. A white bullet, blue fragments, and crimson blood. The harmony drew a beautiful picture as Boss closed her eyes. Hot crimson blood. The target wasn't a djinn after all. Bodyguards quickly rushed to the scene. They guessed the sniper's position from the target's posture and began their chase.

Boss opened the notebook that displayed Kim Hajin's location in real time. He had already reached the city streets and got off his bike. Boss ran to where he stopped.

One minute had been enough. Kim Hajin sat on the terrace of a coffee shop with a pair of sunglasses and a suitcase to one side.

“...”

Boss felt a bit proud. Was that the attitude of someone who just killed a man? However, she soon realized she was wrong. His hands shook, and his forehead dripped with cold sweat. Boss slowly approached him.

“Little apprentice.”

His shoulders flinched when she called him. Boss sat in front of him and stared, but the sunglasses hid his eyes.

“You did well.”

“Did I?”

“Yes.”

Kim Hajin stared at her for a long time before speaking in a shaky voice.

“That’s... good.”

Boss didn’t have anything to say as a staff brought over a cup of Americano coffee. Kim Hajin picked it up with trembling hands.

“*Aak!* Fuck, that’s hot!”

“...”

He stuck out his tongue and carefully blew on the surface before taking another sip. He looked fine from the outside, but his mental state seemed all over the place. Boss looked at him compassionately.

“*Cough.* Ah, damn it. I ordered an iced coffee too...”

Kim Hajin coughed in embarrassment. Boss nodded and asked.

“How was it?”

“People say there’s a first for everything. That was it.”

“Right, it’s not easy to make money.”

Boss held the coffee cup Kim Hajin had set down. Then she unleashed her magic power and immediately cooled it.

“Little apprentice, money is the only thing you can trust, especially for people like us.”

“Us?”

Kim Hajin tilted his head in confusion.

“We don’t have a family. We grew up without ever having a family.”

“...”

Kim Hajin thought about Boss' words. Then he nodded and grinned.

“Well, I guess so.”

Boss liked his answer. She liked him the more she got to know him. His bullet easily broke the mana barrier and killed the target. The mana barrier had undoubtedly broken due to the power of anti-magic.

My eyes weren't wrong. Kim Hajin will certainly become the silver bullet to kill that man. Boss joyfully thought.

“Oh right, can you give me an item as the reward?”

Kim Hajin suddenly spoke.

“Item?”

“Yes, item.”

Kim Hajin knew Boss had many precious items. Choosing an item worth 300 million won might net him a rarer and more expensive product since Boss didn't know much about their market values. Simply put, he would take advantage of Boss with his incredible luck.

Boss, unaware of Kim Hajin's thoughts, nodded after a bit of consideration.

“Understood. I will prepare your reward myself.”

“Great. Then I'll leave now since I'm finished. Have a nice day, Li Xiaopeng.”

I wouldn't have bought that cat if I knew it would end so quickly. Kim Hajin muttered something incomprehensible as Boss grabbed his sleeve.

“Wait.”

“Yes?”

“From now, don’t call me Li Xiaopeng.”

Boss looked at Kim Hajin.

“Call me Boss instead.”

“...”

A cool breeze blew past as her hair fluttered in the wind. Kim Hajin stared into her eyes and swallowed hard.

“I don’t want to.”

“Good... *Huh?*”

Boss, full of confidence, suddenly felt shocked. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I haven’t decided yet.”

“What?”

Boss frowned. However, Kim Hajin spoke even more daringly.

“It’s up to me to decide where I belong. It’s still too early, so... hahaha.”

* * *

I returned to Cube late at night. I felt drowsy, but the sensation of the trigger and the image of fresh blood remained on my mind. I felt somewhat dirty and mindlessly walked along the dark road.

“*Huu.*”

Before I noticed, I had already arrived in front of my room. As I opened the door, I saw Evandel and Hayang sleeping on the couch in

each other's embrace.

I walked up and stroked her hair.

“...?”

Evandel narrowly opened her eyes. She smiled sweetly with a drowsy expression. I held her in my arms as she rubbed her cheek on my shoulder.

“Did you bring yummy food?”

“Ah.”

I forgot. I should've brought some Italian food.

“Uun?”

“Tomorrow. We can eat it tomorrow. It's late, so you should sleep.”

I tucked her into bed and went to sleep on the living room couch.

“You're up too?”

Hayang sat up and yawned. I smiled and lay down as Hayang hopped onto my stomach and curled into a ball.

“Hayang is surprisingly cute.”

I stroked Hayang's back and slowly fell asleep.

* * *

Cube's second semester midterms finally began. However, it felt more bleak and desolate than the first because reporters and family members couldn't visit this time. Some rumors stated that Cube wanted to entirely get rid of the midterms.

I didn't mind that things went differently than in the original story. I had glimpsed over the second semester in my novel, so I didn't know what would happen anyways.

— Today's test was way too hard.

— Yeah, what's up with the hell-mode difficulty? Shouldn't we sue the professor?

Many cadets complained after the first written exam. However, I looked forward to written exams since classes ended earlier.

“Hey, Kim Hajin.”

Chae Nayun ran past me and blocked my path. I tilted my head at her. She didn't know what to say after her grand appearance and fiddled with her fingers.

“...Are you headed to the library?”

“No, I'm going back to my room.”

Her eyes narrowed.

“What, you're not going to study?”

“Nope.”

I bluntly replied and continued walking as Chae Nayun followed me.

“Then *um*, do you have any study guides or something?”

“No.”

Chae Nayun's shoulders flinched. She blocked my path once again and stared into my eyes. She looked a bit pitiful.

“Can you help me out? I bombed today's exam too.”

“Now? It’s the middle of exam week.”

“I can stay up and cram. Apparently just memorizing the key points will boost your score by 10.”

“I think you’re better off asking Yoo Yeonha.”

“But I... had a fight with Yoo Yeonha.”

I received a message on my smartwatch from Kim Hosup.

[Hajin! I found who Agus Benjamin is!]

My eyes widened. Agus Benjamin’s real name was Fernin Jesus. I had finally located Tomer’s father.

[Where is he?]

I quickly replied.

[Nowhere. He already passed away.]

“Huh?”

[What do you mean? Can you explain in detail?]

[He lived in a Korean retirement center until 4 years ago when he passed away. Who would have thought? What a twist, what a twist.]

“...”

I finally understood why the Book of Truth couldn’t locate Fernin Jesus. He had already died.

[Got it. Thanks.]

[By the way, I decided to quit my job. I put in my resume at the place you recommended.]

[That's a good idea. For now, can you tell me the location of that retirement center?]

I checked today's date, *September 7*. The next main story would come up soon. It would be a great burden off my back if I could deal with Tomer before then.

"Come on, I'll buy you something delici—"

I ignored Chae Nayun and ran to the portal station.

Chapter 98

Past

“Wow.”

Vanessa and Paolo watched the CCTV footage of the assassination inside the Colaion family’s Leolen Mansion.

“Perfection as expected.”

Jeronimo’s workmanship was flawless. The assassin instantly killed Siemens and disappeared without a trace. He had effortlessly escaped Torino, which was deep inside the Colaion family’s sphere of influence.

“But what killed him?”

Paolo asked as Vanessa rested her chin on one hand and replayed the tape. The CCTV’s low quality footage couldn’t capture exactly what happened.

“I’m not sure.”

“I... think it was a bullet.”

“No way.”

Guns remained indispensable, but most considered them well-assembled toys compared to artifacts. However, the firearm market did equally match the artifact market since artifacts could only be traded between guilds and individuals. Alternatively, people also used auction houses and special markets like Violet Banquet.

However, anyone could purchase and use guns. High class masterpiece guns could even kill low-intermediate rank monsters. In other words,

more people bought firearms than artifacts.

“No one in Jeronimo Mercenary uses a gun.”

Only ordinary people used guns for self-defense against weak monsters. The powerful didn’t need guns.

“It looks like a bullet no matter how I look at it.”

“How would a magic bullet pierce through the barrier? Anyways...”

Vanessa’s expression stiffened.

“You better keep quiet. Don’t open your mouth no matter what. We know nothing, got it?”

They had to carry this secret to the grave. Godfather Colaion cared the most about his family’s safety. Siemens’ death would surely enrage him. Godfather Colaion would openly punish anyone who harmed the family.

“Of course, I know.”

Paolo nodded as if to ask why she would even mention something so obvious.

“...”

However, Vanessa still worried. Someone like him always slipped up in the movies. Vanessa even took out a magic contract because she couldn’t trust her brother’s words.

* * *

[Sunshine Haven]

The retirement center resided on the outskirts of Seoul. However, its name and appearance seemed more like a comfortable rest spot than a retirement center. I walked up to the entrance and knocked on the

door.

Soon, a middle-aged woman appeared and smiled at me. I was about to introduce myself when she spoke.

“Wow, it’s been a while, Hajin!”

“Huh?”

She caught me off guard. A short silence descended before I regained my composure. Kim Hajin, or rather Kim Chundong must’ve visited in the past. This place was only 10 minutes from Chundong’s original house.

“Ah... yes, nice to meet you. It’s been a while.”

Thankfully, I must’ve not been too out of character since the caregiver reacted normally.

“You must be busy with hero training lately. What brings you here? Ah, come in.”

The caregiver invited me inside.

“...”

I took a look around. The place seemed bigger than it looked. Six people spoke to each other as they played Go and Shogi. Then they noticed me and heartily laughed.

“It’s been almost a year! How has it been?” the caregiver suddenly asked.

“Ah, you see...”

I hesitated and didn’t know how to bring up the topic.

“Yeah?”

“Um, it’s about Agus.”

“Agus... Oh, that South American man?”

I nodded. It seemed Chundong had some sort of a relationship with him. I wasn’t too surprised since the co-author could freely make up Chundong’s past. He must’ve complicated things once again, but the situation didn’t seem too bad. The co-author probably didn’t expect me to come here so soon.

“Yes, I wondered if he left anything behind.”

“Let me think... I don’t think he specifically asked us to take care of it, but there was something.”

“A letter?”

“Huh? Oh, yes, a letter. How did you know?”

My eyes widened. Thankfully, the plot device I left remained unchanged.

“Where might that letter be?”

“It’s in the memorial along with his ashes. Why?”

“Ah, well...”

I thought about how to respond. I didn’t know anything about Chundong’s personality, but I could guess from the caregiver’s soft gaze and the other retirees’ smiles.

“I made a promise with him.”

“Oh, did you? Right, you did like listening to their stories. I think his ashes are inside the Seoho Memorial.”

“Ah, thank you.”

I bowed and exchanged a few pleasantries before arriving at the memorial.

[Seoho Memorial]

“Hm.”

This was my first time visiting a memorial. I had experienced many new things in this world. I scratched my neck and entered. The memorial contained thousands of urns, but my thousand-mile eyes quickly located the name, *Agus Benjamin*. A drawer contained his urn along with the letter.

“Letter...”

I walked up to the drawer. However, I withdrew my hand before opening it. I already knew what the letter said. It shouldn't be me, but his daughter who opens it.

What if the contents had changed? I worried and took it out just in case. I couldn't read the language, but I translated it with my smartwatch and confirmed that the contents hadn't changed.

I felt relief and returned it. Then I entered Violet Banquet as the Truth Agency to respond.

[We have located Fernin Jesus.] [The price for the information will be 300 million won.] [Please complete the payment if you'd like to know.]

* * *

While Kim Hajin read Agus Benjamin's letter, Yoo Yeonha received a report from Falling Blossom's Team 3 in her penthouse.

“Volunteer work?”

Team 3 had reverse-traced Kim Hajin's past and Yoo Yeonha discovered a new piece of information.

— Yes, he often volunteered at orphanages, retirement centers, and nursing homes ever since he turned 11 to when he entered Cube.

“Volunteer work...”

Yoo Yeonha pondered about his life as an orphan who realized his talents and entered the Military Agent Academy. It sounded like a rags-to-riches story. She would’ve thrown her shabby past into the trash, but Kim Hajin continued volunteering to not forget. Yoo Yeonha recalled someone like him, not in real life, but a movie.

“*Hm.*”

She finally understood a few things. Everyone knew Kim Hajin often left Cube. This led to bad rumors about him, but the truth couldn’t have been further.

“Amazing.”

Yoo Yeonha exclaimed in awe. He didn’t forget where he came from and never used his strength for fame. His way of life remained faithful to his beliefs and principles. Yoo Yeonha couldn’t help but admire that even if it differed from her values.

“Is there anything else? Like about his birth.”

— We’re looking into it as much as we can, but we’re at a complete standstill. We can’t find any other traces of his past.

“Dig deeper.”

She felt somewhat disappointed, but let it slide.

“Any other news?”

— An incident broke out in Torino at the Colaion family’s mansion.

“Colaion?”

Yoo Yeonha raised her eyebrows. She had planned on forming a partnership with the Colaion family to smuggle artifacts. The Italian mafia had many black artifacts that hadn't been reported to the central government. They couldn't export the artifacts they dug up, so the government and numerous guilds could buy them for cheap. Yoo Yeonha wanted those artifacts.

“What incident?”

— One of their executives was assassinated. They think the assassin came from Korea, so they're asking us to find the culprit.

“A search.”

Yoo Yeonha pondered. Finding a mere assassin shouldn't be too difficult with Team 3's entire force.

“What do you think? Can you do it?”

— It's not impossible.

“Oh? And why is that?”

— We just hired a rather useful recruit.

Yoo Yeonha frowned. She didn't trust people that she didn't handpick.

“Is that so?”

— Yes, I'll send you his profile now.

Yoo Yeonha opened the profile with a judgmental look.

[Kim Hosup] — 17 years old, 168 cm, 78kg — Military Agent Academy graduate — Gift: [Super High-Speed Network] Can connect his brain to a computer to search and track information. Search speed will increase with higher computer specs and internet speed.

I left my room late at night on Tuesday.

“Ah! Kim Hajin! Over here!”

Chae Nayun shouted and waved as she ran up to me with a smile.

“Ah, is this it? The study guide?”

“Yeah, so stop texting me.”

I gave her the study guide she had been pestering me for. I didn’t make it. I just copied what I found from hacking Yoo Yeonha’s database. She had a habit of saving everything she wrote.

“Ah, thank you so much. I’ll pay you back for sure.”

“You don’t need to. Just study hard.”

I stared at Chae Nayun. Lately, she looked more and more pitiful. I just felt like helping her. I didn’t even know what was right anymore.

I couldn’t look at her when I thought about what I would eventually do. I just had to leave no traces like how I assassinated that mafioso. However, I kept...

“Okay! Thanks sooo much! I’ll go study immediately!”

Chae Nayun smacked my arm and ran off while hugging the notebook.

“That hurt.”

I rubbed my arm. *Why did she always hit me so hard?*

* * *

Time flew by and Cube felt empty as ever from the written exams. Friday came around before I noticed.

“Hey.”

After the final written exam, Chae Nayun appeared with a bright face. She practically lived in the library for the past couple of days. It seemed everything went well.

“Thanks. I survived because of you.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I must’ve gotten at least five problems I would’ve otherwise missed. That’s a big difference, right?”

“I guess.”

Next week would be the combat exams. Naturally, I grew nervous. I wanted to increase my rank to about 200, but what came after was more important. The incident that would occur after the combat exams.

“Oh right, do you want to go there after the combat exam? It’ll be on me.”

“Where?”

“Han Jung Gak. It’s a famous Korean restaurant on Ganghwa Island. You’ve heard of it, right? It’s just as famous as the restaurant you took me to in Paris. Kim Suho and you...”

Han Jung Gak was the highest class restaurant in my setting. I wanted to taste the food. It would undoubtedly be the best. However...

“I’m not going.”

“What? Why?”

“I don’t have time. You can go with Kim Suho.”

“What? Are you jealous?”

Jealous? I couldn't just gloss over that. Naturally, I frowned and snapped back.

"Are you crazy?"

"*Uh*, fine, if you don't want to, then don't. I just wanted to pay you back for treating me in Paris..."

"I'm not going."

I cut her off and headed back inside.

"*Ah*, wait! The two of us can't go alone even if we wanted to! My dad will get mad if he finds out!"

Chae Nayun kept talking nonsense until the end.

* * *

The weekend flew by and Monday came around. Combat exams had finally begun.

First was a team challenge similar to the previous semester's duels, but between two teams.

"Team Rachel will be on offense and Team Yohei will be on defense!"

Our opponents were led by Miyamoto Yohei, a top-class warrior from Cultivation class. Apparently, Yohei descended from the famous Miyamoto Musashi. For the record, I didn't create that setting.

"Ready!"

Many spectators watched the battle. Of course, the audience couldn't compare to the previous midterms, but a crowd still came to watch Rachel v.s. Yohei.

"Get into formation."

Rachel spoke as we formed up. Our two warriors, Rachel and Jin Hoseung, stood in the front while the supporter, Yi Bokgyu, stood between me and Tomer to protect us.

I raised the training handgun and spoke to Yi Bokgyu.

“You don’t need to protect me. Focus on protecting Jamer.”

“What? Why?”

“I’m going to take their magician’s head.”

I would display my strength now since I operated based on the principle of acting strong against the weak and weak against the strong. I would prey on the magician hiding in the back with my newly acquired curve shot.

“Wait, shouldn’t you...”

The judge interrupted Yi Bokgyu with a shout.

“BEGIN!”

Chapter 99

Ghost (1)

The team duel arena looked completely different from the one-on-one arena. Instead of the Colosseum, it took place in a rectangular arena 130 meters wide and 250 meters long. The arena transformed into a mountainous area with rocks and shrubs as soon as the judge signaled the start. Obstacles separated the two teams, but that worked to my advantage.

“Jin Hoseung and I will charge forward. Everyone else can support us from behind.”

Rachel spoke as I jumped into a nearby tree.

“Um, Hajin?”

Rachel’s confused voice rang out from below. I smiled and gestured.

“Go ahead. I’ll support everyone from above.”

I claimed the high ground like a normal sharpshooter. Rachel nodded and entrusted me with my job. Then she and Jin Hoseung charged forward. I followed them from tree to tree.

“...!”

An arrow cut through the air towards me. I bent my waist and narrowly dodged it.

“Wow.”

My body felt light and I could easily continue dodging. My new physique had increased my speed stat to around 6.3 and I felt like a ninja.

I turned in the arrow's direction. The opposing archer shot a second magic arrow, but I struck it down with a bullet. The bullet disintegrated the moment it collided, but still managed to alter the arrow's path. The archer frowned and didn't want to continue fighting.

"Daeyun! Take care of their sharpshooter!"

He shouted at a teammate behind him as he aimed for Rachel and Jin Hoseung. I glanced at the battlefield and felt like background music began to play.

"The heck."

Yohei looked like he came straight out of a comic. He stood in the middle of the battlefield with his eyes closed and a tiny branch in his mouth. He seemed comfortable even as Rachel and Jin Hoseung charged at him. His katana remained in its sheath.

"Ronin, be free and wild like the wind."

He blurted incomprehensible words and opened his eyes as Rachel and Jin Hoseung stepped into range. When Rachel's rapier and Jin Hoseung's saber almost cut him down... his katana flashed with a cold light. It soared and parried the two attacks like lightning. His sword seemed lighter than the wind, yet fiercer than a storm.

I watched the three warriors clashing in a daze. Yohei evenly matched two cadets thanks to all the buffs and extra magic power from his teammate.

I finally understood their formation. Yohei stood in the front while their sharpshooter remained in the middle. Their supporter and a warrior both guarded the magician in the back.

The so-called four-protect-one formation. Their strategy threw everything onto Yohei. Their sharpshooter supported both the front and back while the magician cast buffs on Yohei.

The strategy efficiently focused on defense as long as the magician didn't die or someone like me didn't interfere.

I detoured and looped around to the magician. It seemed I lacked in stealth as the muscular warrior with a buzz cut noticed me. He threw his axe like a boomerang as it chopped down all the greenery around me before returning to his hand. He frowned when he saw my gun.

“Why is a sharpshooter here alone?”

I fired a barrage of bullets without answering. The warrior calmly stabbed his axe into the ground. It grew bigger as he imbued his magic power into it. The supporter next to the magician also raised his shield and defended against the bullets.

Meanwhile, I looked for blind spots in their defense. Their magician hid behind the supporter, but I felt like I could reach him from above. During combat training, cadets wore special protectors that absorbed damage to their vital points. By design, a hit to their neck protector would instantly eliminate them.

Their warrior and supporter exchanged glances that seemed to say, *You protect the magician, I'll get that sharpshooter.* The warrior charged at me with his axe. I didn't particularly mind since I could easily use parkour in this obstacle-filled environment. The slow warrior couldn't catch me as I hopped from tree to tree and kept my eyes on the magician. Their supporter must've felt my gaze as he performed something quite unique.

“Conjunction.”

His kite shield multiplied and surrounded them. However, gaps still existed. By design, the shields couldn't form a perfect cover. I aimed for the tiny gaps.

“Huaaap!”

The warrior swung his giant axe and crushed the tree I stood on. I jumped and turned in the air. *Pssh*— The tree scattered into pieces as I flipped upside down 10 meters in the air. Then I activated bullet time and everything immediately slowed. I spotted a tiny gap between two kite shields. I turned my gun slightly to the right and fired since I could easily control the speed and trajectory of my bullets.

Whish—

The bullet oddly curved in the air. I could clearly see its movement. It should've flown straight, but suddenly dropped. Then it went through the tiny gap between two shields like a homing missile.

“Aak!”

The magician screamed. He didn't pay attention since he trusted the shields. He wouldn't have instantly died if he had kept a single barrier around him. However, the magician wanted to conserve his magic power.

— Team Yohei, magician Yoo Soohwan has been eliminated.

My bullet struck his neck protector.

“Agh, this sly bastard!”

The warrior and supporter charged at me.

“Come on, sly?”

I climbed up a tree and constantly fired at them like a monkey throwing down banana peels.

“Get down! Get down here!”

I hopped to another tree and continued provoking him every time the warrior threw his axe. Meanwhile, the frontline battle also came to a close as Rachel and Jin Hoseung began to push Yohei back without the magician's support. The opposing team's sharpshooter busily dodged Tomer's magic attacks. This battle was practically over while their two other members chased after me.

* * *

I messaged Yoo Yeonha 10 minutes after the duel from the waiting room and asked about Yohei.

[He has the wind attribute, the rarest among water, wind, earth, and fire. His gift allows him to display wind-like movements with his magic power.] [He can send out several sword strikes and fluidly dodge his opponents' attacks. His gift is called Covenant of Wind.] [In summary, his gift and physical abilities are both excellent, but he lacks magic power and doesn't do well in drawn-out fights.] [He formed his team to make up for his weaknesses. The magician Yoo Soohwan has a magic called target chain that transmits spells and magic power to a connected target from long range.] [The fight would've been more difficult if he survived until the end. Yohei's battle sense is second only to Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak.]

Yoo Yeonha sent over a thorough report. Cadets often kept their gifts a secret, but she even found out about that. Asking her turned out to be a good idea.

The waiting room's door opened as Rachel walked in with the same expression she always wore.

"Good work, everyone."

Her face didn't show it, but she sounded happy. Anyone could see that Rachel felt ecstatic.

"Especially..."

Rachel looked at me and smiled.

"We won thanks to Hajin eliminating their magician."

"I shouldn't be praised since I went off on my own."

"We would've called you a troll if you failed, but you're a hero since you succeeded. I thought you were Guan Yu ^[1] when you suddenly said you would take their magician's head."

Yi Bokgyu smiled as Rachel continued looking at me. Then she warmly nodded.

"Yes, well done."

“By the way, where’s Jamer?”

Jin Hoseung asked as he looked around.

“Jamer?”

“Oh right, she did well too,” Yi Bokgyu added.

“Jamer... *Ah.*”

I kept getting confused because her real name was Tomer. Anyways, I wondered why Tomer hadn’t responded to the message that I found Fernin Jesus? Violet Banquet had a trustworthy system. I asked for 300 million won, but she shouldn’t worry about being scammed. *Did she not have the money?*

“Let me go find her.”

I left the waiting room and walked down the hallway in search of Tomer. She wasn’t in the bathroom or any another waiting rooms. Soon, I found her hiding in an alley near a vending machine as she called someone. I eavesdropped while walking towards her.

— *Um*, if you could loan me some money...

As expected, Tomer didn’t have the money.

— Is that all you have to say? How long are you going to drag out what should’ve only taken two weeks?

The caller sounded irritated.

— Sorry.

— Prepare for your punishment if you can’t close it out by the end of the week. Oh right, didn’t you also lose the item the team leader sent you?

— *Ah*, about that... I’m really sorry, but I’m pressed on money, so...

— Are you out of your mind? You sold it because you needed money!

— No, no, I didn't sell it. I just lost it...

— Yeah, I'm so proud of you.

Tomer hung up the call feeling dejected.

"Haa."

She deeply sighed and turned around.

"Hiik!"

I stood right in front of her.

She immediately froze. However, nothing from the call indicated her identity as a djinn. She seemed to realize that and felt relieved. I asked as I put some coins into the vending machine.

"What happened? You're short on money?"

"..."

Tomer silently walked past me.

"Want me to lend you some?"

She turned and looked at me. Now I had her attention.

"You don't know how much I need."

"Well, you're a magician. I can loan you as much as you want if you're willing to write a promissory note."

Magicians could rake in a lot of money. *Clunk, clunk*— A bottle of Sprite rolled down from the vending machine.

“I might not look like it, but I’m quite rich.”

* * *

I left the arena feeling exhausted. Our team’s second duel would take place at 3 P.M.

“Cheer up, only two duels left!” I tried to encourage myself when a familiar voice rang out.

“Hey, Kim Hajin!”

I turned around as Chae Nayun walked towards me.

“Kim Suho wanted me to tell you that he liked your match.”

“Kim Suho did?”

“Yeah, he went straight into his match. By the way, how did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Your bullet curved. What trick is that?” Chae Nayun curiously asked.

“My gift,” I simply replied.

“What a boring explanation. *Yawnn*.”

Chae Nayun locked her fingers behind her neck.

“Ah, I want to fight too. My matches don’t start until the afternoon.”

“I see.”

I ignored her and went on my way when I spotted someone else in front of me. Shin Jonghak and Yoo Yeonha stood about ten steps away. He looked at me with disdain and emotionless eyes. It felt like

being in a haunted house. He always looked handsome, but scary.

“...”

Shin Jonghak looked back and forth between me and Chae Nayun. She frowned and shot back at him.

“What do you want?”

“Haha.”

Shin Jonghak laughed since he liked this side of Chae Nayun. Yoo Yeonha didn't seem to understand why as she stood next to him. He sauntered toward us as if to switch places with me. I just walked past him.

“Are you leaving?”

Yoo Yeonha asked. Her eyes still focused on Shin Jonghak.

“Yeah. What about you? Are you going to your match?”

“Yes, it's at 11 A.M.”

“I see.”

I suddenly remembered something.

“Oh right, hey.”

“Yes?”

Yoo Yeonha finally turned to face me. I briefly spoke.

“Bullets. 5.56 mm.”

“You want me to get you some?”

“Yeah, a lot.”

“It’s possible, but what do you need assault rifle bullets for?”

“I think I’ll need them in the future.”

“*Hmm*, hold on.” Yoo Yeonha turned on her smartwatch.

“How many?”

“About... six hundred?”

“Six... what?”

“Six hundred.”

“You know that high rank 5.56 mm magic bullets cost at least 200,000 won per bullet, right?”

“So it’ll be 120 million in total. Is that too much?”

I looked at her disappointed. Yoo Yeonha suddenly smiled like a queen.

“*Pft*. I can do something like that with my eyes closed. Don’t try to needlessly scratch my pride. Do you also need a weapon to go with it?”

“No, I only need the bullets.”

I almost patted her shoulder, but stopped halfway. *Cough*. I placed my hands in my pockets since Yoo Yeonha hated people touching her.

“I’m leaving now.”

“Yes... *Ah*, wait.”

Yoo Yeonha grabbed me.

“It’s about that ginseng.”

“What about it?”

“We’ll be able to produce medicine with it in two weeks. So I was wondering...”

“Are you asking if I have any more?”

“Yes. It looks like it’ll take a while for us to find proper traders.”

I rubbed my chin in thought. *Ginseng*. Honestly, I felt like I could obtain one by hiking a few times.

“I can’t say for sure, but I’ll trade it for your company’s shares if I find any. Deal?”

“That’s fine.”

I could hear Shin Jonghak while we talked.

— Chae Nayun, why are you hanging out with someone like him?

— What? What are you spouting?

— You didn’t forget about what happened before, right? You said he was weird and told me to squash him.

— *Eh? Ah*, no, *um...* I misunderstood at the time...

Someone like him. I found it quite unpleasant to hear, but that’s just how Shin Jonghak acted. He took pride in his bloodline and status. Honestly, he should be proud. His bloodline couldn’t compare to royalty, but Shin Jonghak’s ancestor served the king as a prime minister. His grandfather, Shin Myungchul, also saved the nation after Outcall like a true noble.

“Just ignore him. Jonghak doesn’t know much about you,” Yoo Yeonha said as she studied my face.

“I don’t mind.”

I walked past them to the lounge area.

* * *

All my team duels ended by 7 P.M. as I returned home exhausted.

“Hajin! Hajin!”

Evandel scurried up to me with a sullen face as I opened the door.

“Hajin! Hayang scratched me!”

She put out her right arm with teary eyes. I looked at the very light scratch. *Haa*. I swallowed my sigh and recalled one of the rules of childcare: *never look bothered by your child*.

“How?”

“I don’t know. Hayang is a meanie! Hayang, you meanie!”

Evandel shouted at Hayang. I looked over at Hayang yawning on the couch and acting self-important.

“She scratched you even though you didn’t do anything?”

“*Un!* I didn’t do anything wrong...”

Would a cat scratch someone for no reason? I looked around the room and found cat treats sprawled around the floor. The treat was called Churu, and even humans found it delicious. I told Evandel to give Hayang only one per day. Even if Evandel liked eating...

“Evandel, you didn’t touch Hayang’s treat, right?”

“...”

Evandel flinched.

“You did?”

“N-No... I just wanted to know how yummy it was because Hayang liked it so much. I only wanted a taste...”

Evandel made excuses as I watched her slightly dumbstruck. Suddenly, my smartwatch rang. A message came from Rachel.

[Hajin! Happy birthday ^—^!] [This is my gift. Great job on the duels today.] [Let's go karaoke after the exams ~.~]

“Birthday?”

I tilted my head. Then I recalled that today was September 8th. Indeed, it was my birthday. I turned on my smartwatch and wondered how Rachel knew. I quickly found out when I spotted the party hat on my messenger profile.

1. A famous general from the Three Kingdoms era known as the God of War. 🙌

Chapter 100

Ghost (2)

Chae Nayun lazed around at 9 P.M. Cadets became more active on social media after finishing one exam.

[Uyeonha] [It was difficult, but I'm glad it turned out great. Good work everyone. #Cube #Exam #OurTeam]

Yoo Yeonha's team finished with three wins and celebrated at a café. She uploaded a group picture of them eating together. Chae Nayun felt jealous because of her gloomy team.

"Uuun."

Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha hadn't spoken since their last fight. She wanted to make up since she started it. *Ding.*

[♡] [NYChae and 4593 others liked this post.]

Chae Nayun subtly apologized by liking her post. Then she scrolled down and saw Shin Jonghak's.

[jonghak2] [3 wins 0 losses #Cube #ShinJonghak #Jonghak #Exam #Hero #OverwhelmingVictory]

Shin Jonghak also posted a group photo, but it carried a different atmosphere from Yoo Yeonha's. He looked like a ruler surrounded by his lackeys.

"I wonder when this guy will be cured of his eighth grade syndrome."

Chae Nayun snickered and continued scrolling.

"Huh?"

She found a rather interesting photo from Kim Suho, who had over 20,000 followers.

[With Master Sharpshooter Hajin, Cube's sole gunner]

"Is this guy... kind or evil?"

The photo seemed to have been taken after the archery competition, but the difference between their faces...

[leonidas357: it's nice to see you smiling.] [Yunseung A: I also monitored this year's class competitions ^^ Hajin and Suho both did amazing.]

"Haha, what is unni doing here?"

Yun Seung-Ah clearly had ulterior motives. Chae Nayun left the app after making fun of her and switched to her messenger.

"*Huh?*"

She thoughtlessly scrolled when she discovered a party hat emoticon next to Kim Hajin's profile.

"Today is his birthday?"

Chae Nayun murmured. She was going to continue scrolling, but then she entered a gift shop. She wondered what to give him, but nothing caught her attention.

"I guess a cake will do... no, maybe I should give him something in real life rather than online... no, why would I? I'm not crazy... just a text message is enough."

Chae Nayun quickly sent a message.

[Kim Hajin, it's your birthday today?]

He didn't reply even after 5 minutes. Chae Nayun added another line.

[Happy birthday lol Why aren't you responding?]

[Thanks]

He responded almost immediately this time.

“Why’s he so cold?”

Chae Nayun pouted and put down her smartwatch.

* * *

Midterm exams finally ended on Thursday. I took a total of four exams. Two of them in teams and the others individually. I didn’t do so well by myself, but I obtained enough points from the team exams to enter the top 200. I should receive a bigger room next year.

Now wasn’t the time to worry about academics.

“Will this be enough?”

I purchased a pinnacle grade magic bag that looked like a normal duffel bag. However, it could carry up to 200 kilograms and cost 40 million won. I stuffed it full of all sorts of items: an icebox, tent, cooking wares, ramen, pork chops, etc...

Woong—

My smartwatch rang.

[Cube will be on break next week.] [Cadets will receive a 70% discount on foreign travels when using cadet cards.]

Classes would be canceled next week due to an external investigation. The djinns would lay low, but investigators wouldn’t find anything.

[The Jinsung Foundation will sponsor a field trip next Thursday. First years will be allowed to join on a first-come, first-serve basis.]

During this field trip, the main cast would encounter a wicked ghost called the ghost of the past.

This ghost would transport them to the year 1970, soon after Outcall. Of course, it wasn't the real past. However, this would be a necessary event for them. Not only Kim Suho, but also Shin Jonghak and Yoo Yeonha...

“Aaaaang!”

Evandel's shout interrupted my thoughts. She stared at Hayang in shock. I followed her gaze and spotted the boneless chicken in Hayang's mouth.

“Hayang... Hayang you... put that down now!”

Evandel tried to run, but Hayang quickly bit the chicken. She immediately stopped at the sight.

“Ah! O-Okay! Okay, Hayang. Let's calm down. Calm down...”

Huu, huu. She acted like it was a hostage situation and raised her hands.

“Right, calm down... that's not something a cat can eat...”

Chomp. Hayang chewed on the chicken and ignored Evandel. I glanced at Evandel's empty plate. It seemed like Hayang ate the last piece of chicken.

“*Iiiiiing!* H-Hayang, you...!”

Evandel chased after Hayang. However, Hayang was too quick. She ran into my arms and sobbed.

“Hajin! Hajin! Hayang ate my chicken...”

“Don't worry. She won't die.”

Hayang wasn't a normal cat. She had a noble bloodline with a grade 4 mana affinity. Animals with higher mana affinity could recover faster, live longer, and had higher intelligence. Some people also called them mystical animals.

"No, not that! She stole my food!"

"Oh, that's the problem?"

* * *

I left the dorm and walked to the park after calming down Evandel. I had a few appointments this evening.

"Over here."

Yoo Yeonha waved from a remote area of the park. She wore sunglasses even though it was dusk. I could see the suitcase next to her. Yoo Yeonha spoke as she handed it to me.

"Here are the bullets. Each magazine carries 45 bullets. There are 900 bullets in here."

"Great, thanks!"

"Ah, wait, there's something else."

Yoo Yeonha handed me some sort of protector.

"What's this?" I tilted my head as she grinned.

"A wrist protector. Your birthday was on Monday, right? It's quite expensive, so use it well. I planned to give it to you on Monday, but everyone was busy with the exams."

"Ah, *um*, thank you."

I took the wrist protector and put it on.

“Oh, it’s great.”

It stuck to my skin and felt high quality. Yoo Yeonha looked at me satisfied and turned back.

“Then I’ll be leaving now.”

“Yeah, thanks again.”

I waved as she left. Next was karaoke. Cube had an entertainment district for mental health. It featured karaoke, a LAN café, a bowling alley, a pool hall, and other arcade facilities. Most cadets gathered here after exams. My teammates waited for me as I arrived.

“Yo! Kim Hajin.”

Jin Hoseung waved. Everyone wore casual clothes except for me. Rachel’s outfit looked especially eye-catching. Her pink sweater and blue jeans perfectly suited her.

“The main character always shows up late, *eh?*”

“Ah, sorry, I had an appointment before this.”

I felt confident since I still had my singing gift.

“Now that Hajin is here... let, let’s go.” Rachel reluctantly pointed to the karaoke bar.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

Jin Hoseung took the lead. Cadets filled the different rooms and loudly sang.

“...”

Rachel peeked through the windows and observed them. She looked a bit mystified by the scene. Jin Hoseung went to the counter and showed his cadet card.

“For six people.”

“Thank you. You may use room 17.”

Rachel marched forward as she murmured, *room 17, room 17*. It wasn't far off as Rachel went in first. The door to room 16 suddenly opened when I was about to enter too.

“*Eh?*”

A person came out of room 16 and looked at me in surprise. I reacted the same.

“Kim Hajin? You're also here?”

“Yeah... you too?”

“I'm here with my friends. What about...”

Chae Nayun peeked through the half-opened door of room 17 and saw Rachel. She nodded with a somewhat disapproving look.

“Well, have fun...”

“*Ah*, wait, Chae Nayun. You're going to Jinsung Foundation's field trip, right?”

“*Huh? Um*, yeah, I am. Why? Are you also going?”

“I have nothing better to do, so I applied.”

Someone pulled on my sleeve as I talked with Chae Nayun. It wasn't Rachel, but Tomer.

“What?”

“...”

Tomer spoke with her eyes.

“Ah, okay. I’m going in now.”

“Yeah, bye.”

Chae Nayun shooed me away as I spoke shortly with Tomer before we entered room 17. Jin Hoseung searched for a song with the remote while Rachel oddly held two tambourines in each hand.

“Alright, I’ll sing first as we discussed in the group chat. Rachel will go next, right?”

Rachel’s shoulders shook. *Trrr*. The tambourines in her hands also shook as Jin Hoseung’s song began.

“Horse, let’s run.”

His shoulders moved up and down as he sang an exciting rock song. However, he stopped after the first verse. Jin Hoseung mischievously smiled as he handed Rachel the remote. She nervously pondered for a while before selecting a song. The accompaniment rang out as we held our breaths in anticipation.

“Th, this- bru-shing wi-nd”

“...”

Her voice sounded pretty, but that was it. She ignored the beat and melody and sang like reading a book. *Pft*. I heard someone’s mocking laughter from outside. Chae Nayun laughed as she held her belly.

“Huu... I’ll also stop after the first verse.”

Thankfully, she only sang the first verse. Rachel wiped the sweat off her forehead and handed me the remote with a satisfied expression. *Did she think she sang well?*

“Here.”

“Ah... yes.”

I took the remote and entered a song. After I placed it down, Rachel stealthily took the remote again. She seemed confident and planned on going again.

Rachel sang a total of six songs that day, which caused quite some pain for our entire team.

* * *

Next Thursday finally arrived. The field trip organized by the Jinsung Foundation would serve as the main story’s turning point. The participants remained the same as the original story except for me.

“What good weather.”

The clear autumn sun shone down. I barely arrived at the Seoul portal station on time.

“Ah, Kim Hajin’s here.”

Five individuals pointed at me as I ran up to them.

“You’re two minutes late.”

Shin Jonghak spoke as he pointed at his watch. I also checked the time. He was right. It was currently 6:02 A.M. I clasped my hands and sincerely apologized.

“Sorry.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak waved it off. I spotted the limousine waiting for us. The six of us went inside the spacious and luxurious interior. It had a high ceiling like the ones in the movies and the seats stretched from one end to the other. I sat in a random spot.

“Hajin, do you want some?”

Kim Suho sat next to me and offered me some gummy.

“No, I’m fine.”

“Then give it to me.”

Chae Nayun snatched a gummy. She nibbled on the gummy bear and asked Shin Jonghak.

“Hey, what are we doing there?”

“Lots of things. Wind Mountain is the Jinsung group’s property, so we’ll meditate at the peak and spar a bit.”

Wind Mountain resided on the outskirts of Seoul 800 meters above sea level. It was dense in mana and had been created after a magic power explosion 50 years ago.

“*Ooh*, that sounds fun.”

I didn’t know about fun, but I knew it would be quite a spectacle. I looked around the limousine at Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, Shin Jonghak, and Yi Yeonghan. They all looked out the window like they expected a picnic.

However, they greatly suffered from a lack of drinking water and food in the original story. They would thank me later.

“*Cough.*”

I crossed my legs. The duffel bag behind me couldn’t feel more reliable.

“What are you doing?”

Yoo Yeonha asked with a quizzical look. I grinned and crossed my arms as she frowned.

[Seoul Outskirts, Wind Mountain Entrance]

The black limousine stopped at the foot of the mountain as the driver got out first to open the door for everyone.

“*Huaa.*”

Chae Nayun breathed in the mountain air as she stretched.

“Doesn’t it feel like we’re going on a picnic?”

She struck Kim Hajin’s shoulder as he yawned next to her.

“Yeah.”

Kim Hajin reacted dryly. He seemed somewhat arrogant as he looked at the mountain.

“*Pft*, did you catch Shin Jonghak’s illness?”

“*Huh?* No, no way.”

He quickly returned to his usual self after Chae Nayun’s remark. Shin Jonghak’s secretary finished talking to him and stood in front of the cadets.

“There’s a cabin prepared in the mountain. The master that Jinsung Foundation invited will be arriving tonight.”

“*Ooh.* A master? Who?”

Shin Jonghak grinned at Chae Nayun’s question.

“You’ll be surprised when you meet him. Let’s climb the mountain for now. We have to reach the peak by 3.”

The hike began without much thought. The six cadets climbed in the following order: Yi Yeonghan, Yoo Yeonha, Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, and Kim Hajin.

Rustle, rustle. Leaves covered the ground beneath them. The steep mountain posed no problems as they laughed and talked.

“Ah, the air feels great. It’s nice to be in an area with high mana concentration. It feels like magic power is pumping into my lungs.”

“*Cough*, well you know, Chae Nayun, if you’re with me, you can enjoy places like this whenever you want...”

“Oh! A dragonfly!”

They hiked for around 90 minutes and should’ve reached the summit by now, but seemed nowhere close.

“The mountain’s pretty tall, or did we take a wrong turn somewhere?”

“I don’t know. Let’s keep going.”

Something felt off, but they continued walking. The joyous atmosphere slowly disappeared as they continued climbing for another 30 minutes. A strange sensation coiled around them.

“Hey, doesn’t it feel a bit eerie?”

Chae Nayun muttered, unable to endure any longer. Yoo Yeonha also slowed down and joined them. Goosebumps appeared on her arms. Yoo Yeonha asked in a quivering voice.

“Jo... Jonghak, does it normally take this long?”

“I don’t know, but I don’t think we took the wrong path.”

Shin Jonghak looked around. *Chwaaa*— A cold wind blew against the leaves. Yoo Yeonha trembled at the sound. *Strange*. Something felt strange. Then Kim Suho explained what they all felt in a low voice.

“We’ve been walking on flat ground for the past 30 minutes.”

Everyone immediately stopped and held their breaths. The uncomfortable feeling spread throughout their bodies. They realized that he was right. They were climbing a mountain, but had been walking on flat ground. Furthermore, no one noticed until Kim Suho mentioned it.

“Don’t worry, Wind Mountain is rich in mana, so a spell might’ve naturally—”

“Wait.”

Kim Suho interrupted Shin Jonghak. He quickly looked around in fear.

“Hajin, where’s Hajin?”

“*Huh?*”

The rest of the group also looked back and forth. However, they couldn’t find Kim Hajin.

“What... he... he disappeared,” Yoo Yeonha muttered with a pale face.

“Hey! Stop messing with us and come out!” Chae Nayun shouted, but her voice didn’t even echo. A heavy silence descended.

“...”

One of the six had disappeared. The remaining five stood blankly without moving.

Chapter 101

Ghost (3)

The five cadets froze for a long time and occasionally looked around. The mountain suddenly became flat and Kim Hajin disappeared. Another strange phenomenon occurred. The scenery rapidly changed as if time had reversed. The sun in the middle of the sky fell and disappeared. Darkness covered them as they panicked. The five cadets nervously came together.

“Hiik.”

Yoo Yeonha began to tear up. She couldn’t even look at a horror movie poster, much less endure this frightening phenomenon.

“Let’s... stay calm.”

Kim Suho snapped out first as Shin Jonghak also stepped up so he wouldn’t lose.

“Calm down. That Kim Hajon must’ve gotten lost since he’s a bit dull. Or maybe he sneaked away to claim something for himself. After all, we’re on Wind Mountain.”

“It’s Kim Hajin, not Kim Hajon.”

The Jinsung group privately owned Wind Mountain. No one could enter without permission, which meant plenty of precious herbs grew about. Shin Jonghak theorized that Kim Hajin came across one and sneaked away to steal it.

“What? Then how do you explain this? Not only did the mountain become flat, but the sun also disappeared from the sky!”

Chae Nayun pointed to the darkness around them and the thick,

overgrown weeds at least 80 centimeters tall.

“That’s...”

Shin Jonghak became speechless. *Psss*— They heard an animal moving through the grass. Yoo Yeonha shrunk like a frightened rabbit as Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak pointed their weapons in that direction. *Ssss*— *Ssss*— Something approached them while rustling through the leaves. *Gulp*. They nervously waited for three minutes.

“I thought it was a mountain beast. Who would’ve thought it was a bunch of kids?”

A man in his mid-forties appeared. He wore dark blue pants and a baggy dress shirt. He looked like a typical salaryman from the 70s and 80s.

“What are you kids doing here?”

He spoke with somewhat of an old accent. The cadets silently examined him. The man also scrutinized them, especially the female cadets.

“*Eh?* Why aren’t you talking?”

Shin Jonghak stepped up when the middle-aged man urged them.

“Oy, you. Where is—”

Kim Suho quickly interrupted Shin Jonghak’s ill-mannered speech.

“*Um*, sir, where are we?”

“*Huh?*” The man stared incredulously at Kim Suho, then suddenly smirked. “What do you mean? We’re in Gwangmyeong. This is a danger zone. We don’t know when magic power will explode again.”

“Magic power explosion?” Kim Suho murmured. The term sounded familiar.

[A phenomenon where unstable mana exploded. The world's unstable mana frequently exploded for three years after Outcall.]

He recalled from a textbook.

“That’s right. You’ll die if you stay here, so follow me.”

“...”

The man mentioned an extinct phenomenon like it still happened. Kim Suho fell into thought. *Magic power explosion. A mountain that turned into flat ground. The man’s old-fashioned clothes...*

“Let’s follow him for now.”

They should follow this man to better understand the situation. All five cadets thought the same and nodded somewhat reluctantly. Shin Jonghak then spoke to the man.

“Lead the way.”

“Eh?” Kim Suho quickly corrected him and pushed him to the side. “Ahaha, this is our first time here, so we’ll have to ask you to guide us.”

“What, Kim Suho, you’re gonna provoke me in this situation?”

“Shut up...”

“Just stay quiet and follow along.”

They followed the middle-aged man through the tall grass and heard occasional howls. Eventually, they reached what seemed like a city.

“This is...”

The cadets suddenly halted and blankly stared at the collapsed buildings and barricades of scrap cars and iron bars. Smoke and flames rose from the city.

“Yo, Myungjong. Have you been doing a good job?”

“Of course. *Um...* who are they?”

“Haha.”

The middle-aged man greeted a young man guarding the entrance who glanced at them with a smile. The middle-aged man turned to the cadets and spoke.

“What’s up? Come in.”

“*Um*, first, where is this?” Kim Suho asked.

The middle-aged man grinned at Kim Suho’s serious tone.

“It’s the safest place around, Gwangmyeong City Hall.”

They had driven by in a limousine earlier in the day. However, the Gwangmyeong City Hall they passed wasn’t dilapidated like this. Kim Suho began to understand the situation.

The man’s clothes. Magic power explosion.

“Can you tell me today’s date?”

“Date?”

Kim Suho asked in a stiff voice. The man rubbed his chin and shook his head.

“Don’t know. Who has the time to count nowadays? I guess it’s about 72 now.”

The cadets fell into a daze once again. *Ding*— Their heads rang.

“As in... 1972?”

“Well, it sure isn’t 1872.”

The young man guarding the entrance walked up. Then several men appeared from on top of the barricades. Their eyes coldly flickered as they looked down at the cadets.

“Come in. It’s dangerous outside.”

The young man grabbed Chae Nayun’s wrist.

“Hey, let her go.”

Kim Suho pushed him away and pulled out the branch he brought just in case.

“A branch?”

“Hey kiddo, put that down. We’re not bad people.”

“...”

Kim Suho tried to unleash his magic power to intimidate them. Right, he *tried*. Unfortunately, he couldn’t muster any magic power.

“Hey, Kim Suho. I can’t use my magic power!”

Chae Nayun experienced the same thing and sounded flustered. Meanwhile, the men on top of the barricades jumped down. At least twenty surrounded them. They imbued magic power into their iron bars.

“These pieces of trash dare to...”

A neon light flashed in the distance as Shin Jonghak began to curse them. Everyone’s attention fell on the light. A man in a helmet rode on a high-tech bike.

“A-Ah! That son of a bitch is back! Run inside guys!”

The middle-aged man urged his friends.

“Hurry! He’s a man-eating monster! Stop dilly-dallying! Alert Asura...
aak!”

A white flash erupted and something instantly penetrated the man’s shoulder. It didn’t end there. Several streaks of light shot forward and lit up the darkness. Yoo Yeonha easily identified the attack.

“Bullets?”

“*Uuk—*”

The barrage of bullets dissolved the encirclement as Kim Suho and the others quickly retreated. They stopped and turned to the man on the bike once they reached far enough. The mysterious man raised his hands and slowly took off his helmet. Soon, they saw his face.

“*Huh?*”

The man neatly tied up his long hair and had a scruffy beard that covered his chin. His facial hair made him look like someone from a Western movie, but they all recognized him. Kim Suho murmured in a daze.

“Kim Hajin?”

* * *

I thought I would be sent back to the past with them just because we walked in the same place at the same time. I was too naive.

About forty days ago, or what should’ve been a few minutes for Kim Suho and the others, I fell into the past while climbing Wind Mountain. The other five experienced a more natural progression since they arrived together.

I panicked at first. However, I realized the situation wasn’t that bad. As expected, the djinns ruling over this place felt stronger than in the original story. Being sent back before the others gave me more time to

prepare.

I got busy from the first day. First, I looked for a place to stay. A djinn ruled over Gwangmyeong City Hall, so I had to pick another place close enough to observe them. Next, I observed the djinn's movements and attacked his subordinates to hinder their growth. I ate alone, attacked alone, and ran alone for 40 days. Today, I finally reunited with them.

"Then this really is..."

Kim Suho quietly listened to my story as we returned to my base.

"That's right. We're in Gwangmyeong of 1972. Outcall happened only 15 months ago, so this place is still hell."

They turned as stiff as a rock. Even Shin Jonghak had a grave look.

"Then how long have you been here?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

"I don't know."

My hair and beard grew a lot after 40 days because of the high mana concentration. Energy conversion also made my facial hair grow faster.

"Maybe a year?" I said that as a joke. However, a heavy silence descended. The moonlight lit up the darkness as the only source of light. The others stared at me with incomprehensible faces. I felt satisfied and laughed as I corrected myself.

"I'm kidding. I've only been here for about five weeks."

"..."

However, they remained silent.

"R-Really. It wasn't that bad of an experience."

It felt like a necessary experience. For two months, I fought people, not monsters. The atmosphere became awkward, but Shin Jonghak asked without much care.

“So did you find out what caused this phenomenon?”

“Yeah, more or less.”

“Really?” Yoo Yeonha’s eyes widened.

“I’ll explain later. For now, let’s get to the base.”

* * *

We arrived at my base. I chose an abandoned building buried in a nearby forest. It served as a good temporary shelter with only one entrance.

“Not even my horse would live here.”

“Hajin, you spent a year here? With nothing around?”

Shin Jonghak shook his head in disapproval as Kim Suho asked with a look of pity.

“It hasn’t been a year. Please believe me!”

I emphasized once again. I never would’ve made that joke if I knew they would pity me like this.

“But there’s... nothing.”

“Yeah, I’m surprised you lived here for so long. You have my respect.”

Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun grimaced. I couldn’t blame them. This was probably their first time seeing such a dilapidated home with only rocks and cockroaches. However, that was only for now.

“Just wait. There’s a lot more to see.”

I took out the duffel bag on my motorbike and pulled out two magic tents. I imbued a bit of stigma's magic power into them... *tada!* They instantly expanded.

“Whoa! What's this?”

Two proper homes popped up. Chae Nayun's eyes lit up as she approached the tents.

“Oh, before I explain what's going on, aren't you guys hungry?”

Everyone other than Shin Jonghak looked at me with sparkling eyes. I took out a grill, an icebox, and several pieces of cooking equipment.

“Oh, but we'll need to butcher it first.”

I already ate most of the food I brought other than some spam and ten bags of ramen I saved for an emergency. As a result, we would have to hunt wild animals and butcher them.

“Butcher?”

“Yeah.”

I opened the icebox with a pig's torso split in half. I caught this one two days ago and butchered it myself. For the record, I vomited twice during the entire process.

“We have to butcher this.”

I looked at Kim Suho. He grinned and raised his hand.

“I'll do it. I'm good at stuff like this.”

“Yi Yeonghan, you help him too.”

“Okay.”

“Butchering, it suits you. Kim Suho the Butcher, that can be your

title.”

Shin Jonghak taunted Kim Suho from the side. I handed him four empty water buckets.

“You, go get water. There’s a stream to the right.”

“What?”

Shin Jonghak frowned. I had never seen him so angry. He seemed to be saying something like, *How dare you order me around!* However, I already knew the magic words to control him.

“Hey, Chae Nayun. Go with him.”

“*Hm?* Me?” Chae Nayun scurried out of the tent.

“*Hm.*”

Shin Jonghak silently took the canteens. Then he coughed a few times and handed two buckets to Chae Nayun.

“Let’s go.”

“Are we going to get water?”

“Yeah.”

“Great. I was getting thirsty.”

Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak walked to the stream.

“*Hmph*, why is it Chae Nayun?”

Yoo Yeonha grumbled as she watched them leave. She turned away and sulked when I glanced at her. I murmured to myself.

“Let’s make some ramen when they come back with water.”

“Ramen?”

Yoo Yeonha’s grumpy face instantly disappeared. I took out a few bags of ramen from the duffel bag.

“Yeah. Why? You don’t like them? You’re not going to pretend to be a chaebol, right?”

Yoo Yeonha smacked her lips and shook her head. “No, *ssp*. I guess there’s, *ssp*, no choice. It’s better than starving to death, *ssp*.”

She must’ve been hungry as she loudly swallowed her saliva.

Chapter 102

Ghost (4)

Yoo Yeonha asked for a broom while Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak fetched the water and Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan butchered the pig. I gave her the one that came with my camping set and she began to sweep. Thanks to her, the shelter became a decent camping ground.

“Not bad.”

Yoo Yeonha looked around and smiled. Meanwhile, I took out a burner and grill. Then I sat on a camping chair.

“*Huaam*. Oh right, *um*, I’ve been meaning to ask. Why can’t we use magic power? It took 30 minutes to clean this place when it should’ve only taken 3.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke as she stretched.

“You can’t use the magic power that you brought from the present. Usable magic power accumulates inside you after two days, but you’ll have to wait at least a week to use it.”

The same occurred in the original story. The post-Outcall mana felt vastly different from the stable mana in the present. The former felt denser, but also more difficult to wield. Everyone would suffer for at least a week until they acclimated. However, this would become a valuable experience for the future.

“Ah, so that’s why.”

Kim Suho overheard and spoke up. He sat next to me with Yi Yeonghan.

“Are you done?”

“Yep, we split it into different parts.”

“Yo, we’re back.”

Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak appeared at the entrance and placed the buckets on the ground. Yoo Yeonha glanced around and coughed.

“Then should we eat now?”

Yoo Yeonha sounded happy since she could eat ramen. I lit the grill and filled the pot with water. Then I placed it on the burner. Today’s menu would be pork belly and ramen. First, I put the pork belly on the hot grill. *Tssss*— The meat pleasantly sizzled. I also placed several bags of ramen into the water as it boiled.

“*Hehe.*”

Yoo Yeonha happily looked back and forth between the pork belly and ramen. We sat around the food 4 minutes later. Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan enjoyed it, but the other three grew up in luxury. Shin Jonghak and Chae Nayun only stared even though they felt hungry. Yoo Yeonha held back because of them.

“Your mana will replenish faster if you eat. Animals here have higher mana content.”

Shin Jonghak finally picked up his chopstick. Yoo Yeonha sighed and finally filled her bowl with ramen. She carefully slurped a few strands of noodles. I also filled my bowl with ramen and ate it with the pork belly.

“*Hm?*”

Yoo Yeonha watched me and also picked up a slice of pork belly into her bowl. Then she ate it together like I did. *Nom, nom.* Her small mouth busily moved as her head drooped. She clenched her fists and trembled. *Was it that delicious?* She sure made it seem so.

“*Ah, I’m going to feel queasy...*”

Chae Nayun slowly challenged a slice of pork belly. The greasy piece of meat entered her mouth.

“*Eh?* It tastes delicious.”

She murmured in surprise after chewing. I explained with a smile.

“It’s a pig that grew up eating mana.”

“What?”

“This pig lived in an area with higher mana concentration than Baekdu Mountain.”

Animals that grew up in mana-rich areas tasted more delicious than ordinary livestock. Most of these areas in the present were privately owned and such animals were considered precious. This pig would be high class even for Chae Nayun’s taste.

“Wow? That’s amazing!”

Chae Nayun began to move her chopsticks. Yoo Yeonha felt threatened and quickened her pace. We ate for the next thirty minutes without talking. Then Chae Nayun pointed at me with her chopsticks as we finished eating.

“By the way, that looks surprisingly good on you.”

“*Hm?* What does?”

“That hair and beard. You look like someone from a historical drama. You know, like one of those cool warriors.”

Kim Suho also chimed in from next to me.

“She’s right. Hajin, your beard grows like a Westerner.”

“Like a Western model?”

“No, not a model.”

A Western model... I proudly shrugged without speaking. It may not look like it, but I spent some time styling my facial hair. Yoo Yeonha muttered in a small voice.

“Yeah, I guess you look better the more you cover your face.”

“What? Care to repeat that?”

“W-Where’s the water?”

She had spoken subconsciously and avoided my gaze.

“By the way, are you bathing properly? You look dirty.”

“I do. At least once every two days at a nearby stream.”

“What! Hey, is the water we just drank...”

“It’s a different stream. Plus, we boiled it.”

“But still...” Chae Nayun sounded displeased.

“Beard...”

Meanwhile, Shin Jonghak rubbed his chin next to Chae Nayun. I felt like I would see Shin Jonghak with a beard after a week or so. Anyways, we played around enough. I clapped my hands.

“Gather up. I’ll explain the current situation.”

* * *

A ghost had caused this time travel, but it would normally never be strong enough to send humans to the past. Time travel was a mystical phenomenon that no one had ever observed. It could be considered a miracle. However, this ghost had reproduced a fraction of this miracle.

“It used a tower remnant.”

I took out a purple crystal from my pocket. Then I asked Shin Jonghak.

“The Tower of Time was inside Wind Mountain, correct?”

“Yeah. My grandfather conquered it more than 20 years ago.”

Only a tower’s reward could perform such a miracle. When someone conquered a tower, it condensed into a grand lump of magic power. These so-called tower crystals functioned differently depending on the tower. The buoyancy stone that kept Clancy Islet afloat was also a tower crystal, as well as the ocean stone and information stone.

“When the Tower of Time condensed into a tower crystal, some of its magic power remained. Over a long period, it formed this remnant.”

I showed them a fingernail-sized purple crystal.

“So the ghost borrowed this crystal’s power and pulled us into a recorded world.”

According to my settings, this recorded world functioned similarly to a parallel world, but slightly different. Yoo Yeonha vaguely understood, but Kim Suho seemed confused.

“A recorded world?”

“Yeah. It’s a form of magical space that reproduces the past. It’s not that different from the real world since it operates within the same laws of physics. However, it can’t affect the real world in any way.”

“Oh...”

I continued explaining about the enemy we had to defeat.

“The ghost also pulled in a djinn by the name of Asura. By the way, he’s not the real Asura, so don’t worry too much. He’s using mana

crystals to grow stronger.”

Mana crystals naturally formed when mana condensed into a solid.

“Um, I have a question.”

Yoo Yeonha raised her hand.

“How can he grow stronger with mana crystals? It wasn’t until the 2000’s that scientists figured out how to use them.”

“By eating them.”

“Eh?”

Most people would instantly die upon consuming mana crystals. They would suffer huge internal injuries even if they survived. However, this djinn was different.

“It looks like he gained a special power when he merged with the ghost. He can swallow and digest mana crystals without consequence.”

“Then...”

Their expressions turned serious. Asura had become stronger than in the original story, but not to a great extent. I couldn’t say the same about other antagonists, but I perfectly countered this self-proclaimed Asura.

“So this Asura is our only enemy?”

Shin Jonghak asked as I shook my head.

“No, there’s more. Before that, I need to explain how we can return to the present.”

I placed the purple crystal on my palm.

“As I said before, this tower remnant is holding this world together. Asura has placed these crystals around the world. Without them, he can’t materialize the past.”

“So we have to steal them?”

“Right.”

I opened a map that I made.

“One exists in Gwangmyeong City Hall, another in a water tower to the northeast, one in an armory to the west, and a steel tower to the south...”

We needed to steal six crystals. Then we had to gather and crush them at the same time. The past would crumble, and we would return to the present. Of course, Asura would use Gwangmyeong City Hall’s 5000 residents to stop us.

“Asura has a subordinate guarding each location other than Gwangmyeong City Hall.”

Honestly, I couldn’t beat Asura’s five subordinates, but I could beat their leader. It was a matter of suitability.

“So it’s clear what we need to do.”

Kim Suho spoke as I nodded and yawned. I felt tired since it was 1 A.M.

“It’s late. Let’s rest for five hours. It’ll help you replenish your mana. First, let’s decide on night watch.”

* * *

I opened my eyes at dawn and felt the cold morning wind. I had developed a short sleep cycle after staying here for 40 days. During my almost 6 weeks alone, I divided my sleep into one hour time frames since I didn’t know when enemies would attack. I even spent an entire day in a tree when they patrolled the area.

“Hmm.”

The morning air felt refreshing. I stretched outside the tent and saw Chae Nayun on watch when I went to the entrance of the abandoned building. The twilight's blue hue shone down on her. She felt my presence and slightly turned towards me.

“You're up?”

She smiled.

“Yeah. I see you're on night watch.”

“Piece of cake.”

“Is it?”

I tied up my shoulder-length hair as Chae Nayun curiously looked at me.

“Hey, isn't it uncomfortable with long hair? Yours is almost as long as mine.”

“It is, but I can't cut it or I might get cursed by a magician.”

“They even have a curse magician?”

“Yeah. He walks around with a voodoo doll.”

I trudged up to Chae Nayun. Then I shoed her off my bike.

“Tsk.”

Chae Nayun clicked her tongue and moved over to a chair. She sat and looked forward at the sunrise over the horizon. The sky still shone with stars and lush vegetation filled the earth. I grew curious about what she thought looking at this scene from the past.

“What are you thinking about?”

“Huh? Mm... I wondered why the ghost couldn’t have sent me to the year 2000 instead of 1972.”

“...”

Her mother would still be alive. I silently looked at the forest. Suddenly, she said something I couldn’t understand.

“Well, I’m sure you thought about it too.”

“...?”

I turned to her as she quietly spoke.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t complain in front of you. Just ignore it.”

I recalled my parents after hearing her words. However, I stopped thinking about it since it felt too painful. Chae Nayun peeked at me and cheerfully spoke.

“Oh, by the way, my mom was born in 1972.”

“So she had you when she was fairly old.”

“That’s just how it was back then. She was super busy. I’m sure she didn’t have the time for a child when she was younger.”

Chae Nayun muttered as she stared at my bike. Then she repeated what she said before.

“My mom was born in 1972 in Sungmo Hospital.”

That was only thirty minutes away on the motorbike. If this was the real world, that is.

“We can’t go to central Seoul. This world is restricted to only this area.”

“Oh, I see.”

Chae Nayun hid her disappointment with a smile.

“How unfortunate.”

Chapter 103

Ghost (5)

The party focused on training for a week. They worked out and sparred to exhaust their magic power. Yoo Yeonha led the training like in the original story.

“*Huup!*”

A crescent sword strike flew through the air. *Clang!* The sharp, metallic sound of swords clashing rang out. Chae Nayun felt like her hands would burst, but she didn’t lose focus. Kim Suho immediately followed with a cross slash.

“*Uk!*”

Then he stabbed forward like water. Chae Nayun couldn’t properly defend and flew back.

“*Auu...* I lost.”

She raised her hand from the ground and surrendered. Yoo Yeonha jotted something down in her notebook.

“Kim Suho 12, Chae Nayun 0.”

“Do you need to keep track?”

Chae Nayun grumbled and stood up. She dusted off the dirt from her body as Shin Jonghak checked her out. The weather had turned rather hot and Chae Nayun had cut her long jeans into shorts. Yoo Yeonha shouted at him.

“Shin Jonghak 4, Kim Suho 8!”

“What? No, it’s 4 wins, 4 losses, and 4 draws.”

“I’m the referee. Kim Suho won those by my decision.”

Woong—

The sound of a bike engine drew near. Kim Suho muttered after drinking some water.

“Looks like Hajin is back.”

“Yeah, *ssp*, looks like our chef is back.”

Kim Hajin took care of their food ever since they arrived in the past. Yoo Yeonha detested herself for drooling whenever she heard his bike since he always brought back something delicious. She began to react subconsciously.

“Hey, Kim Hajin! What did you bring back today?”

Chae Nayun shouted as the bike appeared in front of the entrance with an icebox.

Kim Hajin parked next to the wall and took off his helmet. Everyone had gotten used to his long hair and beard. Chae Nayun scurried up to him like a puppy waiting for her owner. Then she brought back the icebox.

“Cough.”

Yoo Yeonha and Shin Jonghak also followed Chae Nayun. The icebox contained pork, chicken, drinks, and even snacks.

“Is this Coke?”

“C-Coke?”

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes filled with greed when she spotted the brown liquid inside a glass bottle.

“Korea had Coke in the ’70s?”

Shin Jonghak murmured as he rubbed his new beard. He raised his chin to emphasize it when Chae Nayun glanced at him. She stared for a moment and blurted out.

“Why does your beard look like a goat’s?”

* * *

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan handled the cooking. My magic bag contained all sorts of spices and seasonings. They braised some delicious spicy chicken and pork belly.

In the 1970s, even ordinary stream water contained more spirit energy and mana than Baekdu Mountain’s so-called heavenly water. The food tasted even more delicious when cooked with the water. Everyone’s magic power capacity would increase by 10% from eating and living here for six months. Of course, they would also have to train to accumulate that effect.

“Ah, I almost don’t want to go back. How am I supposed to eat food from back home again?”

Chae Nayun muttered as she stared at the empty pot.

“Rather than that, you should get up and spar.”

“My body hurts every time I use magic power. I’m not kidding. It feels like someone is squeezing my heart.”

“That’s because magic power clumps in your heart. You can alleviate that by using it.”

I ignored her complaints as she grumbled.

“Then why aren’t you sparring?”

“Because I don’t need to.”

“Oh yeah?”

I didn't need to spar. The alerts on my smartwatch proved it.

[Your magic dysfunction physique permanently absorbs the accumulated magic! Your strength increases by 0.0002 points.] [Your magic dysfunction physique permanently...]

I gained 0.25 stat points over the past 50 days from this place's high mana concentration. I didn't have to put in any effort. Only an hour would pass in the real world even if we stayed for a year. However, that didn't mean we could stay forever. The party stayed for about four weeks in the original story. The past would slowly erode after that.

“Alright everyone, listen up.”

I clapped and drew their attention.

“We're going to start poking at them in four days. After all, we can't stay here forever. I've come up with a plan.”

I only slightly changed the plan in the original story. We would start at their weakest point and steal two of the crystals.

“Northeast water tower's Kim Mingyo and south steel tower's Joo Parang. We'll split into two groups and ambush them at night.”

* * *

Four days passed and the night we would attack arrived.

We split into two teams with Shin Jonghak and me in one and the other four together. Of course, Shin Jonghak opposed it, but I insisted. I felt more comfortable teaming up with him.

“We'll go first. If you can't clear the mission in two hours, just escape and return to base.”

I got on my bike as Shin Jonghak awkwardly hopped on behind me. He tried to find something to hold, but accidentally touched my butt. Immediately, he shuddered.

“Shit, what am I supposed to hold on to?”

“Next to you.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak spotted two protruding handles on the sides.

“I want to ride it too...”

Chae Nayun watched in envy as I stepped on the accelerator. My bike could go from 0 to 100 in less than a second even on a mountain path. We reached our destination in a flash.

“Get off. We’ll walk from here.”

I parked in a nearby forest and transformed the bike into its suitcase form. Shin Jonghak suddenly asked as we snuck to the target.

“Oy, is there a reason we had to team up?”

“Well...”

Kim Suho wouldn’t kill even if the people in this world weren’t real.

“So?”

“*Sh.* Look.”

We could see the water tower in the distance. Only about twenty individuals guarded it. Furthermore, people from the past couldn’t efficiently use mana. The only person I couldn’t beat was Kim Mingyo. However, he was only as strong as a low-intermediate rank hero, so Shin Jonghak would be enough.

“Kim Mingyo should be inside the water tower. I’ll deal with the small fries outside, so you go get him. I’ll support you from the back.”

“I don’t need your support.”

Shin Jonghak took out his spear. *Whish*— He needlessly spun it and caused a cloud of dirt to rise.

“*Ptui*. Hey, you’re getting dirt in my mouth.”

“Shut it.”

“I saw it entering yours too.”

“...Cut the crap.”

He licked his teeth and spat on the ground. Then a deep voice came from below the mountain.

“Who is it?”

We both turned and saw a young man with a well-built body. He seemed like a lackey on patrol from the way he shone a flashlight at us.

“This place is Asura’s land. Outsiders aren’t allowed, so turn back.”

Shin Jonghak stepped up with a sneer. “And if I refuse?”

“*Ha*, then you’ll be beaten.”

The young man pulled out some nunchucks as his magic power flickered around. *Whoosh— whoosh— whoosh—* He started swinging.

“Can you see the movement of the wind?”

Top, bottom, left, right. The nunchucks swung from all sides and created a fierce gale. I took a step back as the young man burst into laughter.

“Ahahaha! Scared?”

Click. I transformed the Desert Eagle into a shotgun and pulled the trigger.

“This is... *huaak*—!”

I blasted him away like an insect.

“...What a funny guy.”

“You wait here, Shin Jonghak.”

I prepared 100 handgun, shotgun, and sniper bullets along with 900 5.56mm bullets for this event.

“Who are you to tell me what to do?”

“It’ll be easier for two captains to fight once the lackeys disappear, right?”

“...I guess you’re right.”

I climbed a nearby tree and transformed the Desert Eagle into a sniper. First, I targeted the ones patrolling or dozing off. My bullets silently flew and killed them. I didn’t hesitate or feel guilty. This place was only a reproduction of the past. These people weren’t real, but phantoms that would soon disappear. I clenched my teeth and pulled the trigger. A body silently fell as I aimed for another without watching the last one die.

“*Haa.*”

I was drenched in cold sweat by the time I killed five. Even killing fake people took a toll as I closed my eyes for a brief rest.

* * *

Kim Suho’s team infiltrated the south steel tower.

“Hmm...”

Yoo Yeonha pondered as she looked up at the steel tower. A purple crystal shone at the peak. However, a magic cylinder encased it and made it impossible to snatch with her whip.

“What’s our plan?” Yi Yeonghan asked.

Yoo Yeonha scanned the enemy forces below. About forty around the same level as Cube cadets. It would be difficult with just the four of them. Heroes could take on ten individuals one full rank below them. For example, an intermediate rank, grade 1 hero could suppress ten low-intermediate rank, grade 1 heroes simultaneously. However, Yoo Yeonha didn’t think the four of them could do that except for Kim Suho. Yoo Yeonha looked at him and spoke.

“Kim Suho, you need to draw their attention as much as possible. Most of them will chase after you, but they’ll keep a small amount to defend. The three of us will suppress the rest. We’ll slowly decrease their numbers.”

“What? Isn’t that too dangerous?”

Chae Nayun hesitated, but Kim Suho agreed.

“No, I think it’s for the best.”

He lightly smiled. “Then I’ll get going.”

He condensed magic power around his legs and exploded forward. A sonic boom scattered behind him as he shot to the battlefield like a bullet and struck a guard down with his branch.

“Uuk!”

The man collapsed with a scream as everyone focused on Kim Suho.

“E-Enemy ambush!”

Most of the guards ran towards Kim Suho while Yoo Yeonha, Chae Nayun, and Yi Yeonghan rushed at the ones left behind.

“W-What!?”

“Aak!”

Yi Yeonghan headlocked them with his monstrous strength, Chae Nayun smacked them with the magic power surrounding her sword, and Yoo Yeonha suppressed them with her whip.

“Uu, uuu...”

A man with a sword fainted after Yoo Yeonha choked him with her whip.

“Hmph.”

Yoo Yeonha poked the man on the ground with her foot. She leisurely turned back after he didn’t react. Suddenly, a sharp sword shot towards her. She quickly ducked, but the blade severed a few strands of her hair.

“Y-You!”

Yoo Yeonha swung her whip and strangled the attacker.

“Do you have any idea how much effort I put into growing it!”

Her whip strangled him tightly as the man’s face turned purple. She stared at her hair on the ground and grew angry once again when she realized how much she lost.

“Uk, uuk...”

However, she showed mercy and stopped before the man died. Kim Hajin said they weren’t real, but killing them would leave a bad aftertaste.

“Hey, Yi Yeonghan! You handle the steel tower! Yeonha and I will go help Kim Suho!”

Chae Nayun shouted.

“Okay!”

Yi Yeonghan continued ahead as Yoo Yeonha looked over at Kim Suho. Only 5 out of the 30 still stood. He didn’t seem to be at a disadvantage.

“*Uwuk*, hey! Help me, not Kim Suho! Joo Parang is here!”

Yi Yeonghan desperately shouted from the steel tower.

* * *

Two hours later, both teams retrieved the purple crystals without any problems like in the original story. We roasted a whole pig in celebration. I didn’t have much of an appetite, but Chae Nayun and Kim Suho voraciously ate. I watched them finish before speaking.

“Good job today. The north and southeast areas will now become inactive.”

We just had to take it slow like today.

“*Kek*.”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly grabbed her neck as if she choked and smacked her chest before gulping down some water. Her face turned pale.

“What’s wrong, Yeonha?” Chae Nayun worriedly asked.

“Nothing. I just can’t... digest well.”

I frowned. “There’s no way you can’t digest your food.”

“W-What do you mean? It’s not like I’m a pig. I can get sick too.”

No, that couldn't be the problem since the meat was so tender. I narrowed my eyes and scanned her for injuries, but she seemed fine. Then I noticed her hair. It looked asymmetrical like someone had cut it.

"What's that?"

"Yes?"

Yoo Yeonha tilted her head as I pointed at her hair.

"Your hair. What happened?"

"Oh, this? Someone cut it during the last battle..."

"Damn it."

Kim Suho's team would've only suppressed them. The survivors would take back any traces of their attackers. For example, someone's hair.

"*Argh*, why does my chest feel so heavy?"

Yoo Yeonha kept thumping her chest. Someone had cursed her. Even a single strand of hair could kill depending on the curse magician's ability. Gwangmyeong City Hall did have a voodoo magician who used the curse of weakening. Things just got complicated.

"Why are you looking at me like that? I'm not *that* sick." Yoo Yeonha frowned.

"Look how worried he is. Maybe he likes you." Chae Nayun chimed in with a grin.

"Then I'll have to decline. Sorry."

"Listen you two..."

Areas with high mana would amplify the power of curses. They snickered to themselves without knowing.

I was partially at fault for not warning them. I sighed and slowly opened my mouth.

Chapter 104

Ghost (6)

I explained what would happen if the curse magician had obtained Yoo Yeonha's hair. I didn't exaggerate or downplay anything. A curse of weakening could only be removed by killing the magician. The curse wouldn't directly kill her, but an environment like this without any medical facilities could lead to the worst. The atmosphere turned grave after I finished.

"Oh right, you mentioned it before, but I forgot... dammit."

Chae Nayun blamed herself and clenched her fists. I couldn't blame her since I only briefly mentioned it a week ago when she probably felt tired on night watch.

I held most of the responsibility since I didn't properly warn them about all the dangers. They wouldn't have forgotten if I had told them.

We all fell silent for a moment. Then the person of concern broke our anxiety with a cheerful voice.

"Why do you all look so serious?"

Yoo Yeonha continued with a bright expression. "We're not sure if it's a curse yet. Plus, I have some anti-magic power. I can beat something like a curse easily... *ah*."

Shin Jonghak's hand fell on her head.

"Tell me if it hurts."

Her cheeks faintly turned red. Was this a bad boy's charm? She nodded energetically.

“Un, but I don’t think it’s going to hurt much.”

“Don’t lie, *tsk*.”

Shin Jonghak stood up with his spear and spoke in an angry voice, “They should be busy organizing themselves after the ambush. Let’s barge in and crush them before the sun comes up.”

It was currently 3 in the morning with some time left before sunrise. We couldn’t waste any time if Yoo Yeonha had been cursed. Everyone stood up and began to check their equipment.

“L-Let me go too. I’m still okay.”

“You stay put.”

Shin Jonghak stopped her. We left Yoo Yeonha behind and set out to ambush them again.

The battle only took an hour this time. The enraged Shin Jonghak swept through the north tower and retrieved the purple crystal. His physique, intermittent explosive disorder, had been triggered. This strange physique amplified his physical stats up to 130% depending on his anger.

* * *

Asura sat on a throne in Gwangmyeong City Hall as he received a report about the three stolen crystals. He became enraged until Yi Yohan, the curse magician, calmed him down. Yi Yohan had received a lock of one of the attacker’s hair.

“M-My apologies, Boss!”

“It’s fine. Don’t overreact.”

Asura had already sent out scouts to confirm the attackers’ numbers and base. They looked like young and friendly kids. Such children wouldn’t just watch one of their friends die. Asura pitied them and considered them weak for caring about such useless emotions like

loyalty, love, and friendship.

“Bring the remaining crystals back here.”

“Yes? *Ah*, understood!”

They still had three crystals. He would gather all of them together and wait for the attackers to come save their friend.

“Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak...”

Asura recognized two of them as Cube’s greatest rising stars. He already warned his subordinates about them.

“My future looks bright.”

He felt confident in becoming one of Destruction’s executives if he could obtain their heads.

* * *

Yoo Yeonha began to grow thin and weak after one day. We noticed too late that Asura had retrieved all his remaining crystals. Yoo Yeonha’s pupils withered up by day 2. She could barely stand anymore on day 3.

We went out to observe Gwangmyeong City Hall in frustration, but couldn’t spot any movements. They didn’t attack or even patrol. They just holed up in their base.

Time passed as we fruitlessly observed Gwangmyeong City Hall. Yoo Yeonha’s condition deteriorated until she could only lay in bed. She suffered from high temperatures, chills, and nausea. Everyone had the same thought looking at her. She would die at this rate.

“Yeonha, can you eat this?”

“...”

Yi Yeonghan and Chae Nayun made some porridge, but she could hardly eat. She only ate a spoonful before lying back down. Even stigma's magic power couldn't undo the curse since it wasn't a spell that used magic power, but a gift.

"No movements today either. It looks like they'll just stay cooped up in the city hall."

Kim Suho came back from patrol and sounded frustrated. Asura acted differently from the original story. He retrieved all the crystals and simply waited since he knew one of us was dying. He knew we had to go to him.

"We have no choice. We'll have to do what those trash want!" Shin Jonghak grew impatient and shouted.

"Wait, wait, you want the four of us to fight 5000 people?" Yi Yeonghan voiced his concern.

"The past becomes unstable when all the crystals gather in one place. It's the same for the people of the past, so only 100 to 200 should be there. We only have to look out for ten, including Asura."

I explained the situation to everyone.

People of the past would become weaker if the crystals weren't spread out. We could defeat them.

However, we couldn't just leave Yoo Yeonha alone. One of us had to stay before we killed the magician. *Wait a minute.* I looked at the purple crystals inside my leather pocket. *Wouldn't Asura come to me if I was alone?*

"Sounds good to me. Let's go 5 v.s. 200. I feel like I can kill them all."

Chae Nayun aggressively spoke as Yi Yeonghan anxiously bit his fingernails.

"W-What if he sends one of his lackeys to kidnap Yoo Yeonha?"

“I’ll protect her.” I raised my hand.

“I’ll protect her and the crystals. I can just escape with her on the bike in the worst-case scenario.”

I felt confident that I could defeat Asura if he came alone. I also felt confident in escaping on my bike if he brought others.

“Okay.” Kim Suho thought it over with his eyes closed and agreed. “It looks like this is our only option.”

“Damn it. Fine, but don’t say I didn’t warn you if anything goes wrong.”

Yi Yeonghan grumbled and stretched. Shin Jonghak also released his fierce magic power.

“Just you wait, Asura. I’ll tear you apart tonight.”

He prophesized Asura’s death like the main character of a movie.

* * *

Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, and Yi Yeonghan walked along a path under the full moon. The surroundings had turned rather bleak after Asura retrieved all the crystals. The grass lacked color and the trees had withered. They finally spotted Gwangmyeong City Hall. It looked like a fortress now, but no one guarded the barricades. They resolutely walked into the trap after cladding themselves in qi reinforcement.

A man suddenly appeared on the roof of a broken bus. He had a well-built body and carried a long steel pipe. The party could guess he was Yoo Dongsuk from his height and bandit-like appearance. Kim Hajin had mentioned him as one of Asura’s subordinates.

“*Ahem*, this place is off-limits to kids.”

Several men with weapons appeared. Shin Jonghak calmly asked, “You’re Yoo Dongsuk?”

“Haha, a kid shouldn’t talk to adults like that.”

Shin Jonghak smirked and pointed his spear at Yoo Dongsuk.

“Lackeys can screw off. Where’s Asura?”

“Asura isn’t here.”

“I won’t ask a second time.”

Shin Jonghak ignited his spear with black magic power. Yoo Dongsuk’s eyes widened.

“W-What? What’s up with the color of your magic power?”

“Bring Asura right now. Bring Asura here!”

Shin Jonghak spun his spear 180 degrees. He used the most basic spear technique called crescent moon slash. His black magic power shot out in an arc and exploded when it reached Yoo Dongsuk. It destroyed the bus and continued flying until it cut one of the watchtowers in half.

“Wow, scary.” Yoo Dongsuk chuckled as he leaped down. “I’m not lying. Asura isn’t here.”

“Then where is—”

An ominous thought flashed across Shin Jonghak’s mind. He gripped his spear tighter.

“Y-You bastards...”

“Haha, what were you thinking, leaving the crystals behind with your injured friend?”

Stealing from an empty house. It wasn’t that they didn’t expect it at all. They just didn’t expect the boss would go. Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, and Yi Yeonghan quickly turned back, but found themselves

surrounded. Their faces immediately stiffened.

“Pft.”

However, one person remained calm. Kim Suho even burst into laughter.

“Hahaha.”

The others looked at him as though he had gone crazy. Chae Nayun even felt afraid and wondered if that was really Kim Suho.

“What are you laughing about, brat?”

Yoo Dongsuk felt anxious seeing Kim Suho laugh like that.

“No, it’s just... did your boss go alone?”

“...”

Yoo Dongsuk didn’t answer, but his silence gave it away.

“Then we have nothing to worry about.”

Kim Suho turned to his comrades and spoke with a smile.

“Hajin is stronger than me.”

* * *

Tak, tak. I slowly turned towards the ominous footsteps. A man appeared at the entrance of the abandoned building. His red eyes flickered under a black robe. I closed my eyes and smiled.

As expected, he chose the easy route and left his subordinates to ambush our base alone. The ghost must’ve told him the location of our crystals.

“Human, pitiful human. This is why I gave up being a human. I didn’t want to be tied down to useless emotions like you.”

“Shut it.”

I ignored the crap he spouted and studied the surroundings.

“You’re alone?”

“I’m not alone. I have my army with—”

“You’re alone.”

He amplified his magic power capacity by consuming mana crystals, but didn’t know how to properly use his new powers. Furthermore, Asura lacked direct attacks with magic power. After all, he was only a low rank djinn who knew how to do one thing.

—Ssss.

He unleashed his magic power and formed a giant pathway that spewed out strange creatures in all shapes and sizes. Some resembled a wolf, an orc, and even a pig. Their numbers quickly multiplied. One, two, four, eight, sixteen... I stopped counting at sixty-four. He summoned at least 2000, if not more. I stood in front of an overwhelming army.

Asura’s gift was called, Hail of Demonic Beasts.

He used magic power to summon creatures from the demon realm. They should all be around low-intermediate rank, grade 1 to grade 7. Kim Suho might’ve struggled since swinging a sword required more stamina. I couldn’t imagine swinging a sword 2000 times.

However, I wasn’t Kim Suho. I felt glad he came to me. Of course, I planned on finding him with the thousand-mile eyes if he didn’t come.

“Um...”

“Hm?”

Yoo Yeonha grabbed my sleeve when I tried to stand up and breathed heavily. “Leave me... and run...”

I stared at her as she spoke with a hoarse voice. I could see the guilt, worry, and concern in her eyes. I smiled at this side of her.

“Don’t worry and go to sleep. It’ll be over by the time you wake up.”

Yoo Yeonha fell into a daze as I closed her eyes and took out the Desert Eagle. I transformed it with aether into a modern weapon that could fight an army. Not a shotgun or a sniper, but an assault rifle.

This world didn’t prefer assault rifles because of the cost of bullets and its lower power, but neither of those disadvantages applied to me. Aether enhanced my attack power along with the Desert Eagle’s natural buffs. I also had one more trick.

Scan.

The number 44 flashed across my assault rifle. My luck gave me the best possible outcome.

“...”

A smile bloomed on my face. As always, I operated based on the principle of acting strong against the weak and weak against the strong. I perfectly countered his gift. He could summon as many small fries as he wanted, but they stood no chance. Furthermore, I wouldn’t use up any stamina or magic power. I only required bullets and a finger to pull the trigger. The disadvantageous terrain slightly worried me.

“I’ll have to use a little of this.”

I took out a finger-sized crystal from my pocket and modified the terrain by pouring in some of stigma’s magic power. *Bzzzzz*— The ground rumbled and transformed. The circular arena Asura created split in half. Now the army of summoned beasts couldn’t surround me

anymore and could only attack head-on. I only needed to kill two or three with each bullet.

“You know how to use the crystal of the past? What difference does that make?”

Asura chuckled as I calmly replied.

“It changes everything.”

Chapter 105

Ghost (7)

Yoo Yeonha glimpsed an endless sea of monsters in her daze. One, two, three... one, two, three... She couldn't keep count. Everything felt like a distant dream within her groggy consciousness. She felt sure she wouldn't survive this army of monsters. The beast-like creatures growled and bared their teeth. She hallucinated that one of them bit off her neck as her consciousness faded.

There, she saw him standing in front of her when she opened her eyes again.

He stood in front of the army of monsters and looked like a small praying mantis in front of a skyscraper. He wouldn't be able to withstand that dark sea alone, but he could escape.

She used up all her energy to grab his sleeve and speak.

— Leave me... and run...

However, he didn't listen and only smiled.

— Don't worry and go to sleep.

He softly spoke.

— It'll be over by the time you wake up.

He reached out and closed her eyes. Her vision went dark and she began to dream a familiar dream where she had succeeded and several people bowed to her. People who ignored and disdained her, people who mocked her clan for being a hunting dog... they all knelt in front of her. She would accomplish this dream by herself.

Slowly, she opened her eyes again. The darkness faded away and light appeared. She saw his back, but couldn't remember his name anymore. He held an assault rifle, a mass-produced weapon that couldn't shoot magic power like spear and sword artifacts. An unstoppable army stood in front of his shabby gun. Time seemed to slow with her groggy consciousness. The sea of monsters rushed towards him. Beasts on four legs, orcs, spiders, snakes, birds, and one-eyed that shot out magic. All these demonic beasts rushed forward like a tidal wave.

He raised his gun against this raging wave. His bullets turned the world white as it pushed against the black wave. It pierced through the foreheads of beasts, the hearts of orcs, the abdomens of spiders, the mouths of snakes, and the eyes of cyclops. He struck all their vital points without missing and pushed them back. An endless rain tore the monsters apart and never stopped. Corpses quickly stacked up and formed a mountain. He didn't allow a single monster through and decimated the entire army alone.

Yoo Yeonha felt an incomprehensible warmth. She realized how relaxing it felt to be protected. She finally calmed and closed her eyes. *Kim Hajin*. His name entered her mind before she noticed. When she opened her eyes again... she hoped everything would be alright.

* * *

Kim Suho slashed out a crescent-shaped arc with his magic power. Yoo Dongsuk managed to block with his steel pipe, but it sent his subordinates flying past him. Kim Suho charged with no one left to interfere. Yoo Dongsuk swung his steel pipe as he asked, "Is it true?"

"What is?"

Kim Suho parried his pipe.

"That the person left behind is stronger than you."

Kim Suho smiled and found the question funny. "I don't like lying."

Of course, Kim Suho couldn't be sure since he only sparred once with Kim Hajin. However, he believed that Hajin would succeed.

“That’s not good for—”

“*Kuaaaa!*”

A horrible shriek rang out. Kim Suho and Yoo Dongsuk both glanced sideways at Shin Jonghak creating a mess. He looked ridiculous, but had achieved outstanding results. He viciously stabbed and slashed his enemies like an ancient warlord. Yoo Dongsuk saw his subordinates flying around and asked, “Is he as strong as you?”

Kim Suho simply smiled. His silence was enough of an answer. Yoo Dongsuk laughed as he swung his steel pipe again. *KWANG!* Their battle continued back and forth.

“Well, it looks like our strategy failed.”

“It’s not too late to turn back. We have no reason to fight.”

The two looked each other in the eyes and spoke amidst their fierce battle.

“The boss you call Asura isn’t human, but a djinn... *uh*, he’s an evil person who’s using the power of a ghost.”

The concept of djinns didn’t exist yet. According to textbooks, the rise of djinns occurred in the late 1990s.

“*Huup!*”

Yoo Dongsuk pushed Kim Suho back without replying. Kim Suho sighed as he enveloped his sword with magic power. The sword’s blue glow transformed into a brilliant gold.

“You hid a rather interesting power, *eh?*”

The same applied to Yoo Dongsuk. His body suddenly glowed red and he grew several times bigger. Kim Suho put on a serious expression as he fixed his stance.

Asura laughed at first and pitied the young man with overgrown hair and a beard. However, he began to feel fear as time passed and his army dwindled. He could feel a chilling killing intent from the young man's eyes, and the outpouring of bullets overwhelmed his army.

Even now, Asura's army continued to rush nonstop. Asura also snuck in ranged attacks now and then. However, the young man's mysterious bracelet defended against the demonic beasts' venom and the attacks. The young man killed the monsters that specialized in ranged attacks first.

Asura couldn't understand. He thought he would only have to wait until the magazine emptied. However, the young man reloaded in less than a second and continued firing. A single opening didn't exist.

Asura couldn't understand the bullets' destructive power either. His demonic beasts instantly died in one hit. A single bullet often killed two beasts, and sometimes three. Not a single claw could reach the gunman.

"Impossible..."

Asura watched this incomprehensible battle in a daze. The countless beasts gradually became countable. Asura stopped his remaining forces and took a step back. He wanted to assess the situation.

Kim Hajin also stopped firing. Then he murmured tiredly, "You must've merged with the ghost since you could summon so many. What did he want? Revenge? Wealth? Honor?"

Kim Hajin stared at Asura, who remained silent. He aimed at Asura.

"You don't have to answer."

Click. Kim Hajin pulled the trigger. Asura unleashed his magic power and formed a barrier. Dozens of demonic beasts also moved to block Kim Hajin's line of fire. However, no bullets came out. *Click. Click. Click.* Kim Hajin pulled the trigger a few more times. The result remained the same.

“...”

“...”

Whish. A brief wind blew. Asura and Kim Hajin stared at each other. Kim Hajin rummaged through his pockets, but ran out of ammo. Then he graciously spoke with a calm expression.

“Asura, I don’t hate you. I understand where you’re coming from.”

A character with no background that only served as a stepping stone for the main characters and the supporting cast. An extra, rather than a villain. Asura, or rather Cheonhwa, became a djinn for a simple reason.

“That’s how I created you.”

Kim Hajin felt sorry. At least, he needed to act like it.

“You had no choice but to become strong. You probably thought you could become a djinn who enjoyed wealth and honor by merging with the ghost.”

Kim Hajin sounded sentimental all of a sudden. Asura responded with a single sentence.

“You’re out of bullets.”

“I’m not.”

Kim Hajin took out a single magazine from his pocket. He slowly reloaded his gun and asked, “I want to know. What kind of a life have you lived?”

A smile emerged on Asura’s face.

“It’s empty.”

“What? Can’t you see this?”

Kim Hajin tapped the magazine in his gun, but Asura leisurely replied.

“Then shoot.”

“*Tsk.*”

The assault rifle transformed into a handgun. *Tang, tang, tang, tang, tang—!* Kim Hajin quickly pulled the trigger and used up the entire magazine in less than a second. The monsters around Asura all turned to dust as he flinched in shock.

“See? I didn’t lie. This battle already ended.”

He pointed behind Asura. Kim Suho and the others had returned. Asura’s subordinates also stood there with complicated looks.

“...”

Asura looked around with a blank expression. He wasted too much time with a single person and lost his chance. He only had about a hundred demonic beasts left along with the partner in his heart.

“*Uk!*”

Suddenly, his heart began to violently beat. The ghost of the past was telling him something. Asura shook his head. However, his body twisted strangely and the ghost shot out of his heart. Then Asura’s body turned to dust.

—...

A black ghost floated in the air and howled. However, a formless being couldn’t pose any harm. Kim Suho attacked the ghost with Misteltein and instantly sucked it into the divine grade weapon. Misteltein grew stronger by absorbing spirits. The ghost of the past would now reside in Misteltein forever.

A short silence descended. Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, and Yi Yeonghan stared at the scenery in front of them. Kim Hajin stood alone amidst a desolate battlefield with a mountain of corpses. Soon,

his voice rang out.

“Welcome back.”

Kim Hajin smiled at the four of them who returned just in time. Kim Suho had trusted him, but the others looked shocked.

“W-What?”

Kim Hajin couldn't understand their looks until he saw the mountain of corpses.

“Oh... this? T-These will disappear soon.”

The corpses would disappear in about two minutes without magic power. However, everyone's shocked expressions wouldn't disappear for a while.

* * *

I didn't ask Kim Suho how he convinced the people of the past. The story took a different turn from the original story, but the results remained the same. I felt satisfied as I sat on the ground in exhaustion. I wasn't physically tired, but mentally drained. I turned on my smartwatch to read the messages that would alleviate my fatigue.

[You have massacred a large number of enemies! You have received a huge experience boost in Master Sharpshooter!] [You have pierced the vital points of countless enemies! Master Sharpshooter has evolved to grade 5!] [Your luck has been applied! An understanding of the darkness attribute has been added to aether from decimating thousands of darkness attribute demonic beasts!] [You have obtained 330 SP!]

“Wow.”

Several alerts popped up. Master Sharpshooter also leveled up to grade 5, but the best gain was aether's understanding of the darkness attribute. It would also apply to the Desert Eagle when they fused. *No wonder my bullets flashed white.* Of course, special bullets created with SP would still deal more damage than bullets with aether's

understanding.

“What?”

I couldn't properly think because Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak, and Yi Yeonghan kept looking at me suspiciously.

“I mean, it doesn't make sense.”

“What doesn't make sense?” I shrugged at Chae Nayun's question.

“Stop kidding around.”

Chae Nayun looked serious and somewhat wronged. I grinned and transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle. Everyone's eyes widened and wondered how such a weapon appeared.

“I told you. I have a gun-related gift. It was just a good matchup against Asura.”

“A good matchup?”

“Yeah. Pulling the trigger 2000 times is easier than swinging a spear or a sword 2000 times.”

I briefly explained and turned to Kim Suho, who rested nearby.

“Did you bring the crystals?”

“Ah, yeah.”

Kim Suho handed me three crystals.

“Are we going back now?”

I shook my head. “No, we're going to return these crystals where they belong.”

“Huh?”

“This is the greatest training area you could ask for, so we’re going to stay here for the next two weeks. It would be a shame to leave before we milk it dry.”

This place resembled an inferior hyperbolic time chamber. We should be able to grow stronger.

“We have plenty of people to spar.”

I pointed at Asura’s past subordinates, who awkwardly stood behind us.

Chapter 106

Return

I returned the crystals to where they belonged and headed to Gwangmyeong City Hall. We received a warm welcome surprisingly. Asura had ruled like a tyrant and the residents now rejoiced. They told me that Asura had led many to their deaths for mana crystals.

Everyone gathered at the abandoned building for a party that night. Gwangmyeong City Hall's residents brought rice and meat as we sat around a campfire. We happily ate and talked. Of course, I left as soon as I finished since I didn't feel like I belonged.

"Here, Kim Hajin. Take it."

Yi Yeonghan handed me a bowl of porridge.

"What's this?"

"For Yoo Yeonha."

Yoo Yeonha had yet to completely recover after we lifted the curse. She currently slept in the tent.

"Why are you giving it to me?"

"The others are busy."

Yi Yeonghan pointed to the campfire at Kim Suho and Chae Nayun talking with Asura's former subordinates. The topic must've been funny since even Shin Jonghak laughed.

"We've heard the news. Currently, Seoul is split into several factions. Gangnam is divided between Shin Myungchul and Chae Joochul, while Gangbuk is..."

“How is Shin Myungchul’s reputation?” Shin Jonghak asked.

“He’s a great person who brought peace to the Gwanak region.”

“Haha, I see.” He enjoyed hearing them praise his grandfather.

Chae Nayun also asked, “Then what about Chae Joochul?”

Chae Joochul the Immortal was Chae Nayun’s grandfather and one of the strongest in the world. She received a negative reply contrary to her expectations.

“He’s not trustworthy at all. I stayed in Seoul for a bit, so I know. He’s sly, like a snake. He’ll surely cause something big in the future.”

“...”

Chae Nayun’s expression stiffened. Indeed, Chae Joochul wasn’t a kind person in my settings. I took the porridge to the tent.

“Hey, I brought some food.”

Yoo Yeonha raised her upper body from the bed as she groaned. She looked a bit disappointed when she saw me, but tried to hide it.

“You’re pretending to be sick, right?”

“Yes? *Ah*, no, I’m still tired... *uup*.”

I shoved a spoonful of porridge into her mouth. Yoo Yeonha nibbled in confusion and ate like a kid. She frowned at me after chewing about 10 times.

“What is it?”

“What.”

“Why are you doing this all of a sudden?” Yoo Yeonha looked sullen.

“Didn’t you say you could barely lift your hands? I’m feeding you.”

“But that was...”

She probably pretended to get Shin Jonghak’s attention. I grinned and prepared another spoonful. —*Kyahaha*. I turned towards Chae Nayun’s laughter from outside.

“Ah, wait, wait! Ah!”

The porridge pasted around Yoo Yeonha’s mouth when I turned back.

“Open your mouth, would you?”

“What? You’re saying this is *my* fault?”

“...”

I cleaned off the porridge and fed her again. However, Yoo Yeonha kept her mouth tightly shut and glared.

“You don’t want to eat? You’ll starve to death.”

“No, it’s just that... it’s not very tasty. Don’t you have something other than porridge?”

“I have one ramen left.”

Yoo Yeonha swallowed hard and pretended like she would eat it reluctantly.

“Then I’ll take that. This is too bland.”

“I’ll make it for you if you finish this.”

Yoo Yeonha opened her mouth and started eating again.

“Why don’t you come out and talk instead of staying cooped up in

here?”

“I don’t have the energy.”

Yoo Yeonha fell back in bed and covered herself with the blanket. I stood up to leave her alone when she suddenly spoke.

“Um...”

“Yeah?”

“Thank you,” she whispered sincerely. I simply nodded.

“It’s good that you know.”

“You always end up helping me out.”

“Right? When are you going to pay me back?”

Yoo Yeonha smiled and softly replied, “Hey, don’t you think we can become good allies?”

Allies... I could easily live a comfortable life if I became her ally. She would become a top CEO with multiple corporations in various fields such as magic engineering, pharmaceuticals, guilds, auctions, and weapons.

“I can help you hit it off with Nayun.”

“What? I don’t need something like that.”

“*Eh?* You really changed ship?” Yoo Yeonha suddenly raised her upper body again.

“Change ship?”

“From Nayun to Rachel.”

“What? No, it’s neither of them. I can’t afford to like anyone right now.”

“Come on, don’t lie.”

Yoo Yeonha looked at me mischievously as though she knew everything. I stared at her and nodded.

“No ramen for you then.”

“*Eh?* W-Wait!”

I ignored her and left. Then I went to Yi Yeonghan.

“She said she doesn’t eat porridge.”

“*Huh?* Really?”

Yi Yeonghan tilted his head and went into the tent.

— Yoo Yeonha, why aren’t you eating? Don’t have an appetite?

— *E-Eh?* Ah... well, *um...* ramen...

— Ramen? Kim Hajin said he’d make you ramen instead? I thought you didn’t like ramen.

— *Eh...?* Oh... right...

— Then just rest for today. You don’t have to eat.

— I don’t like you, Yi Yeonghan. I’m serious.

— W-What? Why?

— Get out. Just get out.

I eavesdropped on their conversation as I boiled some water. Yi

Yeonghan came out and asked, “Kim Hajin? Why are you boiling water? Yoo Yeonha says she doesn’t eat ramen.”

“Did she?”

Yoo Yeonha peeked her head out of the tent and angrily blurted, “Leave him be. He saved my life. It would be rude to decline his offer.”

“What’s up with her?”

Yi Yeonghan retreated as I finished the ramen under Yoo Yeonha’s watchful eyes.

“Enjoy.”

“Thank you.”

Yoo Yeonha happily took the ramen into the tent. I glanced around and got on my bike, but Kim Suho noticed me.

“Hajin, where are you going?”

“Oh, I need to get something.”

I hadn’t used certain things in this world of the past. I noted them in my settings book, but never used them when I wrote the actual chapters. I planned on obtaining them since a few could come in handy.

* * *

Everyone continued training and sparring to become stronger. We relocated from the uncomfortable, abandoned building to live with the Gwangmyeong City Hall residents.

Magic power explosions and monster attacks occasionally occurred during the two weeks we stayed. However, we worked together with the residents to resolve any troubles.

Of course, they chased out some of Asura's subordinates who committed crimes. With Kim Suho's leadership, they also abolished the hierarchical system and any evil practices.

Kim Suho and the others grew quite close with the people of the past. Yoo Yeonha constantly looked for people who would become the ancestors of someone famous. Chae Nayun played with the kids every day and Shin Jonghak formed a crew that looked quite strong. Kim Suho also helped the residents create several facilities and renovated the existing ones. Everyone spent their time laughing and having fun.

However, I couldn't enjoy it as much as the others since some of the people I killed remained dead. I didn't know whether the residents knew or pretended not to know, but they treated me kindly.

"Huu."

Time passed. I sat in a barbershop surrounded by many people.

"This is great. My hands felt itchy every time I saw your hair."

"Yeah, it felt like the perfect length two weeks ago, but now it's too long."

Chae Nayun commented on my hair for some reason. I wondered if a barbershop should be in the middle of the road as I looked around. Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, and Shin Jonghak all glanced at me. Quite the crowd with people from the past also gathered to watch my haircut.

"By the way, can you leave a bit of his beard?" Chae Nayun asked on her own.

"Hm? Why? I want to shave it entirely."

I asked as I rubbed my beard. It would shock Evandel if I went home like this.

"I think you'd look better with some of it left."

“Nayun.” Yoo Yeonha smiled at her.

“What does it have to do with you?”

“*Eh?*”

Chae Nayun fell into a daze. Yoo Yeonha continued with an even bigger smile.

“I’m genuinely curious. Why does it matter how he looks?”

“W-What? I’m just trying to recommend a better path for him.”

“*Mm*, is that why you went on a drive with him last week?”

“What?” Shin Jonghak’s eyes coldly flickered.

“T-That was because we went to get food! W-What are you trying to say?” Chae Nayun shouted as Yoo Yeonha wriggled her eyebrows and backed off. Meanwhile, the surrounding residents smiled.

“Then I’m starting.”

The barber began to cut my hair. My head grew lighter as the scissors chopped off my shoulder-length hair. I gradually enjoyed the moment with the residents’ laughter, the light breeze, the warm sunlight, and...

“He doesn’t look all that bad, *eh?*”

“Of course! After all, he’s the one who drove away that tyrant.”

“How did he defeat him? Not even Dongsuk could do anything.”

The past would soon disappear.

“Alright, done. Now it’s time to shave.”

The barber finished cutting my hair and took out a razor. I felt startled since he brought it to my face without any shaving cream. *Srrrk, srrrk*— However, the barber used his magic power instead. I calmly entrusted myself to him. Soon, he finished and handed me a mirror.

“Oh?”

I felt surprised when I looked in the mirror. I could hardly recognize myself. The others felt the same. Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, and even Kim Suho looked at me in awe. A clean pomade and a light beard like a Western model. I naturally checked my smartwatch.

[Buff – Master Barber’s Touch] [Will temporarily increase the invariable charm stat by 0.5 points.] [Duration – 4 weeks]

I shot up and respectfully asked the barber when I saw this alert.

“May I ask for your name?”

“Haha, do you like it that much? My name is Kim Woosuk.”

“Kim Woosuk. Do you perhaps have a son?”

“I do. I have an eight year old. His name is Kim Hojin.”

Kim Hojin. I would have to visit him in the present since gifts could often be inherited. I grabbed Kim Woosuk’s hands and bowed. Then I looked around. A mother waved with a child in her arms, elderly people smiled, and young men and women respectfully looked at me. I also bowed to all of them.

“Thank you for everything.”

My haircut was the last business of the day. No, of the past.

“We should be thanking you instead.”

“Goodbye.”

“Will you come by again?”

“These young men and women will achieve great things in the future. I’m sure we’ll see them in the newspapers.”

We didn’t explain much to them. They didn’t know that this was the past or that they were just records.

“Then...”

I turned to Kim Suho and the others. Now, we had to return. They nodded with a somewhat bitter smile.

“We’ll go get them.”

“Yeah.”

They each went to retrieve a crystal as I entered Gwangmyeong City Hall. I sat on the rooftop after climbing the stairs. Then I looked up at the sky. The sun fell halfway towards the horizon and the beautiful sunset dyed the world orange. I leisurely watched this beautiful scenery as I waited for the others.

Soon, the northeast water tower’s purple light disappeared. I could see Yi Yeonghan climbing the south steel tower. The fragments of the past slowly came together. I felt a presence behind me after about 10 minutes.

“Kim Hajin, take this.”

Shin Jonghak returned first. He casually threw the crystal at me and went back down. His lackeys (fan club members) waited for him with tearful eyes.

“Yo, Kim Hajin!”

A loud voice rang from below. Yi Yeonghan threw his crystal from the ground as I caught it.

“Thanks.”

Then I heard the clacking of Yoo Yeonha’s high-heels as she walked up to the roof.

“Where did you get those high-heels?”

“Someone gifted them to me. I’m quite popular, you see.”

Yoo Yeonha handed me the crystal.

“Oh, by the way...” I asked her something I felt curious about. “While you were cursed... you didn’t enjoy it or anything, right?”

“What do you mean? Why would I enjoy it?”

“*Huh?* Oh, *um*, never mind. Just ignore what I said.”

I had omitted a certain setting. [*Yoo Yeonha likes being bullied.*] I never mentioned it in the actual story since it felt strange and the opportunity never came, but I grew curious if that setting made it into this world.

“Anyways, I’ll be going now.”

Kim Suho came up as Yoo Yeonha went down.

“Kim Hajin! Here you... *Huh?*”

“Come down with me.”

“I want to be with Hajin. *Ah*, hey, what are you doing?”

Yoo Yeonha dragged him away as he gave me the crystal. The final crystal arrived three minutes later after Kim Suho.

“I’m here.”

Chae Nayun trudged up and handed me the crystal. With this, we had gathered all six crystals maintaining the past.

“Are you going to destroy them now?”

She sat next to me with her knees together.

“Yeah, get ready.”

“Can I watch?”

“Sure.”

I held the crystals in my palm. Then I infused stigma’s magic power into them. The tattoo on my upper arm glowed blue as the crystals fused into a small sphere. I held it up with my thumb and index finger before lightly squeezing. *Clang*— A sharp sound rang out as the crystal crumbled into purple dust. The changes quickly set in. The scenery began to disappear as the sky shattered. I calmly watched the recorded world of 1972 break down.

“Hey.”

Chae Nayun suddenly asked. Just like me, she watched the sky disappear. “Is this what it means to forget?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Nothing. I just wondered if forgetting meant the person would disappear from my heart like this.”

She sounded calm, but her eyes turned red as she thought about her family. However, she didn’t cry.

“How would I know? Why are you asking that?”

“I can’t recall my Mom’s voice no matter how much I try. Her scent, the happy days we spent together... I don’t remember anymore. It’s like they disappeared.”

I turned to the side and faced her. I had never experienced anything like that, so I chose some words from a book I once read.

“Don’t worry about it too much. You can’t smell anything from a flower that doesn’t wither.”

“What’s that. So cringy.”

“It is what it is.”

Memories felt precious only because they wore out and became partially forgotten over time.

“*Hmm.*”

It seemed like I had failed at comforting her. I took something out of my pocket.

“Here, you can have this.”

“*Eh?*”

“It’s a ticket.”

Chae Nayun tilted her head at my explanation.

“A ticket that will help you see flowers for a while.”

I felt my fingers curl up at my own words. What I gave her was a time capsule. A small box with a lock and an analog clock marked 01/01/2018.

“What’s this?”

“A time capsule. You know what that is, right?”

“Do you think I’m stupid? Of course I do.”

One of the items I noted in my settings, but never used. It took me a whole day's worth of stigma's magic power to find it using the Book of Truth.

"What is it for? And why are you giving it to me?"

"You see the number there? You can change it to go back to that time period for a while. To be more precise, you'll be looking at your memory of that time from deep inside your subconscious."

"..."

Chae Nayun widened her eyes at me. Then she blurted a single word. "Really?"

"Yeah."

"Why aren't you using it instead?"

I felt a tinge of pain in my heart when she said that. Honestly, I had planned on using it for myself perhaps in five or six years when my parents' voices and appearances grew faint. I could hold onto my fading memories. However, an item from this world would surely cause a problem in the present. It would be better for Chae Nayun to use it.

"I don't even know my parents' faces, so there's no point in me using it."

I made up a good excuse. Chae Nayun looked at me before putting the time capsule down.

"Then I won't use it either."

"What?"

"It's cowardly. Either we both use it, or we don't at all. That would be the right thing."

I felt shocked, even slightly angry. Then I pressed her temple with a finger.

“I should smack you.”

“What? Are you crazy? Fight me then.”

She raised her fists and took a boxing stance.

“Shut up and just use it, or you’ll regret it.”

“...”

Chae Nayun pouted and picked up the time capsule. It seemed she didn’t want to give it up so easily despite her words.

“Where do you want to go?”

“To 2013.”

Chae Nayun changed the numbers on the clock.

“March... 13th.”

“Why then—”

Plop. Chae Nayun disappeared without a trace before I could finish. Almost like magic, or perhaps a miracle.

“*Hm.*”

Suddenly, I stood alone. I stretched and looked around. Everyone else seemed to have returned except for me. Half the world had turned dark. The sky looked blurry, but pieces of the setting sun still shone. Even a crumbling world looked beautiful. I closed my eyes inside this disappearing world. The ringing as it crumbled seemed to shake my heart as well. I should be back in the present once I opened my eyes...

“Hey, Kim Hajin!”

I opened my eyes at the sudden voice. Then I quickly looked around and recognized Wind Mountain. My half-closed eyes looked up at the person who called me.

“There you are.”

Lush vegetation, fresh mountain wind, and brilliant sunlight. Chae Nayun brightly smiled along with this beautiful scenery.

Chapter 107

Rest

I longed for a childhood memory. My only birthday with everyone: Grandpa, Dad, oppa, and even Mom. I wanted to experience that day again. I wanted to engrave it into my mind for the rest of my life.

[03/13/2013]

Would it work? I wasn't sure, but when I adjusted the time capsule next to Kim Hajin... *Woong*— A white light suddenly engulfed me.

“...?”

I became a child again in a familiar garden. I spotted balloons and a cake with cartoon characters. A big table had all sorts of delicious food.

“Nayun.”

A large hand touched my shoulder and I suddenly turned stiff. The kind voice called me once again.

“Nayun?”

A boy who had yet to pass puberty. I could barely hold back my tears at his familiar voice. Today was a good day. I didn't want to cry.

“Un, oppa. You're here?”

My tongue wouldn't work like I wanted. Oppa kneeled and snickered.

“Guess what I got for you.”

“A scooter.”

“Eh?”

Oppa looked flustered. I knew he saved up three months of his allowance to buy it.

“Uh... did someone tell you?”

He smiled wryly as I ran into his embrace.

“Thank you.”

He seemed disappointed that I found out, but smiled as he lifted me.

“I’m the one who should be thankful.”

The front entrance grew noisy as I looked past oppa’s shoulder. Dad had arrived with Grandpa.

“Aiya, my little babies.”

Grandpa approached us with a smile as oppa handed me to him. His chest felt harder than oppa’s.

“Happy birthday, Nayun.”

“Thank you, Grandpa.”

“Oho?”

Grandpa looked surprised because I used to be afraid of him as a child. He stroked my head and set me down. I stood on the grass and looked around with a restless heart and sweaty hands. That person finally appeared along with a slight breeze. Mom walked in with her jade-like skin and long, brown hair.

“Mom.”

I called her for the first time in a long, long time. I could feel my face contorting. My lips quivered and my vision turned blurry. Just calling her wasn't enough. I ran with all my strength into her embrace. Her delicate fragrance seeped into me. The voice I had forgotten sounded in my ears. I cried and cried, so much that I couldn't open my eyes. I sat at the head of the table in Mom's embrace as Dad worriedly spoke.

"Nayun, why are you crying? Are you hurt anywhere?"

"Leave her be. She's still a child."

I barely managed to stop crying after about 5 minutes. I remembered that this wasn't real. I couldn't waste this precious time crying. I wiped away my tears and looked at the cake in front of me. Grandpa waved his hand and lit the candles as Mom laughed.

"Nayun, make a wish."

"Wish?"

"Yeah. Whatever you want will come true if you close your eyes to make a wish and blow out the candles."

I closed my eyes. I didn't wish for anything much. I just wanted to remember this moment for the rest of my life. I blew on the candles and opened my eyes.

Clap, clap, clap—

Everyone wished me a happy birthday. I held onto Mom's hands and brightly smiled in her embrace.

"Here you go, a scooter!"

"Oh? When did my grandson earn so much?"

"It's because you give him too much allowance, Father. You shouldn't spoil him."

“Ha, are you complaining because I didn’t give you as much at his age? What do you think, Daughter?”

“I... Here, Nayun! It’s the penguin with glasses!”

Mom changed the subject and handed me a Pororo plushie. I remembered reminding her that this penguin was called Pororo. I couldn’t speak from the lump in my throat. The surroundings began to turn white like ink peeling from a painting. Time was up. My heart felt like bursting and the tears I held back began to flow. I closed my eyes as I listened to the loving voices of Mom and oppa.

Soon, the world turned silent. *Chwaa*— Leaves suddenly rustled. I found myself on a mountain when I opened my eyes. I stretched, unable to think. Then I went to find Kim Hajin.

* * *

Chae Nayun reached out to me as I stared at her. Was she trying to help me up? I took her offer.

“Thanks.”

Chae Nayun looked renewed.

“Hey.”

“Yeah?”

Chae Nayun handed me the time capsule.

“The time capsule?”

“I used it once, but it looks like it’s still here.”

“Really?” I checked my smartwatch to find out why.

“You keep it. I told you I don’t need it.”

“Huh? Why? You should use it this time.”

The time capsule now required immense magic power. Perhaps because it came to the present from the past or because it had been used. It needed 15,000 units of magic power to fully charge. One’s magic power stat needed to be at least 15 to use it again. The required amount would only continue to double, making it practically impossible to reuse. It could only be charged by a single person in one go.

“No, you should use it when you want to see them again.”

“No, I can’t. It’s your turn to—”

“I told you.” I interrupted her.

“I’ve never met them before.”

Chae Nayun immediately shut her mouth.

“So you use it, okay?”

“Okay,” Chae Nayun replied half-reluctantly and half-glad. I turned around with a grin and started down the mountain.

“Ah, hey, where are you going?”

“I’m tired, so I’m going home.”

“What?”

Chae Nayun ran up to me and grabbed my sleeve. She pulled her hand back when I turned around.

“W-Why? Why are you going back now?”

“Because I’m tired. Aren’t you? I sure am.”

“But still...”

“I’m not coming. I’m going home.”

“Fine.”

Chae Nayun left with a pout. Then my smartwatch suddenly rang.

[Here’s my account number. I’ll pay you back as soon as possible.]

It came from Tomer. I had written a promissory note for her before we went on the trip. I even added a magic power contract to it. I transferred the money to her account through my smartwatch.

“Hey.”

Then I called Chae Nayun. She turned back with a mischievous grin on her face.

“Yeah? You’re coming, right?”

“No, tell the others that I’m going back.”

“...”

Her face crumpled like an ugly newspaper.

“See you later.”

I received an alert from Violet Banquet. Tomer immediately paid, which would be converted into points and transferred to me when I gave her the information. I sent Tomer what I found out.

[Fernin Jesus changed his name to Agus Benjamin...]

I wrote the reply as I descended the mountain. Then I received another message when I arrived at the foot of the mountain and took out my bike.

[Thank you so much for today.] [It feels like I received something precious.] [I’ll treat you to something good later ^-^]

It came from Chae Nayun.

“She sure sounds happy.”

I wondered what she saw and replied with a smile.

[Sure.]

* * *

I returned to Cube at 7 P.M. Only 7 hours had passed even though I spent 90 days in the past.

“Uuk.”

I stretched and took in the ocean breeze at Cube’s central park. I felt relaxed for some reason. This place felt like home now. I turned on my smartwatch as I walked to the dorm.

[Blessing in Disguise has increased your stats by 0.005 points!] [Blessing in Disguise has increased your stats by 0.005 points!] [Blessing in Disguise has increased your stats by 0.005 points!] [Your luck has activated! All stats have increased by 0.01 points from eating food rich in mana!]

I went through the backlog of alerts from the past 90 days. Then I checked my stats.

[Strength 2.970 (+ 2.970)] [Stamina 2.980 (+ 2.980)] [Speed 4.685 (+ 4.685)] [Perception 5.620 (+ 5.620)] [Vitality 3.070 (+ 3.070)] [Magic power 2.005]

“Oh, I’m at full power.”

The numbers in parenthesis represented the temporary stat boosts from energy conversion. It filled up to 100% thanks to living in a rich mana area for such a long time. Looking at the numbers made me happy.

“Hm?”

Someone ran towards me from the distance. A blonde girl wearing headphones, a sweatshirt, and sweatpants. I doubted my eyes when I spotted Rachel.

“What’s up with the color of those sweats?”

She wore spinach-green sweatpants with a bright blue sweatshirt. She dressed well for the karaoke, so did she just put on whatever for running? I never made such a setting, so I didn’t know. I had written that she grew up in a sheltered environment, but that was obvious for a princess. Rachel slowed as she saw me.

“Hello.”

I lightly bowed when she arrived. She took off her headphones and smiled.

“It’s been a while, Rachel.”

“Yes.”

“Did you come back from England?”

“Yes.”

“Ah.”

I planned to head off since I didn’t have much to say, but her sweats kept bugging me. I coughed and carefully asked, “Do you usually wear sweats when you run?”

“Yes? Ah.” Rachel seemed embarrassed and shyly asked, “Are they okay?”

“Huh?”

“Well, *um*, this is a bit embarrassing, but I’ve never chosen my own clothes before. My attendant usually picks them out.”

Rachel spun as if to show off her clothes, but they looked too unfashionable.

“I’m putting more effort into choosing my clothes since I’ll be an adult soon.”

She sounded unconfident, and rightly so. I scratched my neck and muttered, “*Um*, I think you should just wear what your attendant picks out.”

“Does it stand out?”

“Yes, a lot.”

“*Ah...*”

She scanned her clothes before nodding. What did she plan on doing? I curiously watched.

“*Ah.*”

She suddenly bent down and pulled up one leg of the sweatpants. Then she looked at me for confirmation.

“How about now?”

“...”

She might’ve misunderstood what I meant by standing out. Perhaps it was her Korean.

“Just wear what your attendant suggests.”

“*Mm.*”

Rachel seemed disappointed and pulled up the other side of her sweatpants.

“How about...”

“Pull them both down.”

“Oh.”

Rachel pulled her sweatpants back down. I sighed and asked, “Are you out on a run?”

“Yes. You must’ve... come back from a barbershop. You have a beard now.”

“Yes? *Ah*, well, yeah. I’m going to buy some fried chicken.”

“Fried chicken?”

“Yes, some fried chicken, pig trotters, braised pork, and pizza.”

Rachel tilted her head as I briefly explained, “I eat a lot.”

“I see.”

Me too... Rachel murmured to herself and smiled.

“Then I’m going to keep running.”

“Yes, good night.”

Rachel went off as I headed to the cafeteria.

* * *

I returned home with both hands full of food, but Evandel didn’t run up to me like usual when I opened the door.

“Evandel?”

I walked into the living room feeling somewhat odd. Then the scene I saw slightly shocked me.

“The heck.”

Hayang stared at me from the top of her cat tower as Evandel slept while hugging the bottom. It looked like she tried to get Hayang to come down and fell asleep from exhaustion. Quite a chase seemed to have occurred from the mess.

"They're still fighting, *huh*."

I approached Evandel with a laugh and brought a fried chicken leg to her nose. *Sniff, sniff*. Evandel's nose wriggled before she opened her mouth wide. *Haap*— And bit down on empty air. *Nyam, nyam*. She frowned when she couldn't taste anything even after chewing.

Hayang jumped from the cat tower and struck Evandel's head. *Pabat!* Evandel suddenly woke up.

“Ah, *aaang*...”

She held her head and groaned.

“Ah!”

Then she discovered me and scurried away.

“W-What!”

“What do you mean.”

“Who, who is it?”

“It's me. Hajin.”

“Eh?”

Evandel took a closer look with her sleepy eyes.

“Hajin?”

“Yeah, I got a haircut. Come here. I brought some fried chicken.”

“Fried chicken?”

“Some pig trotters and braised pork too.”

“Pig trotters... braised pork...”

Evandel muttered in a daze as she approached me. I knelt and held my hands out as she waddled into my embrace. I smiled and did something I always wanted to do. I rubbed my beard against her cheek.

“*Ah, aak!* What is it? No!”

Evandel tried to run away, but it was too late. I missed her a lot after 3 months. I continued rubbing my prickly beard against her soft skin. Evandel resisted and even tried to shove her hand into my mouth and nose, but I didn’t stop until Hayang approached us with a weird look.

“...?”

Hayang stared at the back of Evandel’s head and raised her paw. I wondered what she would do when... *Thwack!* Hayang smacked Evandel’s head again and ran away.

“*Ahhk! Uuu...* Kim Hayang! You get back here!”

Evandel furiously chased Hayang. However, Hayang instantly climbed to the peak of the cat tower.

“*Uuu! Y-You...!*”

Evandel shook the tower with all her strength.

“Get down, get down, get dooown here—!”

“...”

I finally understood the messy scene from before.



PDF by: traitor/SEN



The Novel's Extra

WUXIA
WORLD

KW

The Novel's Extra

- 소설 속 엑스트라 -

- VOLUME 2 -

**-AUTHOR-
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[Wuxiaworld]

Chapter 108

Action (1)

Tomer read the reply as she bit her fingernails.

[Fernin Jesus changed his name to Agus Benjamin and smuggled himself to Korea in 2020. For unknown reasons, he entered a retirement center rather than starting a new life and died in 2024 at the age of 53. He was cremated through standard procedures and his remains are located at a memorial. The following is the name of the retirement center he stayed in...]

Tomer's face stiffened. Dead at the age of 53. She couldn't accept the words written on her smartwatch.

"Bullshit."

Tomer bit on her fingernails until they bled.

"Dead? What right does he have to die?"

Her heart filled with anger. The trash who killed her mother and abandoned her already died. She shot up with tearful eyes filled with resentment and glared at the information before storming off.

The retirement center wasn't far away. Tomer ran there as quickly as possible. The magic power inside her formed a special sequence that amplified her physical abilities. She only needed 15 minutes with the spell called haste.

[Sunshine Haven]

Tomer took a deep breath in front of the sign. She wiped away her tears and slowly turned the doorknob. *Kiiik*— A faint smell of medicine tickled her nose, but it didn't smell as bad as a hospital.

Tomer walked up to the counter. The nurse also spotted her and asked.

“Do you need something?”

“*Um...* I’m here to find a patient. His name is Agus Benjamin.”

“Who?”

The nurse tilted her head as though she never heard that name before.

“Agus Benjamin. He’s Latino like me, and old.”

“*Ah*, the Latino man.”

The nurse recalled since a Latino seemed to be rare.

“I remember now. He was extremely shy and quiet, but...”

The nurse’s face darkened.

“I believe he passed away already. About 2 years ago.”

Tomer felt her heart drop and her throat tightened. *Was he really dead? On his own, so peacefully in such a calm place?* Her hands trembled, and her heart surged with rage once more. No, it was still too early. She refused to believe until she saw definitive proof.

“*Um*, this person—”

Tomer rummaged through her pocket for a bundle of photos, but she lost her strength as the photos fell to the floor. The nurse came around to help pick them up.

“T-Thank you.”

“No, it’s fine. *Ah*, that’s him. He looks younger, but that’s definitely him. I remember clearly since he looked different.”

The nurse explained as she looked at the photos. Tomer could hardly maintain her sanity, but managed to endure the anger and asked.

“Then... what kind of a life did he live here?”

“I’m not sure. He didn’t talk much to any of the nurses or other elders.”

“Did he leave behind a will or any inheritance?”

“Yes? *Ah... um*, I’m not sure. Even if I did, I would need to know your relationship with him...”

Tomer took out her wallet and showed the nurse her magician license. *[2 star Magician Jamer]* The nurse’s eyes widened. Magicians were even more rare than heroes. Only 900 magicians graduated every year from the world’s number one Korean Magic Academy.

“I’m Jamer Jesus. This man’s real name is Fernin Jesus. He’s... my biological father.”

Tomer explained as best as she could. The nurse became more compassionate after hearing this.

“I see... but I really don’t know much. I’ve only seen him a few times while passing by.”

“Do you know anyone who would know something about him?”

“*Mm...* if I remember correctly, a volunteer student often talked to him.”

“*Ah*, really?”

The nurse nodded.

“Yes, I can’t remember too well, but they seemed to be close. He even came by recently.”

“Oh, ooh! Can you tell me who that student is?”

“Well, I’m not too close with him either. The head nurse is, but she’s away on a foreign volunteer trip.”

“Ah! You have a computer, right? Don’t you have some record of it?”

“Oh, you’re right. Hold on a minute.”

The nurse began to tap on the keyboard. Tomer’s smartwatch suddenly rang.

[Tomer, your mission has been terminated. We will deploy a new agent, so return. The disciplinary committee will decide on your punishment.]
[Congrats on your demotion.]

“Fuck that.”

“Duck?”

“Eh? Ah, never mind.”

Tomer sneered at the djinns who cared so much about hierarchy. She only entered djinn society because she thought that bastard became a djinn. She could care less about the mission or the disciplinary committee now that she had found what she was looking for. She didn’t care about anything else anymore. Tomer pulled off the smartwatch provided by Wicked.

“Ah, found it. It wasn’t recorded in the computer, but in the guest book.”

The nurse muttered as she held up a notebook.

“Really? So what’s his—”

“Kim Hajin.”

“Ah, Kim Ha... Kim Hajin?”

“Yep, Kim Hajin. It’ll be hard to meet him since he was admitted to Cube. He’s an aspiring hero.”

The familiar name and background matched too well to be a coincidence. Tomer fell into a daze.

* * *

I walked through the redwoods as Cube’s break ended. They planted many trees at Cube to maintain a certain level of mana. It made these roads a popular date course during this time of the year. Naturally, many couples walked past me. I wondered how bad spring would be when cherry blossoms bloomed if it was already this bad in autumn. Cube lacked disciplinary measures. They technically prohibited dating, but couples could always say they were just friends and no one would care.

Tok, tok. Someone tapped my back while I felt grumpy.

“*Huh?*”

I turned around and saw a girl staring at me with her arms crossed. Her black dress shone beautifully, and she perfectly maintained her silky hair.

“What’s up?”

“Here.” Yoo Yeonha handed me a document envelope.

“What’s this?”

“What I promised before.”

“...”

Promise? What promise? I tilted my head and checked the contents. It contained 20 carefully wrapped pills and several documents. Then I remembered.

“We made them from refining half of the ginseng you gave me.”

“Half?”

“We needed to keep some to appeal to the market. We’re planning on using the other half in various ways. We’ll give you company stocks to make up for the cost. I’ll give you the other half when things improve in the future.”

“That’s fine with me.”

She spent half of the ginseng as she liked, but I didn’t mind since Yoo Yeonha wasn’t the type to backstab someone. Unfortunately, she was the type to get crossed. She still trusted people too much once they earned her approval. Honestly, that seemed natural for a 17 year old. The internal power struggle of a massive guild was too dark and complicated for a young girl. *Ah*, that event should be coming up around winter break. The so-called Yoo Yeonha Arrogation Scandal.

“How are they?”

“Oh, are these what I asked for before?”

I took out one of the pills.

“Yes. We made them by condensing the ginseng and mana crystals together. Each pill should be worth at least 100 million won.”

“100 million won per pill?”

I had 2 billion won in my hands.

“Are they actually worth that much?”

“Not exactly. However, people who buy such pills will get suspicious if it’s too cheap. Also, those pills are a bit special. We could’ve made 300-400 other types of medicines with the same amount of ingredients. They have to be expensive to make a profit.”

“Mm.”

I checked the pill’s description with my smartwatch.

[Ginseng Pill] [High-intermediate rank] [Consumable] — A medicine created from neutralizing mana crystal solution with ginseng. A glimpse of a skilled, meticulous technique can be seen. Your strength, stamina, vitality, and magic power stats will permanently increase by 0.001-0.02 over 24 hours once consumed. (Note that the effect will diminish the higher the user’s stats.) Chance of Qi Deviation — 0.5% (Consuming several within 24 hours will drastically increase this chance.)

I felt satisfied. I could raise my stats or modify them for even better effects.

“Eat one a day.”

“Yeah, thanks.”

I returned the favor since I received something good.

“Oh hey, take this.”

I took out a ginseng from stigma’s storage. Yoo Yeonha’s eyes shone like jewels when she saw its faint brown glow.

“Wow, you found another one?”

“Yeah, but Shin Jonghak will be mad if he sees this.”

Yoo Yeonha stared at me. Even I would find it impossible to find a ginseng every time I went to a mountain. However, the Jinsung group privately owned Wind Mountain and no one hardly visited. I whispered to her, “I’ll leave it to your conscience. You can return it or use it.”

“Cough... Well, Jonghak forgot my birthday once.”

Yoo Yeonha understood what I implied and smiled. I also laughed as

an accomplice. She held the ginseng that should've entered Shin Jonghak's stomach.

"Then I'll take off now."

"Yeah, see you."

Yoo Yeonha turned back as I continued on my way. Then my smartwatch suddenly rang.

[Um, it's me, Jamer.]

It seemed she got a new smartwatch since her messenger ID had changed.

[What's up? Are you paying me back already?]

She didn't reply for a long time. She must've gone to the retirement center, so she probably needed some time to collect her thoughts. I decided to patiently wait for her.

* * *

"Hajin, Hajin. What did you bring back?"

"Meow."

Hayang and Evandel ran up to me as soon as I returned.

"What? Why are you two so friendly today?"

"Un? We're always friendly. Right, Kim Hayang?"

Friendly? Yeah, right. And what's up with Kim Hayang?

"Hajin, Hajin."

Evandel hopped up and down for me to pick her up. I lifted her onto

the couch along with snacks. I brought back a special roll cake today.

“Whoa...”

Evandel’s eyes sparkled at the cake’s white texture. I sat at the kitchen table and swallowed a ginseng pill. Then I checked the official schedule.

[Mission Experience] Cadets must select one of the six missions below: — Escort — Tunnel — Field — Colosseum — Group Monster Subjugation — Dungeon

Cadets had to experience various missions like heroes. It would be like combat training. Each cadet had the same six options. If I recalled correctly, Kim Suho and Rachel chose the tunnel. Lancaster also started to act around this time.

Wiing— My smartwatch vibrated.

[Yo, Kim Hajin.] [Which mission are you choosing?] [I’m thinking of going with the tunnel.] [(emoticon of a hamster running around)]

It came from Chae Nayun. A loud shout rang from the living room before I could reply.

“Aaaaang, Hajin, Hajin! Hayang keeps trying to steal my food!”

Evandel held up the cake box as Hayang tried to climb on her to get to it. Just when I thought they became friends...

“Hayang.”

Hayang retreated at the sound of my voice as Evandel looked relieved.

“Hajin gave this to me. You have your own food. Eat the cat food over there.”

Evandel scolded Hayang and set the cake box on the table. I received another message when I was about to reply to Chae Nayun.

[Are you awake?]

Boss had sent it.

[Yes, I'm awake.]

“Ugyak!”

Another ruckus broke out between Evandel and Hayang. I didn't know what happened, but I figured I'd just leave them to sort things out.

[Little apprentice, do you have a Violet Banquet ID?]

[No, I don't.]

[lol]

I frowned. *Did she just laugh at me?*

[Do you want onw?] [want one?] [Typo.]

I replied after laughing.

[It'd be great to have one.]

[lol]

She laughed at me again.

“...?”

I raised my head since everything sounded too quiet. *Weren't Evandel and Hayang fighting?* I saw Evandel pouting on the couch. — *I hate you. You always steal my food.* She murmured to herself.

“Hmm.”

Evandel and Hayang had the same amount of whipped cream around

their mouths. It looked like they evenly shared the cake, or should I say they evenly stole from each other. Evandel stopped looking at Hayang, but Hayang acted quite strangely.

Meow—

Evandel glanced at Hayang, but immediately turned around and continued pouting. Hayang sneaked up and sat next to her.

“Hmph, who might you be?”

Evandel muttered and scooped away. *Meow—* Hayang chased after Evandel as she repeatedly moved away and plopped in front of the TV. Hayang purred cutely and rubbed against her. The corner of Evandel’s mouth twitched. It was only a matter of time before she forgave Hayang. Hayang seemed to know and continued being playful.

Boss replied as I watched them with a fatherly smile.

[I thought you’d say that, so I prepared a Violet Banquet ID for you.] [The access code is qkenpwnkWSD394820##3. The ID is Fenrir, password is: ‘youcanchangethepasswordinyoursettings’.]

“...”

The password seemed complex, yet simple.

[Thank you. Why Fenrir?]

[Fenrir. That will be your mercenary code name.]

[Ah.]

Fenrir was a mythical wolf monster that appeared in Northern Europe several years ago. It had devoured hundreds of heroes and caused billions of euros in damage. No one knew whether it was the real Fenrir from Norse mythology. Many also called it the demon wolf.

[That’s quite a grandiose name. Isn’t it too much for me?]

[I think it's futtinf.] [Fitting. You look like a wolf too.]

[Eh? Where?]

[Your chinky eyes.]

I looked in the mirror. *Weren't my eyes pretty round?* If anything, it should be because of my beard.

[Can it be Lobo if it's based on my appearance?]

[Lobo? Like robot wolf? That's a weird wolf.]

[No.]

I scratched my neck.

[Lobo. Like the wolf king...] [ref]In reference to “Lobo the King of Currumpaw” by Ernest Thompson Seton.]

“No, wait, why am I talking like I’m an official member? I never said I would officially join Jeronimo Mercenary!”

[Ah, wait, I still haven't...]

“...”

I deleted my reply after thinking about it. Now wasn't the time to play hard to get. Soon, Chae Jinyoon would wake up as a devil. I had to grow close with Boss as soon as possible. I already considered every other possibility, but killing him was the only way. I felt more complicated the more I thought about it. Finally, I replied.

[Do as you want. By the way, what about that 300 million won item we talked about?]

[I'll sebf it to yoru Violet Banquet ID.] [Send. Stay online.]

Did she have small fingers? Or was she just bad at typing? She kept

sending typos. Then again, Boss was never good with electronics in the original story.

[Yes, I'll be waiting.]

Chapter 109

Action (2)

Yun Seung-Ah looked around her new office inside the world's number 1 guild, Creator's Sacred Grace. She relocated to a new building called the Ark.

[Rank 250. Vice-leader Yun Seung-Ah]

She rubbed the badge that displayed her updated rank. The office she received for becoming the world's rank 250 hero looked grand and fancy as expected.

"Do you like it?"

Yun Seung-Ah only smiled at her secretary's question.

"Right, don't I have a schedule for Cube's Mission Experience?"

"Yes. Vice-leader will be in charge of the tunnel next Monday, October 5."

"Is that so?"

Yun Seung-Ah sat in her chair.

"Mm."

She hummed in joy from the comfy leather of a blood alligator.

"I can't believe it's October already. Time sure flies."

"You're right."

“Any other interesting news?”

“Just one. It seems Jeronimo Mercenary has a new recruit.”

“Oh, really?”

Yun Seung-Ah’s eyes flickered with interest. She also held a deep relationship with Jeronimo Mercenary. Several teams with different tasks made up Creator’s Sacred Grace like many other guilds. Yun Seung-Ah began her career in the djinn eradication team, which often required the help of mercenaries.

“Has his codename been released?”

“We aren’t sure, but sources are calling him Fenrir.”

“Oh?” Yun Seung-Ah exclaimed in surprise. “That’s quite a grandiose codename.”

Yun Seung-Ah had seen Fenrir before. Creator’s Sacred Grace also participated in the battle with that monster ten or so years ago. Valuable data on it still remained in their video records.

“Yes, but he specializes in assassination and sniping.”

“Really? That’s not very fitting considering his codename. After all, the demon wolf Fenrir tore everything apart with its teeth.”

Mercenaries who specialized in assassination often received the limelight since they primarily fought against djinns rather than monsters.

“He should be an extraordinary specialist since he joined Jeronimo Mercenary. They didn’t reveal his identity?”

“No, our sources only heard rumors of him joining. Not much else is known.”

“Mm. I’m looking forward to it. They make a spotlight video for every

new recruit.”

They officially called these spotlight videos mercenary cinematics that showcased the new recruit’s gift and power. Jeronimo Mercenary began with 13 members and advertised themselves like this every time they recruited a new member.

“It doesn’t look like a new mercenary cinematic will come out.”

“Mm... Well, I’m looking forward to it.”

Yun Seung-Ah felt her heart beating faster. It felt like receiving news about her favorite video game receiving a sequel. She liked working with Jeronimo Mercenary that much.

* * *

[Yi Yeonghan invited Kim Suho, Kim Hajin, Yi Jiyeon, Rachel, Chae Nayun, Hazuki, and 3 others.]

Yi Yeonghan: [Hihi. This is the group chat for the tunnel team. Chae Nayun told me to make one.]

Chae Nayun: [When did I say that?]

Yi Yeonghan: [Huh?]

Chae Nayun: [What]

Kim Suho: [Mm? What’s up with this group chat? What’s it for?]

Yi Jiyeon: [Hi Suho!]

Yi Yeonghan: [I don’t know. Chae Nayun told me to make it.]

Kim Suho: [Oh, hey.]

Kim Suho: [Chae Nayun did?]

Chae Nayun: [No no, it wasn't me. Yi Yeonghan, do you want to die?]

Xie Chen: [Hello.]

Yi Yeonghan: [Oh, it's been a while, Chen!]

Yi Yeonghan: [Chae Nayun messaged me. She said to create a group chat, so we can move around together]

Chae Nayun: [When did I say that?? It isn't me, really, you know he's a pathological liar, right?]

“The heck is this?”

I came back from showering and my smartwatch received 500 or so new messages. It seemed like a group chat for the tunnel team.

“Was something like this in the original story?”

I didn't think so. I skimmed through the messages. Cadets usually went to their missions by 10 A.M. They talked about meeting and going as a group.

“Hm...”

I sent a message once I understood the gist of the conversation. Not to the group, but Rachel.

[Rachel, are you going with the group?]

[Yes, I am.]

[Then you should wear what your attendant picks out for you.]

[Why =_=?]

“Ah, what do I do?”

Honestly, I worried about Rachel lately. I still had to give her the butterfly seedling's dust, but I couldn't think of a way.

"Should I put it in an accessory?"

The butterfly seedling's dust only adhered to targets with hidden potential. The dust could naturally seep into her if I sealed it in an ordinary necklace or bracelet.

"*Hm.*"

That sounded like a decent plan. A necklace seemed like too much, but a bracelet should do. I could say that she did a good job on the team challenge as an excuse.

"Perfect."

I entered an accessory shop on my smartwatch and picked out a decently priced bracelet worth about 100,000 won. Then I suddenly received a message.

[Hey, did you use to do volunteer work?]

It came from Tomer.

[Yeah, I did. Why?]

[No reason. I just thought maybe I should too.]

[That's a good idea.]

[Have you ever met a Latino like me while you volunteered?]

"Eh?"

Did she not find her father's letter? What happened when she went to the retirement center?

"Ah, she must've met a different nurse."

She must've not heard about the letter if she didn't meet the head nurse.

[Yeah, I have. Why?]

Tomer didn't reply. *Did she plan to message me in a week again?* Things must be complicated for her, so I somewhat understood.

"Hajin, Hajin."

Evandel called me from the living room. I put on a t-shirt and walked over. Hayang lay on the couch while Evandel made something in front of the kitchen table.

I quietly watched. Two sharp eyes, a protruding mouth, and a four-legged body with rough fur. She made a wolf.

"Wow, what's this? It looks so good!"

I sat next to her and stroked her head. Evandel joyfully laughed and handed me the wolf.

"Here, it's Hajin's."

"Mine?"

"Un, un. Look."

Evandel tapped the small wolf's back. The frozen white wolf suddenly developed color and ran into my chest with a growl.

"Whoa!"

I closed my eyes in shock and fell on my back. Then I quickly recovered, but the wolf disappeared. Evandel looked at me mischievously.

"What, did you pull a prank on me? You!"

“Ah! No, no, *uhehe*, *ah*, *uhihihi*, *ahahahaha*.”

I tickled her sides since Evandel was especially ticklish. Just tickling her sides could make her cry and roll around. I continued her harsh punishment for 30 seconds.

“Aaang... but it’s a present...”

Evandel muttered out of breath on the floor. I felt something different and looked at my chest where the wolf jumped into. The symbol of a wolf had been branded there.

“What’s this?”

I checked my smartwatch.

[Buff – Infused Ghost Wolf. The wolf has recognized you as its master.] — Energy of the Wolf: Will increase your strength, stamina, speed, and vitality by 0.1 points. — Sixth Sense of the Wolf: A huge wolf will emerge to protect its master when it senses a life-threatening danger. — Movement of the Wolf: You will make less sound while walking.

“Oh wow.”

Evandel finally made something useful. It seemed she wanted to show off and earn my praise, but I misunderstood. I felt sorry and hugged her tightly.

“Thank you.”

“...”

Evandel didn’t say anything. I looked down and wondered if she was angry, but she had already fallen asleep. She must’ve spent all her energy to make this wolf.

“So cute.”

I picked her up and carefully placed her in bed. I received an alert

from Violet Banquet when I returned to the living room.

[You have received an item.]

It must've came from Boss. A purple portal appeared in front of my laptop screen. *PONG!* A cylinder object the size of a baseball popped out. It looked like a Yoplait, but was actually under armor.

[Pinnacle grade Under Armor] [Pinnacle grade] [Partial Artifact] [Stored Mana 5000/5000] — Body Reinforcement: Will increase your strength, stamina, vitality, and speed by 0.3 points. — Artifact Transformation: You may use the stored mana to activate the following effects: Haste, High rank Defense Enhancement, Body Adaptation (Will fit the equipment accordingly to your body.), Underwater Mask (Can create a mask that allows you to breathe underwater.)

This state-of-the-art equipment was made from refining artifacts with magic engineering.

“Let’s see...”

I placed the cylinder on my bare chest and infused some magic power into it. *Chwaak—* A dark blue mana spread out from the cylinder and enveloped my body. An under armor easily surpassed 300 million won as defensive equipment made from mana crystals. It could easily be a billion won or more considering the quality of this one. As I thought, Boss tended to undervalue items. I made sure to thank her with a message as I put the armor away.

* * *

The tunnel team met in front of the Cube portal station the next day at 9 A.M. except for one person.

“Isn’t Kim Hajin always the last one? Don’t you think so too, Rachel?”

Yi Yeonghan asked Rachel. He tried to act friendly, but Rachel didn’t respond. Her eyes seemed to say, *It’s bad to talk about someone behind their back.*

“Cough. Ah, there he is.”

Yi Yeonghan awkwardly pointed into the distance. A student who didn't look like a student appeared. He neatly styled his hair in a pomade and his beard looked well-trimmed. He wore a black jacket and boots that made him look like he was in his mid-20s.

“He didn't shave his beard yet. Maybe it's because a certain someone complimented him,” Yi Yeonghan muttered as he nudged Chae Nayun's shoulder. Chae Nayun grew flustered.

“W-What about me.”

“What?”

“I-It's not like that! He even ignored all the messages I sent him.”

“Oh? You even messaged him first?”

“*Ii, iik.*” Chae Nayun trembled in anger as Kim Hajin joined them.

“Kim Hajin, you're three minutes late.” Yi Yeonghan tapped on his smartwatch as he clicked his tongue.

“Ah, sorry.”

“It's fine. It's only three minutes. Anyways Hajin, you look great today.” Kim Suho spoke as he nudged Kim Hajin's arm.

“You're one to speak.” Kim Hajin placed his hand on Kim Suho's waist. Chae Nayun felt disgusted by how close they became.

“I'll forgive you since it was only three minutes. Alright, let's go to Busan!”

Yi Yeonghan led the group today. He was still the class president despite often being the joker. The group took the portal to Seoul before transferring to Busan. The most famous tunnel in Busan was the underwater tunnel. The world-renowned architect, Kim

Kyunggwan, had constructed it through the ocean to connect with Japan and China. This tunnel wasn't for trade, but for subjugating sea-dwelling monsters and dungeons.

“Hey.”

Chae Nayun tapped on Kim Hajin's shoulder as the group walked to the underwater tunnel's entrance.

“What.”

“Why didn't you shave?”

“*Hm?*”

The beard's 0.5 charm buff would disappear if he did. Kim Hajin replied half-heartedly, “Just because.”

“Just because?”

“What.”

“No, nothing. By the way, why aren't you replying to my texts? It says you read them.”

Honestly, Kim Hajin was just playing hard to get. Thinking about it made Chae Nayun mad as she frowned.

“I forgot.”

“What?”

“*Ah*, over there!”

Yi Yeonghan pointed into the distance at a woman in front of the underwater tunnel's entrance.

“*Whoa!* Isn't that hero Yun Seung-Ah!”

The cadets' eyes flickered as they saw her. The world's rank 250 hero, Yun Seung-Ah, possessed both beauty and talent. Many often lauded her as the future of Korea and both civilians and heroes looked up to her. A few cadets completely froze in front of such a great figure.

Yun Seung-Ah stepped forward when she noticed that we spotted her. A powerful gale erupted and her single step covered 200 meters.

“Whoa!”

“Ah!”

She teleported using magic power combustion. Her sudden appearance caused several cadets to jump back in surprise.

“Hello, everyone.”

Meanwhile, Yun Seung-Ah scanned the group with a leisurely smile.

“Suho, Nayun, Yeonghan...”

She recited each cadet's name.

“Rachel, and... Hajin? Is that you, Hajin?”

“Yes.”

“Oh my, you changed quite a lot. You... even grew a beard.”

Kim Hajin silently nodded.

“Good morning, everyone. *Mm...* I'm not good with words, so let's just head down immediately.”

Yun Seung-Ah gestured as everyone followed after her like ducklings. Yun Seung-Ah and the cadets got on the elevator as she explained, “This underwater tunnel is extremely useful. It allows us to hunt sea monsters and serves as a pathway to underwater dungeons.”

Ding. The elevator soon arrived underground. The underwater tunnel felt truly massive. It looked as wide as a four lane highway going both ways and as high as two ogres combined. It also had rest areas, restaurants, and vehicles driving through.

“We’re still underground, but you’ll find that we’re surrounded by water as we walk further. It’s quite a beautiful view.”

The group continued following Yun Seung-Ah.

“You’ll see other roads forking out every once in a while down this main road. You can see where these roads lead by reading the signs. If it says D, it leads to a dungeon. If it says M, it leads to monsters...”

Tirring— Tirring— Yun Seung-Ah’s smartwatch loudly rang. She frowned and checked the content.

“Ah shoot! It looks like there’s an emergency at the end of the tunnel. I’ll have to go ahead...”

Yun Seung-Ah awkwardly smiled. “I’ll come back quickly, so take a look around in the meantime.”

“Yes!” the cadets replied loud and clear.

“Don’t go too far. Stay in groups of 2 and check out the side roads.”

Yun Seung-Ah suddenly turned around and snapped her fingers before leaving. “Ah, I’ll fairly form the groups.”

Yun Seung-Ah projected a smartwatch app that paired the cadets. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun. Yi Yeonghan and Hazuki. Xie Chen and Yi Jiyoona. Kim Hajin and Rachel. It quickly assigned the groups.

“I’ll be back in a jiffy!”

Yun Seung-Ah winked at Chae Nayun before running down the tunnel. However, Chae Nayun only bitterly smiled at her as she ran off.

You didn't need to do that...

Her gaze turned to Kim Hajin who laughed as he talked to Rachel.

“Tsk.”

Chae Nayun clicked her tongue and walked to Kim Suho.

“Hey, Chae Nayun.”

“Hey...”

Wiing— Chae Nayun’s smartwatch suddenly also rang. She casually checked it.

[This is the director of Daehyun Hospital.] [Patient Chae Jinyoon showed signs of waking up around 10:23 A.M. today] [I can't say for certain that he will wake up soon, but it is surely a great sign.]

Chae Nayun’s mind turned blank at the sudden news.

Author's Note: Yun Seung-Ah's age has been buffed. Now, she's only 10 years older than Suho!

Chapter 110

Action (3)

Rachel and I walked along Road D-3C. The D meant it led to a dungeon, the 3 denoted that it was the third road, and the C signified that the dungeon had been conquered. The tunnel walls listed the monsters from the dungeon and heroes who participated in the dungeon.

“It feels like I’m in an aquarium.”

The transparent walls revealed a beautiful sight. We stood about 75 meters under sea level, which was too shallow for monsters above intermediate rank. The monsters here only looked cute.

I didn’t find the view too appealing, so I continued walking forward before realizing that Rachel had disappeared.

“...?”

I turned around and found her observing a school of fish far behind me. Her ocean-colored eyes sparkled like emeralds.

I sneaked back to her and pretended to also look while rummaging through my jacket for the bracelet. *How should I give it to her? Would now be too random?* I had little experience in giving presents. *What was I supposed to say?*

I picked it up on my way here... sounded weird. *Thank you for everything until now...* made it seem like I would disappear. *It’ll help with your development...* sounded like a scammer trying to sell a product.

“Wow.”

Rachel exclaimed like a child. I followed her line of sight to a school

of tiny fish swimming in a line. They formed a giant blob the size of a whale.

“Amazing.”

“Right? Korea is the only country with an underwater tunnel of this size!” Rachel excitedly explained.

“Is that so?”

“Yes! I read many research papers on underground tunnels.”

It would be difficult to name a better duo than Rachel and research papers.

“I worked hard to understand those research papers in Korean. It’s even more amazing now that I’m looking at the real thing.”

“I see.”

Korean had become a shared language throughout this world and most papers used it.

“Yes, because translated versions often lose the meaning.”

“Ah, I see. Translated versions... right. I’m grateful Korean is my first language.”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. I had bombed English on the College Scholastic Ability Test and regretted not taking more English classes.

“I’m jealous. *Ah*, apparently English was the shared language before Outcall. Isn’t that interesting?”

“Oh, then—”

“Wow, look! A shark... *ah*, a baby shark!”

“You’re right.”

This princess loved the ocean as she stared in awe at the tiny shark.
This felt like the perfect moment.

“*Huu.*”

I took in a deep breath.

“*Um, Rachel?*”

“*Yes?*”

She turned from the baby shark as I awkwardly smiled and took out the bracelet. I had sealed the butterfly seedling’s dust inside its platinum outer shell.

“This might be sudden, but it seemed like the perfect opportunity.”

“*...*”

Rachel only blankly stared at me. She didn’t say anything or try to take the bracelet. I muttered the excuse I prepared beforehand.

“About this. Remember how you helped me a lot before as the team captain? Everyone chipped in to buy this bracelet, so don’t misunderstand.”

Rachel remained silent. A second felt like ten seconds.

Screw it.

I held the bracelet in my right hand and Rachel’s wrist in the other. Then I forced the bracelet onto her.

Click.

The butterfly seedling’s dust would seep into her once she unleashed her magic power.

I sighed in relief as Rachel silently looked back and forth between me

and the bracelet. She looked a bit sad and dropped her head. She almost spoke when...

—KOONG.

A sudden vibration shook the tunnel and all the lights flickered off. It instantly went dark as I took out the Desert Eagle. Rachel also pulled out her rapier.

Tak, tak. We could hear footsteps. I turned towards the sound, but not even my thousand-mile eyes could catch the source.

“What?”

[You're with a companion.]

A dark voice rang out. I couldn't quite understand what he said since he spoke in English with a British accent, but I knew it was Lancaster. Rachel's face stiffened.

“Sir Lancaster.”

[Don't worry. I'm only here to talk. I'm not in the mood to fight since I watched something amusing today.]

I could only understand the first half that he only wanted to talk.

[Here.]

A corpse suddenly dropped from the sky. It looked bloodied from head to toe, and its limbs twisted in strange directions.

“*Hiik!*”

“*Whoa!* What the fuck is this!”

I cursed subconsciously out of shock. Rachel's eyes widened at me. “Y-You cursed...”

“Ah, cough.”

I awkwardly coughed before we focused again on Lancaster.

[That person is an agent who has been guarding you from the shadows.]

“...”

[Princess, I wanted you to know that I am always watching.]

Lancaster’s voice disappeared as I struggled to comprehend the situation. I expected him to appear, but I didn’t recall anything like this. He should’ve sent a few assassins and Rachel should’ve awakened her ability by defeating them. He should’ve said, *My goal today was only to scare you*. However, he chuckled out a corpse instead?

“The heck.”

No other threats occurred as the lights returned. The corpse also disappeared.

“Where did the corpse go?”

I muttered in a daze when Rachel tapped my shoulder.

“Hajin, let’s... go outside.”

“Ah, yes.”

We walked back with our guards up. The eerie atmosphere gave me goosebumps. Rachel glanced at me and asked, “Are you okay?”

“Yes? Ah, of course. It just surprised me. Who was that?”

“Um... I... I’ll tell you later.”

We came out to the main tunnel. Everyone else already returned and looked serious.

“Hajin, come here.”

Kim Suho called me over.

“What’s up with them? *Um*, hold on.” I left Rachel and ran up to Kim Suho.

“What’s up?”

“Hajin, you see...”

Kim Suho told me that Chae Jinyoon showed signs of waking up and that Chae Nayun had left to visit him. I blacked out the moment I heard and found myself running somewhere by the time I regained my senses.

* * *

I would’ve gone there by bike, but left it at home today. I took the Busan portal and ran to Daehyun’s VIP hospital in Seoul.

“*Haa, haa...*”

I finally arrived in front of the hospital. My heart screamed in pain and my lungs almost burst. I caught my breath as a familiar voice rang out.

“You heard the news?”

I turned around startled. Yoo Yeonha also arrived in a hurry, but her appearance remained the same.

“Yeah, you too?”

“Yes. I participate in all important matters related to the Chae clan. Why did you run over in such a hurry?”

“...”

I glared at the hospital without answering. I had predicted that the devil seed would sprout in January with the Book of Truth. I thought I still had time since it was only October. However, I forgot one important thing. Chae Jinyoon could wake up before the devil seed sprouted.

Things would get more complicated if that happened. It didn't take a genius to figure out that killing an unconscious patient would be significantly easier than killing a conscious patient. A piece of cloth suddenly touched my forehead. I looked up in surprise at Yoo Yeonha right in front of me.

"Why are you sweating so much? Are you that worried?"

Yoo Yeonha personally wiped my sweat off with her handkerchief. I wondered why we stood perfectly at eye-level until I noticed that she wore high heels.

"Done. Here, you can have this."

She gave me the handkerchief.

"Uh, yeah... thanks."

I took it and looked at the hospital. Then I subconsciously sighed.

"He didn't wake up, but showed signs. It's not something to make a big deal about," Yoo Yeonha answered my burning question.

I see. That's great.

I turned back.

"Eh? You're going back already? Don't you want to see Nayun?"

Yoo Yeonha sounded surprised. I replied as I walked away, "No, I don't think I belong here."

I only ran for a while, but my body and mind felt exhausted. *Was this*

how mental exhaustion felt?

“Haa...”

My smartwatch received another message as I sighed.

[Little apprentice, I got the alert that you received yoru item.] [Your. So when are you goign to take on your next misson?]

It came from Boss. I realized once again that she was my only hope. I clenched my teeth and immediately replied.

[I can start tomorrow.]

* * *

Yoo Yeonha watched Kim Hajin slowly disappear as she thought about what he said.

— I don't think I belong here.

“Pft. It sounds like a line from a drama. I don't think I belong here.”

She murmured in a deep voice when she received a message.

[Yeonha, I'm heading over right now. Is Nayun doing okay?]

It came from Kim Suho.

[I haven't even met...]

She suddenly came to a realization as she typed.

“Did he leave to make room for Kim Suho?”

Everyone knew that Chae Nayun had favorable feelings for Kim Suho. She clearly acted differently in front of him.

“Hmm...”

Indeed, Kim Hajin would've realized that Chae Nayun liked Kim Suho. Yoo Yeonha half-heartedly replied, *[not yet—]* before heading inside. No, she almost entered when Chae Nayun trudged out from the entrance. She seemed to have aged by 5 years, but faintly smiled. Yoo Yeonha raised her hand.

“Nayun.”

“Ah, Yeonha.”

Chae Nayun saw Yoo Yeonha and scurried up to her with a bright smile. She desperately needed someone to talk to. Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha sat at a nearby bench. Then Yoo Yeonha carefully asked, “How’s the situation?”

“He’s still uncon... I don’t know. *Um*, the doctor said that the graph is spiking up and down. He chased me out, saying that oppa needed to rest.”

Yoo Yeonha understood what Chae Nayun implied.

“That’s good news, right?”

“Yeah. Patients in similar cases all woke up within three months.”

Chae Nayun placed her hands over her chest.

“I feel like my heart is about to burst. How embarrassing... I shouldn’t cry...”

Chae Nayun lived the past five years thinking Chae Jinyoon would never wake. Her pent-up sorrow and struggles seemed to overflow as she clenched her teeth and cupped her hands over her face. Soon, her feelings came out as she sobbed and her whole body trembled. She should’ve cried out of happiness, but she seemed rather sad and pitiful.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha patted her back without saying anything. Frankly, she couldn't empathize with Chae Nayun at all. Yoo Yeonha had a happy family despite an obsessive father and an ambitious mother.

Chae Jinyoon had been in a coma for 5 years with no signs of waking. The passing time could've only cycled between rage, sadness, frustration, despair, and resignation. Hope finally returned when it had almost disappeared. A family member thought to be lost forever could finally come back.

Yoo Yeonha couldn't imagine what Chae Nayun felt.

"Ah, hic... hic. My chest hurts."

"Oh right, Kim Suho is coming soon. That person already came by."

Yoo Yeonha spoke once Chae Nayun calmed.

"That person?"

"Kim Hajin."

"Kim Hajin came too?"

"Yeah."

Yoo Yeonha pictured the Kim Hajin she just met. He was covered in sweat and looked like he would cry.

"He arrived even before me all covered in sweat."

"..."

Chae Nayun slowly looked around for someone in hiding.

"He already left."

"Eh? Why?"

“I don’t know.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled mischievously. “Maybe he yielded the seat to Kim Suho.”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you like him? Kim Suho, I mean.”

Chae Nayun’s face stiffened. Yoo Yeonha slightly turned before she could respond.

“Or maybe you used to like him?”

“N-No, it’s neither. W-What are you talking about?”

“Really? That’s not how I saw it.”

Yoo Yeonha smirked and teased her. However, Nayun seemed to have lost all her energy from crying and didn’t react much. Then they felt several people running towards them. Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun simultaneously turned and spotted Kim Suho, Yun Seung-Ah, and Shin Jonghak.

Chapter 111

Action (4)

Rachel contacted the Royal Court as soon as she returned and revealed everything to her butler. Lancaster had appeared and murdered the agent protecting her, but returned without hurting her.

— Can you describe the situation before Lancaster appeared in more detail?

The butler seriously asked.

“Yes? *Ah, um...* A friend gave me a present.”

— By the way, Princess, you can speak to me in English.

“*Ah*, right, sorry. So *um*, about the situation...”

Rachel reported what happened in English. The butler rubbed his chin before continuing in a low voice.

— *Hm...* perhaps Lancaster wants Princess to suffer the same pain.

“Yes?”

Rachel tilted her head.

— Lancaster lost his most precious people in the London Incident. He must want Princess to share the same fate. He must’ve misunderstood Princess’ relationship with this friend.

“*Ah...*”

It seemed possible now that she thought about it. After all, Lancaster

said he saw an amusing scene.

“But that’s not it...”

Rachel looked at the bracelet on her wrist. Lancaster was gravely mistaken if that’s what he thought. She wasn’t in any position to be intimate with someone.

— Anyways, Princess. I see you’ve changed a lot.

“*Eh?* In what way?”

— In the past, you used to love eating and playing around like a child. Now, you’re calm and collected.

“T-That was before I grew up.”

Honestly, Rachel acted quite playful until she turned six. She always fulfilled all her responsibilities before playing. The queen, the royal consort, and Rachel’s butler could only watch with a smile, but her playfulness disappeared after that incident.

— It’s getting late, Princess. You should sleep. We will notify you soon whether we’ll send another agent or hire a skilled mercenary.

“Yes. By the way, did that agent... have a family?”

The butler bitterly smiled and shook his head.

— No, he didn’t.

“I see. Please treat him well. I will also participate in the funeral.”

— Yes, understood.

Someone had died to protect her. That put a heavy burden on her heart, but Rachel hung up without showing any weakness.

“*Haa.*”

However, she couldn't prevent a sigh from escaping. Rachel took out her earphones to relieve her stress. She looked at the music app on her smartwatch.

[If – Kim Hajin] [Now I Wish It Was So – Kim Hajin (karaoke)] [You In My Arms – Kim Hajin (karaoke)] [To J – what I sang (karaoke)]...

She secretly made several recordings when they went karaoke and managed her insomnia to some extent thanks to Kim Hajin's voice. On a side note, she also realized her terrible singing after listening to herself.

"Today, let's go with..."

Now I Wish It Was So. Rachel hit the play button and hopped into bed.

* * *

[I can start tomorrow.]

Boss contacted me the next day after my positive reply.

Apprentice Mercenary Mission [Difficulty: D] [Reward: 400,000,000 Korean won or an item of equivalent value] [Goal: Attack a djinn group under Jehon's human trafficking.] [Jehon operates a human trafficking truck once a week. Two guarded trucks will cross the Weike Bridge at 10 P.M. Attack and rescue the hostages.]

The mission took place in China. To be more precise, it would occur on a road connecting China to Mongolia. Djinnns often used this smuggling route.

According to my settings, the Russian region neighboring Mongolia was a lawless zone where strength reigned supreme. It also served as a lair for djinnns who committed all sorts of crimes. However, a society operated by djinnns also inhabited this lawless zone. The UN refused to recognize it, but most referred to this place as Pandemonium. It equaled in size to a small city.

I went to Beijing through Seoul when classes ended the next day. I

made sure to wear a mask and sunglasses once I arrived.

The northern region of Beijing was considered an intermediate rank danger zone filled with monsters. I arrived at a worn bridge above a river after an hour of driving.

“It’s kinda creepy.”

Intermediate rank monsters frequently appeared and I didn’t spot a single person.

“Let’s see.”

I knocked down several trees to block the bridge’s only entrance. Then I received a message.

[There will be multiple enemies, but not all will be djinns. Some became the dogs of devils and others are simply evil people who lead despicable lives. These are your targets.]

“Hm.”

Contracts with devils amplified a djinn’s negative emotions. Weaker djinns tended to commit harsher crimes using all sorts of methods. Their instincts grew stronger with unmet desires that led to rage and pure evil.

“That’s nice to know.”

I could deal with them easier without being mentally burdened. I looked around for cover. The surrounding area looked like a desert. The trees in the nearby forest were all too short. I had no choice, but to directly confront them.

I got on my bike and drove about 600 meters over the bridge. Then I faced the bridge and saw everything around it in full view.

I checked the time at 9:35 P.M. They would arrive at 10. I weaved aether into a chair and sat as I took out a cloth and wiped the Desert Eagle. Finally, I spotted two trucks and four escort vehicles after about

30 minutes.

“Here they come.”

I slowly stood up and infused the Desert Eagle with Aether, transforming it into a sniper rifle. Then I aimed at the truck drivers. The driver in front seemed drunk or high as he snickered. I had no reason to hesitate and pulled the trigger.

TANG! My clothes fluttered from the pressure. The bullet blew up the driver’s head without a scream. The window shattered and the driver immediately scattered into black dust. It didn’t stop and pierced the truck’s cargo compartment.

Click—

I ejected the bullet casing and aimed for the second driver. He had no clue and made an easy target. I fired and a white bullet immediately pierced through. *Kiiik—* The trucks skidded and crashed into trees. The escort vehicles finally noticed and stopped. The doors shot open as a total of 18 djinns ran out. Three with swords, four with spears, two with axes, three with bows, and the rest with assault rifles. I observed their movements as I took out a ginseng pill with modified effects.

[Medicinal energy has spread throughout your body.] [All variable stats except magic power will increase by 1.5 points for 5 minutes.]

This modification only required 5 SP. It didn’t cost much since I changed a permanent stat boost into a temporary one. I swallowed the pill and activated the under armor’s haste. Then I transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle. I could feel my body swirling with energy.

“Huu...”

I took a deep breath and stared at the incoming djinns.

— 他妈的是什么？

— 你想回去吗？嘿！你这个婊子的儿子！

They spoke among themselves. Of course, I didn't understand Chinese. Honestly, I didn't care.

“Would you shut up?”

I calmly aimed at them. They charged like raging bulls and kicked up a cloud of dirt. However, I activated bullet time and they felt like snails. First, I targeted the djinns with assault rifles. I fired a bullet into each of their heads. They couldn't even use magic power reinforcement and easily scattered into dust. Then I aimed for the ones rushing in with spears. They managed to close in about 200 meters away, but wouldn't proceed any farther.

“Hm?”

However, they could use magic power reinforcement. That surprised me, but magic power reinforcement was different from qi reinforcement. It was only a low rank defensive skill from randomly releasing magic power. I could easily break through such an elementary skill.

I fired three bullets at the djinn in the front.

The first made the magic power reinforcement unstable, the second destroyed the unstable magic power reinforcement, and the third pierced through the gap to kill him.

I only needed 3 bullets to kill each spear warrior. The world remained still as I fired nonstop. Multiple sparks of light flashed from my barrel and slaughtered all the weaklings. I aimed and fired like a machine.

“...”

I fired a total of 30 shots and killed ten warriors. Not even a minute had passed since they got out of their cars.

Now, only two djinns with bows remained. They pulled their bowstrings, but I only needed to flick my finger. White light flashed

from my barrel.

The two djinns scattered into dust.

“Haa.”

Time returned to normal. I felt slightly lightheaded and walked over the bridge. Then I opened the cargo compartment of the right truck.

“Uaaaaaa!”

A man charged at me with a dagger. He caught me completely off guard as my head momentarily blanked. His eyes flickered with killing intent and blue magic power covered his dagger. A giant wolf shot out of my chest and bit his neck before it could reach my heart.

“AAAK! AAAAAAAK!”

The wolf equaled the size of two adult men. I rubbed my chest as the wolf restrained him. I... wasn't hurt.

“Whew.”

I sighed in relief at the potentially fatal mistake. I should've been more careful.

“Kuaaaaak...”

Crunch. His neck broke and the djinn scattered into dust. I looked around the cargo compartment full of kidnapped people. Their eyes filled with fear and sorrow.

“...”

[Mission completed.]

I sent Boss a message before throwing the djinn's smartwatch to them.

“The djinns are all dead. You can use that to call heroes and go home

now.”

The wolf that saved my life approached me. He panted for my praise, so I stroked its head. Boss quickly replied.

[Confirmed. We'll deal with the cleanup.]

* * *

I stayed up all night at the Beijing Hotel and returned at 6 A.M. when the Cube portal opened. The dorm room felt oddly warm for some reason. Was it because of Hayang on the couch and Evandel's nightingales on the TV?

I smiled as I walked into the bedroom. Evandel had already gone to sleep. I sat on the edge and stroked her head. I realized that this child had been my emotional support for a long time now. I couldn't help but wonder when I started relying on such a young child.

“Sigh.”

Only a year had passed since I fell into this world. I had reached this point after only a year. Once I spent another 10 years like this and returned to Earth... *Could I go back to normal? Could I forget everything like it never happened?*

“Yaawn.”

Evandel opened her eyes and stared at me. Then came into my arms with a warm smile.

“It's Hajin. Hajin, Hajin...”

She murmured as she rubbed her cheeks against my chest.

“Oh right, Evandel. You saved me today.”

“Yummy, yummy food...”

Evandel didn't seem to care.

"We can eat yummy food later. Go back to sleep."

I rubbed her back.

* * *

I slouched over my desk 3 hours later in class. I only slept less than an hour and felt exhausted.

"*Auu...*"

I struggled to stay awake as someone sat next to me and tapped on my shoulder.

"Yo, Kim Hajin."

I turned to face Chae Nayun while still slouching. She practically beamed with joy.

"What."

"You didn't forget your promise tomorrow, right?"

"Promise?"

Kim Suho joined in. "You forgot, Hajin? We said we'd eat together."

"*Hah?*"

Only then did I raise my body. I spoke while looking at Chae Nayun, "I thought you said you planned on eating with Kim Suho."

"*Uh... ah*, didn't I tell you we would all eat together?"

"I'll be there too." Yoo Yeonha appeared next to Chae Nayun. "Jonghak and Yi Yeonghan will also come."

“Yeah, it’ll be for all members of the time travel group.”

Chae Nayun placed her hand on my head as she said that. Startled, I stiffened up. Meanwhile, she straightened my hair with her hand.

“There.”

She smiled in satisfaction. I glared at her dumbfounded. Even my mom stopped doing that after I hit puberty.

“Anyways, don’t forget to come. We’re going to karaoke after.”

“I’m busy that day—”

“Otherwise, we’ll invite you to a group chat.”

“That’s...”

I frowned. *Please spare me from that.*

Chapter 112

Truth (1)

The Chameleon Troupe relocated to a new base in an underwater cave near England's Bristol Channel. A guild expedition would occur near Suwon's abandoned factory, so they took the opportunity to move.

"Oooh..."

The Chameleon Troupe gathered to assess their revenue for the third quarter and discuss the battle prowess of their seat candidate. At least, they had planned on doing that. However, several members couldn't make it due to missions or personal affairs. Only five had gathered. Boss stood in front of them and displayed a video of Kim Hajin's mission.

"He killed 20 people in 21 seconds. Is that even a gun?"

A handsome man with a gentle complexion spoke in awe. He was Chameleon Troupe's seat of green, Jin Yohan.

"How can a gun be that strong? What a mysterious gift."

"So? What do you think?" Jain urged him to give his assessment.

"Hmm..." I'm not sure, but he should be around a high-intermediate rank hero."

"What? That high?"

"Huh?" How is that high?"

Jin Yohan's tone caused Jain to frown. This was the problem with strong people. They underestimated the standards of lower ranks.

“Then 10 high-intermediate rank heroes could beat you.”

“*Nah*, that’s an exaggeration. Maybe a hundred.”

Jin Yohan shook his head and generously praised himself.

“What do you think, Jain?”

“I think he’s... intermediate rank. Like Kim Suho, he should be about intermediate rank, grade 7 to 9. I’m not sure about how he’ll fare against a strong opponent, but he seems helpful against many weaker opponents.”

Jain quickly pointed out Kim Hajin’s strengths and weaknesses. Kim Hajin would’ve collapsed from the praise if he overheard.

“*Eeeh*, only intermediate rank?”

“I’m being generous too. If he has that much potential at only 17... think about how he’ll be in 5 years. He’ll become an incredibly sharp weapon.”

Jain already concluded that Kim Hajin had a weapon-type gift that enhanced and transformed weapons. He also had a special physique that added an anti-magic property to his magic power.

“We need Gyeong for assessments like this. Is he still in the demon realm?”

“Yeah, that fool doesn’t want to come out.”

The demon realm was also another name for Pandemonium. Humans avoided talking about it, but Pandemonium was even more lavish and hedonistic than Las Vegas. Anyone could enter so long as they had the strength to break through the crowd of monsters. Cheok Jungyeong took pleasure in fighting there.

“What does Boss think?”

Jain asked their leader. However, she didn't reply. Jain turned and saw Boss clicking on a gaming console.

"Boss, you're playing a game?"

"*Hm? Ah...* it's nothing."

Boss nonchalantly replied with her eyes still fixed on the console. She looked rather cute.

"Did you fall in love with electronics after exchanging a few texts with Kim Hajin?"

"..."

Pibibip— A game-over effect could be heard. Boss switched off the console and looked sharply at Jain.

"Don't get cocky."

Jain slowly looked away, but recalled how friendly Boss acted when texting Kim Hajin. She felt slightly wronged and somewhat jealous. Then she changed the subject to Droon.

"Droon, did you clean up properly?"

"Yep. The victims were all rescued and I ate the rest! Both humans and bullets."

Droon responded with a bright smile as Jain sighed.

"Say you fed it. It's creepy if you ate it. Also, did you find out about that wolf?"

"Yeah, it's Kim Hajin's pet!"

"No, that's not what I..."

Jain felt unsure about that mysterious wolf that suddenly shot out of

Kim Hajin's chest.

"Don't worry about that." Boss stepped in.

"I will ask him myself. Kim Hajin trusts me very much."

"Really?"

"He'll believe me if I say you use red beans to make wine."

"Well, if you say so."

Jain nodded for now.

* * *

As promised, we met 2 days later in front of the Korean restaurant Chae Nayun had reserved. Han Jung Gak boasted 3 Michelin stars and I ended up joining the other five.

"Welcome. Come in, come in."

Chae Nayun enjoyed eating at Han Jung Gak from childhood and led the group. The interior resembled a traditional Korean house that looked quite homely. We followed Chae Nayun to our seats at a long table for six. I sat in the middle next to Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan as Chae Nayun sat in front of me.

"The food here is amazing. Look forward to it."

Chae Nayun said as she looked into my eyes. I avoided her straightforward gaze and pretended to nod. She initiated the conversation in a cheerful voice.

"Being here reminds me of the past."

"The past?"

"In 1972. We stayed there for about 7 weeks. My skills improved so

much. I haven't lost once since I came back."

"Didn't you lose to Rachel?"

"That was a tie!"

The others happily chattered about the world of the past. They also spoke about their worries concerning the upcoming exams. I silently listened as we waited for the food. Suddenly, I noticed that Shin Jonghak acted strangely.

"Oi, Kim Suho. Are you preparing well for exams?"

"It's so-so. What about you?"

"Have you ever seen me study? I'm different from you."

"Oh, is that so?"

"Right, we've been different since birth. Someone like you who only works hard wouldn't understand."

Shin Jonghak displayed his rivalry against Kim Suho, but didn't act particularly hostile. He should've been more intimidating like in the original story, but his current actions seemed mellow to the point that I found it funny. Of course, this was a good thing. However, I still felt curious. *Why did Shin Jonghak change so much?*

"Your food has arrived."

A waiter interrupted my thoughts and brought all sorts of dishes like braised short ribs, soy sauce marinated crab, kimchi, and stone pot rice. They served your typical Korean food. Only the grilled short rib patty was limited to one per person among the dozens of side dishes. I also liked it the most and took a bite.

"Wow, this is amazing."

The patty melted in my mouth as I subconsciously exclaimed.

“Yeah, it’s really good.”

Kim Suho commented from next to me. He seemed to be the type who savored his food as he only nibbled a small corner. However, I put the entire patty in my mouth.

“It’s good, right? Right? See, I told you it was going to be good.”

Chae Nayun happily cheered as I ate. “It’s good, right?”

“It is, so quiet down.”

“*Huhu.*”

I swallowed and went back to observing Shin Jonghak. He stared at Kim Suho with hawk-like eyes for any breach of table manners so he could nitpick, but soon gave up to focus on eating. I also looked down at my plate.

“What?”

For some reason, another grilled short rib patty had appeared. *What happened? Did I spit it back out?* I raised my head and made eye contact with Chae Nayun. She smiled. So she gave it to me. Chae Nayun moved her mouth without a sound when I pointed to the patty with my chopsticks.

You can have it.

“...”

I felt burdened by her kindness. However, the patty’s irresistible smell tickled my nose. *Gulp.* I swallowed hard. In the end, I surrendered and took a bite. A spark suddenly went off in my head as I chewed. I looked at Chae Nayun eating a rice bowl before turning to Shin Jonghak. Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun. In this three-way relationship, the biggest source of Shin Jonghak’s character development was... Chae Nayun.

I stared at Chae Nayun. *Did giving her the time capsule affect her too*

much? No, that was impossible. Chae Nayun liked handsome men. She suddenly laughed.

“Why are you staring? Do you want me to order more?”

“*Huh?* Oh, *um*, no.”

“Excuse me, Auntie!” Chae Nayun called a waiter before I could stop her.

“Can we get two more grilled short rib patties?”

I watched her cheerfully ordering more and felt an inexplicable sadness.

* * *

We went to a nearby karaoke bar after lunch. Chae Nayun sang surprisingly well. Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan also sounded decent. Yoo Yeonha looked forward to Shin Jonghak’s performance, which was also better than average. However, Kim Hajin was... on a whole different level. He could’ve been successful as a professional.

“Wow, my ears are melting.”

“Why don’t you just go pro?”

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan made a fuss as Yoo Yeonha glanced at Chae Nayun. Kim Hajin’s singing just ended, but Chae Nayun’s eyes remained closed as she savored the lingering images. Then Yoo Yeonha received a message on her smartwatch.

[Come outside. I have something to talk to you about.]

It came from Kim Hajin. Yoo Yeonha glanced at him before leaving the room. She waited for about 3 minutes when...

“Hey, buddy.”

Someone called her in a friendly tone. Yoo Yeonha couldn't help but laugh. "Buddy? What's up with the sudden English?"

"It means friend. Don't you know?"

"Do you think I wouldn't? Well, you know how I am, right?"

Kim Hajin laughed and nodded. He cut straight to the chase since Yoo Yeonha didn't like small talk.

"Of course. I need you to make some bullets."

"*Eh?* Bullets?"

Yoo Yeonha didn't expect such a request.

"Yeah, but I'm not looking for manufactured ones. I'm asking for custom-made. It's possible, right?"

"Yes. Essence of the Strait has state-of-the-art technology for it."

Most bullets were smaller than a thumb. Compressing mana into such a small object could only be done with state-of-the-art technology developed in the 2000s.

"I know. Also..."

Kim Hajin took out a small leaf from his pocket. Yoo Yeonha couldn't tell whether he picked it up from the ground or plucked it off a branch. The item didn't fit the situation.

"What's this? A leaf?"

"Grind it up and put it inside the bullets."

"Come again?"

Yoo Yeonha carefully scrutinized the leaf after receiving it. She couldn't find anything special about it no matter how much she

looked. She frowned and stared at him.

“You won’t tell me what it is even if I ask?”

Kim Hajin nodded.

“I just have to grind it and put it in the bullets?”

“Yep.”

“Okay.”

“Thanks. *Ah*, tell the others I’m heading out first.”

Yoo Yeonha tilted her head. “We’re leaving soon too, so why don’t you just stay?”

“I don’t feel comfortable. Shin Jonghak is eyeing me too much.”

Kim Hajin nudged her shoulder. Yoo Yeonha took a few steps back in shock.

“D-Don’t do that. It hurts.”

“*Ah*, sorry. Anyways, I’m leaving.”

“Yes, see you.”

Yoo Yeonha watched him leave as she rubbed her shoulder. Then an emergency message arrived on her smartwatch.

[Master, we may have found an incident related to Kim Hajin.]

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes widened.

[Report.]

[Something called the Kwang-Oh Incident occurred the year Kim Hajin was

born. There is a huge cover-up on it. Someone attacked one of our men while looking into it.]

“Attacked?”

Yoo Yeonha quickly replied. The amount of effort and money she spent on her investigators lingered on her mind.

[Is he okay?]

[Yes, he is recovering without any issues.]

[Send me what you’ve gathered so far and halt the investigation for now. The safety of our investigators always comes first.]

[Understood, Master.]

Yoo Yeonha stared at the words, *Kwang-Oh Incident*.

“Kwang-Oh Incident... Kwang-Oh Incident... Why does it sound so familiar?”

She recalled the phrase from a casebook inside her family home’s library. No, it was more like her father’s diary. She was only seven, but clearly remembered. She didn’t understand it back then because he wrote most of it in Hanja, but her father harshly scolded her for reading it without permission.

“I’ll have to take a look later.”

I can sneak a peek since Father is going on a trip this Friday.

“Huhu.”

Yoo Yeonha felt proud. Now she could properly return the favor to her ally. She saw Chae Nayun glaring at her when she happily turned around.

“Hük!”

Yoo Yeonha jumped in surprise. “H-Hey, Nayun, what’s up?”

“I wondered where you went?”

Chae Nayun gestured for her to come back.

“*Uh*, yeah... Oh, Nayun, that person said he’s leaving first.”

“What? Why? What did he talk to you about?”

Chae Nayun frowned as she asked. Yoo Yeonha found this side of her quite cute and poked her with her finger.

“*Ak!* What is it?”

“*Geez*, you don’t have to look at me like that.”

“Like wh— *ah*, hey, *aaang*, s-stop!” Yoo Yeonha kept poking her from her side and a more sensitive area.

“*Ahng*, st-stop poking me.”

“What was that?”

“R-Really, *aang*. Hey!”

Chae Nayun could no longer endure it and covered her breasts. “Why are you poking me there? Are you crazy?”

“It’s because I’m jealous.”

Yoo Yeonha explained as she looked for an opening. She couldn’t help but wonder how someone could have such a perfect figure. Her skin looked milky white as well. *Poke, poke.*

“*Ah, aah*. S-Stop, d-don’t. I-I’m ticklish, *ah*, stop—!”

Chae Nayun ran away from Yoo Yeonha with a flushed face.

Chapter 113

Truth (2)

I returned home late at night. Evandel and Hayang ran up to me as I opened the door. I was used to Evandel's *Hajin Hajin* and Hayang's meowing by now. I hugged the two of them and sat on the couch. I had bought an animated movie that Evandel wanted and played it on the TV. They grew silent as the movie began. Hayang's intelligence seemed to match humans. She refused to eat normal cat food and recognized me as the head of the household.

"Wait a minute."

I looked at the ring on my finger and Hayang's wagging tail. Then I came up with a strange idea. *Who said only humans could wear rings?*

[Homer's Ring] [Artifact] [Awakened] A ring Homer wore in the past. It resonates with nature and will endow its wearer with energy. [Intelligence Boost – Will increase the wearer's intelligence by 0.001 points every 24 hours up to a maximum of 0.365 points.] [High rank Magic Power Amplification]

I modified the ring's setting out of curiosity.

[Intelligence Boost – Will increase the wearer's intelligence by 0.001 points every 24 hours up to a maximum of 0.365 points.] [For a selected non-human target, the increase will become 0.01 points per 12 hours.]

[40 SP will be used.]

"Huh? This works?"

I calculated in my head. With 0.02 points per day, 18 days would be enough to maximize the stat. It also didn't require much SP. *What if I erased the non-human part?*

[The rate of increase will double for the first person who wears it.] [250 SP will be used.]

The gap between a human and animal was huge.

“Hmm.”

I pondered for a moment. It would cost 40 SP and 18 days. *Would Hayang be able to help me if she grew smarter?* I looked at Hayang in Evandel’s arms. She might not be able to help me, but she could help Evandel. It wouldn’t hurt to try.

I slipped the ring onto Hayang’s tail. She turned to look at me and spotted the ring. She stared at it for 1 second, 2 seconds, 3 seconds... then wagged her tail, satisfied by the sparkle.

“Let’s see how smarter you become in two weeks.”

I stroked Hayang’s back and thought of the wolf Evandel gave me. I turned on my laptop and checked its stats.

[Ghost Wolf] [Servant] [Intermediate rank] — The first servant created by Evandel the witch.

Basic Stats: [Strength: 5.350] [Bite: 6.150] [Speed: 7.550] [Perception: 7.605] [Vitality: 2.750] [Magic Power: 3.850]

Special Skills: [Intuition (Advanced)] Can sense danger. [Absorption (Low)] Can strengthen itself through absorption. [Tattoo Form (Low)] Can merge with its master in the form of a tattoo to recharge its magic power and strengthen its master’s stats.

First Servant: Its growth potential and hierarchical rank are superior to other servants.

Unity of Soul: Will grow stronger along with Evandel the witch.

“Wow.”

Its stats surprised me, especially its incredible speed and perception. I could even ride it instead of my bike if its vitality and stamina were higher. The word *servant* also caught my attention.

“So that’s why.”

Now I understood why it was so strong. One of a witch’s authorities was the ability to create servants. In doing so, a witch separated a part of her soul. As a result, servants were much stronger than normal creations, and a witch could only create 3-5 servants throughout her life. In the original story, Evandel’s most notorious servant was the three-headed dog, Cerberus. I remember describing its huge body with black flames.

“I’ll have to give the under armor to him.”

This wolf had the potential to grow into the real Fenrir. *Why did Evandel choose a wolf? Did I resemble one like Boss said?*

“Haha, look at that, Hayang.”

I could hear Evandel giggling as she watched her movie. She laughed, stared in shock, teared up, and swayed from side to side at various scenes.

Woong— I received a message.

[The Traveling Club will be going to a festival in Busan this Saturday. Please RSVP whether or not you will be attending.]

I furrowed my brows. Honestly, the traveling club would encounter some sort of trouble every time they went out.

“Vroom.”

Evandel tilted her head to the right along with the car on TV. I carefully placed my hand on her head.

“Evandel?”

“Yeah?”

“Let’s go out to play on Friday.”

The traveling club would visit the Busan festival on Saturday and Sunday. I could grab a hotel and spend some time with Evandel on Friday.

“Play?”

Evandel’s eyes sparkled.

“Yeah, it looks like I’m free on Friday. Since we went to Disneyland last week, this week we’ll...”

Evandel’s eyes sparkled with anticipation.

“Go to a festival.”

* * *

Friday at 2 P.M.

“Combat magic is very important, yet simple.”

I was currently in the middle of our *[Combat Magic and High Rank Magic Application]* class. I glanced at Tomer sitting next to me. She jotted down notes like usual.

Recently, I spoke a lot with her. She stealthily asked me questions about Agus Benjamin like what kind of relationship we had and what type of person he was. I planned on bringing her to our side as I answered her questions. Her father’s cremation urn should be surrounded by the flowers I brought.

“Most spells require you to refine magic power inside your body. However, certain spells are an exception. The most well-known example is the barrier spell...”

The class continued without end. Tomer tapped my shoulder as I dozed off. She handed me a piece of paper as I wiped my drool.

[How did you get close to that person?]

I looked at the paper, then at Tomer's face. She had a serious expression. I cleared my throat and jotted a reply.

[It wasn't easy.]

[So how? The nurses said even they couldn't get close.]

[Well, he didn't have a family. Our situations were similar.]

I passed the paper back. Tomer seemed like she didn't understand.

[What do you mean by similar?]

"Oh right."

However, she stopped writing mid-sentence. She had already investigated my background and recalled I was an orphan. Tomer glanced at me sympathetically, then scratched out the sentence and wrote a new one.

[Got it.]

I took the lead next.

[You've been asking about him since last week. Why?]

[That person is my biological father.]

"Eh?"

I wanted to poke her a bit, but I never expected her to drop the bomb. She seriously surprised me.

[I know what you're thinking. I feel the same. I never thought I'd find someone who knew him either.]

Tomer quickly jotted down.

[That person abandoned me and ran away. That's why I've been looking for him.]

I remained silent. Unlike Tomer, I knew the truth. Her father didn't abandon her. It was the opposite. He had protected her by leaving. He killed his wife because she became a djinn and tried to sell off their daughter.

[So I'm wondering. Did that bas... person leave a will or keepsake behind?]

The South American culture back then was to kill off all relatives related to djinns. Tomer's father chose to become a criminal because of this witch hunt culture. He ran away to protect his daughter, but had always missed her. He left behind a letter for that purpose.

[Yeah, he left behind a letter.]

Tomer's eyes coldly flickered.

[Where?]

[In a memorial, along with his cremation urn.]

[Where's the memorial?]

[Let's go together. I'll take you there.]

[Shut up and just give me the address.]

The theatrical effect wouldn't be as strong if she went alone, but it didn't matter too much.

[Here.]

I gave her the address. Tomer typed it into her smartwatch.

[By the way, today will be my last day at Cube. I'm not trying to run off with your money, so don't misunderstand.]

"Excuse me."

Kim Hyojun, the chief magician from Seoul magic tower, pointed at us.

"Are you two in a relationship?"

Only then did I realize our arms practically touched as we secretly passed notes back and forth. Tomer scurried to the side, but everyone's attention already fell on us.

"I don't think you two suit each other. Also, dating so openly is prohibited in Cube."

"It's not like that."

I felt an intense stare as I answered. It came from Chae Nayun. Yoo Yeonha, who sat next to her, continued taking notes without a care. However, Chae Nayun glared at me with puffy cheeks.

"Cadet Kim Hajin? Come here for a minute."

"Ah."

"Ah?"

"Ah, yes."

I knew this would happen. Kim Hyojun wouldn't just let it slide. He liked to embarrass students to feel superior. I scratched my neck and went up in front of the class.

"Cadet Kim Hajin, you passed the first semester with average scores all around."

Kim Hyojun projected my scores from last semester. I scored between a C and B+ on the light sphere, magic power emission, magic power harmonization, etc.

“Then what was today’s lesson about?”

“Uh...”

I didn’t know since I wasn’t paying attention. I remained silent until someone whispered.

— Barrier, barrier.

Kim Suho came to my rescue.

“It’s barrier.”

“...That’s right. Can you demonstrate it for the class?”

Kim Hyojun asked. *Wait, barrier?* I suddenly recalled a scene from the original story. Kim Hyojun always bothered Kim Suho like this out of jealousy.

“Barrier?”

“Yes, try it.”

My lips felt dry as I activated stigma’s magic power and created a barrier to cover my upper body. It cost one and a half streaks of stigma. The blue magic power formed a pentagon that looked quite decent. It had a vein-like circuit that efficiently transported magic power. I didn’t mean to, but stigma had created a perfect barrier. Kim Hyojun looked somewhat displeased, but soon faked a smile and praised me.

“It looks good. The magic power’s transparency is especially noteworthy.”

However, he quickly added negative remarks.

“But it’s weak, too weak. Everyone, do you know what the problem is with a cadet like him?”

He turned to the class and lectured as though I did something deplorable.

“It looks pretty on the outside. Too pretty, as if appearance is all that matters. That seems to be all there is to it.”

I glanced at the barrier. Stigma had decided on the appearance by itself.

“Cadet Kim Hajin!”

Kim Hyojun pointed his finger at me.

“You are not a celebrity! A barrier must be sturdy, even if its appearance isn’t the best!”

Kim Hyojun ignited a fireball on his palm.

“The barrier you created will be blown away by even this tiny fireball.”

“Um...”

I stared at the fireball. Honestly, I didn’t think it would penetrate my barrier.

“Cadet Kim Hajin, are you ready?”

“Yes? Ah, yes.”

“Then I will now demonstrate why a barrier shouldn’t just be pretty.”

Kim Hyojun didn’t throw the fireball. A combustion of magic power sent it flying towards me. *Boom!* A small explosion erupted, along with smoke. However, my barrier remained perfectly fine and the fireball had scattered. A heavy silence descended. As I thought, stigma’s magic

power was on another level. Its only flaw was its quantity.

“*Cough*, looks like it isn’t so bad. BUT!”

Ding— The bell rang and signaled the end of class.

“*Huu.*”

Kim Hyojun sighed and glared at me before muttering.

“You can go back to your seat.”

Friday’s final class ended at 4 P.M.

* * *

[5:00 P.M.]

The family house of the famous Yoo clan was a large, 1500 square meter castle in Gangnam, Seoul worth tens of billions of won. Yoo Yeonha returned home after classes today.

“Welcome back, Young Lady.”

A butler politely greeted her as she approached the front door.

“It’s been a while. Are Father and Mother home?” Yoo Yeonha whispered.

“Master is on a business trip, and the Mistress left for a seminar.”

“Oh? How unfortunate. I dropped by to see them.”

“Should I give them a call? Mistress left not too long ago.”

“Ah, no. You don’t need to do that.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled as she handed her baggage to the butler. The

situation turned out even better with her mother gone.

“I have exams coming up, so I’ll head to the library and read Father’s books.”

“Yes, Young Lady.”

She knew her parents weren’t home, but still tiptoed upstairs to look for information regarding the Kwang-Oh Incident.

“I haven’t been here in such a long time.”

Tens of thousands of books filled her father’s library. The entire collection would cost just as much as the house. She pushed aside her father’s desk and moved the carpet to reveal a secret vault.

“*Huh?* It requires a password now?”

It was only a simple box 10 years ago. Yoo Yeonha thought for a moment before entering four numbers: 0429. She tried both her birthday and her mother’s, but it didn’t work.

“*Hmm...*”

Yoo Yeonha thought harder. She had a skilled hacker among her investigators, but it would be impossible to hack since this vault wasn’t connected to the internet. Would she have to give up after coming all the way here? 04290816. She suddenly thought of combining her birthday with her mother’s. Bingo. *Peebeep*— The vault opened.

“Let’s see.”

She found an old and thick diary inside. Her father had kept it for 20 years. Yoo Yeonha looked for Kwang-Oh as she flipped through the pages. *Kwang-Oh, Kwang-Oh, Kwang-Oh...*

“*Ah, here it is.*”

[Today, I received a report on Kwang-Oh.]

September 9, 2008. Yoo Yeonha read through the diary entry.

Chapter 114

Truth (3)

[Today, I received a report on Kwang-Oh.]

As soon as she read the first line, her investigators sent her a message that Kim Hajin was admitted to an orphanage near the Kwang-Oh evacuation shelter. Yoo Yeonha felt sad she didn't have any potato chips as she slowly turned the page. She could easily read the Hanja now, which her father often used to write in.

[The media reported last night's incident as a djinn attack on the Kwang-Oh evacuation shelter. They said a single djinn massacred 9 heroes and all the civilians there, but I would never forget what happened in Kwang-Oh that day for the rest of my life.]

At first, it seemed like a simple recounting of the Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter Massacre. However, the tone of the writing began to change.

[President Kim Sukho declared Jin Younghwan, who troubled him, as a secret agent for djinns. However, I knew that Jin Younghwan was an honest man. His only flaw was that he was too honest. Perhaps Kim Sukho didn't want his embarrassing secrets to leak. However, Chae Joochul agreed that Jin Younghwan was a djinn and also wished for his death. Jin Younghwan had many loyal subordinates. It would surely raise suspicions if he was assassinated alone. As such, Chae Joochul ordered a skilled assassin to massacre everyone and left me to oversee the plan.]

“...?”

Yoo Yeonha turned the page back and forth as she read it again, but couldn't understand the contents. She even translated it with a smartwatch app thinking she had misinterpreted a few words. However, the contents remained the same. Yoo Yeonha read her father's confession in a daze.

[On that day, I received a transmission from Jin Younghwan. It sounded urgent, but I had concocted that monster invasion. I told Jin Younghwan that saving civilians came first and drove them into a corner at the Kwang-Oh evacuation shelter. Jin Younghwan tried to protect the civilians there.]

Yoo Yeonha stared at the neat handwriting that she recognized and felt a strong headache. However, she didn't stop reading.

[At 8 P.M. on November 8, Chae Joochul's assassin murdered Jin Younghwan and all his subordinates in the evacuation shelter. I wanted to bury this incident in my heart, but received the assassin's report the next day. It stated that one of Jin Younghwan's subordinates was with his pregnant wife.]

Yoo Yeonha froze at the words, *pregnant wife*. Kim Hajin was admitted to an orphanage the day after the Kwang-Oh Incident.

[The report contained another interesting matter. The assassin had found an umbilical cord at the site. The mother had given birth even in the face of death. The baby's corpse was never found.]

Yoo Yeonha realized what happened when she reached this part. Her heart ached despite the lack of evidence. She squeezed her chest and hoped the baby wasn't Kim Hajin.

[This baby was fated to die. He would have no future even if he survived, so I set out to find him and kill him.]

She felt something inside her shatter as she read her father's heartless declaration. Memories flashed in her mind.

— Don't worry and go to sleep. It'll be over by the time you wake up.

An image of a guy who fought an entire army of monsters to save her. He had risked his life for her. However, her father had led his parents to their deaths and even tried to kill him.

[However, I suddenly recalled my daughter's birth on April 29. She couldn't do anything by herself, but her existence alone brought me great joy. I called the assassin and asked what happened to the baby. The assassin had thrown the baby away without killing him.]

Yoo Yeonha dropped her head and clenched her trembling hands. A familiar voice suddenly rang in her head.

— Hey, don't you think we can become good allies?

It was her own voice. For the first time in her life, she had asked someone to become her ally. It seemed insignificant, but that was her way of showing gratitude.

[In the end, I omitted information about that child from the report. However, I killed his parents and didn't help him. He might be slowly dying at this very moment on the cold, hard ground. I have no intention of denying this.]

— Buddy means friend. Don't you know?

He had also acknowledged her as an ally. His voice became a sharp blade that pierced her heart.

Yoo Yeonha shook and no longer dared to turn the page. Her heart violently beat as she felt an unknown emotion rising from the depths of her heart. Guilt, resentment, anguish... She couldn't think, and no longer wanted to. Cold sweat formed on her forehead as her vision turned blurry and exhaustion engulfed her body.

[I've lived the life of a coward. It would make no difference if I further dirtied myself. I decided to forget for the sake of my daughter and my clan. However, I am leaving the truth behind in this diary. Am I just trying to appease my guilty conscience? Or is it to spite Chae Joochul? That, I don't know.]

Kim Hajin's face and her father's confession formed a monster that she couldn't withstand. *Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin...* His name flickered before her like an apparition. She choked and couldn't bear the torrent of emotions.

* * *

[Seoho Memorial]

Tomer stood alone under the crescent moon that illuminated the night. She had dealt with all her personal affairs before coming here, and could no longer predict her future since she had lived for revenge, but now that was impossible. She briefly thought about tearing her father's will apart and taking her own life.

Kiik— Tomer opened the door to the memorial and looked for the name, Agus Benjamin. She soon found it engraved on a cabinet that stood out from the rest.

[Agus Benjamin]

A cremation urn sat inside the small, square cabinet. It didn't look so lonely with flowers surrounding it.

"What's this?"

The number of flowers surprised her as she picked up one of the small cards.

[2024 April, Kim Hajin]

Tomer immediately checked the rest of the flowers.

[2024 August, Kim Hajin] [2025 April, Kim Hajin] [2025 August, Kim Hajin]

They all came from Kim Hajin. The flowers hadn't wilted either since they all contained useless magic power.

"The hell."

Tomer cursed and threw them aside. Then she found a yellow envelope inside the cabinet. She carefully held it up and read the Spanish on the cover, *To my daughter*. A sudden heat rose from her heart. She ripped open the envelope and began to read the letter inside. She was curious what excuse her damn father would cook up.

[Dear my beloved daughter,

I am wrought with complicated emotions as I write this letter. On one hand, I hope that you don't read it. On the other, I hope that you do. I am also worried about how you will feel after...]

Tomer skimmed over the letter, partly because she hadn't read any Spanish in a long time.

[Your mother could not withstand the temptation and sold her soul to a djinn.] [I couldn't let anyone find out.] [It was the only way to save you from a society that executed the relatives of djinns.]

She couldn't understand several sentences and found them harder to accept. Tomer felt rage rather than acceptance. As far as she was concerned, her father refused to repent and blamed her mother instead.

[I wanted you to go to Korea and live a better life in a better country. However, you disappeared when I arrived in Korea. I gave up everything and entrusted you to a friend, but I couldn't contact him either. I thought about ending my worthless life as the world betrayed me...]

Tomer crumpled the letter without finishing it. She considered it a lie and almost tore it apart when two items fell out of the envelope onto the ground. A rusty brooch her father had given her for her birthday and a small watch she had given him after saving up her allowance.

Tomer stared at the two items in a daze. The foundation of her being shook as she leaned against the wall and opened up the crumpled letter. She collected her thoughts before reading the letter again, slowly and thoroughly.

* * *

I rented a room in the presidential suite of the Lotus Inn Hotel in Busan. I sipped on a glass of wine on the balcony of this 500 square meter room. A suite like this was usually hard to come by, but someone had canceled before I made a reservation. It still cost 8 million won a night, but my luck managed to snag it.

“What a beautiful view.”

I sat on the balcony and stared into the horizon. I could see the beach and the streets decorated with colorful lights the night before the festival. We arrived in Busan at 5 and enjoyed water gun fights, fireworks, and a 3-star Michelin restaurant until 9. I took pictures of Evandel and Hayang running around and having fun. My personal favorite was Evandel's face as she tasted a 3-star Michelin dish for the first time. It felt like my first real vacation.

[Thanks.]

A message came from Tomer. This also made me happy. Our relationship as creditor and debtor still existed thanks to our magic contract. Now, Tomer should become my ally without any issues.

“Wow! Look at that, Hayang! We're inside this paper!”

I could hear Evandel's voice from the living room. She seemed fascinated by the pictures I printed. I couldn't help but smile at her pure soul. I received another message as I took a sip of wine and enjoyed the fresh air.

[Um, Hajin, if possible... can you maybe teach me how to wield magic power?]

Rachel had sent more than one message.

[Honestly, I felt amazed when I saw the barrier you made in class. Recently, I've been feeling like I hit a wall... (ㄸ_ㄸ)]

I found her messages cute, but I couldn't help her since I relied on stigma. Rather than that... a wall? *Was the bracelet not working?* I should've tested it before giving it to her.

[I can pay you lesson fees (★ω★)!]

The butterfly seedling's dust should've helped her reach a new level already if it had worked as intended. It wouldn't just simply awaken her potential since Rachel's gift also involved elementals.

“Hmm...”

Rachel had a lot of pride. I knew since I created her. The fact that she asked for help meant she was that frustrated. I couldn't blame her. She should've been enlightened at the end of the first semester, but it had been delayed for half a year now.

[See you Sunday night.]

I agreed in the end. I just needed to make the butterfly seedling's dust seeped into her body from the bracelet.

"Ah, what a great breeze."

I leaned against the handrail and looked down. The people below looked like ants from the presidential suite on the 60th floor. A certain man walking by a street caught my eye. He dressed very fancy and stood out from everyone else with black hair, a tall nose, and well-defined facial features. This handsome man resembled Legolas.

I felt an ominous sensation as I stared at him. The man looked up as though he felt my gaze. An ordinary person could never discover me from this distance, but I could tell he was looking straight at me. He almost smiled. I felt my heart tremble and returned a relaxed smile. Then the smile on his face grew thicker.

I felt like I knew him. My intuition as the original author screamed.

A man who came from another world like Kim Suho, but with a completely different personality. He despaired the loss of his world. A seeker of evil with twisted beliefs. The growth-type final boss that I designed, whose name I feared to utter.

I had no way of knowing what changes the co-author had made. Not to mention, I went on hiatus when the final boss began to make his move.

Hold on.

I suddenly had a strange thought. *Did the final boss actually look like that?* He did first appear at the Busan festival. However, his smile seemed strange. I didn't recall writing anything about him smiling so often.

The man nudged his companion and gestured at me, as if to say, *Look at that guy*. Right, he had a companion who was a girl. They both looked up at me.

I made eye contact with the girl. The navy-haired beauty with a sharp expression resembled an elf. Her eyes coldly flickered and I could feel her killing intent. This crazy girl exuded killing intent just because we made eye contact.

“Wait a minute.”

I began to feel a sense of fear and unease. *Could it be?* The final boss represented the polar opposite of Kim Suho. *Could he have become... a she?*

It wouldn't be impossible, but I hoped the co-author had enough common sense to not do that.

Chapter 115

The First Encounter (1)

I carefully observed them to find out who was the final boss. They spoke to each other while pointing at me. I could hear them with my gift.

— Sahyuk, what do you think about him?

The man called the girl Sahyuk. Then her last name should be Jin. *Jin Sahyuk*. I couldn't help but sigh as I pressed the temple of my forehead. She had the same name as the final boss. I held up my smartwatch, but no alerts popped up.

— Is he really looking at us?

Jin Sahyuk glared at me and asked.

— Of course, our eyes met.

— He doesn't look strong though.

I had designed Jin Sahyuk as a growing final boss with the same, or perhaps even higher potential than Kim Suho. She would grow faster than Kim Suho and become the final boss in the end. She served as Kim Suho's true rival. Her fate shouldn't have changed despite the gender swap. I wouldn't hesitate to kill her even if it took all my SP and the bullet made from Misteltein's leaf.

— Sahyuk, you must train your discernment. Someone who could observe us from that distance with the courage to glare back at you couldn't possibly be average.

My eyesight was special. One's perception stat needed to be at least 15 to match mine.

— And look at that beard. He looks quite strong.

I rubbed my beard. I had left it alone since I gained SP from just walking around Cube with it. I should get rid of it now.

— Didn't you tell me not to judge a book by its cover?

Jin Sahyuk glared at the man. However, he only laughed in response. I grew more curious about his identity. In the original story, Jin Sahyuk only had lackeys around.

“*Sigh*, never mind.”

This world was already different. I needed to stop crying about diverging from the original story.

— *Cough*, that's because I have good discernment and you don't. Listen brat, stop glaring at him. Are you trying to pick a fight?

— He glared at me first! He's still glaring!

— I'm sure he's just attracted to you. Why don't you wink at him instead? Show off your beauty.

— What about a death wink? I can shoot a beam of magic power at him.

I flinched. *This crazy bitch...* Thankfully, the man reacted sensibly and stopped her. Then he waved and they walked away. I watched them leave to an unknown destination. They caught me off guard, but I had confirmed the girl's identity. I still wondered about the man. *Who could possibly stand beside her as an equal or even a superior?*

“Hajin, can Hayang and I go swimming?”

Evandel's cheerful voice rang out.

“*Hm?*”

I turned around and saw her swinging her legs inside the indoor swimming pool while Hayang happily swam around.

“Sure, but do you know how to swim?”

“Of course, of course!”

Evandel jumped into the pool. She didn’t need to change since her clothes were made from magic.

“Hayang, Hayang. Let’s race!”

Hayang swam to the starting point and I could see the cat was growing smarter.

“It will be ready, start, then go. Okay? Ready...”

Evandel dragged out her word as she observed Hayang’s posture. Then suddenly...

“Start!”

She shouted and got a head start. Her cheap tactic surprised Hayang as the cat quickly chased after her. I smiled as I watched them. *Is this how it feels to have a daughter?* Of course, Evandel was a one-of-a-kind child.

* * *

We went to the new apartment I purchased instead of returning to Cube on Saturday morning. It was located in Seoul’s Seocho District and each room was about 160 square meters. I realized that my financial power wasn’t anything special yet. This apartment cost half of my savings even after I became a multi-billionaire through the stock market. Of course, the cost of the land always remained high since Korea was a tiny country despite being a superpower.

“Hajin, Hajin, where is this? It’s so big!”

“It’s our new house. We’ll be staying here from time to time. You can think of it as... a villa.”

“Aha.”

Evandel ran to the couch like usual as Hayang looked around for something to climb.

“I should have brought the nightingales.”

Evandel murmured as she rolled around on the couch. She referred to all the birds she created as nightingales. They all looked different, but we started calling them that.

“Evandel, play here with Hayang, okay? We have Legos, dolls, video games, and a TV. The fridge also has some food and snacks. Uncle is going out for a bit.”

“Un!”

“Meow.”

Evandel and Hayang happily agreed since I played with them all day yesterday. I raced through the roads on Agusta as its engine quietly hummed. Soon, I arrived at the Seoul portal station at 8 P.M. I came an hour earlier than scheduled and waited on a bench after parking my bike. Oh Hanhyun arrived first, and my early appearance clearly surprised him.

“You’re already here, Hajin?”

“Yep.”

Kim Suho arrived next and also reacted the same. He dragged along a half-asleep Yi Yeonghan.

“Hajin? Why are you here so early?”

“No reason. I guess I’m just looking forward to it.”

“Ah, I get it. *Kuku*, that’s cute.”

Kim Suho laughed. Then he suddenly recalled something and spoke to Oh Hanhyun.

“Oh right. Yoo Yeonha says she’ll come later tonight. She’s not feeling well.”

“What?”

That surprised me. *Why wasn’t she feeling well?* Nothing should’ve happened to make her sick.

“Do you know why?”

“She was hospitalized.”

“What? Hospitalized?”

My surprise turned into shock. Yi Yeonghan replied as he yawned.

“I think it was gastritis caused by stress? You know, she’s kind of sensitive. Chae Nayun went to visit her yesterday.”

Speak of the devil, Chae Nayun just arrived.

“Yo.”

She waved with a bright smile and ran up to us. She surprised me too. Chae Nayun wasn’t the type to smile so joyfully when her friend was sick.

“I heard Yoo Yeonha’s sick.”

“Oh, Yeonha? She’s fine now thanks to me staying up with her all night. Her complexion doesn’t seem pale anymore, so she told me to go ahead.”

“Did she?”

She must've just eaten something bad. After all, Yoo Yeonha liked to secretly eat junk food.

"Alright everyone, let's go!"

Oh Hanhyun smiled and led us through the portal. It only took ten steps to travel from Seoul to Busan. The scenery came into view as we left the portal station. It deserved to be called the second capital of Korea. A variety of shops lined the streets. People of all nationalities walked by, but everyone spoke in Korean.

"We'll take a street tour today. Busan is full of street shops with clothes, miscellaneous stuff, weapons, antiques, and more. It's my hometown, so just follow me." Oh Hanhyun confidently guided us.

"Busan, Busan. Busan seagulls."

Chae Nayun happily hummed and came next to me. "Hey, have you been to Busan?"

"Yeah, obviously."

"I see. Oh look, that must be Busan's road with street shops."

Chae Nayun nudged my arm and pointed to the street vendors. We walked together and looked at the displays of clothes, weapons, scrolls, books, etc. Then Chae Nayun disappeared and came back after around 5 minutes.

"Hey, try this."

She brought a hat from somewhere.

"What's this?"

"Try it on."

She put the hat on my head before I could say anything and glanced at me from top to bottom.

“Oh, not bad. Do you want me to buy it for you?”

“No, I’m good.”

“I already bought it though, so just keep it on.”

Then she disappeared again. I looked at the price tag. *What kind of hat cost 350,000 won?* I kept it on since it was a gift and continued browsing the shops. I wanted to find a proper antique shop to score some valuables. Chae Nayun appeared once again with a hot dog this time.

“Hey, eat this.”

“Where did you...”

She stuffed the hot dog into my mouth before I could finish.

“Why aren’t you eating?”

“I’ll get sick if I do.”

Chae Nayun giggled at me eating the hot dog. I silently stared at her. She seemed cheerful and energetic. Her bright attitude tired me out. *Is she acting like this because Chae Jinyoon's condition improved? Or was it because she...* Suddenly, I felt my stomach churn. A fundamental question rose in my head. *Am I allowed to be this friendly with her? An uncomfortable acquaintance. Wasn’t that supposed to be the extent of our relationship?*

“...”

However, feelings couldn’t be controlled so easily. A dark thought emerged inside me that it would be okay as long as she never found out.

“Hey, try this on. It’ll get cold soon.”

Chae Nayun placed a scarf around my neck.

“Where do you keep getting these things. Take it off.”

“Ah! It’ll get cold soon. Hey, Kim Hajin! Where are you going?”

I ran away as quickly as I could.

* * *

I felt exhausted. It became evening as we spent the day having fun. The sun set fairly early since it was autumn.

“Today’s final course is... Busan Disneyland!”

We stood in front of our last destination for the day. Smugglers should be secretly conducting a trade inside. Their conflict would soon turn into chaos and Kim Suho would run into Jin Sahyuk while suppressing them.

Chae Nayun raised her hand after checking her smartwatch. “Ah, Yeonha says she’s here now.”

A limousine stopped in front of the entrance as Yoo Yeonha stepped out. Chae Nayun hopped towards her.

“Are you feeling better now?”

“Yeah.”

Yoo Yeonha walked past Chae Nayun and Kim Suho and stood in front of me.

“...”

She stared at me lifelessly. She seemed weak and fragile, unlike her usual self. *Was her food poisoning that bad?*

“Does it still hurt?”

Yoo Yeonha shook her head. Then Oh Hanhyun spoke up.

“Oh right, we’ll be traveling in pairs inside Disneyland.”

“You, go with me.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke before Oh Hanhyun could explain how pairs would form.

“*Huh?* Me?”

“What, what are you doing, Yeonha?”

Chae Nayun gave her an odd look, but Yoo Yeonha grabbed onto my sleeve. I also wondered why she acted like this, but I agreed since it seemed like she had something important to say.

“Sure.”

I paired up with Yoo Yeonha as we entered Disneyland. It felt like we stepped into a fairy tale, but Yoo Yeonha remained silent and occasionally sighed as she glanced at me. I wondered why she seemed so down, so I brought her on a rollercoaster. As expected, Yoo Yeonha panicked as we went up and seemed more energetic by the time the ride ended.

“Are you feeling better now?”

“...”

“If not, we’ll go again.”

“N-N-No, I’m fine. S-So let’s skip t-this and r-ride that.”

Yoo Yeonha pointed at the giant Ferris wheel. I slightly furrowed my brows.

“Isn’t that a couples’ ride? Why would you want to go there?”

“I need to talk to you about something.” Her voice slightly trembled.

“If you say so. What’s it about?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t reply as I followed her. Honestly, this would be my first time riding a Ferris wheel. We silently stared at each other inside the slow-moving pod.

“What is it?” I asked out of frustration.

“Oh, is it about the bullet I asked you to refine? Is it too difficult?”

“No... I should be able to give you that by next month. That leaf wasn’t ordinary.”

“Right? *Ah*, you can use any leftovers for your research.”

“Research?”

“Yeah, for your pharmaceutical company. We’re allies, aren’t we? Or maybe I’m just an investor, haha.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha clenched her teeth and dropped her head. It was then. *KOONG!* An explosion rumbled. I looked down from the window before looking back at Yoo Yeonha. To my surprise, she stared at me with a determined look and seemed unconcerned about the chaos below.

“What?”

“Remember what I said? That I had something to talk to you about.”

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“You see...”

KOONG! The Ferris wheel suddenly shook and stopped. Yoo Yeonha

didn't react at all, but I quickly looked back down. Two people glared at each other where the explosion took place. I focused my sight and hearing on them.

— It really was you. To think you're having fun with a girl. Should I say it's to be expected from a kid?

Jin Sahyuk leered at Kim Suho and Chae Nayun.

— You.

Kim Suho glared at her with a stiff face.

— So you recognize me. You would be a fool not to. After all, it's just you and me.

— Who are you and why are you picking a fight with us?

Chae Nayun frowned and stepped forward. She wore a polar bear hat that she must've won from a game.

— Shut your mouth, shit for brains.

— Shi... I dare you to say that again.

Chae Nayun was a headstrong girl in her own right, but Jin Sahyuk took the meaning of crazy to another level. She condensed her magic power into a ball and threw it at Chae Nayun. It burst into a beam that instantly struck Chae Nayun in the stomach and sent her flying a hundred meters. Kim Suho couldn't even react to the sudden attack.

“Hey, I think we're going to have to talk later.”

The situation didn't look good. I didn't expect her to knock out Chae Nayun in one blow. Jin Sahyuk was supposed to be a growing final boss. *Why the hell was she so strong?* I quickly opened the pod door and prepared to jump down. However, Yoo Yeonha grabbed my wrist. I looked back at her.

“I don’t think I can do it later. If it’s not now... I don’t think I’ll ever be able to say it again.”

Yoo Yeonha looked like she would cry as she desperately spoke. I froze. *Just what could have caused...* Ah! A light bulb suddenly went off in my head. The pieces of the puzzle finally came together. A part of the Yoo Yeonha Scandal must’ve occurred already. It would make sense why she suffered from stress-induced gastritis.

“Then you don’t have to say it.”

I’ll always help you. I smiled and tapped her head. Then I jumped down from the Ferris wheel.

Chapter 116

The First Encounter (2)

I jumped from a height of around 100 meters. I felt the air against me as I landed, but I didn't feel much pain despite my weak body. However, my smartwatch revealed the truth. That fall cost me 15% of my stats from energy conversion. It felt like a waste, but I put the thought aside and quickly ran to Chae Nayun.

"Ah..."

She sat on the asphalt and held her stomach. Her injuries didn't seem too serious despite taking the powerful blast of magic power without qi reinforcement.

"Kueek!"

At least, that's what I thought. She coughed a mouthful of blood to prove me wrong. Then she staggered before collapsing again.

"Hey, wake up."

"Kim Hajin?"

Chae Nayun blankly looked up at me as she breathed roughly. I took out a potion and poured it into her mouth.

"Drink it."

"Uup."

Chae Nayun managed to swallow everything, but immense pain would follow.

"Uu! Uk! Uuk!"

She twisted her body before fainting. However, her pulse became steady and her breathing also returned to normal. She should fully recover in 20 minutes. I hid her away in some nearby shrubs. Then I ran to Kim Suho and Jin Sahyuk.

— Try running to that girl. I'll kill you both.

— Why did you change so much?

— Change? Don't talk to me so casually. We might be in a new world, but that doesn't change our past relationship.

Kim Suho and Jin Sahyuk spoke to each other about the past concerning nobles, peasants, knights, continents, and swords. They spoke about things only they could understand. A fight would break out once they finished.

— Sigoal, Rowle!

Jin Sahyuk unleashed her magic power with a roar. She created dozens of spears in the air. The magic weapons flashed towards Kim Suho as he fended them off with a steel pipe he found on the ground.

— Do you really need to do this? What reason is there for us to fight?

— What nonsense are you spouting? You think that pipe will be enough?

She sent her spears flying again like bullets. They carried immense power and exploded like missiles wherever they landed. The spears rained down from the sky as Kim Suho dodged what he could and parried the ones he couldn't. They left huge craters in the ground that caused many park rides to break down. Disneyland turned into a wasteland after a full minute of Jin Sahyuk's attacks.

“She's way too powerful.”

Jin Sahyuk had completely destroyed the surroundings without taking a single step. Kim Suho also didn't have Misteltein with him. In contrast, Jin Sahyuk didn't require any weapons. She only relied on

her overwhelming steel-colored magic power. Kim Suho couldn't defeat her. No, the current Kim Suho didn't even intend on defeating her.

“*Huup!*”

Kim Suho swung his pipe and sent a magic spear back to Jin Sahyuk. However, Jin Sahyuk's defense was just as strong. She easily blocked it with a shield of magic power as another spear struck Kim Suho's shoulder.

“*Uk!*”

Kim Suho's qi reinforcement managed to stop it from penetrating, but the impact sent him flying. Jin Sahyuk didn't miss this opening. More beams shot towards him as he flew. *Boom, boom, boom, boom.* Kim Suho's body ricocheted in the air from dozens of blasts. Her attacks continued even after he lost consciousness. I had no choice but to intervene. Thankfully, I prepared some medicine for moments like these.

[Your stats have increased by 1.5 points for 10 minutes.] [An overlapping consumption has further increased your stats by 0.75 points for 5 minutes.] [An overlapping consumption has further increased your stats by 0.375 points for 2 minutes and 30 seconds.]

I felt a surge of energy through my body as I stood in front of Kim Suho. I wondered what I was doing, but reality had deviated long ago from the script. I had to correct it as the extra in this new scenario.

“Give it a rest.”

“*Hm?* Who are... Oh, the guy from yesterday.”

Jin Sahyuk stopped for a moment as she recognized me.

“You're his teacher?”

“Teacher?”

I guess I didn't look like a high schooler with my beard. I smirked and opened my mouth to correct her, but six spears shot past me.

BOOM!

A huge explosion erupted from behind. I fell into a daze at the sudden attack, but soon snapped out of it. I could still feel her killing intent. She wasn't done yet. I immediately activated bullet time as a spear shot towards my head. I could feel its movement as I tilted my head and narrowly dodged it. *BOOM!* The spear struck the merry-go-round behind me and exploded.

"Hm."

I wouldn't have survived if she continued. However, she only stared in surprise.

"You dodged that? I thought you wouldn't since you didn't react at all to the other six."

My heart beat like crazy as she looked at me with interest. Perhaps she overestimated me because of what happened yesterday. In that case, I could play the role.

"Why don't you stop here? Kim Suho and I didn't even bring our weapons." I spoke as imposingly as I could. She should be content now since she already beat up Kim Suho.

"And why don't you answer my question? Are you his teacher?" Jin Sahyuk asked once again. I shook my head.

"No. I'm just a friend."

"Then leave. Otherwise, I'll bury you along with him."

Jin Sahyuk acted more violently than expected. I placed my hand in my pocket. It didn't seem like she would stop. In that case, I should take advantage of her reckless attitude. I compressed aether into a 500 won coin and scanned it. I looked at the number as I slowly took it out of my pocket, 40%.

“What’s that?”

Jin Sahyuk furrowed her brows at the coin.

“I told you, I didn’t bring my weapon.”

“So?”

“So I’ll just have to throw this at your face.”

Jin Sahyuk snickered as I shrugged. Thankfully, her arrogant personality remained. I coughed and carefully asked, “Can I try?”

“*Pfft*. Try it if you think you can.”

She stretched out her arms to receive my attack. I smiled inwardly as I gripped the coin. I only had one shot to strike her head. I wrapped the coin with all of stigma’s magic power and added an anti-magic property along with one more item.

[Ginseng Pill] — Will seep into and strengthen magic power.

I used a similar method in the past to kill Evandel and obtain aether. I melted the ginseng pill into the magic power around the coin. Then I glared at Jin Sahyuk. She watched me with anticipation and showed no signs of defending. The coin glowed a bright blue after I infused the pill.

“*Oho*, that’s quite an interesting—”

“*Huup!*”

I mustered all my strength into my right arm. My muscles bulged as I squeezed out every drop of stigma’s magic power and threw the coin.

Pshuuuu—!

The coin shot towards Jin Sahyuk. Stigma’s magic power enhanced it many times over. Jin Sahyuk calmly watched as she formed a magic

shield. No matter how strong her shield, it was only made up of magic power. *Drrrrr-!* The anti-magic coin drilled a hole in her shield and struck between her eyebrows.

“What!”

The coin pushed her back as she kept her eyes open and withstood the force. Her feet plowed through the asphalt.

“Fuck.”

The coin eventually came to a stop, but Jin Sahyuk showed no signs of losing consciousness. *Clang—* It fell to the ground and two streams of blood flowed from her forehead.

“That hurt...”

Jin Sahyuk condensed her magic power as she glared at me. However, my coin certainly succeeded in damaging her brain. The brain was vital in wielding magic power. As a result, she couldn’t properly condense her magic power and it repeatedly broke down. This seemed like a golden opportunity, but I couldn’t move anymore. I had nothing left in the tank as a man appeared.

“That’s enough. Get back.”

The mysterious man with her last night appeared out of nowhere. He grabbed Jin Sahyuk’s arm and pulled her back.

“Ah, let me go. I’m fine. I can still kill him.”

Her condition didn’t look good despite what she said. She couldn’t even stand straight and staggered.

“*Sigh.*”

The man karate chopped Jin Sahyuk’s neck. The light in her eyes faded as the man hung her on his shoulder. Then he coldly stared at me.

“This is our first meeting, right?”

I only nodded since I couldn't even move my mouth anymore.

“*Mm...* Well, she won't be so careless next time thanks to you.”

Then they disappeared.

* * *

The man had already left with Jin Sahyuk by the time the dispatched heroes arrived. She felt light as a feather, but the man could feel his back growing wet.

“*Ah*, she's drooling. Do you have to sleep like that?”

The man placed a mask made from magic power over her mouth. As he left the premises...

“Where are you going?”

A woman's cold voice held him back. The man recognized it. He paused and smiled in her direction.

“Jain.”

The voice belonged to a woman, but a man dressed as a security guard stood in front of him. Jain smirked and nodded.

“It's been a while, old man.”

“Yes, it has.”

The man recalled the days he wasn't called by his name, but a color. He set those useless thoughts aside and asked, “I heard the empty seat will be filled soon. Is the little brat not here?”

The little brat referred to Boss. Only he could call her that.

“I’d rather not see blood,” Jain briefly retorted.

“Oh, worried about me?”

“No, I’m worried about Boss since she can’t win against you.”

“*Hmm.*”

The man stared at her. With just a look, Jain’s camouflage faded. Soon, her beautiful appearance revealed itself.

“Then why did you come?”

“No reason. I just wanted to see how you were doing.”

Jain glanced at the girl on his shoulder. “Looks like you already found a new child.”

The man simply smiled. “Right, she’s my disciple. She’s a bit special and constantly tries to kill me.”

Magic power condensed around the man’s hand. No, his hand transformed into magic power itself.

“So Jain, looks like you gained some confidence. Or did you just become fearless?”

His hand wavered like a heat wave. Anything he touched wouldn’t come out unscathed. However, Jain remained calm despite his threat.

“Remember what you said? People who have something to protect can’t act as they wish.”

Jain pointed to the girl on his shoulder.

“You can kill me, but I can also kill that girl.”

“I guess you’re right.”

The man lightly smiled. The undulating magic power around him disappeared like it never existed.

“Then I’ll take my leave. It was good to see you.”

The man walked past Jain under the faint moonlight.

“Are you fine just leaving like this?” Jain’s voice rang out from behind him.

“The new black discovered by Boss is a wolf hired solely to kill you.”

The man continued walking without a reply. Like how Fenrir devoured Odin, Boss gave Kim Hajin that name in hopes of reproducing the old myth.

“Fenrir is right there.”

Only then did the man stop. Hidden from Jain’s view was a thick smile on his face.

“I wish him the best of luck.”

The man recalled what he saw before. Jin Sahyuk’s foolishness played a huge role, but the boy had suppressed his disciple with only a single coin.

“It looks like...” The man turned around to reveal his smile.

“He has the potential.”

His easygoing attitude made it seem like he really wanted to die. Jain’s expression turned sour, but she refused to lose and returned an even thicker smile.

Chapter 117

The First Encounter (3)

The heroes and police arrested all the smugglers who caused a scene at Disneyland. Tomorrow's headline would read something like, *Failed Negotiation Leads to Smugglers' Infighting*. Jin Sahyuk's party, the real cause behind much of the mess, disappeared before the authorities arrived. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun also recovered thanks to my potions.

“...”

Kim Suho sat between pieces of destroyed asphalt as I walked up behind him and placed my hand on his head. His hair felt quite soft. He turned around and smiled at me. I smiled back and sat next to him.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah, thanks to you. I'll pay you back for the potion.”

“Don't mind it. So how are you related to that girl from before?”

I already knew, but asked anyways. Kim Suho looked into the horizon and murmured.

“She's just someone I know.”

“I see.”

I didn't ask any further as we stared at the night sky for a while.

“Hajin.”

Kim Suho suddenly called my name.

“Yeah?”

I spoke as softly as I could. He faced me with complicated emotions in his eyes. I understood what he felt, yet didn't at the same time. I could empathize with his sense of loneliness from losing his home, but Kim Suho had no hopes of returning.

“Never mind.”

“That's lame.”

I laughed to brighten the mood. Kim Suho faintly smiled.

“By the way, you're the one who suppressed her, right?”

“No, she suppressed herself.”

“What does that mean?”

I stood up and placed my hand on his shoulder.

“It means she underestimated me.”

“...”

Kim Suho looked up at me. He had several charms like his bright and reliable personality, but he seemed quite melancholy now.

“I'm leaving. I don't know who she is to you, but don't feel so down.”

“I'm not down.”

Kim Suho bashfully lied. I ruffled his hair.

“A-Ah! W-What are you doing?”

“I'm leaving for real now.”

“What? Hey!”

Kim Suho glared at me with his hair puffed up like a lamb. I returned to the hotel.

* * *

Yoo Yeonha deeply contemplated in a 2 person luxury hotel room.

“I couldn’t tell him.”

She murmured to herself. She had resolved to tell Kim Hajin the truth, but missed her chance while hesitating.

— You don’t have to say it.

Yoo Yeonha still recalled his words. However, he didn’t know what she would confess. Even without his words, Yoo Yeonha felt like she wouldn’t have confessed. She feared he would point his gun at her when he found out the truth. Her first ally would become her greatest threat. It brought her fear and sadness.

“Ah, that felt great.”

Chae Nayun came out of the shower and interrupted her somber thoughts. Yoo Yeonha looked at her putting on her underwear. Then she asked, “Does it hurt anywhere?”

“Huh? Oh, it’s fine. The emergency treatment went well.”

Her internal injuries quickly healed thanks to the immediate consumption of a potion and her body’s natural toughness.

“Whew.”

Chae Nayun sat on the edge of the bed with nothing but her underwear. It featured a cartoon cat, but she didn’t look childish with her excellent figure. Chae Nayun picked up her smartwatch instead of putting on some clothes. She typed on the holographic keyboard as

Yoo Yeonha asked her.

“What are you doing?”

“*Hm?* Oh, I’m texting Kim Hajin. I thought I should thank him.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha silently watched her. Chae Nayun respected her grandfather, Chae Joochul, but he had played an even greater role than Yoo Jinwoong in Kim Hajin’s suffering. Of course, Chae Joochul wouldn’t have shown his ugliness to his granddaughter. However, the longer Chae Joochul remained a good grandfather, the more Chae Nayun would feel betrayed when she learned the truth.

Should I tell her about Kim Hajin’s past? That the one who killed Kim Hajin’s parents and forced him to live in solitude was Chae Joochul, who she admired most. Or should I just remain silent?

Yoo Yeonha spoke her name.

“Nayun.”

“Yeah?”

Chae Nayun didn’t know anything about Kim Hajin’s tangled past. If possible, Yoo Yeonha wanted to keep it that way. Chae Nayun would undoubtedly feel worse than Yoo Yeonha since she knew the pain of losing one’s family.

“Who was that person?”

“What do you mean?”

“The person who attacked you.”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“You didn’t tell the police?”

“Yeah, I was too lazy.”

Chae Nayun didn't tell the police since she feared her father would find out and cause a mess. *Tap, tap, tap*. Her eyes and fingers only focused on the smartwatch screen. Yoo Yeonha stared at her before adding.

“Be nice.”

“*Hm?*”

“Be nice when you text him. Don't be snarky.”

“What?”

“Just listen to me so you won't regret it later.”

“What? Do you have a screw loose?”

Chae Nayun looked dumbfoundedly at her before crawling into the bed. Then she frowned at the reply from Kim Hajin.

[Sleep.]

* * *

I returned to Cube two days later at 11:00 A.M. with Evandel and Hayang. Cube's dorm felt cramped now compared to the presidential suite and Seoul apartment we enjoyed over the weekend. Thankfully, I would be assigned a bigger room next year. I could always move out and commute to school.

“Chicken, chicken, chicken...”

Evandel and Hayang anxiously waited at the kitchen table as I brought 3 roasted chickens.

“Since Hayang only eats legs and wings...”

Evandel gave Hayang two chicken legs and wings. She finally learned how to share after fighting for a long time. I watched them eat with a smile before heading to the bedroom and turning on my laptop.

[You have obtained 433 SP!] [Your luck has been applied. You have received a 22% bonus in SP!]

I gained quite a bit of SP from last night's incident. The bonus itself was close to 100 SP. It was time to use it now.

"Mmm..."

I typed in a physique I recently came up with.

[Medicinal Memory Physique]

It seemed like I would consume a lot of medicine from now on, so I thought of a physique to make the effects more permanent.

Medicinal Memory — Your body will memorize a portion of medicinal effects when consuming medicine with the same properties. The amount will depend on your luck. Reproduction — Your body will naturally produce medicinal effects that are 100% memorized. The amount will depend on your luck. — Reproduced medicinal effects will have different cooldowns depending on their effects. Adaptation & Growth — The medicinal effect will increase with repeated consumption and reproduction. The amount and frequency will depend on your luck.

[1000 SP will be consumed. Would you like to save?]

"Damn."

As expected, modifications that permanently increased my stats were extremely expensive. However, it was also worth it. I had more than enough SP thanks to my fights with Asura and Jin Sahyuk.

[The setting has been changed.] [Your luck has been applied. Medicinal Memory Physique's overall functionality has improved!]

"Hm."

I tried eating a ginseng pill.

[Your strength, vitality, stamina, and magic power stats will slowly increase.] [Your body has remembered 4% of the ginseng pill's medicinal effects.]

I would only need to consume 25 pills to reproduce it if the increase was linear.

“That’s not bad at—”

My upper arm suddenly ached. I had been expecting the pain. I quickly took off my shirt and looked at my arm. A new crescent line began to form above the cross-shaped stigma. I clenched my teeth since Evandel and Hayang were outside. I didn’t want them to worry. My consciousness slowly faded from the burning sensation.

* * *

“Huk!”

I opened my eyes at 11 A.M on Sunday. I promised to meet Rachel today.

“Shit, I’m screwed.”

I went to the living room and found Evandel and Hayang asleep. First, I checked my smartwatch.

[Missed call – 6:34 A.M.]

I had one missed call this morning. *Could it be...?*

“Argh.”

My arm still hurt, but I quickly raced to the place where we promised to meet. I arrived in five minutes and looked for Rachel from a nearby bush.

“...”

As expected, she had been waiting for me. She sat next to a street cat to pass the time and stroked its back as she looked at the sky. Her mouth slowly moved. *One, two, three...* it seemed like she was counting the stars.

I felt bad, but checked her wrist for the bracelet first. I couldn't help her without it. Thankfully, she wore it. I approached her as I scratched my head.

“*Um...* Rachel?”

She silently dropped her head when she saw me. She didn't seem too angry for someone who waited five hours without hearing back. However, her lips faintly protruded and her sharp eyes told me she was upset. I couldn't blame her.

“Sorry, I'm late. Something came up.”

I slowly walked up to her. She greeted me with a faint smile.

“It looks like you just woke up.”

Rachel glanced at my hair. I touched it. Indeed, it puffed up like I just got out of bed.

“That's okay. I just arrived too.”

“*Eh? Ah... cough*, sorry.”

She definitely sounded upset. I awkwardly stretched my arms.

“I'll cut straight to the chase since I came late. *Um*, you wanted to learn about barrier, right?”

She nodded.

“Before I teach you barrier... why don't you try following my training

method first?”

“Huh?”

“You know, people have different training methods. One of the best ways to overcome a slump is to change your training method. The method I use might be suitable for you too.”

Rachel doubtfully looked at me from my hurried tone.

“Why don’t we take it slow...”

“No, no, just sit like you’re meditating.”

Rachel tilted her head.

“Just sit like me.”

“Ah, yes.”

Rachel sat cross-legged on the ground.

“Next, spread your magic power throughout your body. This is called breaking through acupoints.”

I muttered some words I recalled from martial art novels. Thankfully, Rachel concentrated on controlling her magic power without complaint. A faint blue glow surrounded her body.

“Good, just keep going.”

I encouraged her, so she wouldn’t grow suspicious.

“Next, try moving all that magic power to your left wrist. We’re going to circulate it through your body afterward.”

This useless training method would become the greatest once her magic power activated the bracelet.

“Put some strength into your left wrist like you’re emitting magic power from it.”

Pssssh. The bracelet began to shake from the vibration of magic power. However, the butterfly seedling’s dust showed no signs of releasing. Meanwhile, Rachel’s face turned red like a tomato.

“Harder, like you want to break that bracelet on your wrist.”

Rachel’s trembling grew stronger. Her magic power became so fierce until... *Snap!* The bracelet broke in half and the butterfly seedling’s dust finally poured out.

Chapter 118

What Must Be Done (1)

The butterfly seedling's dust scattered from the broken bracelet and seeped into Rachel's magic power. She didn't notice any changes as she focused on circulating her magic power.

"Now, with your right wrist..."

I made her circulate magic power throughout her entire body to avoid any suspicions. From the left wrist to the right, her ankles, then her forehead. Soon, Rachel was covered in sweat.

"Haa, haa."

"It's hard for everyone on their first try."

I couldn't help but inwardly laugh at coaching someone with a 9-9.5 potential. This breathing exercise shouldn't be completely meaningless. After all, Kim Suho did it every morning.

"Alright, next..."

The butterfly seedling's dust should've successfully seeped into her body. She only needed to exercise her magic power to reveal its effects.

"Try standing up."

Rachel stood up enthusiastically, thinking it was time for the real thing.

"We'll set barrier aside for now."

She lost all enthusiasm at my words and tilted her head.

“Rachel, we’ve known each other for 8 months now. We became pretty close for a semester because of team challenges, right?”

“Yes? *Ah*, yes, you’re right.”

“Take it with a grain of salt, but I’ve been watching you in battle. Have you ever taken an elemental affinity test?”

“Elemental affinity?”

“Yes, I’m quite good at discerning talent. I guess you could say I have sharp senses. You know that I helped Chae Nayun too, right?”

Chae Nayun was a hot topic among Cube's community and several guilds. She switched from a bow to a sword and showed immediate results.

“Yes, I took one when I was young and the results came out positive. How did you...”

She wondered how I knew.

“Something feels different about your magic power. Its property slightly changes depending on your environment.”

I had created this trait for Rachel. She seemed to know as her eyes widened.

“*Ah*, you’re right! I’ve felt it too, but my elemental affinity hasn’t increased since I was 10, so I gave up on it.”

People of this world didn’t know much about elementals and how to cultivate one’s elemental affinity. Even the other world where Kim Suho came from only had a few elementalists.

The butterfly seedling’s dust would serve as a pathway to connect Rachel with elementals. Furthermore, I already knew the training method she developed with Kim Suho in the original story.

“Then let’s start from the beginning. You might’ve used the wrong training method.”

“...”

Rachel looked doubtful. She must be annoyed since she came to learn barrier.

“Your current problem isn’t barrier. Didn’t you say you fell into a slump? You have to think about overcoming that slump instead. Learning barrier is putting the cart before the horse.”

“Ah, I see. You’re right.”

I surprisingly convinced her. She seemed like the type to easily change her mind.

“Try to resonate your magic power with the grass. Like you’re about to talk... or rather, share your magic power with it.”

“Yes, I’ll give it a try.”

The most important aspect of wielding elementals was resonating with nature. Rachel closed her eyes and followed my instructions. Time passed... 3 minutes, 5 minutes, 10 minutes. Rachel’s body became hazy, but no changes occurred. I thought it had failed when something finally happened.

“Oh!”

The grass began to emit shining particles. Only a few particles faintly glowed, but that undoubtedly confirmed Rachel’s ability to wield elementals. It required one’s gift to align with a certain disposition.

“Rachel. Rachel? Open your eyes.”

Rachel slowly opened her eyes.

“Un?”

She seemed uncertain until she saw the green particles floating in front of her. I smiled at her surprise.

“Well, it looks like I’ll have to accept quite a hefty lesson fee.”

Rachel looked in shock at me.

* * *

Nothing eventful happened after meeting Jin Sahyuk in Busan. This period would certainly have been skipped in a novel. I did what I had to do during this time.

First, I completed two more missions for Jeronimo Mercenary. I assassinated a djinn for one and escorted cargo for the other. Boss liked how I handled things and offer me an official contract this time.

I trained with Rachel every night for an hour. It benefitted both of us. She treated my words like holy scripture ever since I awakened her talent. She trained her elemental affinity accordingly. As for me, I trained to react more efficiently in bullet time with the help of her quick attacks.

*[Sparring with a strong opponent has increased your speed by 0.05 points!]
[Sparring with a strong opponent has increased your vitality by 0.05 points!]
[Sparring with a strong opponent has increased your stamina by 0.05 points!]*

My stats naturally increased for the first time in a while.

Time flew by and November came around. A year had passed since I came into this world. A new year would begin in a few weeks.

“This will be covered on the exam so make sure you know it.”

I sat in Phenomenon Realm Analysis II. The sky outside turned dark because of the abnormal climate even though it was only two in the afternoon. It also grew quite chilly. However, cadets acted no different than usual. They slept less to study for the upcoming exams and continued to train their bodies. Half went to the library while others

worked out at the fitness center. As for me, I completely ignored the class and stared at my laptop.

[24 hours have passed since medicine consumption. All stats have increased by 0.005 points.] [You have memorized the painkiller's medicinal effects.]

[Completely Memorized Medicinal Effects]

1. Painkiller: Will increase pain resistance for 30 minutes. Reproduction Cooldown: 6 hours

2. Detox: Will cure toxins below intermediate rank. Reproduction Cooldown: 6 hours

3. Instant Amplification: Will increase your strength, stamina, speed, perception, and vitality by 2 points for 10 minutes. Reproduction Cooldown: 12 hours

[Strength 3.405 (+ 1.070)] [Stamina 3.435 (+ 1.980)] [Speed 5.140 (+ 2.685)] [Perception 5.655 (+ 2.620)] [Vitality 3.405 (+ 1.070)]

My body had memorized several medicinal properties and effects. I completely memorized the above three, which allowed me to use them whenever I wished without any side effects.

“This is as far as we’ll go. You’ll have free study periods starting next week. Focus on reviewing everything from this semester.”

The professor ended the class with a closing statement. I packed my stuff and stood up to leave since I had an appointment outside of Cube today.

“Hey, Kim Hajin.”

I turned around at the nasal voice. Chae Nayun stood in front of me with a red nose.

“Why is your nose red?”

“I caught a cold.”

Her nasal voice reminded me of a TV program. A child asked if heroes could catch colds. The answer was yes. Heroes could still catch a cold, but it only lasted a day at most. It meant that they had trained hard. A huge change would occur in one’s internal temperature when magic power instantly left the body. This left them vulnerable to light sickness like the common cold.

“Aren’t you working too hard lately? You’ve been training at the fitness center until 3. You’re only going to hurt yourself if you overwork.”

“What, are you worried about me?”

Her brows danced up and down. I shook my head.

“Never mind. So what do you need?”

“Ah, teach me this.”

Chae Nayun handed me the homework we just received for phenomenon realm analysis. I solved the entire thing since she clearly asked me to.

“Yay! Thank you.”

Chae Nayun smiled at all the answers and put her notebook away.

“Oh right, I’ll be going to Master’s camp for winter break.”

“Master?”

“Yeah, Yoo Sihyuk.”

“Ah...”

Yoo Sihyuk’s hell training. Only Kim Suho was supposed to go this year, but it seemed he also invited Chae Nayun since she switched to a

sword.

“That’s great.”

I said with a smile. Yoo Sihyuk’s camp lasted from December to early February. She would be away for 3 months. I couldn’t be more glad.

“Good luck. Try your best.”

I tried to walk past her.

“Hey, hey, by the way...”

She grabbed my sleeve and pulled it back and forth.

“Let’s go on a trip with the others before that. I won’t have fun for the rest of winter break once I leave.”

“I... don’t think I’ll have time.”

“Come on. Let’s go. I’ll pay for everything.”

She kept pulling my sleeve with a smile. However, I refused.

“I can’t go.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, I don’t have time.”

She let go of my sleeve and pouted at my same excuse from before.

“Fine. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

She muttered in disappointment before leaving. Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, and Yoo Yeonha looked at me strangely.

— Hey, Yi Yeonghan, he’s playing hard to get, right?

— No doubt about it.

I could hear them whispering.

* * *

I arrived at the field in Gangwondo 3 hours later.

“Bite!”

The giant wolf shot out of my chest and raced forward to attack a troll.

— *Kieeeeeek!*

The troll struggled to pull off the wolf, but Evandel’s servant was several times stronger than a low-intermediate rank troll. The troll soon collapsed.

— *Auuuuu.*

The wolf happily howled after its kill as I checked my smartwatch.

[The ghost wolf has absorbed the troll’s blood and acquired its low rank regenerative power.]

He acquired an ability called skin hardening from an orc 5 days ago. The ghost wolf’s absorption ability produced great results.

Recently, I focused on raising him as much as possible since he was Evandel’s first servant. Honestly, he was already stronger than me. If anybody asked, I might have to say he was Fenrir.

— *Hek, hek, hek.*

The ghost wolf came back panting. I couldn’t call him cute with his teeth covered in blood, but I happily stroked his back.

“Well done. Well done.”

— *Grrr.*

The wolf closed his eyes in satisfaction. I contacted SH Agency and told them my location. One of their employees should arrive in 5 minutes to retrieve the troll's corpse. I sat on the wolf's back as I waited and looked around SH Agency's homepage.

“Wow, looks like they'll go public soon.”

The homepage looked much better than before. They had 23 contracted hunters now, including a hero named Jin Jangho. Park Soohyuk's business expanded quicker than expected. I couldn't help but smile at our relationship and how I owned 4% of this future giant's stock. I received a message while reveling in satisfaction.

[Where are you?]

It came from Yoo Yeonha.

[I'll go to you. Where are you?]

[No, I'll go.]

[I'm in the field at Gangwondo.]

[Just wait 30 minutes.]

“*Hmm.*”

Yoo Yeonha had asked to meet today. She probably succeeded in refining Misteltein's leaf into bullets.

The wolf continued to hunt for the next 30 minutes as I met Yoo Yeonha at the entrance.

She waved as I approached.

“Is it about the leaf?”

“Yes, our research showed it was extraordinary. We could hardly believe a single leaf had as much magic power as an artifact. Sadly, we couldn’t figure out its origin.”

“It must’ve been difficult to refine.”

“It cost around 100 million won considering all expenses.”

Yoo Yeonha nodded as she handed me a suitcase. I took it without restraint.

“Five bullets. We had enough leftovers for three-tenths of a bullet, but used it for research as you suggested.”

“Thanks.”

Yoo Yeonha bit her lips at my praise.

“Don’t thank me.”

“Then what, should I sue you or something?”

“No, I’m just sorry. Anyways, was it okay to use such a precious leaf for bullets?”

“Yeah, I told you. These are just what I’ve been looking for.”

All five bullets were made for my Desert Eagle. Their size didn’t matter since I could just modify them.

“Please, I’m not that gullible. Those bullets also have medicinal effects. I can’t believe you’ll actually use them.”

“You could’ve given me the medicine later...”

“It’s going well.”

Yoo Yeonha interrupted me.

“We already set up our potion brewing chain with cultivated ginseng. They’re only novices, but we contracted three ginseng diggers.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled, but it lacked sincerity and she seemed a bit sad.

“Well, that’s good. Are there any other problems?”

I gripped an envelope in my pocket. It contained a list of all the traitors related to the Yoo Yeonha Scandal along with their misdeeds. It cost me 150 SP to obtain from hacking. I tried to give it to her, but she cut me off.

“No, there’s none.”

“*Eh?*”

None? Did the Yoo Yeonha Scandal not happen yet? I let go of the envelope in my pocket.

“I have some things to take care of, so I’ll be leaving. Feel free to ask whenever you need anything. I’ll do my best.”

She couldn’t be more reliable. It felt quite convenient to have the future queen of Seoul as my ally.

“Oh, I’m about to head out too. Do you want to grab lunch?”

“No, I have some things to do.”

Yoo Yeonha coldly turned away.

“Rice soup or hamburger.”

I only said 4 words.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha flinched before leering at me.

“I told you, I don’t like those things.”

She grumbled before quickly disappearing into a limousine. I didn’t doubt she headed towards a McDonald’s or rice soup restaurant. I opened the suitcase after she left.

Click—

Five bullets lined up on the luxurious velvet. I could see my expressionless face on the bullets’ sleek surface.

[Refined Misteltein Bullet] [Partial Divine Grade] [Null attribute] A.44 Macon platinum bullet with pure magic power and compressed remnants of Misteltein. It contains a portion of god-slaying powers. [Attack Power: 9/10]

An attack power of 9 would undoubtedly be enough. I closed the suitcase. I couldn’t tell my expression from the black surface. All the preparations were complete. It was time to make the request.

Chapter 119

What Must Be Done (2)

I sent Boss a message last Friday night that I wanted to negotiate. Boss went silent for a week until today. Her message contained a coordinate to an intermediate rank danger zone on the outskirts of Gyeonggido.

“Huh?”

I spotted an abandoned house in the middle of a forest when I arrived. It looked like the houses that often appeared in horror movies with faded bricks covered in moss and vines. I went inside as my footsteps echoed in the darkness. Goosebumps rose on my skin every time a chilly wind blew.

“Hello?”

Something large dropped from the ceiling the moment I spoke. Evandel’s ghost wolf shot out from my chest as I grasped the situation.

“A bat?”

Fenrir crushed the flying nightmare. *Er, wait. I was Fenrir.*

— *Krrrr! Krrrr!*

— *Guaaaa!*

The giant bat struggled until its neck twisted like a stringless puppet. The flying nightmare should’ve been an intermediate rank, grade 6 monster.

“I guess I’ll leave close combat to him.”

I could shoot from long range as the wolf took care of anything that approached. It seemed like the perfect combination.

Kiiiik—

The door behind me opened as small footsteps resounded. I turned around and saw Boss. She looked back and forth between the dead bat and the wolf.

“Is that your pet?”

“Yes? *Ah*, yes, something like that.”

“It’s cute. Take a seat.”

Boss pointed at the table, which was the only furniture. I sat with the wolf next to me. Then I asked Boss.

“Did you leave the bat here on purpose?”

“No, many monsters live around here. It must’ve entered on its own. Anyways, I heard you wanted to negotiate?”

“Yes.”

“Let’s hear it. What condition didn’t you like?”

Boss took out the official mercenary contract. It offered a great salary, which mercenaries rarely received. However, what I wanted couldn’t be included in any contract.

“I liked the conditions.”

“Then what?”

“I’d like to make a request.”

Boss tilted her head. I told her what must be done.

“I need you to help me kill someone.”

Silence descended. I couldn't even hear Boss' breathing. I had done my research and concluded that it was impossible to kill Chae Jinyoon alone. Daehyun Hospital's VIP ward couldn't be underestimated. Each room resembled a fortress that could withstand a full-powered attack from high-intermediate rank heroes. Three powerful mercenaries protected Chae Jinyoon's room in shifts. Still, the security had lessened compared to the beginning. A high-intermediate rank hero used to guard him. Regardless, I had no way of penetrating their defense. My identity would certainly be discovered. The Chae clan could easily use Yoo Jinhyuk and I couldn't avoid his gift.

I knew it was selfish, but I still wanted to remain with the few comrades I made.

“You want to... kill someone?”

“Yes.”

I gave Boss an envelope with a stiff expression. Boss stared at it for a moment before grabbing it with a sigh. Then she opened it as pictures and details of Chae Jinyoon fell out. Boss' expression immediately changed. She looked at me with wide eyes.

“Is there a specific reason?”

I nodded.

“What is it?”

“*Mmm...* for the sake of world peace.”

I told her the truth, but Boss made a sullen face. I didn't have a personal grudge against him.

“...”

Boss remained silent. Chae Jinyoon was undoubtedly a difficult target. To be more precise, the Chae clan posed a problem.

“I’ll be the one to kill him. You just have to create the opportunity.”

I didn’t plan on asking anyone else to do the deed. I added a secret word as she remained silent.

“Boss.”

I purposely avoided calling her Boss for this day. Her eyebrows twitched. She tried to maintain an imposing attitude, but I could see the corner of her lips curling.

* * *

The group that went to the past, except for Kim Hajin, met at a coffee shop. Yoo Yeonha was the only one actually studying for the final exams. Even Kim Suho busily texted on his smartwatch. Chae Nayun stared at him suspiciously.

“Kim Suho, you’re texting Seung-Ah unni, aren’t you?”

“*Huh?*”

“I knew it. That’s why she kept asking about you.”

Kim Suho flinched.

“*Uh...* we’re just talking normally.”

Yoo Yeonha interrupted, “Isn’t that even stranger? A cadet casually talking with a guild’s vice-leader? She’s currently the most popular hero too.”

“*Eh? Ah,* no, it’s not like that...”

Kim Suho began to ramble. Luckily for him, the subject quickly changed as Yi Yeonghan teased Chae Nayun.

“Why are you so quiet? Are you thinking about Kim Hajin?”

“Why would Chae Nayun be thinking about that idiot?” Shin Jonghak reacted strongly as Yoo Yeonha frowned at his language.

“Jonghak, don’t call him an idiot. He’s rank 1 in theory.”

“Right, Jonghak. Didn’t you ask him for help yesterday?”

“What? Don’t make things up, Kim Suho. Have you finally gone crazy?”

“I saw you ordering Kim Horak to ask for you.”

Kim Suho remembered seeing Shin Jonghak awkwardly hand his notebook to Kim Horak. Then Kim Horak went to Kim Hajin with it.

“That was just him asking what he didn’t understand.”

“What nonsense is that...”

“Shut up! Stop being so loud. I’m tired and annoyed from my hellish training.”

Chae Nayun quickly suppressed them. Yoo Yeonha smiled bitterly and closed her textbook. No one seemed interested in studying.

“So, all three of you are attending Yoo Sihyuk’s camp? You’ll be a league above the rest once you finish.”

“Yeah, we’ll return in early March.”

“*Hm...* then when should we go on our trip?”

The best part about being a student was going on trips with friends. Chae Nayun’s mood lightened after Yoo Yeonha brought it up.

“A week after finals on December 17.”

“Oh, that day doesn’t work for me. I have plans with Hajin.”

“What?” Chae Nayun’s eyes widened at Kim Suho’s unexpected words.
“W-W-What plans?”

“*Uh*, we’re going...”

Kim Suho paused. Kim Hajin had discovered a dungeon last week and invited him. Kim Suho felt that he shouldn’t reveal it to others.

“...We’re going on a drive together.”

“A drive?”

“*Uh*, yeah. I’ve been wanting to ride his bike.”

“*Pft*, what a fitting duo.”

Shin Jonghak sneered while Chae Nayun banged her head against the back of a couch.

“Ha, haha, I can’t believe this. Ha, haha.”

Chae Nayun suddenly shot up after repeating this woodpecker-like motion.

“Hey, I’m leaving first.”

“Where are you going?” Kim Suho asked.

“Training. I’m going to train. Don’t follow me, Shin Jonghak.”

“*Cough*.”

Shin Jonghak sat back down.

Koong, koong. Chae Nayun angrily stomped away for no reason.

I met with Rachel at 9 P.M. after meeting with Boss. We trained one-on-one like usual.

“By the way, why did you ask me to help you with barrier? I’m only rank 334.”

I suddenly grew curious and asked. Rachel looked at me before speaking with a sheepish smile.

“I’m not that stupid. I already know you’re staying at that rank on purpose.”

“Yes? *Ah*, well...”

I shrugged at her high evaluation of me. She wasn’t wrong. I could easily climb to rank 30 if I fully utilized stigma’s magic power. Any higher would be doubtful because of my stats. I gained 0.7 from aether, 0.3 from the under armor, and 0.1 from my ghost wolf. My stats still weren’t great despite the 1.1 bonus from items.

“Let’s start. Try activating barrier.”

Rachel nodded with a determined look. She stood up straight and summoned a barrier. It seemed a bit jagged, but still covered her upper body.

“I’ll try attacking now.”

I held up my cadet handgun and aimed at her barrier. I could easily kill a low-intermediate rank monster with it, but it shouldn’t penetrate her barrier.

“Cover yourself with qi reinforcement just in case.”

“Yes!” Rachel enthusiastically replied and covered herself with qi reinforcement. She felt really passionate about learning.

“Try to stop my bullets with that barrier.”

“...?”

She seemed a bit confused and probably thought the barrier would defend on its own.

“Using this barrier?”

“Yep, you’ll know what I mean. It’ll be quite difficult.”

“...”

Rachel curled her body behind the barrier. I grinned and aimed at her.

“I’m shooting.”

I fired. The bullet oddly curved underneath her barrier and struck her arm.

“*Uuu!*”

Rachel shook at the sudden impact. Then she rubbed her arm. It should only sting since she had a qi reinforcement. I slightly provoked her.

“You’ll need to practice for at least three years if you want to block my bullets.”

“...”

Rachel’s eyes flared with pride. “I, I want to try again.”

“Of course.”

Rachel decided to enlarge her barrier to deal with my bullets. I aimed at the opening with a smile and fired at her feet. *Tang.*

“*Auu! Ow!*”

Her qi reinforcement must've been weaker there as she fell to the ground and held her foot. She glared at me with tearful eyes.

"T-That was mean!"

"What do you mean? That was your fault. Why block a bullet with just a barrier?"

"Eh?"

"Try asking the grass or the wind."

I remembered a scene I once described. A breathtaking scene from the future when Rachel asked her elementals to cast hundreds of barriers. She saved thousands of lives and finally overcame her trauma.

"..."

Of course, that wouldn't happen until later. The 17 year old Rachel could only glare at the grass.

Buzz—

My smartwatch suddenly rang. I had added this alarm to notify me of changes concerning myself.

[24 hours have passed since consuming a ginseng pill. All stats have increased by 0.0012 points.] [The medicinal effect, physical body reinforcement, has been 100% memorized.]

4. Physical Body Reinforcement: Will increase all stats by 0.001-0.02 points. (The increase will depend on your luck. Your physical stats will not affect it in any way.) Reproduction Cooldown: 24 hours.

I finally obtained this medicinal effect after eating Yoo Yeonha's ginseng pill every day. The effect permanently increased its user's stats by 0.001-0.02 points, but its upper limit could only be obtained by children or the elderly. I could only receive a max of 0.0015 points. My stats would continue to increase with this new effect. A year would give me 0.657 points if I gained 0.0018 points per day. Ten

years would give me 6.57 points.

“*Mm.*”

I nodded in satisfaction and raised my gun.

“Alright, let’s go aga...”

Psssh, psssh. The leaves rustled behind me. *Who was it?* I quickly turned around, but the person had already run away. My thousand-mile eyes could easily spot them through the forest.

“*Huh?*”

The familiar silhouette with brown hair was Chae Nayun.

* * *

Time flew by as the hellish finals began. I breezed through the written exams like always. Most cadets worried about the combat exams.

“Listen up. Everyone will start from an equal position for the final exam.”

Every first year gathered in Gyeonggido on December 8 for the final exam.

“The final exam will be tower climbing!”

I didn’t know much since I skipped most of it after the first semester. I suddenly regretted it.

“This is a common training program before guilds attempt to conquer a tower. Up to 1500 people can enter at a time.”

The square building in front couldn’t be called a tower. I looked at it in a daze. The 10 floors should be much bigger inside.

“This tower’s entrance is a magically engineered device similar to a

portal. You'll be sent to a random location, so don't be alarmed!"

The cadets entered one by one after the instructor's explanation. I closed my eyes as I stepped through. It felt similar to a portal. I could only see darkness until my thousand-mile eyes adjusted.

"*Hmm.*"

I found myself in a small white room with only a narrow pathway to the right. I focused my vision, but couldn't see through the walls. As expected of a tower, something seemed to hinder my gift.

"*Argh*, my eyes hurt."

I felt like I could peer through the walls if I added stigma's magic power, but decided to save it for later. The lights came on and signaled the start. Glowing sentences appeared on the walls.

[The 3 Commandments] [Cooperate with white to climb.] [Be wary of traps.] [Have faith.]

"I'll be damned if Lancaster or any other djinns don't appear."

I felt all too familiar with how things always panned out. Djinns wouldn't dare to act too openly, but they had already taken over about 30% of Cube. First, I took a careful look around. The room didn't seem to have anything special.

"I'll have to cross that bridge."

The pathway on the right led to a bridge. It looked like a trap with both sides completely empty, but I had no choice. I walked down the only path and arrived at the bridge. Then I carefully proceeded over it one step at a time. *Shweeek*— An arrow came flying with a shockwave. No, not just one. Another also came from the left and right. However, all three arrows slowed in front of me in bullet time. They felt like turtles compared to Rachel's attacks. I grabbed the two arrows from the sides and dodged the front by tilting my head. Then I chucked them forward and destroyed the crossbow.

“Ahahaha!”

I easily cleared the first trap and laughed imposingly. However...
Doosh— I heard the sound of something opening.

“W-What!?”

The bridge beneath me suddenly dropped.

Chapter 120

What Must Be Done (3)

KOONG! I landed with a thud, but didn't suffer any injuries thanks to aether covering my back. I quickly got up and looked around. It seemed like an empty cave complex. Only the rocks on the ground seemed noteworthy.

"I'm not familiar with any tower like this."

Honestly, I had only carefully designed one tower called the Tower of Wish, which was the largest one in history. It could be considered an alternate world. I planned to go there in the future. I *had* to go, but that was for another time.

"What am I supposed to do now?"

"Uwoooah!"

A scream rang out from above as someone else fell. *Was it a coincidence?* Chae Nayun landed on the ground. *Or were stupid people more likely to fall for the trap?* That would mean I was stupid too.

"Auuu..."

Chae Nayun rubbed her back and seemed surprised when she saw me.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Mr. Kim."

She narrowed her eyes and said some strange words.

"Did you hurt your head?" I reached out a hand. She hesitated, but soon grabbed it and stood up. Then she dusted herself off and asked, "Where are we?"

“How would I know? Rather, how did you fall?”

“Well, a crossbow shot an arrow at me. The floor suddenly collapsed after I destroyed it.”

Come to think of it, the crossbow was white. One of the three commandments said to *[Cooperate with white]*. *How were we supposed to cooperate with a crossbow that tried to kill us?*

“Wait a minute.”

I widened my eyes and looked forward. My thousand-mile eyes quickly expanded and I spotted a group of dwarves around a kilometer past the cave complex. They stood in front of a stone door and pulled on a rope tied to it.

“I found the way. Follow me.”

I gestured at Chae Nayun and proceeded forward. She looked at me somewhat grumpily before following.

“Where are we going?”

“There are NPCs ahead.”

“NPCs?”

A tower’s magic power could create beings that lived inside it. These existences were officially called tower residents, but people liked to call them NPCs like in a game.

“This tower has NPCs?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Even an artificial tower was mystical. We ran for about 5 minutes until we spotted the dwarves.

“Wow, your eyesight is freak... amazing.”

“Just say freakish.”

I didn't know why she changed the way she talked.

“W-What do you mean? I'm always like this.”

Chae Nayun dodged my eyes as she flipped her hair. I ignored her and observed the NPCs. They all wore the same green clothes, but nothing else stood out.

“Ah! Who is it!?”

One of the NPCs noticed us. The others also looked over.

“They must be here to help us!”

“Oh, venerable giants! Please open this door for us!” the dwarves pleaded.

“What do we do?”

“Hold on.”

One of the three commandments said to *[Have faith]*. I didn't know what that meant, but I couldn't be careless.

“What are your names?”

“I'm One!”

“I'm Seven!”

“I'm Twelve!”

“Never mind then.”

I counted them off myself. *One, two, three... seven.* I didn't know if we could trust them.

“Is there anyone else?”

“We have other brothers!”

“How many?”

“100!”

White^[1]? The stupid wordplay made them more trustworthy.

“Fine, we’ll help you.” I looked at Chae Nayun and signaled her. She grabbed the rope tied to the stone door.

“I just have to pull this?”

“Yes! But it’ll be difficult alone!”

“You hear that?”

I also grabbed the rope. The stone door easily opened when we pulled.

The problem came from within. A giant praying mantis jumped out as soon as it opened. It seemed like a fairly high ranked insect monster from its black carapace. It swung its front legs and charged at us. However, Chae Nayun slashed with her sword before it could approach. Her magic power cleanly cut its shoulder. Then she kicked the shrieking mantis in the abdomen and slashed again as it flew back. *Swish*— A crescent wave of magic power plowed through the ground and obliterated it.

Chae Nayun closed her eyes and sheathed her sword as her short hair fluttered in the wind. I blinked several times. She had grown crazy strong.

“Thank you, thank you!”

The dwarfs bowed and walked through. We should probably enter as well.

“Let’s go.”

“Take the lead, Mr. Kim.”

“...*Hm.*”

We walked through the stone door and instantly found ourselves in a forest. Then the dwarves continued leading us to their town.

“Are towers normally like this?”

“Towers have intelligence, so I’m sure they can change their structures.”

Towers had intelligence exceeding humans according to my settings. However, their intelligence didn’t exist for survival, but another reason.

“Let’s follow those NPCs. It looks like the town has other cadets.”

“Sure, Mr. Kim.”

“...*Sigh.*”

We followed the NPCs into town. They had all sorts of facilities like inns, restaurants, and weapon shops. Other cadets had also arrived.

“Oh, it’s Nayun!” one of the cadets shouted.

“Nayun!”

It was the high rank supporter, Yi Jiyoona.

“Yi Jiyoona? What is this place? How do we climb up?”

Yi Jiyoona pointed at the noticeboard in front of the town’s community hall.

“Take a look at that first.”

I began to read it as Chae Nayun joined me.

[Stage – Dwarven Town] [Enemies are terrorizing the dwarves who seek your assistance.] [Please leave your thumbprint here if you would like to join the war effort.] [You will be awarded 25 points for every enemy invasion you stop.] [100 points are required to proceed to the next stage.] [You will receive bonus points based on your contributions.]

Yi Jiyeon spoke once we finished reading. “Hurry and sign up. It’s the only way to earn points.”

We promptly left our thumbprints on the noticeboard.

“Enemies!”

A dwarf on a watchtower suddenly shouted. I turned in the direction he pointed and saw goblin warriors marching with archers in the middle and magicians in the back. A group of around 300 goblins approached.

“Hey! Gather up!” Chae Nayun quickly adapted to the situation and shouted. All the cadets soon gathered around her. We had 27 in total with 17 warriors, 8 supporters, and 2 sharpshooters. Chae Nayun didn’t know what to say after calling everyone over. I nudged her shoulder.

“Everyone’s here, Ms. Chae. What should we do?”

“Um... *argh*, who cares? They’re just goblins. Let’s just fight.”

“...”

A brief silence descended.

“Then I’ll snipe the goblin magicians.”

“Huh? Oh, sure.”

I looked around for high ground. The town had a watch tower, but I wanted somewhere higher. Thankfully, I spotted a 40 meter tree nearby. I climbed up using parkour and sat on a large branch. I took out the cadet handgun and aimed at the goblin magicians in the distance.

“Scan.”

The 40% buff wasn’t bad. The cadet handgun couldn’t compare to the Desert Eagle, but goblins had especially weak defenses. They should instantly die from headshots.

— *Kieeeeeek!*

A goblin raised its staff and howled. *Was that the leader?* I fired at the howling goblin. My bullet drew a clear arc and pierced its head. I fired at the other magicians after confirming the leader’s death.

Each bullet killed a goblin magician until none remained.

“Nice, Mr. Kim! Let’s go, everyone!”

Our warriors charged forward at Chae Nayun’s command.

* * *

This place seemed even more real as the sun set after we finished fighting. Chae Nayun and I walked into the town’s restaurant and wondered if this was really a tower.

“So, Ms. Chae, what are you going to eat?”

“Just fruit juice. By the way, why are you calling me that? It’s kind of annoying.”

“You started it.”

“That doesn’t mean you can do it.”

I had no clue what she meant, so I just ignored her. I looked around the restaurant before turning to her. She admired the sunset with a smile. I sighed with a heavy heart and called her name.

“Hey, Chae Nayun.”

She turned to face me.

“*Eh?* What’s up, Mr. Kim?”

“...How’s your oppa doing?”

Chae Nayun made a vague expression. “What, you’re finally worried about him?”

“No, I’m just wondering. It’s probably the same for everyone else.”

“*Heh*, don’t lie. I know you were the first to arrive at the hospital. Yeonha told me.”

“...”

I stared at her. Honestly, I wanted to ask how she would feel if someone killed him. However, that shouldn’t be asked as long as someone was still human.

“By the way, Mr. Kim...”

Chae Nayun changed the subject and wriggled her fingers. “Was it, *um*, last week?”

She stuttered and looked at the ground. “What were you, *um*, doing with Rachel? At night.”

Was she calling me Mr. Kim because of that? They were rivals.

I briefly replied, “Training.”

“Oh, why are you training so late?”

She stuck out her lips. I was more curious about Chae Jinyoon's condition. *Would Boss help me?*

“Also, I heard you're going on a drive with Kim Suho.”

Chae Nayun sure had a lot to say.

“I like motorcycles more than Kim Suho.”

“No, that's...”

“Let's go on a trip. I'll pay for all the expenses.”

“No, I can't.”

“Why? Tell me why you don't have time. I'll match my schedule to yours.”

I inwardly laughed at her tantrum.

* * *

Two nights passed since the final combat exam. We spent the first day killing goblins, and the next killing trolls and yetis. Three attacks took place over two days. We successfully defended against all of them and obtained 75 points. The bonus points would be given out once we defended against all four invasions.

“Wow, I guess they saved the best for last.”

The third day finally arrived. As expected, a boss monster appeared.

“*Uaaak!* It's the black ogre!”

The dwarf on the watchtower ran away screaming. A few cadets turned pale at its mountain-sized appearance.

“For real?”

“This has to be a prank, right?”

I carefully observed the black ogre. Even the weakest black ogre was an intermediate rank, grade 3 monster. It had great endurance and would serve as the perfect target to test my 3 streaks of stigma. I tapped Chae Nayun as she looked at the giant ogre.

“Let’s do it like usual. I’ll support from the back while everyone attacks.”

“Wouldn’t bullets just... *Eh?* You’re using a bow?”

Chae Nayun tilted her head. I bought one from Cube just in case. The cadet handgun was too weak. I also wanted to raise my rank to 100. Who knows? Maybe djinns had sent that ogre.

“You’re going to use magic arrows?”

“Yeah, I can’t use a gun forever. Alright, I’m going ahead.”

“Ah, hey, wait!”

I climbed the usual tree and looked down at the black ogre. It didn’t seem as big from this height. I calmly aimed and drew the bowstring. Then I imagined an arrow. It couldn’t be just a normal arrow. The tip had to be jagged for more power. It had to be perfectly balanced like a spear. I should be able to use it as a weapon by itself.

Ssss—

Stigma’s magic power sucked in the surrounding air. It continued to condense until it formed the exact arrow I imagined. I infused the light attribute into it as well. This single arrow cost almost all 3 streaks of stigma. Of course, that meant its destructive power was unimaginable.

I pulled the bowstring with all my strength. The light from it swirled like a tornado and only grew brighter. I released it after taking a short breath. The arrow shot forward like a beam of light. The black ogre seemed to have noticed as it raised its hand to block. However, an

explosion erupted the moment its hand touched. The blinding light burned its flesh.

— *Guooooo!*

Its arm burned white as it screamed. It could no longer fight against over a dozen warriors with just a single arm. Not to mention, Yi Jiyeon had cast several buffs on Chae Nayun.

“Wow.”

Chae Nayun blankly stared at the black ogre instead of charging in.

1. 100 is “baek,” which is also white. 🤔

Chapter 121

What Must Be Done (4)

I took away the arm of a peak intermediate rank monster with an arrow that cost 3 streaks of stigma. It caused a decent explosion, but I didn't have the energy to watch the outcome. Drowsiness flooded my brain as I fell from the tree.

“Ah.”

I looked at the battlefield and saw a sword of magic power shooting up. Chae Nayun's greatsword extended to half the length of the black ogre's arm. The ogre staggered as countless attacks from every cadet poured in.

The recoil from stigma seemed to increase as I gained more streaks. My body couldn't withstand the magic power.

“Argh.”

I felt dizzy and closed my eyes. *Boom, boom, boom.* The battle grew fiercer, but the sounds slowly faded. I eventually gave in to the drowsiness.

* * *

Chae Nayun stood right in front of me when I opened my eyes. I could see her soft skin and curious expression. Her otherworldly beauty surprised me.

“Ah.”

She flinched and took a step back.

“What.”

“Y-You, You’re awake?”

Why is she so surprised?

“Did you do something to me?” I asked as I rubbed my face.

“W-What do you mean? You slept so peacefully while everyone else fought!” Chae Nayun sat next to me and nervously yelled.

“Oh, sorry. I just felt tired.”

“*Cough*. Well, what you did was quite awesome. Was that your finishing move? You know, like an ultimate ability.”

I nodded. Using it made me fall asleep for an hour or two, so it could only be called a finishing move.

“What happened to the black ogre?”

“We killed it. Thanks to you.”

“That’s good to hear.”

A hologram suddenly popped up in front of us.

[You have cleared the stage!] [Contribution points will now be awarded. The top three contributors are as follows.] [Chae Nayun: 68 points] [Kim Hajin: 39 points] [Yi Jiyeon: 33 points] [The bottom 30% will immediately move to a lower stage.] [The top 30% will move to a higher stage after 2 hours of rest.] [The remaining 40% will be given a chance to try again.]

I finally understood this tower after seeing the alerts. Cadets would either go up, down, or stay on the same level after completing stages. Grades would be given out accordingly once the exam ended.

“Ah, so this is how it works.”

Chae Nayun also understood as she clapped her hands. Then she

poked my shoulder. “Hey, team up with me.”

“Team up?”

“Yeah, there’s a party function. Look.”

She showed me her smartwatch. They gave us exam watches like the last final exam. I thought it could only tell time at first, but it now had this party function.

“The heck.”

“Let’s team up.”

I looked at Chae Nayun and dodged her sparkling gaze. She grabbed my sleeve. “I want to team up with you.”

“Let me go.”

“Come on. Let’s team up. Please?”

She tried to act cute by pulling my sleeve back and forth. I could feel my brain shaking.

“Hey, wait. Let go. I’m going to puke.”

“I’ll let you go if you agree. Hurry up.” She shook me with enough force to rip my shirt. I nodded without a choice.

“Okay, okay.”

Chae Nayun didn’t stop until we officially partied up.

* * *

I went through two more stages with Chae Nayun. We protected an NPC from monsters in a forest and fought against other cadets or giant monsters in a colosseum. Honestly, Chae Nayun carried me with her overwhelming skill.

She specialized in prolonged fights. Not even Kim Suho could match her recovery with her immense magic power capacity. Naturally, she shined in stamina tasks like climbing a tower.

Of course, our grades would be decided individually even though she carried me. I racked up points whenever I could and constantly stayed in the top 30% of every stage.

[This is the final stage.]

Eventually, we reached the final stage in a cave. Only the top cadets made it. Chae Nayun nudged my shoulder.

“Hey, this must be the boss stage. Can you see anything in front of us?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I widened my eyes and focused. My vision flew past until I caught sight of someone.

— *Yaawn.*

A girl squatted in front of a stone wall. I smiled as I spotted Rachel.

“There’s someone there.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, it looks like you can’t proceed alone. Let’s go.”

“Okay.”

Chae Nayun and I ran forward. Rachel shot up as she heard our footsteps. Then she took out her rapier and stood on guard.

“Rachel!” I greeted her with a shout.

“What? Rachel?”

Chae Nayun stopped running. Rachel sheathed her rapier and ran towards us.

“Hajin...?” Rachel called my name with a bright expression until she saw Chae Nayun next to me.

“Chae Nayun?”

“What, why is the princess here?”

They looked displeased at each other. I reached out and shook Rachel’s hand. Then they resumed glaring at each other like true rivals. The press would constantly compare and encourage them to fight for the next 5 years. They had the same gender, age, and also both used swords now. Naturally, hero reporters acted even more extreme than typical celebrity reporters and picked on them.

“So *um*, Rachel, why are you alone?”

“Huh? *Ah*, it said I couldn’t enter alone, so I waited for someone else.”

This final exam could pose serious harm to Rachel. Monsters above high-intermediate rank wouldn’t pop out since Lancaster didn’t have enough influence, but Rachel certainly faced more danger than any other cadet.

“That’s good to hear. Then let’s enter together.”

“Yes, follow me.”

The stone wall blocking the path suddenly revealed a corridor when Rachel touched it. She led us in as we followed along. Chae Nayun glared at us from behind. After walking for about three minutes...

“Oi, Princess.” Chae Nayun finally opened her mouth.

“You didn’t team up with anyone?”

“Yes, I was alone the whole time,” Rachel briefly replied.

“Oh, really? Teamwork should be part of the exam’s grading criteria. You’ll probably get a zero for that.”

Chae Nayun snickered to provoke her, but Rachel remained silent. Then Chae Nayun placed a hand on my shoulder.

“But we should get a perfect score.”

“What do you mean.”

“We teamed up since the first stage. Plus, I’m a warrior and you’re a sharpshooter. It’s the perfect combination.”

“Oh... well, sure.”

Rachel glanced at Chae Nayun. “It’s combination, not combination.”

“Same difference.”

Rachel suddenly clapped her hands after we walked for another 3 minutes as though she recalled something.

“Oh right, Hajin! Would you like to come to England over winter break with some of the other team members? Clancy Islet has a huge festival.”

“On Clancy Islet? Sure, that sounds great.”

I’ve been wanting to return, but couldn’t without an invitation. I felt a bit sorry for Rachel, but I wanted to make more money until the casino blacklisted me.

“Great! You can come with Hoseung, Bokgyu, and Jamer.”

Rachel smiled. *Jamer*. I suddenly grew curious about how Tomer was doing. Chae Nayun muttered from the side, “You’ll fall behind if you only play around.”

“...”

Rachel's eyes narrowed for a moment. Chae Nayun enjoyed such reactions and smiled triumphantly.

"Have you heard of Yoo Sihyuk, Princess? What about the Yoo Sihyuk Camp? The heirs of hero clans pay billions of won to get in. That's where I'll be going over winter break. I'll surpass you in swordsmanship soon."

"Hajin, stupid people can't comprehend what they're taught, so it's just not as efficient," Rachel retorted while pretending to talk to me.

"What? Did you just—"

"In that sense, I am a very efficient learner."

Rachel was obviously not talking to me.

"Recently, I've gotten quite close to elementals, elementals."

Rachel emphasized the word. She said it twice like how Evandel called me *Hajin*, *Hajin*.

"Elementals?"

"Yes, elementals. Elementals."

"What? What does she mean?" Chae Nayun furrowed her brows. I could see her burning with a sense of rivalry.

"Ah, my bad. That was supposed to be a secret."

Rachel proudly placed her hand over her mouth. Her cheeks puffed up like she held back from laughing. She usually didn't act like this. I guess Chae Nayun tended to make people act just as childish.

"Did a hamster enter your mouth?"

Chae Nayun mockingly murmured as we arrived at another stone wall. It opened by itself as we walked up to it.

“This is it?”

It led to a large circular room.

“Wait.”

I held up my arms to stop them since I spotted someone in the distance. He couldn't look more suspicious with a black robe covering his body.

“There's someone there.”

“Hello, cadets.”

The man approached us.

“I am Heuk Jeon, the exam overseer in charge of the final stage.”

His black pupils squirmed and his ghastly aura didn't match an overseer's. I could smell the scent of blood. Chae Nayun and Rachel also shared the same suspicion.

“Are you really an exam overseer?”

“Of course. However, I will have to pick someone to stay behind for this stage. Only two can participate at a time.”

The self-proclaimed exam overseer took out a die.

“1 and 4 for the male cadet, 2 and 5 for the short-haired cadet, and... 3 and 6 for the blonde cadet.”

Tok. The die rolled on the ground.

“You won't be able to participate if your number appears.”

It rolled a 5 as expected. Chae Nayun frowned as the overseer spoke.

“Short-haired cadet.”

“What.”

The overseer flicked his finger. Then a cage suddenly fell from above and trapped Chae Nayun.

“Ah! What’s this?”

“Stay there for now. It’ll end soon.”

“Ah! Wait! Ah, uaaaaah...”

The overseer flicked his finger again and the cage quickly shot up. Rachel nervously muttered after seeing this.

“Hajin, that person...”

“Yes, I also think he’s a djinn.”

Rachel shook her head and corrected me. “He’s from Dark Moon Society.”

“Dark Moon?”

“Yes, look at the symbol on his robe.”

It had a black goblet and a faint moon above it. Rachel clenched her teeth.

“Sorry, it’s because of me.”

“What? Ah, no...”

Was Dark Moon Society that amazing? I felt like I wrote a setting about them, but couldn’t put my finger on it.

“Now then, shall we begin?”

My thoughts didn't continue for long. Heuk Jeon unleashed his magic power as he stared at us. *Koooong—!* The ground rumbled as crevices appeared and slowly grew bigger.

“The test is simple.”

Dozens of daggers shot up from behind him as he emitted real killing intent.

“There is a dueling arena below.”

Heuk Jeon jumped down as the ground continued to break. His voice rang out from below.

— You will clear the stage if you last 10 minutes there.

A heavy pressure fell on me. The ground beneath me sunk as I lost my footing.

“*Ak!*”

Rachel jumped and grabbed my hand. “Hajin, are you okay!”

“This...”

“It's a gravity field. Come... up... *uk.*”

Rachel tried to pull me up, but my body grew heavy. The pressure was undoubtedly immense since even Rachel struggled. I could hardly breathe.

— If one of you falls...

Heuk Jeon's voice echoed.

— I will kill that person.

He seriously meant it. Fear spread across Rachel's face.

— Ah, but don't worry. The gravity field will disappear once someone falls. For the record, the chance of both of you surviving for 10 minutes in that field is 0%. The gravity field will only grow stronger until even I can't withstand it, so one of you should just give up.

Indeed, it grew stronger as more of the ground broke.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Rachel and I exchanged glances. I finally understood his intentions. He wanted us to fight each other to survive or sacrifice ourselves. Rachel's expression turned serious.

“Hajin, don't have strange thoughts.”

“...What strange thoughts.”

Rachel held onto me with both hands. “Don't let go. Put some strength into your hand. Hurry!”

“...No.”

Unlike you, I can't let go of my own volition. I inwardly laughed as the gravity field grew unbearably strong. It pressed down on us with tens of times our weight. I found it difficult to keep my eyes open.

“Ah, ah, Hajin! Don't have any strange thoughts and come up—!”

“ ... ”

Rachel desperately screamed, but I felt like I would die if I stayed any longer. I let go of her hand.

“Ah, aah, no!”

I fell, but I felt liberated rather than heading towards death.

“Kim Hajin!”

Rachel screamed and also jumped. However, a transparent barrier appeared out of nowhere and blocked her. She slammed her fists against the barrier as she stared at me falling.

* * *

Thud.

“*Argh.*”

My back hit the ground. It felt like déjà vu. I didn’t suffer any injuries thanks to aether. However, the situation changed this time. I quickly shot up after spotting the self-proclaimed overseer.

“You came as expected.”

He should be from Dark Moon Society according to Rachel. I couldn’t remember much about this organization, but he was on the same level as an intermediate rank hero. I felt my heart beating. My bad feeling at the beginning of this exam turned out to be correct.

“So I have to fight you now?”

I was confident in not losing even if I couldn’t defeat him. He didn’t know about the ghost wolf. A surprise attack would give me the advantage. The ghost wolf would bite off his neck as soon as he approached.

“Are you confident?”

Heuk Jeon asked. I fired the cadet handgun without answering. *Tang, tang, tang, tang, tang.* I emptied the clip in less than a second. However, not a single bullet reached him. The daggers hovering behind him cut them all down.

“Unfortunately, I will kill you.”

He spoke quite a lot, which benefitted me. I threw the cadet handgun at him. One of his daggers flew forward and cut it in half.

“You’re abandoning your weapon? It’s too quick to surrender, don’t you think?”

“No.”

I stretched out my arm. Magic power shot out and formed another handgun.

“You see, I’m the type that’s overgeared.”

I transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle. He didn’t show any signs of approaching, so I had to make him. Heuk Jeon kept smiling, so I smiled back.

“Don’t hold anything back. You might regret it.”

“...”

His smile stiffened as he threw off his robe and unleashed his magic power. However, the strange tattoo on his upper arm caught my attention. *A black goblet with a faint moon.* I felt like I recognized it after seeing it again.

“Dark Moon Society...”

“Oh? Looks like you’re quite knowledgeable for a brat.”

The man proudly smiled. He seemed happy about his famous organization. *What role did they fill in the original story?* It was on the tip of my tongue.

“AH!”

A light bulb suddenly went off in my head. They served as one of the Chameleon Troupe’s many lackeys!

Chapter 122

What Must Be Done (5)

The Chameleon Troupe had ties with several organizations since they couldn't possibly manage everything alone. Of course, most of these ties only existed temporarily and the Chameleon Troupe always remained superior. Most groups they traded with didn't even know their true identity.

Dark Moon Society was one of many private organizations in Pandemonium. If I correctly recalled, their leader came from England and they functioned like a crime syndicate similar to the mafia.

"To think even a brat has heard of us. We must've become quite famous, *eh?*"

The United Nations and several governments denounced Pandemonium, but it wasn't the hell they made it out to be. Pandemonium had a sizable amount of residents that included humans. Dark Moon Society desperately clung to the Chameleon Troupe to elevate their own status. Having the Chameleon Troupe as a backer would give them an edge in power struggles against other organizations.

Lancaster must've hired the Dark Moon Society since their leader also came from England.

The fact that Dark Moon Society somewhat served the Chameleon Troupe wouldn't change anything. I couldn't just introduce myself as a friend of Boss. She would probably kill me.

"Then let us start."

Heuk Jeon spoke as he gathered his daggers. I counted one, two, three... seventeen. He must be at least intermediate rank since he could skillfully control all of them.

“Come. I’ll allow you to make the first move.”

He acted like he looked down on me, but didn’t leave a single opening. His daggers thoroughly protected him like a curtain of blades.

“Fine.”

I used the third medicinal effect I memorized. [*Instant Amplification*] A surge of heat coursed through my body as my muscles bulged. I could feel a rush of adrenaline as my thought process also sped up. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Despair is a part of death. I’ll let you experience it thoroughly.”

Click. I open my eyes and fired at the blabbering fool. *Tududududu*— Small explosions erupted as I emptied my 45 round magazine in a second. Heuk Jeon didn’t bat an eye against such a barrage. His daggers hovered like satellites and cut down all the bullets. *Clang, clang*— All the severed bullets fell to the ground and only silence remained.

“*Hum...* that’s it?”

Heuk Jeon leisurely smiled. *Tsk.* I clicked my tongue. Unfortunately, he was a bad matchup for me. I could fire bullets powerful enough to break his daggers, but he had seventeen of them.

“*Huu.*”

However, I couldn’t die here. Honestly, I could win whenever I wanted if I used the god-slaking bullet, but that would be like beheading a chicken with a guillotine.

“How disappointing. I’ll attack now if that’s all you have.”

He kindly announced his next move with a smile. I focused on his daggers as they flew at me.

I activated bullet time, but something felt off.

I could see a dagger accelerating towards my head before it happened. I could also see a second dagger suddenly shooting up towards my chin before it neared my heart. My bullets could change the daggers' trajectories now that I could see them.

Clang, clang, clang.

My bullets clashed with the daggers and continued to change their directions.

My gift, Master Sharpshooter, allowed me to predict the trajectory of any long range attack.

"Tsk."

However, actually defending against them was a different story. My eyes could follow their movements, but bullet time would only last 3 minutes. I would be in trouble once my sense of time returned to normal. Unfortunately, the flying daggers didn't show any signs of stopping. Heuk Jeon leisurely observed me from a distance. Then I thought of the other weapon hidden in stigma's storage.

[Awl of Weakening] [High rank – Enchant] [Poison attribute]: An awl that will weaken the pricked target. Enchanted with the high rank magic, weakening.

It was the weapon Tomer was supposed to receive from Wicked's executive. The high rank effect should work on Heuk Jeon.

"Uk."

A dagger grazed my shoulder as bullet time ended. I clenched my teeth in pain.

I only had to prick him once with this awl. The problem was how. Then I came up with an idea. Stigma's magic power could turn my will into reality. It was worth trying.

I focused all my senses on stigma.

“Uk.”

Heuk Jeon’s daggers continued to cut me as I stood my ground. I wanted to stand behind him!

Stigma shone brightly through my shirt. The world seemed to turn upside down as the scenery distorted and reassembled. I found myself behind him in the blink of an eye. I didn’t miss this golden opportunity and struck his shoulder with the awl.

“What!”

He reacted fast, but it was too late. I released the ghost wolf from my chest.

“Bite!”

The wolf jumped on him.

“Uk! W-What!”

He struggled underneath the wolf as I switched to a shotgun. I barely held myself back from collapsing. *Kiiik*— It took two seconds to transform the gun.

“Come back.”

I called for the wolf after it suffered several deep wounds. The wolf’s only flaw was its stamina and vitality. It jumped back inside me exhausted.

“A-*Argh*, fucking hell.”

His relaxed demeanor had completely disappeared as he glared at me with hatred. He tried to summon magic power, but the awl of weakening made it impossible.

“Try eating this.”

I shoved the shotgun barrel at him.

“It might hurt if it doesn’t end quickly.”

“...”

Right when I was about to pull the trigger...

[12 hours have passed since the first cadet completed the tower. The exam is now over.]

The exam ended and saved Heuk Jeon’s life. A blinding light engulfed me before transporting me away. I laughed, *Who knew someone could be luckier than me? Heuk Jeon was it?* I would inevitably run into him again. I should tell Boss.

* * *

I returned to the waiting room alone and stared at my smartwatch.

“Oho.”

[Your understanding of stigma’s magic power has increased.] [A new function, Imprint Idea, has been added.] [Imprint Idea – Will store stigma’s magic power as a special idea. You can store a total of two ideas. The cost of magic power for stored ideas is halved.]

“Interesting.”

Stigma received a new ability because of how I used it during the fight. I immediately decided to store the short-distance teleportation. Moving a mere 50 meters required two and a half streaks, but teleportation was an ability unique to gifts.

“Hey, Kim Hajin!”

“Hajin!”

I busily tapped on the smartwatch keyboard when two people called

me. I raised my head and saw Chae Nayun and Kim Suho running towards me.

“Ah, w-what happened to your face? How did you become so ugly? Are you okay?”

Chae Nayun rubbed my body out of concern. Was she worried or making fun of me? I found it a bit insulting.

“I wouldn’t be here otherwise.”

“Was that bastard really an exam overseer? Did you clear the stage?”

I ignored Chae Nayun and turned to Kim Suho. She must’ve told him what happened since he looked just as worried. Chae Nayun found a deep cut on my waist.

“Wha! What’s this? It’s so deep I can see inside your flesh!”

Why did she act so anxious when I was the injured one? I calmly stared at her rubbing my arms, shoulders, and legs.

“Oh right! Kim Suho, the potion!”

“Ah, I almost forgot. Here, Hajin. It’s a potion for external injuries.”

Kim Suho handed me a potion.

“Huh? Oh... no, it’s fine.”

I slowly took a step back. I didn’t want to apply such a potion. External injury potions were especially painful.

“Ah, don’t run away.”

Chae Nayun snatched my hand and applied the potion to a gauze.

“Ah, wait.”

I felt excruciating pain as the wet gauze touched my wound.

“*Ahuk, ah*, hey! Go easy on me.”

“Come on, it’s not that bad.”

Chae Nayun smiled despite my pain. My smartwatch suddenly rang as she finished treating me.

[Your body has memorized 1.5% of the emergency potion’s recovery effect.]

Oh right, it also applied to potions. I forgot until now and questioned my intelligence.

“By the way, what happened to the Princess?”

“Rachel? She’s... oh, there she is.”

Rachel was desperately crying as she spoke to an instructor. I could hear her saying, *Please find Kim Hajin!*

Wiing—

My smartwatch rang again. It went off like overtime toda... My face suddenly stiffened.

[I talked with the other members about your request.]

It came from Boss. My heart dropped as I read the first line.

“Hey, I need to go to the restroom.”

“*Huh?* There’s no restroom here. *Ah*, hey, where are you going!”

I went to the most isolated place I could find and made sure I was alone before reading the rest of the message.

[The result was 5 yes, 5 no.]

I clenched my teeth. As expected, even the almighty Chameleon Troupe hesitated to kill Chae Jinyoon. However, the Chameleon Troupe had a total of 11 members, excluding the empty seat.

[I have yet to decide.]

Boss hadn't voted yet.

[Yes, Boss.]

I sent her a short message. However, she didn't reply. I didn't know whether she simply typed slow or tried keeping me on my toes. Boss finally replied as I grew impatient.

[Little apprentice.] [You've already killed several people, but they were all evil and deserved to die.] [Your request is different from your missions. This time, you said you wanted to kill someone yourself. No matter the reason, your conscious will bear a heavy weight if you commit murder of your own will.]

“...”

Her message sounded solemn, but I had a strong hunch she only pretended to be kind. A small mistake in her text ruined the atmosphere. I couldn't help but notice as a former writer.

[Will you be able to endure it?]

[Um, Boss, I'm sorry to say, but it's conscience, not conscious.]

[If you can]

Boss paused mid-sentence. I probably shouldn't have corrected her, but it was already too late.

[?]

Boss replied with a single question mark.

[Ah, I'm sorry.]

I quickly apologized, but she seemed to sulk and didn't reply. I felt a bit anxious, so I called her. Thankfully, she picked up immediately.

"Hello?"

— What is it?

She sounded unenthusiastic. I sighed and apologized once again.

Chapter 123

Chae Jinyoon (1)

“Sorry, we’ll have to discuss the details later since I’m in the middle of an exam.”

— Fine. It was a typo, just so you know. I was a bit offended you pointed it out. I was about to fix it.

As I finished setting an appointment with Boss...

“Kim Hajin, is Kim Hajin here?”

An instructor called my name in the waiting room.

“Ah, yes.”

“You’re here?”

I ended the call and raised my hand. The instructor looked surprised.

“*Cough*, Rachel is looking for you. Looks like you two got separated during the exam. Tell her not to make such a big deal. This isn’t England, so she can’t order us around.”

I bowed in apology. “I’m sorry.”

The instructor clicked his tongue and reported to the higher-ups. “All cadets are accounted for.”

Then he quickly left. Rachel stood behind the instructor who just left.

“...”

She stared at me with tearful eyes. I felt sorry for making her worry. I should've looked for her first.

"I was looking for you. You should've told me you were okay."

"Ah, sorry. I had to take care of an urgent matter."

— Thank goodness.

Rachel muttered with a sigh. Her sincerity almost made my heart skip a beat. Then she asked, "So what happened in that last stage?"

"Well, I won."

"*Eh?* Wow, really? Against a member of the Dark Moon..."

She suddenly stopped and looked around. Then continued in a softer voice.

"Against a member of the Dark Moon Society?"

"Yeah, I beat him up."

"*Ah!*"

Honestly, I barely turned the situation around after suffering multiple injuries, but Rachel didn't need to know.

"Wow..."

She seemed awestruck with a half-opened mouth and looked at me with shining eyes. I casually shrugged as she fully accepted my explanation.

"From now on, I'll have to call you Master."

"What? *Ah*, no. You don't need to."

Our master-disciple relationship would shatter after a single proper fight. No, I could probably win against her at least once since she's never fought anyone with so many tricks like me.

"Master."

"Please, you don't have to."

I scratched my neck in embarrassment.

"Cadet Rachel, Cadet Kim Hajin."

Kim Soohyuk approached us.

"Ah, Instructor Kim."

"What's going on?"

Our class instructor felt trustworthy, unlike the rude instructor from before. Rachel and I explained everything. He took it seriously and said he would report it to the academy, but Cube's executives would likely dismiss it. They could easily make excuses since Rachel and I were the only witnesses. They would probably say it was all according to plan or that we misunderstood the instructor.

"Anyways, well done."

Kim Soohyuk patted our shoulders and turned back. I asked Rachel, "What are you going to do now?"

"Me? I'm going back to England tonight... Master."

She added the last word with a teasing smile. I took special care not to look at her. Rachel was the type that would drastically change the more she opened up. Her appearance and the way she acted would be too fatal for my heart.

I returned a small smile and looked at my smartwatch.

[Hajin Hajin.] [I learned how to text. Hayang helped me.] [When are you coming back? I miss you.]

Nowadays, Evandel was too preoccupied with the smartwatch I gave her. She learned how to look up videos and would probably learn how to order food soon.

I should hurry home to eat with Evandel.

* * *

Kim Suho and I visited a nameless dungeon in the Baekdu Mountain Range's Upper Sword Mountain.

"Whew. Good work, Hajin."

I sprawled on the ground as Kim Suho praised me.

"Wow, my hands are still shaking. Wasn't that super fun?"

Kim Suho reflected on the previous battle with a bright smile, but I felt too shaken up to do anything. The dungeon boss was an intermediate rank, grade 1 snake called Jqr that spat out black venom.

I came up with a simple strategy. I would support from the back as Kim Suho charged in. It went mostly according to plan. Kim Suho easily slashed away its venom as I shot its eyes. However, the damned monster began to rampage after losing its sight. It shot venom everywhere and attacked without a care for its safety. I would've died if I hadn't memorized the detox medicinal effect.

"Is this urn the reward?"

"Yeah, that should be it. Jqr was protecting it, right?"

I forced myself to stand.

"What is it?"

“I’ll have to appraise it first.”

Kim Suho handed me the urn without hesitation.

[Jar of Greed] A random effect will be added to whatever item you place inside.

This was one of the randomization items I created. You just had to place an item in it for about ten days. No one knew what effect would be added, but I wasn’t too worried with my luck.

“You can take this one.”

Kim Suho suddenly spoke up.

“Mm? What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I took Misteltein, so you should take this one.”

“Still...”

I knew this jar could be used twice.

“It’s fine. I’m happy with just the combat experience. Oh right, we should go on a trip together if you feel bad.”

I lay down and pretended to sleep. Kim Suho laughed as we passed the time in silence.

Wiing—

Someone’s smartwatch vibrated. It wasn’t mine. I turned and saw Kim Suho earnestly typing. I felt like I knew who he was messaging.

“Yun Seung-Ah again?”

“...”

Kim Suho flinched. I couldn't help but laugh. Their relationship had developed earlier than planned. In the original story, she couldn't even text Kim Suho because Chae Nayun always kept a close eye on him.

"You two going out?"

"*Huh?* N-No, how could someone like me go out with Senior Seung-Ah."

"If you aren't worthy, then no one is."

Any girl would fawn over his looks alone.

"Anyways, Hajin."

"You're good at changing the subject."

"N-No, I'm going back to what we talked about before. About the trip."

"You like going on trips that much?"

"No, it's just that I'm leaving soon. We won't see each other for at least 3 months."

Kim Suho continued with a serious face, "And you can also get closer to Nayun."

"Also?"

"Yeah, Chae Nayun has changed a lot. Now, she's..."

"No, not that." I changed the subject.

"*Huh?*"

"If I *also* get closer to Chae Nayun, that means you're getting close with someone too. It must be Yun Seung-Ah."

“N-No, it’s not like that!” Kim Suho angrily shot up.

“*Haha*, it’s not like that for me. I don’t like Chae Nayun. I never said I did in the first place.”

“*Eh?* Really? That’s not good.”

“Not good how?”

“*Uh...* never mind.”

Kim Suho closed his mouth. It seems like they talked about me. *Should I hack into their smartwatches later?*

“You can take the jar, but you’ll have to come on the trip.”

I smiled and nodded. I could do that much since I wouldn’t have cleared this dungeon without him.

* * *

The trip took place on December 17, a cold winter day with Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yoo Yeonha, Yi Yeonghan, and Chae Nayun. We headed towards a luxury resort near Gyeongpodae. The Daehyun group owned a 5 star hotel there. Chae Nayun suggested we take a limousine since none of us had a driver’s license.

“*Nom, nom.*”

Everyone seemed full of energy, but only Yoo Yeonha remained awake after 30 minutes.

“*Nom, nom.*”

I watched her happily eat the chocoballs that Chae Nayun brought. Yoo Yeonha showed no interest until everyone fell asleep. I found it quite funny how she savored every one of them.

“...”

We suddenly made eye contact. Yoo Yeonha reluctantly handed me the box.

“Would you like some?”

“No, I’m fine.”

“That’s a good choice. They’re not that good.”

She ate another one as she said that. *Thud*. The limousine shook and Chae Nayun’s head fell on my shoulder. Her fragrant scent tickled my nose.

“*Hmm.*”

Yoo Yeonha murmured to herself as I pushed Chae Nayun’s head to the side, but it fell on my shoulder again after 2 minutes. *She isn’t awake, right?* I turned back to the front after giving up and met eyes with Yoo Yeonha. For some reason, she looked at us with a sad expression.

“What.”

“Yes? *Ah... um*, I felt a bit bad since Nayun’s head must be heavy.”

“*Mm*, I guess you’re right. Her head’s too big.”

I made fun of Chae Nayun to check if she was awake, but she didn’t react. She must really be asleep.

We arrived at our destination after another 30 minutes. My jaws dropped at the resort. Even the buildings nearby looked luxurious. Gangwondo lived up to its setting with a GDP that matched a small country.

“Follow me!”

Chae Nayun got up as soon as we arrived and guided us with a lively voice. We would stay in a huge suite with 6 bedrooms for the next 2

days. We put our bags away and met in the living room.

“Our schedule is packed, so make sure you don’t get lost!”

Chae Nayun shouted with a smile. Everyone looked forward to what she had planned. From 12:00 to 9:00, we participated in a 9 course schedule consisting of playing pool, bowling, jet skiing, swimming, hot spring bathing, and other events. I didn’t know whether we were on a trip or training for the Olympics.

* * *

We held a barbeque at 11 P.M. for our final event of the day and enjoyed some high-quality meat with Gyeongpodae’s view in the background. *Tssss*— I felt relaxed from the sound of the meat sizzling.

“Kim Hajin, this is stuck. Give me a hand.”

Chae Nayun tapped my shoulder. I turned around and saw a piece of meat stuck on the grill.

“I can grill by myself.”

“Yeah, no.”

Everyone else sat at the table, but Chae Nayun insisted on helping.

“Oh right, I bought a motorcycle too.”

“What? Really?”

“Yep, it’s parked in the parking lot. Want to go for a ride after this?”

“Do you have a motorcycle license?”

“I do, but you’ll need to drive since I’m still inexperienced.”

“Oh? What’s this?” Yi Yeonghan’s teasing voice rang out. “What are you two doing over there?”

Chae Nayun frowned and glared at him.

“Shut up, Yi Yeonghan.”

“*Ouch*, scary.”

“Why don’t you leave the cooking to him? There’s no reason for you to help.”

Shin Jonghak muttered somewhat annoyed. He still had the meat I gave him stacked on his plate. It seemed he was too busy paying attention to us to eat.

“Why? It’s nice to see.”

Kim Suho chimed in. Shin Jonghak glared at him.

“W-What do you mean it’s nice to see? Y-You shut up too, Kim Suho.”

Chae Nayun stuttered and glanced at me. Our eyes briefly met before we dodged each other’s gaze.

“*Cough*.”

Chae Nayun’s face turned red. “Hey, don’t have any strange thoughts.”

“I don’t.”

“Why? Did things go well with Rachel?” she suddenly pouted and grumbled.

“What are you talking about?”

“Never mind.”

“Oi, Kim Suho, why don’t we play some pool again after this? The loser has to swim in the ocean.”

“Sure, I’m down.”

Shin Jonghak and Kim Suho planned another match while Yi Yeonghan mischievously stared at us. Yoo Yeonha focused on looking for an opportunity to cook some ramen.

I inwardly laughed at all of them. This kind of atmosphere called for soju. A night sky full of stars, the sound of crashing waves, and people whom I now felt lonely without. I felt deeply moved since I never thought I would feel affection in this world. I could let myself go today if I had a glass of alcohol.

Tak, tak. Chae Nayun tapped my shoulder. “See, aren’t you glad you came?”

I couldn’t deny her beautiful smile.

“It’s not bad.”

“*Heh*, I know you love it.”

Chae Nayun grinned. Then her smartwatch rang. “*Ah*, I have to take this. Hello?”

She picked up the call on a pair of earphones.

“*Ah*, yes. This is Chae Nayun.”

I could hear the voice on the other side.

“Yes?”

She suddenly dropped the tongs. Her hands trembled and her breathing sped up. She fell in shock as the voice continued.

“He...”

She paused.

— Yes! Patient Chae Jinyoon woke up! He fell asleep again, but...

Chae Nayun held her breath. What I feared ended up happening. Chae Jinyoon had woken up before the seed sprouted. I closed my eyes. I needed some time to think, but Chae Nayun hung up the call and pulled my sleeve.

“Hey.”

She looked at me with tearful eyes and pleaded, “Please give me a ride.”

Domestic portals had closed 30 minutes ago since it was 11:30 P.M.

Chapter 124

Chae Jinyoon (2)

I found it hard to believe, but the doctor's hopeful voice didn't seem like a lie. My mind completely blanked. I couldn't even feel happy because I'd given up a long time ago.

“...”

The doctor's voice grew softer as my head rang and my vision turned blurry. I slowly turned to the side and saw Kim Hajin. His perfectly average face seemed especially vivid today.

“Hey.”

I wasn't sure what to think, but I knew I had to go to the hospital. He seemed like the only one who could help.

“Please give me a ride.”

Kim Hajin looked at me with a heavy expression. *Did he overhear the call?*

He sighed as Yoo Yeonha asked, “A ride? Did something happen?”

“Huh? Erm...”

“Let's go. It won't take more than 20 minutes,” Kim Hajin spoke as I struggled to answer.

So he did overhear. I smiled at how reliable he was even in this situation.

“I thought only your eyes were good, but I guess your ears are too.”

“We can talk about that later. Where did you park your motorcycle?”

“Follow me.”

“What? What happened?”

Shin Jonghak shot up and asked. Yi Yeonghan, Yoo Yeonha, and Kim Suho also seemed concerned. I ran to the parking lot with Kim Hajin without explaining. Soon, we reached the motorcycle.

“Where’s the key?”

“Key? *Ah*, right...”

“...”

Kim Hajin shook his head. I couldn’t remember where I put the keys. I was such an idiot even in this situation.

“Am I really an idiot?”

However, Kim Hajin carefully looked at the motorcycle and sighed in relief. “It’s fine. This works with a smart key.”

“Smart key?”

“Yeah.”

Kim Hajin tapped on his smartwatch a few times and the engine suddenly started. He pulled me onto the back seat before I could even express my surprise. The engine’s roar echoed throughout the parking lot.

“Hold on tight.”

“Y-Yeah.”

Hold on where? I grabbed onto the hem of his shirt not knowing what to do.

“Scan.”

The moment Kim Hajin murmured in a barely audible voice...

Vroooooom—

The bike shot out of the parking lot. The wind felt too strong even with Kim Hajin's body shielding me. It felt like we were going at 400 km/hr.

“Hey, I'm going to— fall off—”

I tried to speak, but the sheer speed prevented my voice from reaching him. I didn't have any other choice. I slowly moved closer and leaned my head against his back while wrapping my arms around his waist. The only reason my face turned red was because I had never done something like this before. That's how I justified it, but Kim Hajin's back felt surprisingly large and comfortable.

“Uwat!”

The bike suddenly turned as I put more strength into my arms.

* * *

I've been putting off what I had to do and even avoided thinking about it.

I wondered why I was even here and why I had to complete such a task. I might've been avoiding reality, pretending to question whether I had to kill Chae Jinyoon.

However, I couldn't find a method to save him and I had a duty to fulfill as this world's creator.

Chwaaaaa—

A fierce wind blew against me. Chae Nayun's bike went far beyond its capabilities under the random consolidation system's effect. It went

400 km/hr or even higher. I could feel a soft sensation on my back as I focused on driving.

It took exactly 20 minutes to reach Seoul from Gyeongpodae. We finally arrived at Daehyun's hospital after speeding like crazy.

"We're here."

I spoke to Chae Nayun leaning against my back. She didn't react, so I nudged her with my shoulders.

"*Uun...*"

She opened her eyes and started sobbing. I spoke again as her eyes filled with tears.

"We're here."

"*Ah.*"

Chae Nayun stared at the hospital in a daze, as though she were dreaming. I grabbed her hand and pulled her off the bike.

"*Aah.*"

"You're not dreaming. The others should be on their way too."

Not even a hero could run from Gyeongpodae to Seoul. It would take at least an hour and a half even if they woke up the chauffeur and took the limousine. We didn't have time to wait for them.

"Let's go."

"*Um, yeah.*"

"What about your father?"

"He's out of the country with my grandfather."

Not even the Daehyun group's president could forcibly open a closed portal. We walked into the VIP ward. The guard at the entrance recognized Chae Nayun and quickly opened the door.

The outer area of the VIP section contained a luxurious garden. The number of hidden cameras and anticrime magic easily surpassed three digits. I could see a doctor and a group of nurses coming out.

"Nayun?"

They ran up to us and seemed surprised at my presence. Chae Nayun scratched her neck and introduced me.

"He's my frien... he's an acquaintance. Can we go in?"

She introduced me a bit strangely. *An acquaintance?*

"Ah, yes, come in."

A middle-aged doctor with glasses and well-combed hair guided us inside. The VIP ward had refined décor like a temple. Chae Nayun asked as we walked through the hallway.

"How's his condition?"

The doctor smiled. "He's not fully awake yet, but you'll be able to see him wake up soon. It's truly a miracle."

We stopped in front of an escalator heading underground. Chae Jinyoon would be downstairs.

"Excuse me, but he's..."

The doctor glanced back and forth between us.

"Ah, it's fine. He brought me here."

"Is that so?"

“Of course. Right? I know you’re tight-lipped.”

Chae Nayun’s trust caused me even more pain.

“Then let’s head down.”

We took the escalator to Chae Jinyoon’s room, which took up almost half the floor. A magic barrier protected the room with three mercenaries guarding the entrance. They could easily match intermediate rank heroes.

“Congratulations, Young Miss.”

A particularly intimidating mercenary walked up and smiled. Chae Nayun nodded with a dazed expression.

“Y-Yes, thank you.”

“Is he also going in?”

The mercenary pointed at me. Chae Nayun nodded.

“Yes.”

“*Hm.* He’ll need the president’s permission...”

“I’ll permit him. Father is probably too busy to come today.”

“*Cough.*”

The mercenary opened the door as we entered with the doctor. I could smell a clean, flowery scent and felt the dense magic power in the room. A masterpiece painting hung on the wall along with pictures of Chae Nayun and Chae Jinyoon around the room.

“*Ah...*”

Chae Nayun muttered in a daze. Chae Jinyoon lay at a 60 degree angle as he collected his breath. He was awake, but physically and

mentally exhausted.

“We told him he hasn’t woken up in four years, but it’s only been two hours since he first regained consciousness. His memory is still hazy, but he should fully recover in a month.”

The doctor explained, but Chae Nayun couldn’t hear him. Tears flowed down her face as the doctor excused himself.

“Then I’ll be back in a bit.”

He left and closed the door. Silence filled the room as Chae Nayun stared at Chae Jinyoon. Then she said what she wanted to say for a long time now.

“Oppa?”

Chae Jinyoon turned his head. The kind and gentle older brother I created. He saw Chae Nayun and silently stared at her for a long time. Eventually, a thin smile emerged on his face and he managed to speak.

“Nayun.”

He still remembered his younger sister’s face despite his brain damage. That was the kind of man Chae Jinyoon was.

“You’ve gotten so big. I heard from the doctor that it’s been four years, right?”

Chae Nayun trembled at his gentle voice, but couldn’t move. I grabbed her wrist and walked towards him. Chae Jinyoon watched me with interest.

“Is he your boyfriend?”

“*E-Eh?* W-What are you talking about? He’s not.”

Chae Nayun strongly denied it, but added a final word after sneaking

a peek at me.

“...y-yet.”

“Yet?”

This time, I felt dumbstruck. “W-What!”

Embarrassed, Chae Nayun pushed me away. Meanwhile, Chae Jinyoon watched us with a warm smile.

* * *

I scheduled to meet with Boss 2 days later in Gangwondo. Boss sat in a chair while reading a book in an empty cave. *Tak, tak*. The sound of high-heels rang out as Jain walked out from the darkness. Boss continued to read as Jain stood in front of her.

“Boss, Chae Jinyoon woke up.”

Boss silently closed the book.

“Are you really thinking of doing this?”

“...”

Boss stared at Jain and nodded.

“Will the four of us be enough? *Ah*, I guess it’s five since Kim Hajin wanted to kill him with his own hands.”

Jain murmured with interest. Boss only told a few members about Kim Hajin’s request. Only a few would know what happened regardless of whether or not they would succeed.

“Yes, I am.”

“*Hmm...* Well, this indeed seems to be the best way to rope Kim Hajin in.”

The Chameleon Troupe would obtain Kim Hajin's debt and gratitude by accepting this request. Even Jain felt tempted. She believed Kim Hajin had the potential to become one of the world's strongest heroes.

"Don't we have too much to lose though? We don't know why he wants to kill Chae Jinyoon and we would be turning that geezer into our enemy."

"No."

Boss shook her head. She already checked Chae Jinyoon's condition the day Kim Hajin made the request. Chae Jinyoon's magic core had been destroyed. Chae Joochul would feel no sympathy towards someone like that, even if it was his own grandson. That was the kind of man he was.

"He might even appreciate it since he would obtain the world's sympathy at the price of his grandson's life."

Boss gritted her teeth as she spoke. She showed a rare display of emotion since they had quite the history, but Chae Joochul had cut off all contact after the previous boss' death.

"Well, I can't say for sure, but Kim Hajin is strange no matter how I think about it."

Jain crafted a chair out of magic power and sat down.

"Explain."

"That greedy ghost refused our request even after we offered another 3 billion won."

"Greedy ghost... You mean Yoo Jinhyuk?"

"Yep."

Yoo Jinhyuk was a hedonist who wasted his money gambling in Gangwondo, Las Vegas, and Clancy Islet, but he was still the number one informant in Korea.

“It’s just too strange. He’s never hesitated to look into someone’s past, whether it was a chaebol or a hero. Why would he be so adamant about Kim Hajin?”

Yoo Jinhyuk had refused a 500 million won offer to look into a single person. Jain raised the price as high as 3 billion won, but Yoo Jinhyuk didn’t budge.

“This must mean he already looked into Kim Hajin’s past.”

“And?”

“He’s staying quiet because he thinks it’ll jeopardize his life. There must be something special about Kim Hajin’s past.”

It sounded logical. Boss nodded in agreement.

“Should we keep poking him?”

“No, look into another information guild.”

Jain grinned at Boss’ words. Yoo Jinhyuk just lost a big customer today. Boss was the type to easily hold grudges.

“Well, information guilds nowadays all have low standards, but I’ve been watching a couple of places for a while now.”

“Where?”

Jain turned on her smartwatch and projected a hologram.

[Falling Blossom] — Naturally and elegantly, like falling petals.

“One is Falling Blossom, a rising star in the field. It’s only been half a year since they started, but they have great reviews so far.”

“Mm.”

Falling Blossom. She liked the name.

“And the other one?”

“It’s this.”

[Truth Agency] — Anything you seek is at our disposal.

“...”

Boss frowned at the lame name and description.

“It has great reviews despite how it sounds. It’s the best information agency when it comes to finding people.”

“We’ll go with Falling Blossom.”

Boss liked luxury and expressed her decision.

“Alright, I’ll put in a request.”

“And next?”

“We’re good to go for Chae Jinyoon. The plan is perfect. Just ask Kim Hajin when he’s available. I’m sure that child needs time to prepare his heart.”

Tap, tap. Footsteps sounded in the cave. Jain immediately sharpened her senses and stood on guard.

“Who is it.”

“I already called him.”

“Called who? Kim Hajin? Already?”

“Yes. It’ll be the first time you’re seeing him. Act accordingly.”

Jain looked forward with a startled expression. Kim Hajin wore a black coat that reached his knees and styled his hair in a clean

pomade. She liked his fashion sense, but he didn't look particularly handsome with his average face. He leisurely walked through the darkness.

“At least he walks like a model.”

Jain murmured with a grin.

Chapter 125

Chae Jinyoon (3)

I could see Boss and Jain sitting as I walked through the cave. They emitted powerful magic power like everyone who surpassed a certain threshold. I took a deep breath and walked up to them.

“You’re here, little apprentice.”

“Yes.”

I bowed. However, she seemed to be asking for more with her eyes.

“Boss.”

“*Mmm.*”

She hummed in satisfaction and formed a chair out of her black magic power. I sat and stared at Jain as she scanned me from top to bottom.

“This is Jain. She’s a fellow member.”

Jain smiled and waved. “Hi hi.”

“Yes, nice to meet you.”

This would be our first official meeting despite the many times I saw her in disguise. I respectfully bowed.

“Hajin, I have so many questions.”

“Yes, what is it?”

She probably wanted to know my motive for killing Chae Jinyoon.

“Those clothes, did you copy them from a fashion magazine?”

“Come again?”

What kind of question was that?

“You have excellent fashion sense, unlike other male cadets your age.”

“...”

Honestly, I put a lot of effort into my clothes because of my average looks. Of course, I could afford better clothes now than other cadets.

“I’m just a bit interested.”

“I see.”

“Jain.” Boss leered at her and she quietly backed off.

“I want to know why you want to kill Chae Jinyoon.”

“...”

Should I tell them about the mysterious devil’s seed? Would they believe such a calamity existed without any proof?

“You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

However, Boss cut off my worries. Jain smacked her lips in disappointment as Boss continued with a serious face.

“However, you’ll have to pay the price.”

Boss’ eyes flickered with a strange fervor.

“You will become our strength. Remember this debt and sign the contract.”

The last part made me chuckle. “Of course.”

“Good, then I’ll explain the plan.”

Jain immediately spoke and created a triangular table with her magic power.

* * *

Chae Nayun visited every day after Chae Jinyoon regained consciousness. His condition steadily improved. He still spent more time asleep than awake, but would recover fast enough to walk in a month.

“Mmm...”

Today was the fourth day since Chae Jinyoon had woken up. Chae Nayun visited him with her friends, including me.

“Hmm...”

Chae Jinyoon scrutinized us before pointing at someone.

“You’re Kim Suho, right?”

“Y-Yes, I’m Kim Suho. How did you know?”

Kim Suho widened his eyes.

“Chae Nayun used to talk about you a lot when she was in Military Agent Academy.”

Chae Nayun flinched and peeked at me before explaining, “Y-Yeah, I said you looked delicate and acted like a know-it-all.”

“What? Isn’t that too harsh?”

“*Haha*, I agree with you, Chae Nayun.” Shin Jonghak chimed in with a hearty laugh.

“Jonghak looks just as delicate though.”

“No, no. I look much more manly.”

Shin Jonghak objected to Yoo Yeonha’s point. However, I couldn’t focus on their conversation and sat deep in thought.

The devil’s seed had reached 97% according to the Book of Truth. I only had two months or maybe one if 100% took 4-5 years.

“Why are you so zoned out?”

Yoo Yeonha tapped my shoulder. I smile bitterly.

“Nothing, I’m just a bit tired.”

“Ah, you’re Hajin, right?” Chae Jinyoon pointed at me. Our eyes met and he smiled.

“Thank you for coming every day. You’re making me ashamed.”

“Eh? He came every day?”

Yoo Yeonha asked in surprise. Shin Jonghak seemed disgruntled while Kim Suho shrugged with a smile.

“Of course, he’s been coming with Nayun every day.”

“Ah, d-don’t say that, oppa.”

Chae Nayun could only visit once a day for about three hours when he was awake. She had pleaded for me to come along for the past 4 days. I agreed, thinking I could maybe talk to Chae Jinyoon privately.

“He’s, *um*, oppa’s fan.”

“My fan?”

“Yeah, he used to talk about you all the time. Right? Remember last semester?”

Chae Nayun jokingly growled and put me in a headlock. I didn’t have the energy to play along with her jokes and silently squirmed away.

“I was just joking.”

Chae Nayun muttered as she awkwardly poked my arm. “Hey, I was just joking.”

“Chae Nayun.”

Shin Jonghak cut in, clearly showing his displeasure.

“What.”

“Follow me outside.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Your watch.”

Chae Nayun looked down at her watch.

“Ah, I’ll be back in a moment, oppa.”

They seemed to have received a message and left me alone with Chae Jinyoon. We stared at each other in silence. I finally got the chance to talk to him in private, but my head was filled with complicated thoughts. I spoke after some time.

“Chae Jinyoon.”

He smiled at my stiff voice. “Yes, Kim Hajin?”

“How’s your body?”

“Mm, I think I’m getting better,” he softly responded as I asked another question.

“What about your head?”

“My head?”

Chae Jinyoon seemed confused at my question.

“Yes, have you experienced any urges to do something bad?”

“Huh?”

“Like suddenly having horrible thoughts or feeling demonic energy rather than magic power from your body.”

“...”

I could see my fearful reflection in his eyes. I wanted to ask, *Will you believe me if I said you will become a devil? Can you give up your life to protect your younger sister?*

“Mm, I’m not sure. Are you perhaps talking about Operation Fireflake?”

Chae Jinyoon thought about the past. I dropped my head, unable to ask those questions. I remained silent as I clenched my teeth and tightened my grip on the chair from the worries in my heart. Then Chae Jinyoon suddenly placed his hand on my head.

“I don’t know what’s troubling you so much, but...”

Thud— The door suddenly opened.

“Ah, sorry oppa. What?”

Chae Nayun furrowed her brows as she saw Chae Jinyoon’s hand on my head.

“Hajin must’ve been a big fan of mine.”

“*Pft*, really?”

She didn’t think much of it and sat next to me as Chae Jinyoon asked, “Where are the others?”

“I sent them back. You have to rest soon anyways.”

“*Ah*... that’s a shame. Did something happen?”

“Yeah, *um*, Master Yoo Sihyuk said he’d delay his camp for about 4 days. I’ll be leaving on the 25th.”

Yoo Sihyuk had heard about Chae Nayun’s circumstances. However, she didn’t seem too happy.

“Oppa, should I just not go?”

Chae Jinyoon didn’t reply. Instead, he slowly turned towards me.

“I think she’s asking you, Hajin.”

“What? N-No, I’m obviously asking you, oppa.”

“What do you think, Hajin?” Chae Jinyoon asked.

Yoo Sihyuk’s school was located at the peak of Baekdu Mountain with one of the highest concentrations of spirit energy and mana in the world. It was impossible to reach its peak without being above a certain level. You had to forcefully train your lungs to arrive at Yoo Sihyuk’s school. Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, and Shin Jonghak would be unable to leave until winter break ended.

“Should I not go?” Chae Nayun turned to me and asked.

I responded resolutely, “No, you should go.”

Chae Nayun had to leave.

“Eh? Ah... but it’s not the end of the world even if I don’t go...”

“Go.”

“Tsk.”

Chae Nayun’s face turned into a bulldog’s as she glared at me. Thankfully, Chae Jinyoon seemed to agree.

“Nayun, I agree with Hajin. You don’t have to worry if it’s because of me. You can see me any time, but this might be the only chance to train at Yoo Sihyuk’s school.”

“I was planning on going anyways. Oh yeah, I brought a camera.”

Chae Nayun changed the topic and took out a camera from her bag. Then she pushed it at me.

“Here, take some pictures of us.”

Chae Nayun ran next to Chae Jinyoon. It surprised him, but he soon smiled. I silently watched them and murmured.

Scan.

The number 44 came out. *Jackpot.* I wondered what kind of photos this camera would take and raised it with a somber expression.

“Say cheese.”

Click. Click. Chae Nayun and Chae Jinyoon made all sorts of poses. She hugged him, gave him a peck on the cheek, and leaned on his shoulder. After about thirty or so photos...

“You should take one with Hajin.”

Chae Jinyoon made an unexpected suggestion.

“Ah, no, I’m fine...”

“I insist. Nayun, go stand next to him.”

“What? No...”

“Chae Nayun.”

“...”

Chae Nayun stood next to me embarrassed when Chae Jinyoon raised his voice.

“Alright, say cheese.”

“C-Cheese.”

Chae Nayun bashfully made a peace sign. *Click*. Chae Jinyoon took the only photo of us together.

* * *

The visiting period ended at night. Chae Jinyoon slept as Chae Nayun and I walked around the hospital garden.

“Kim Hajin.”

Chae Nayun skipped through the garden under the faint moonlight and called my name. She made the happiest expression in the world.

“Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin.”

“...”

“Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin.”

“What?”

“Nothing. I just wanted to thank you.”

I became speechless.

“Cough, you have nothing to thank me for.”

“You came with me every day.”

She continued as we strolled through the garden. “Honestly, I was too afraid to come alone. I love oppa so much, but it’s been almost 5 years since we talked. I didn’t know what to say or what he might think about me all grown up.”

Then she poked my shoulder.

“But it didn’t feel awkward at all with you around.”

We arrived at the entrance with my bike parked next to the wall.

“I see.”

I replied unenthusiastically and prepared to leave. I got on my bike, put on my helmet, and turned on the engine.

“Are you free on Christmas?” Chae Nayun spoke as I was about to step on the gas. I turned towards her.

“That’s the day you’re leaving.”

“I want to see you before I go.”

“...”

I didn’t answer, but Chae Nayun continued.

“I’m leaving at 6, so I’ll meet you at noon in front of the hospital.”

“I’m leaving.”

“Yeah, good night.”

I smiled bitterly and stepped on the accelerator. I could see Chae Nayun looking at me from the side mirror as I raced away.

* * *

Evandel and Hayang greeted me as I opened the door to the luxury apartment I bought in Seocho District, Gangnam.

“Hajin.”

“*Meow.*”

“Hey, you two.”

I picked up Evandel in one arm and Hayang in the other. I did my best to smile at their bright expressions.

“How did ordering food go?”

“It went well! We ate steak! Steak!”

“You followed my instructions?”

“Yeah! I told the delivery man to leave the food in front of the door. Then I brought it inside after he left!”

“Good job.”

I placed them down on the couch. It felt nice to have such a big house. All the space gave me some peace of mind.

“Oh right, did you take Hayang on a walk?”

“*Un!*”

Recently, I’ve been making Evandel practice going out. I made her wear a smartwatch just in case, but I didn’t worry too much with Hayang by her side.

“Good girl.”

“Hehe, ehehe.”

I patted both of them as Evandel giggled. Then I received a message.

[Little apprentice, we have finished all the preparations. We will make our move on January 3. Be ready.]

My face immediately stiffened.

“Watch TV for a bit.”

I went into the bedroom and took out the Jar of Greed. I had placed aether inside it after obtaining it. Aether was certainly worthy enough to upgrade. More than ten days had passed since December 10. I slowly opened the lid.

“Eh?”

My hands emitted a golden light. I had experienced this before. It meant my accumulation of luck had activated. Golden light rose from the jar.

“Bravo.”

Aether carried a strange pink light.

“Wait, what?”

I turned on my smartwatch with a sense of foreboding.

[Aesthetic Greed] The desire to seek beauty has been attached to aether. — Its user's invariable charm stat will increase by 0.002 points every 24 hours, up to a maximum of 1. (Note that the charm stat cannot increase beyond 9). — Aether will now react to beautiful things. — Aether's detail materialization will become more exquisite.

“...”

I stood in a daze. Objectively, it seemed fantastic. After all, it permanently raised an invariable stat. Furthermore, the charm stat not only affected one's outer appearance, but also your musculoskeletal balance and height. With a full point, I should grow at least 2-3 cm taller. Such a drastic change would indeed trigger my accumulation of luck. Still...

“Why?”

Why couldn't it have been intelligence instead of charm? I would've been happier if it increased my variable stats by 2.

“Sigh...”

I couldn't do anything about it. Of course, I could change the settings with my gift, but erasing an existing function to add a new one would cost too much. I decided to be content and reached for aether. It shot towards me and coiled around my body like a snake.

Chapter 126

Chae Jinyoon (4)

Christmas arrived as huge news swept through Korea on this beautiful holiday celebrated by lovers and families. The world's rank 1 guild, Creator's Sacred Grace, announced their Tower of Miracle campaign. Their announcement came a couple of weeks late, but I didn't mind since the results would remain the same. I already bought 4 billion won of their stocks and would sell them soon.

"Are you worried?"

I spoke on the phone with Kim Suho while reading the guild's stock chart.

[Creator's Sacred Grace +10.1%]

A top guild's stock price rarely fluctuated, but theirs had already risen by 10%. I almost made a 100% profit thanks to stock market leverage.

— Not at all.

I could hear the concern in his voice despite his words. The Tower of Miracle campaign would last 6 months. Most tower conquests took 3 months, but the Tower of Miracle was the world's largest tower. Creator's Sacred Grace would announce their defeat after 6 months. I thought about stopping them, but their guild master wouldn't listen to a kid like me. After all, he even refused to listen to Yun Seung-Ah.

— She'll come back victorious.

"I hope so."

They might have a chance since they delayed the announcement by 2 weeks, or they might suffer an even greater loss. I couldn't be sure of

the future anymore. I might have a forest of knowledge in my head, but infinite trees existed. I couldn't know every single one.

— By the way, you're on your way to meet Chae Nayun, right?

I glanced at my watch. *11:59 A.M.* A minute left before the promised time Chae Nayun forced on me.

“Why would I be?”

— What? Come on, don't be like that. She planned a lot for today.

“What?”

— Well, *uh*, she asked me about what you liked and what to do for fun. She was looking forward to it a lot, so you have to go.

It seemed like Kim Suho worried about us more than Yun Seung-Ah.

“I'm hanging up.”

— Wait! Please, just go. Please?

“Why are you trying to act cute?”

It was a Kim Suho-like thing to do. I hung up with a grin and closed my laptop. Then I lay down on the couch and turned on the TV. After an hour passed by...

Tididi— The door opened as Evandel and Hayang returned from their walk.

“We're back!”

“*Meow.*”

Evandel raced to the couch and stared at me like she wanted something. I handed her the remote since it was about time for her favorite anime and headed to the bedroom.

“Sigh.”

I hopped on the bed and subconsciously sighed. My heart ached and I suddenly had a strong urge to smoke. This uncomfortable feeling wouldn't disappear, so I reluctantly looked at my smartwatch. I hadn't received any messages or calls from Chae Nayun. She should've already gone home by now. An hour had passed and she wouldn't have waited with her personality. I convinced myself and picked up the game console.

I finally left the bedroom at 3 P.M., unable to calm my heart. Evandel slept on the couch with Hayang as a pillow. I carefully turned the doorknob, but they woke up and stared with sleepy eyes.

“Uh, I’m going out for a bit. I’ll bring back yummy food.”

“Un...”

Evandel went back to sleep as I left. I rode my bike out of the parking lot and drove to Daehyun's hospital.

“She’s still there?”

I came just in case. Chae Nayun leaned against the wall wearing clothes she had carefully picked out. She did her hair in a short wave and uncharacteristically wore light makeup. My heart ached as I looked at her. I swallowed a sigh and drove towards her. She pouted at her smartwatch, but suddenly looked up with a smile when she heard the bike's engine.

“Ah! Hey! Kim Hajin!”

She pointed at me and ran up.

“You’re freaking... I mean, you’re very late. Where were you?”

“I didn’t agree to meet in the first place.”

Chae Nayun leered at me, but didn't complain. She just held up her watch.

“I had a lot planned today. We were supposed to eat brunch at noon, go bowling at 1, then a café at 2, visit a fortune teller at 3, an arcade at 4, a restaurant at 4:40...”

I lightly struck her head as she recited her schedule.

“Uk.”

She stiffened and slowly raised her head. I thought she’d react harsher, but she only looked at me confused.

“Why’d you hit me?”

“Who plans everything out like that? This isn’t combat training.”

“Then what do we do?”

“Let’s go on a drive. We have about two hours left.” I tapped on the seat behind me.

“Drive? Sure!”

Chae Nayun rejoiced and got on the back seat as I stepped on the accelerator.

“Let’s go straight to the arcade. After we play for 40 minutes, we can go to the restaurant.”

“Shut it, fool. Dates are supposed to be spontaneous.”

“I-It’s not a date. I told you not to misunderstand— *ugyak!*”

I sped up to prevent her from making excuses. We circled around Seoul’s beautiful scenery on Christmas without going to the arcade. I came 3 hours late, but we saw many things and enjoyed our time together. We stopped by a clothing store and left wearing completely different clothes. Then we ate at a restaurant and I forced her to try some pancakes.

We spent two and a half hours together before I drove her to the portal station.

[Domestic Portal Station]

“Ah... mm...”

The portal she had to take led to the North Hamgyeong Province. However, she hesitated to leave and stayed by my side.

“Hurry, you’re going to be late.”

I couldn’t look at her and only muttered at the portal in the distance. Chae Nayun nudged my shoulder.

“Hey.”

“Hm?”

“Today was fun.”

Her words pained me.

“I’m glad.”

“By the way, before I come back, don’t...”

She didn’t finish before shaking her head and smiling.

“Never mind. I’ll see you soon.”

She reached out with her small and pale, yet calloused hand. I grabbed it with a bitter smile. Her cheeks turned faintly red.

“Your hand is pretty big... and soft.”

“I only have to pull the trigger when I train.”

“I’m jealous. *Cough*, anyways.”

She let go of my hand.

“I’ll see you later.”

I smiled without a word.

“Then I’m going.”

“Yeah.”

“Stay safe.”

Chae Nayun walked to the portal while glancing back.

* * *

The 3rd of January finally arrived with sleeting weather. I got in a sedan in a desolate park. Jain and a man I hadn’t met before sat in the front with Boss in the back.

“This is the helper I mentioned. Don’t be too surprised.”

“Hello.”

Judging by the man’s reggae-style hair and black skin, he was likely Khalifa, the Chameleon Troupe’s blue seat.

“Now that the main hero is here, everyone close your eyes and entrust yourselves to my magic.”

Jain unleashed her magic power and I could feel something painted over my skin.

“Done. Here are your fake IDs.”

It only took 3 minutes to become completely different people. I

opened my eyes and looked at the rear-view mirror. It reflected a nurse instead of Kim Hajin.

“I don’t know why you want to make things difficult. We could’ve just used poison.”

However, the devil’s seed couldn’t be killed so easily. I had to use the god-slaying bullet.

“The plan is simple. We’ll enter Chae Jinyoon’s room as nurses. Then we’ll bring him away and kill him in a secluded area.”

Jain made it sound easy, but it would be extremely difficult considering the security. However, it would be possible thanks to Jain’s disguises and Khalifa’s portal ability.

“As for how we’ll kidnap Chae Jinyoon, that’s why he’s here. Our helper can open portals, but we’ll be found out if the magic power is too great. Our best bet is a small portal that only travels 20 km. My disguise will wear off once you go through the portal, but you won’t have to worry about anyone seeing you. We already have a barrier set up where you and Chae Jinyoon will arrive.”

I would face Chae Jinyoon there alone.

“Boss and I will create a fake Chae Jinyoon once you and Khalifa leave. All you need to do is finish your task and come back through the portal.”

Jain’s ability wore off once her target went past a certain distance. She had to stay in the hospital room to maintain the fake Chae Jinyoon.

“Now, get off and pretend like you’re heading to work. Only I will be in the sedan. I’ll stay close enough to maintain your disguise, so don’t worry. Just make sure you’re no more than 4 km away.”

Her distance was restricted to 10 km for 1 person, 8 km for 2, 6 km for 3, and so on. Khalifa got off first, followed by me, then Boss. The sedan drove off slowly as the three of us maintained an appropriate distance.

We successfully entered the VIP ward as I headed to the counter and waited for Jain to call.

“Haeyeon?” Jain called at exactly 11:00 A.M.

“Yes?”

“It’s time to check on Chae Jinyoon. Follow me downstairs.”

“Ah, yes.”

I followed Jain along with another nurse and doctor who were actually Boss and Khalifa. We took the escalator down and arrived in front of Chae Jinyoon’s room. Jain looked at the clipboard and spoke to the mercenary.

“It’s 11:10 A.M. Time for a check-up.”

“Yes.”

He let us through without any suspicion. We locked the door as soon as we entered. Chae Jinyoon was sound asleep. Jain murmured, “CCTV.”

I was in charge of dealing with the CCTV and temporarily stopped it with my smartwatch. It cost 200 SP.

“It’s done.”

“Good.”

Jain turned to Boss.

“Boss, be careful so the mercenaries outside don’t notice.”

“I know.”

Boss carefully unleashed her magic power and created 2 puppets. Then Jain turned them into Chae Jinyoon and the nurse I disguised as.

“Alright, you’re up, Khalifa.”

“Okay.”

Khalifa created a small portal. *Wooong*— The undulation of magic power felt slightly stronger this time. We had to hurry before the mercenaries noticed.

— W-What was that? Hello? Did something happen inside?

I placed Chae Jinyoon in a wheelchair and walked into the portal.

* * *

The portal led to a desolate forest with sleet covering the ground and leafless trees all around. I parked the wheelchair next to a wooden bench and waited for Chae Jinyoon to wake up. Chae Nayun’s face suddenly overlapped with his as she smiled at me. I tried to suppress the thoughts in my mind.

“Fucking hell.”

But I just couldn’t do it. I pulled out a cigarette. Then I put it in my mouth and lit it with magic power. The acrid smoke passed through my throat into my lungs. The combination of nicotine and tar made me relax just a little.

Chae Jinyoon finally opened his eyes after an unknown amount of time.

“...”

He stared at me, unbothered by the foreign scenery. I stared back and bowed.

“...Kim Hajin?”

I didn't reply.

"Where are we?"

I didn't reply.

"Did something happen to the hospital?"

I didn't reply. Instead, I took out my gun and loaded it with the god-slaying bullet.

"Hajin?"

Chae Jinyoon's innocent voice caused me heart-wrenching pain. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. Then I dropped the cigarette and stomped it out.

"Chae Jinyoon, have you heard of the devil's seed?"

"What?"

"It should be something that hasn't been confirmed in this world yet."

I continued while looking at him. I felt like I needed to explain why he had to die out of respect, but it was honestly just my cowardly justification.

"A devil's seed is a devil that takes over a human like a parasite. Once the seed sprouts, the devil will take over and transform the host."

My clothes fluttered in the wind. I could taste the bitterness from the first cigarette I smoked in almost a year. I slowly raised my gun and pointed it at his head.

"Chae Jinyoon, this seed is inside you."

He silently stared at me.

"You will become a devil."

My vision turned blurry and my hands trembled uncontrollably.

“I’m... I’m sorry.”

I held the gun with both hands and tried my best to stop trembling as I placed a finger on the trigger.

“I’m sorry. I really am. I’m sorry...”

However, I couldn’t help but hesitate. Chae Nayun’s smiling face overlapped with Chae Jinyoon once again. Her feelings made my heart ache. The pain and sorrow suffocated me. I was afraid. Afraid of the pain she would feel and the wound she would bear.

Chae Jinyoon’s face suddenly contorted and demonic energy rose from his body. It burned the ground and stifled me. His entire body turned ash-black. Chae Jinyoon, or rather the devil, reached out to me. I could feel the killing intent from its deathly black fingers and bloodshot eyes. I hesitated even as its hand drew closer to my neck. I didn’t have the strength to pull the trigger from mental exhaustion. My hesitation should’ve killed me. However, no danger occurred. It felt as though the world had stopped.

I looked into the devil’s eyes in the middle of this serene forest. Its bloodshot eyes froze, but carried a hint of tears. My heart sank. The devil’s seed couldn’t fully sprout due to Chae Jinyoon’s will.

“...”

Chae Jinyoon stared at me and suppressed the evil within him. I couldn’t say anything. He had made his decision and I couldn’t betray his conviction. I couldn’t let his efforts go to waste. I clenched my teeth and aimed.

“I won’t hesitate this time. For the both of us.”

A small thought crossed my mind as I pulled the trigger. *Chae Jinyoon, the man I created. A kind, warm, selfless, and righteous... hero.*

KWANG!

The world seemed to grow farther as a brilliant light dyed the surroundings white. The god-slaying bullet pierced Chae Jinyoon's forehead and destroyed the seed. His blood and brain splattered all over me and his bones pelted my skin. A strange ringing reverberated in my ears. My legs gave up as I collapsed to the ground. All sorts of emotions swept through me. My face felt wet from what could've been tears or blood.

"Ah..."

An indiscernible sound came out of my mouth. I couldn't tell if it was the cry of a human or a beast.

Today, I had murdered Chae Jinyoon.

Chapter 127

Funeral (1)

My body felt heavy and dizziness overwhelmed me. I could barely maintain consciousness as a strange suspicion surfaced inside me. *Was this world a novel or reality?* The sentences I wrote popped up in my head as Chae Jinyoon's heroic tales flashed before my eyes. The Tower of Wish, artifact scrambles, and the Tower of Miracle...

However, these things could no longer occur. For the first time, I realized I had killed someone, and something inside me broke. The subconscious belief that this world was just a novel finally shattered.

Tsss.

Black boots descended on the sleet-covered ground. I raised my head in a daze and saw Boss' dark pupils. She fluttered along the snowy field.

"Take care of the corpse."

Boss muttered as I stared at the tragic Chae Jinyoon lying with half his head blown up. He had partially transformed into a devil and the demonic energy in his body would soon explode.

Boss helped me up as I noticed my half-burnt body. The thin clothes I wore for Jain's disguise had burned when I fired my gun. I staggered as I tried to stand and my head fell on Boss' shoulder. She stood still and accepted me.

A portal opened nearby as Jain and Khalifa walked out. Their expressions turned grave when they saw the scene.

Then demonic energy suddenly shot up from Chae Jinyoon's corpse. I couldn't recall what happened next.

Chae Shinhyuk threw open the door on the night of January 3.
KWANG! He saw a familiar face inside the morgue.

“Hello, Chae Shinhyuk.”

He met the forensic scientist, Kim Joongho, again 11 years after his wife’s death.

“...”

Chae Shinhyuk approached the corpse next to Kim Joongho. He clenched his teeth when he saw the man with only half a face. It was his son, Chae Jinyoon.

“Do you have any leads on the suspect?”

Chae Shinhyuk tried to maintain his composure.

“Not yet. An isolation barrier must’ve surrounded the crime scene. They didn’t leave a single trace.”

Investigators had all sorts of supernatural gifts like psychometry, cold reading, etc. However, not even the most competent could find any evidence.

“Was it djinns?”

“We aren’t sure.”

“But there’s demonic energy right here.”

Chae Shinhyuk pointed at the black energy around Chae Jinyoon’s right arm.

“Do I look like a fool?”

Tears began to flow from Chae Shinhyuk’s eyes.

“...Chae Shinhyuk.”

Kim Joongho softly sighed. He had no choice but to explain.

“This demonic energy... came from Chae Jinyoon.”

“...What?”

Chae Shinhyuk’s face contorted frighteningly. Kim Joongho stared at him with a complicated expression.

“This demonic energy came from Chae Jinyoon, but was stopped as it traveled through his veins. It must’ve stopped because he died.”

“...”

Chae Shinhyuk couldn’t understand. No, he refused to accept it. Demonic energy came from his son’s body? That was impossible... unless Chae Jinyoon was a djinn.

“You should be able to find the murderer with your abilities.”

Kim Joongho continued as Chae Shinhyuk began to breathe roughly.

“With Daehyun’s power, with Chae Joochul’s power, even rampaging through Pandemonium shouldn’t be difficult. However, we are no longer living in the ’80s.”

Kim Joongho’s gaze fell on Chae Jinyoon’s right arm.

“Jinyoon became a djinn. No, this is the first time I’ve seen such an arm. This is even more elaborate than a djinn’s devil transformation. It’s persisting even after his death.”

Chae Shinhyuk’s breathing grew even more disheveled. Killing intent could be felt in his eyes.

“I can only surmise that something happened four years ago during the djinn suppression operation. An autopsy will be necessary to

discover the exact reason. However, that will also reveal Jinyoon's true state."

Chae Shinhyuk looked at his son. A half-blown face, an eye forever closed, a frail body, and... a right arm devoured by a mysterious existence. Chae Shinhyuk slowly closed his eyes as an emotion from the depths of his heart ate away at him.

"This right arm."

Chae Shinhyuk spoke after some silence.

"Are you the only one who knows about it?"

Kim Joongho remained silent and nodded.

"Are you certain?"

"...Yes, but it's something we will have to reveal one day. For humanity."

"..."

Chae Shinhyuk placed his hand on his son's cheek. The skin already felt cold and dry. Caressing it felt no different than a fish. Chae Shinhyuk muttered with a somber tone.

"...I never thought I'd see the day my son woke up."

He thought Chae Jinyoon had died four years ago, but his son miraculously woke up 2 weeks ago and he had felt like he was on the top of the world.

"Today, I lost my son for the second time."

His son passed away too quickly, almost as though he had woken up just to say a final goodbye. Chae Shinhyuk would bear this heart-wrenching pain for the rest of his life.

“I don’t want to lose him a third time. I want to bury him peacefully for Nayun.”

Chae Shinhyuk spoke while looking at Kim Joongho. Kim Joongho could only bow with a sigh as tears flowed from Chae Shinhyuk’s eyes.

“...I will do my best. I’ll take my leave now.”

Kim Joongho left the father and son alone.

“...”

Chae Shinhyuk caressed his son’s face with a trembling hand. He couldn’t say anything as he choked on his tears. He only had one wish.

Son... my son... I hope you have a better father in your next life...

* * *

A memory from the past came to me. It lacked color and missed several moments, but I often dreamed of it.

— Nayun.

Oppa called me after watching me practice archery for a long time.

— Un?

— You can take a break if it’s too hard.

He held up my hand and seemed sad when he saw my blisters and cuts, but I shook my head.

— I’m going to work even harder. I want to become an even greater hero than oppa.

Oppa smiled at my arrogant remark and stroked my hair. His hands felt warm and reliable.

— I hope you do. By the way, you didn't forget about next week, right? We're going to the amusement park.

He had planned a trip to Korea's most famous amusement park, Foreverland. However, instead of being happy, I shook my head with a troubled expression.

— *Um*, I can't go. I'm going somewhere else with my friends.

— Really?

He seemed disappointed, but quickly grinned.

— Then I guess we'll go some other time. Oppa is going to work now, so don't overwork yourself. You won't grow taller if you do.

— *Un*. See you later, oppa.

That morning remained so vivid in my memory for one reason. That night, oppa came back in a coma.

“*Ah*.”

Tears flowed from my eyes as I woke up. The dazzling sun shone through the window as morning on Baekdu Mountain arrived. The air at Yoo Sihyuk's martial arts school felt refreshing without any mana phenomena like fogs.

I looked beside my bed at the precious pictures I took with oppa.

“*Huhu*.”

A smile emerged on my face. I took out another picture hidden below after making sure no one was around. It was the picture of me and Kim Hajin.

“It came out so well.”

I wasn't looking at it for any particular reason. It just came out really

well. It definitely wasn't because of Kim Hajin.

“*Auu.*”

I stretched after putting the picture back and headed to the bath.

“You're here, unni?”

A small 10 year old girl greeted me as I entered the bath.

“Oh hey, you're up early too.”

“It's Jihae.”

“Right, Jihae.”

Yoo Sihyuk had 16 official disciples, eight males and eight females. They received training under Yoo Sihyuk and five other instructors. However, Kim Suho, me, and 10 other camp members weren't included among the official disciples. We would only stay for winter break.

“*Auu*, so good.”

I hopped in the hot spring after showering. Nothing could go wrong with a mana-rich hot spring. I came out after 20 minutes. Then I switched into my uniform and went out to the front yard for morning training.

“Yo, Chae Nayun.”

Shin Jonghak and Kim Suho came up to me. They seemed to have taken a bath too. I snickered at them.

“Isn't it a beautiful morning?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“I feel like I can beat you today. You better watch out.”

Was it because of the clear sky? I felt particularly good today. Kim Suho looked at me and laughed.

“Why are you so energetic? Is it because today’s letter day?”

“Eh?”

Today was January 3, our tenth day here. The schedule contained a special event.

“N-No, that has nothing to do with it.”

Electronics didn’t work on Baekdu Mountain, so we couldn’t communicate with the rest of the world. This problem could be fixed, but Master Yoo Sihyuk left things as they were. However, we could communicate with the outside world on letter days.

“She’s right, Kim Suho. The only one she would want to write to is already here, so cut the nonsense.”

“You shut up... geez.”

I smacked Shin Jonghak’s shoulder. He kept making me curse when I tried to fix my way of talking.

“He’s coming.”

Yoo Sihyuk walked towards us with his hands behind his back.

“Get ready.”

We stood in a straight line. *How long would today’s training last?* 10 hours? 12 hours?

* * *

The sun had long after 14 hours of hellish training. Chae Nayun lay in bed and stared at a piece of paper.

[Hi, I'm on Baekdu Mountain.]

“...That doesn't sound right.”

She had already written her letter to Chae Jinyoon. It only took 30 minutes as she followed her heart. However, this particular letter required more time.

[I'm in Baekdu Mountain lol. Training is so easy;; What are you doing?]

“No, that doesn't sound any better...”

Chae Nayun ruffled her hair and threw her pen down.

I should have read some books. I don't know how to write at all!

Chae Nayun sighed, but wouldn't give up this chance that only came once every 10 days. She picked up her pen and fell deep in thought. *Tok, tok*— Someone knocked on her door and burst inside.

“W-What!”

Startled, Chae Nayun hid the letter with her body. Yoo Sihyuk looked down at her as she slowly raised her head.

“...Chae Nayun.”

He sounded somber. Chae Nayun hid the letter in her pocket and slowly got up.

“Yes, Master. *Um*, you should knock before entering a lady's room.”

“...Come outside for a minute.”

Yoo Sihyuk seemed uncharacteristically serious.

“Yes?”

“...Just come outside.”

He sounded kind, unlike his usual self. She tried to recall if she did anything wrong as she followed him.

* * *

The tragic news was announced on January 5. Yoo Yeonha quickly ended a meeting and got in her car after receiving the news from her parents. Chae Jinyoon had died. Her parents didn't tell her anything else. She remained shocked until she thought of Chae Nayun. Yoo Yeonha's heart sank when she recalled the cheerful Chae Nayun 2 weeks ago.

“Let's get off.”

Yoo Jinwoong spoke softly as Yoo Yeonha followed her parents out of the car. No reporters dared to besiege Daehyun's funeral home, making the venue oddly quiet and lonely.

“Eh?”

Yoo Yeonha paused while trudging to the entrance. She saw a familiar person under the shade of a nearby tree. Kim Hajin smoked a cigarette while staring at the funeral home with a complicated expression.

“Why isn't he going in? And he's smoking?”

“Yeonha, what are you doing?”

Her mother suddenly called her.

“Ah, yes, I'm coming.”

Yoo Yeonha followed her mother inside. She spotted Chae Nayun sitting in a daze with hollow eyes as soon as she entered. This was the first time she ever saw the cheerful Chae Nayun like this.

Yoo Yeonha swallowed a sigh and stood in front of their family.

“Nayun.”

“...Ah, Yeonha... you came.”

Chae Nayun greeted her and tried to smile, but that only made her look more pitiful. Her lifeless eyes seemed ready to burst into tears. However, she desperately held herself. Yoo Yeonha understood that was the type of person Chae Nayun was.

“Yeah, wait just a minute.”

After adjusting her dress, Yoo Yeonha stood in front of Chae Jinyoon’s portrait and bowed with her family.

“Chae Shinhyuk.”

“Oh, you’re here.”

Yoo Yeonha walked back to Chae Nayun as their fathers talked. Yoo Yeonha looked into her eyes and softly held her hands.

“Um, Nayun... Where are the others?”

“...I didn’t tell them. I didn’t tell them, so don’t call them here.”

Chae Nayun sounded desperate. However, Yoo Yeonha thought of Kim Hajin smoking a cigarette outside.

“Even if you say that... that person is already outside.”

“...That person?” Chae Nayun meekly asked.

“Kim Hajin.”

Chae Nayun fell into a daze at his name and remained motionless.

“I, I’ll be back soon.”

Then she walked out of the funeral home.

“ ... ”

Chae Nayun couldn't even walk properly. Her legs shook as she staggered forward. She seemed too different from her usual self. Yoo Yeonha could only feel sorry.

Chapter 128

Funeral (2)

I saw an unfamiliar ceiling when I opened my eyes. It looked luxurious with Catholic frescoes that became clearer through mana resonance when I focused on them. The change in color was quite a mysterious mechanism.

“You’re up?”

A voice spoke as I stared at the frescoes. I turned and saw Boss sipping tea in a chair.

“You slept for 2 days.”

“...!”

I quickly raised my upper body. Many things could’ve happened in 2 days. However, Boss seemed calm.

“Don’t worry. The cover-up was perfect.”

I wanted to ask many things, but couldn’t. Boss lightly smiled and looked at me for a while.

“The funeral is starting today.”

“Ah...”

Memories of when I pulled the trigger returned. *Chae Jinyoon’s funeral. Did I have the right to be there?* I clenched my teeth. Suddenly, a strong urge overwhelmed me. I rummaged through my pockets, but I couldn’t find my pack of cigarettes.

“Your weapon is here.”

Boss misunderstood and pointed to the shelf with my Desert Eagle. I carefully grabbed it. It didn't seem damaged anywhere since aether had reinforced it.

"Where are we?"

I asked as I stored the Desert Eagle into stigma. Boss widened her eyes as the handgun transformed into a current of mana and seeped into my arm.

"That's quite an interesting storage method."

"It's nothing much."

I shrugged. Boss grinned and proudly explained, "This is my mansion on an island in the East Sea. *Ah*, just in case you misunderstand, this entire island is my home."

"Wow, that's amazing."

I exaggerated since Boss liked being praised.

"*Huhu*, why don't we open the windows?"

I looked outside at the gem-like ocean, the clear sky, and felt the salty breeze. Indeed, it was worth bragging about.

"Wait, how do we get back?"

"*Hm?* You don't have a personal portal?"

Boss was clearly bragging. Only the rich could afford personal portals. It could connect to Busan if I recalled correctly.

"I'd like to head home."

"You can stay a bit longer."

"Someone is waiting for me."

“I see.”

Boss reluctantly led me outside. Many attendants ran about on the unknown island. However, none of them were humans. Boss created these puppets from her magic power to perform set tasks. She lived among them.

“It’s a lonely place.”

“Sometimes you need to get used to loneliness.”

“...”

I walked through the garden to Boss’ personal portal while taking in the beautiful scenery. The portal was smaller than usual, but it still performed just as well.

“I just have to go in?”

“Yes, it should be connected to Busan. I’ll come with you. I need to take care of something in England.”

Boss made a call. Then the portal activated and we stepped inside. We walked through the Busan portal station’s VIP area until we reached a crossroad. Boss planned on going to England while I headed to Seoul.

“Then I’ll see you later.”

“Yes.”

We went our separate ways after exchanging goodbyes. I closed my eyes and felt the portal’s magic power around me. *Shooong*— I could see the familiar sight of Seoul’s portal station once I opened my eyes again. I left and bought 3 packs of cigarettes at a nearby convenience store. Chae Jinyoon’s funeral should be held at the Daehyun’s funeral home. I located it using the Book of Truth and walked there.

“...”

I couldn't bring myself to enter the somber funeral home. I also didn't think I could pass the guards outside, so I decided to watch from a distance and told myself I'd go back once my heart calmed down.

I took out a cigarette and lit it under a nearby tree. A puff of smoke entered my lungs. One, then two... I subconsciously began to smoke again.

"Hm?"

A fourth visitor came to pay their respects. I saw Yoo Yeonha walking into the funeral home. We didn't make eye contact, but I felt an unknown sense of foreboding. I felt like I should leave, but it was already too late.

"Ah."

Chae Nayun walked out and our eyes met as she looked around the funeral home. My feet refused to move when I saw her tearful expression.

Tap, tap. She walked towards me in a black mourning dress. She slowly drew closer.

"Kim Hajin."

And arrived in front of me before I noticed. I didn't know what to do, so I just remained silent.

"How did you find out? Did Yoo Yeonha tell you?"

Chae Nayun forced a smile. She tried to pretend like she was fine.

"By the way, are you a delinquent? Why are you smoking?"

Her forced smile made her look even more pitiful.

"Why aren't you answering? Hey, let me have that."

Chae Nayun reached out for my cigarette.

“What? Are you crazy?”

I subconsciously blurted and threw the cigarette on the ground. Then stepped on it. Chae Nayun didn't look down. Her gaze remained fixed on me.

“Does smoking make it better?” she suddenly asked. Her voice shook and a stream of tears flowed down her face. Immediately, my vision turned hazy.

“Why are you crying?”

Only then did I realize I was crying.

“...”

I wiped my tears with one hand as she walked up to me. Soon, she was only a single step away. Our bodies practically touched. I had to push her away, but I couldn't bring myself to do so. My heart couldn't follow my brain and I froze in front of her tears.

“What... what should I do now?”

She quietly sobbed and lowered her head to hide her tears. Then her forehead touched my chest and I couldn't breathe. I suddenly remembered what I thought about before. That I could maintain this relationship as long as I wasn't found out.

“I, I...”

I realized that was impossible after seeing her like this.

“*Huaaang...*”

She put her arms around me and cried in my embrace. It felt like my heart would burst. I tried to push her away, but she wouldn't let go. She only drew closer as the pain inside me grew worse.

“What, what do I do about oppa?”

She couldn't hold back anymore and trembled uncontrollably.

“Oppa, oppa, oppa...”

Her sobbing seeped into me like poison.

“Poor oppa... what am I supposed to do... *uaang*...”

“...”

I couldn't bear to watch her. I knew all too well that I had no right to comfort her. I didn't belong here. However, my arms tightened around her before I realized it. She dug into my body, as though to fill the emptiness in her heart.

“If I, if I... *Huaaang*—”

Her tears fell on my chest as mine fell on her shoulders. The cold winter breeze blew against us, but the bitter cigarette smoke lingered.

“*Ah, aaah*...”

Chae Nayun couldn't withstand her grief anymore. Her legs gave out as she crumbled. I finally managed to say something.

“Sorry.”

I could only tell her that.

“I'm... sorry...”

* * *

Yoo Yeonha watched the two of them from a distance. This depressing situation couldn't be called a reunion.

“...”

All sorts of complicated thoughts flashed across her mind. *If Chae Nayun found out the truth one day. If Kim Hajin found out the truth one day. Would their story come to a sad end? Or would they overcome all odds and achieve happiness?*

Yoo Yeonha didn't try to come up with an answer. She simply set the future aside.

“Eh?”

Chae Nayun suddenly lost all strength and collapsed. She had undoubtedly fainted. Yoo Yeonha ran up to them.

“Is she okay?”

Her eyes met Kim Hajin's when she yelled out. Yoo Yeonha instinctively shuddered at his frighteningly hollow eyes.

* * *

I left Chae Nayun to Yoo Yeonha and returned to the Seoul apartment where Evandel and Hayang waited. I stood in front of the door and pressed the password. *BeebeebEEP*— I could hear rustling inside, but I didn't enter on purpose.

— Who is it?

Evandel quizzically murmured after hearing the password, but the door remained closed. I grinned and opened the door.

“I'm home.”

Not even half a day had passed since I last saw them, but they had waited for 2 days. Evandel smiled brightly and ran into my embrace.

“Hajin!”

I got on my knees and hugged her. She felt light and warm. Then I wondered if I hugged her first or if she hugged me first? Something rose from the depths of my heart as I shuddered from all the exhaustion.

“Hajin, why are you so late? I was waiting.”

“Sorry, something came up.”

I held her tighter as Evandel tried to squeeze out.

“Ak.”

“Did you eat well?”

“*Un*, we ordered food. By the way, it’s getting stuffy.”

“I’m glad. And you went out on a walk?”

I continued to ask as I loosened my arms to avoid hurting her.

“I went with Hayang. Oh right, I even built a sand castle with a new friend!”

“Really?”

I couldn’t say anything else. My voice wouldn’t come out from the lump in my throat.

Chapter 129

Funeral (3)

I opened my eyes to a white ceiling. My mind felt hazy and I couldn't see clearly. *Was I still dreaming? Did I wake up already?* The boundary between dreams and reality felt ambiguous. However, the cigarette smell on my body told me the truth. I couldn't deny the painful reality.

“Hng.”

Chae Nayun sniffled. Then she sighed and looked out the window. The emotions that ate away at her disappeared after she released all her pent-up sorrow.

“You're up?”

Chae Nayun turned in the direction of the soft voice.

“Master?”

Yoo Sihyuk calmly looked at her and sighed, “You can come back to the mountain whenever you want. Take your time and rest.”

Yoo Sihyuk rarely let go of the disciples he accepted. Chae Nayun and Chae Jinyoon were two of the few exceptions.

“Ah...”

Chae Nayun blankly stared at him, unaccustomed to his kindness.

“What, got a problem?”

“No, not at all.”

Chae Nayun quickly shook her head.

“Good, then—”

“Actually...”

Chae Nayun cut him off and raised her upper body. Her heart ached when she saw the black mourning dress she wore, but she didn’t want to waste any more time lying around.

“I’ll return right away once the burial ends.”

She clenched her fists with strong conviction in her heart. Yoo Sihyuk shook his head out of concern.

“No, you shouldn’t push yourself.”

“I heard he was murdered.”

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth. Her father didn’t say much, only that an unknown assailant had attacked Chae Jinyoon.

“I was told so as well.”

Chae Jinyoon was one of Yoo Sihyuk’s beloved disciples. Even Chae Nayun felt his chilling rage.

“Don’t think about taking matters into your own hands, Master.”

Chae Nayun looked at her small and calloused hands. She finally found something she had to do. Only she had the right to accomplish it.

“I will find him and kill him myself.”

“...” Yoo Sihyuk looked at her murmuring in rage.

“Oh right.”

Chae Nayun suddenly recalled something. “Please give me 4 days before then.”

“Sure.”

“Ah, no, maybe a week is better. So *um...* is a week okay?”

“...”

Yoo Sihyuk narrowed his eyes. However, he couldn’t say anything when she tried her best to mask her sorrow with anger.

“Just contact me whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you, Master.”

“*Hmph.*”

Yoo Sihyuk stood up to leave when Yoo Yeonha walked in.

“Ah, hello, Sir Yoo Sihyuk...”

“I don’t need to be addressed so politely by a kid.”

“Ak.”

Yoo Sihyuk poked Yoo Yeonha’s forehead before walking past her. Yoo Yeonha watched him leave with a pout, then approached Chae Nayun on the bed.

“Yeonha.”

“Hey, Nayun. Are you feeling better?”

“Yeah, a lot better now. By the way...”

Chae Nayun didn’t finish her sentence, but Yoo Yeonha knew what she wanted to say.

“That person went back home.”

“Ah... I see. Where’s my smartwatch?”

Yoo Yeonha pointed to the shelf. Chae Nayun grabbed it and grinned.

“Hey, which information guilds are good nowadays?”

It was clear what she wanted to do. Yoo Yeonha put on a serious face and spoke, “Leave it to me.”

She proudly announced to Chae Nayun, “I’ll take responsibility and find out who did this.”

“Oh.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled at Chae Nayun’s expression of awe.

“I’ll give you a 30% discount since we’re friends.”

“What?”

* * *

Chae Joochul, the former president of the Daehyun group, had a well-known hobby. He liked to collect castles and owned over a hundred in various styles.

“Ho...”

Chae Joochul had purchased a famous castle in France’s Centre-Val de Loire region. This castle called Chateau de Chenonceau was built during the Renaissance and served as an important landmark in the city.

This castle was one of his favorites. Currently, Chae Joochul sat on a throne inside it.

“To think this old man would lose his grandson at this age.”

Chae Joochul was well over 80, but no one would dare to call him an old man. His abundant white hair pushed up neatly and he wore a luxurious suit over his well-built body. The only thing that made him look like an old man was his cane.

“Secretary Kim, what do you think I’m feeling?” Chae Joochul asked the secretary bowing in front of him.

“I wouldn’t dare imagine.”

The secretary answered. Chae Joochul stood up from his throne.

“You’re right.”

Chae Joochul’s apathetic eyes fell on his secretary, who lowered his body even more, unable to withstand those eyes.

“Shinhyuk should be holding a funeral right now.”

“Yes, President Chae Shinhyuk is handling the funeral and investigation. He wanted to quietly take care of it.”

“Is that so?”

Koong. Chae Joochul’s cane knocked on the ground.

“Something must’ve happened to my grandson if my hot-tempered son is staying quiet.”

Chae Joochul didn’t react to his grandson’s death. He sounded rather apathetic.

“What shall we do?” the secretary asked.

“*Mm...* No matter the situation, someone touched the Chae clan. That won’t reflect well on me if I let them off.”

His voice lacked any semblance of emotion. He calmly spoke as though it was the most natural thing.

“Call Yoo Jinhyuk.”

“Yes, understood.”

Chae Joochul smiled. Yoo Jinhyuk was kicked out of the Yoo clan for committing a grave mistake in the past, but Chae Joochul had kept him alive because of his useful ability. Chae Joochul felt it was time for Yoo Jinhyuk to pay back his debt after making quite a name for himself.

“How shall we set the price?”

“Price?”

Chae Joochul’s expression changed for the first time as he furrowed one of his brows, but soon relaxed and rubbed his chin.

“Price, you say?”

He laughed sinisterly and spoke, “Tell him to carefully consider why he is still alive if he dares to ask for a price.”

* * *

Four days passed after Chae Jinyoon’s 3 day funeral. I currently sat in Seoul Grand Park since Chae Nayun wanted to meet here. I couldn’t refuse when she said Chae Jinyoon would be buried in a memorial here.

“It’s so cold.”

I could see my breath as I waited on the bench. Ten minutes had already passed since our promised time at 3, but I didn’t see her anywhere.

“I shouldn’t have come.”

I murmured in regret. Suddenly, something warm touched my shoulders and something else fell on my head.

“...?”

I glanced up at Chae Nayun pressing her hands on my shoulders and resting her chin on my head.

“What are you doing?”

“Sorry, did you wait long?”

“No, not really.”

Chae Nayun sat next to me with a smile and leaned against my shoulder. Then she sniffed my clothes and frowned.

“You smell like cigarettes.”

“*Cough.*”

I scratched my neck. I’ve been addicted to smoking lately. It was worse than when I smoked in the past, which wasn’t too surprising given the situation. What surprised me most was that cigarettes temporarily raised the perseverance stat. A single cigarette increased it by 0.3 points for about an hour. I spent some time looking for the best brand as well.

“You better not.”

I couldn’t help but laugh as I said that. I never thought I’d say something so pretentious to a girl.

“I’m already smoking it indirectly.”

“...”

I raised my right shoulder that she was leaning on.

“*Ah, ow.*”

She pouted as I pushed her away, then suddenly bit my shoulder.

“Ak, what’s wrong with you?”

“Yummy.”

“Don’t say strange things.”

She pulled her head back and scanned my clothes from top to bottom.

“*Hehe*, I see you carefully picked out your clothes.”

“No, I normally wear these.”

“Please, you usually only wear the cadet uniform. By the way, they look good on you.”

We talked as though everything was normal and didn’t bring up anything from that day.

“Hey, I’m... going back.” Chae Nayun suddenly changed the topic.

“Going back where?”

“To Baekdu Mountain.”

“Will you be okay?”

Only a week had passed since Chae Jinyoon’s funeral. I became short of breath and trembled when I thought about it. I could only imagine how bad it was for her.

“Yeah, of course.”

Even so, she cheerfully replied. I felt somewhat relieved. However, she seemed to have something else to say as she poked my shoulder.

“What now?”

“So *um...*”

“Yeah?”

“Wait for me for just a month and a half.”

That was how long her training would take. I knew what she implied. I suppressed the pain in my heart and feigned a smile.

“What’s in it for me if I do?”

“I can’t tell you that.”

“*Haa.*”

I sighed. From this point on, everything would be uncharted territory. I couldn’t predict what would happen. I only wondered how we would see each other by the end of this story.

“Don’t worry. I won’t run away until then.”

I could only offer her a slight assurance.

“Really?”

She wrapped her arms around my neck and pulled me in. Her face filled my vision. We were close enough for our breaths to mix and our noses to touch. Chae Nayun smiled bashfully.

“Then I can be at ease.”

She placed her forehead on my chest as I rubbed her head a few times.

“*Uuu*, you smell like cigarettes.”

She shot up with a frown and turned around. She tried to hide her face, but I could see her bright red ears.

“Your face is going to explode. What did you do that for?”

“W-What about my face!”

Chae Nayun stuttered. I smile bitterly and stood up. We looked at the scenery side by side. The park bustled with countless people under the cold winter sky.

* * *

News of Chae Jinyoon’s death swept across the entire world. However, the Daehyun group didn’t reveal much information. Only unfounded rumors and speculations floated throughout the web. Naturally, none were remotely close to the truth.

“Here you go, Kim Hajin.”

“Thank you.”

I came to the post office on January 27 to receive a letter. Chae Nayun didn’t know my address, so she sent her letters to the Seoul post office instead.

I sat in front of a nearby desk and opened it. She acted like a man, but her handwriting couldn’t be more girly.

[How are you doing? I’m doing fine. Honestly, what happened still pops up in my head every time I sleep. I don’t know for how long, but what’s funny is that training so hard actually makes things okay. Also, the food here is at least 3 star Michelin level. The ingredients are all super high quality because of the mana around here. It’s super good. Oh right, I tried smoking a cigarette that I stole from an instructor.]

“Eh?”

I widened my eyes and continued reading.

[I can’t believe you can smoke this thing. It tasted so bitter I immediately threw it away.]

Should I be glad? I reached the end of the letter.

[Can you write back more often? I can write letters once every 4 days, unlike the others. I'll write another one then.]

I could see another piece of paper behind her letter. This blank letter was a magical item if I recalled correctly. Once I wrote on it, the same thing should appear on a letter in Baekdu Mountain.

“ ... ”

I wasn't sure if I could accept her letters or write to her. I thought about running away, just disappearing from her side. However, I couldn't make up my mind no matter how much I thought about it.

— *Kyaaaaaak!*

Someone suddenly screamed as I looked out the window.

“What?”

Monsters climbed out of a manhole in the middle of the street. I didn't expect to see monsters in Seoul, but it didn't surprise me. After all, monsters would start appearing more frequently from now on.

“ ... ”

I frowned and observed the chaos outside. I knew heroes would arrive soon, so I didn't have to take matters into my own hands, but I caught sight of a vicious mole rat chasing a kid. My body moved before I could think. I left the letter behind and ran out with my Desert Eagle. Immediately, I pulled the trigger and a bullet pierced the mole rat's head.

“Sunghyuk!”

The mother ran over and quickly took her son away. Ordinary people screamed and ran at the sight of monsters. However, I walked in the opposite direction and transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle.

“There sure are a lot.”

About 70 or so monsters had appeared out of the manhole. They all looked different, but the strongest one only seemed to be intermediate rank, grade 7.

I aimed forward and fired. I didn't need to move the gun in any way. My bullets curved in all sorts of directions as though each was alive and chasing its prey.

It only took a second to kill 70 monsters. The road became completely silent as the gunshots subsided. I placed the Desert Eagle back into stigma.

"Ah, don't take pictures."

I admonished the people trying to snap photos of me. They began to type, slightly disappointed. *I saw something amazing in Seoul. Someone killed all the monsters with a gun.* They probably wrote things like that.

I couldn't stop them since everyone knew a Cube cadet used a gun. I simply returned to the post office. An interesting piece of news came up on TV as I agonized over what to do with the letter.

[Essence of the Strait's leader, Yoo Jinwoong, allows his daughter take on important guild matters.] [The world's rank 2 guild, Essence of the Strait, is caught in suspected nepotism and abuse of authority. The person in question is a 17 year old minor?] [Emergency: Monsters have invaded various parts of Seoul's underground system. The danger level is low, but civilians are recommended to stay home.]

"Ah."

The timing had been delayed, but it finally happened. I wasn't too worried since I already had all the ingredients for a counterpunch. Yoo Yeonha would use this opportunity to purge and placate all opposition, paving the way for her absolute rule.

"Sigh..."

This letter in front of me posed more of a problem.

Chapter 130

Crossroad (1)

[Yoo Jinwoong's daughter, Yoo Yeonha, caught in a scandal... The guild leader's daughter is running the guild?]

Yoo Yeonha bit her fingernails as she watched the news. She thought it would be buried under the monster outbreak that occurred in the middle of Seoul. However, more articles came out the next day and false rumors began to circulate on the third day. Her smartwatch kept buzzing from all the calls and messages. She also received threats and attacks on social media. They said all sorts of things like she didn't deserve her place or that she used her appearance to coax people.

"Auu..."

Her head hurt from all the stress. Yoo Yeonha closed her eyes and massaged her forehead. She usually noticed such attacks before they happened, but this caught her completely off guard. It must've been meticulously organized.

"I've been too relaxed."

Yoo Yeonha criticized herself. She had only used her information guild for outside threats and overlooked internal ones.

"It's not looking good."

Most of Yoo Yeonha's money came from her mother and she used it to invest in various businesses. It wasn't illegal, but she had used Essence of the Strait's money. Falling Blossom also existed on Violet Banquet, so she could be expelled if the public found out. That would negatively impact the guild as a whole. However, her mother's disappointment worried her the most.

"Who is it?"

Yoo Yeonha bit her lips. Too much of the guild's internal data had leaked. The perpetrator was most likely a guild member from the vice leader's faction, but no one there should have so much information on her.

“Argh, my stomach.”

Her stomach churned from the stress. She buried her head on the desk and squeezed it. The timing wasn't good. *Kim Hajin's past. Chae Jinyoon's death. Creator's Sacred Grace's Tower of Miracle campaign...*

“Argh, my stomach!”

Her stomach hurt for a different reason this time. Creator's Sacred Grace was in the middle of conquering the Tower of Miracle. If they succeeded, Essence of the Strait would only be chasing their shadow. However, they could fall below rank 2 with this scandal.

“Argh, aaang...”

Yoo Yeonha stomped as she cried out. She had trouble sleeping and eating for the past 4 days. It wouldn't be strange if she fainted.

— Excuse me, Young Lady.

Yoo Yeonha raised her head.

“What is it now?”

— You have a visitor.

Yoo Yeonha shot up and strode to the interphone.

“I told you to kick all the reporters out!”

— Ah, well... He's not a reporter, but a cadet. He keeps saying that he's the Young Lady's ally.

“Ally?”

Yoo Yeonha furrowed her brows. Only one person would call himself that.

“Is it... Kim Hajin?”

— Yes, he says he has something to give you. Should I let him in?

“Ah... Tell him to wait. I’ll go out myself.”

Yoo Yeonha left her room and came out to the family mansion’s lobby. It took some time because of the mansion’s sheer size.

“*Sigh.*”

Yoo Yeonha opened the front door and breathed in fresh air for the first time in a while. She saw Kim Hajin waiting by the main gate beyond the garden. The guard opened it when Yoo Yeonha gave the signal. Kim Hajin walked towards her.

“What’s up?”

Yoo Yeonha asked as he arrived. Kim Hajin held up a plastic bag.

“You weren’t responding to my calls or messages, so I came myself.”

“Ah, well, you know things haven’t been going so well. Anyways, what’s that?”

Yoo Yeonha pointed to the plastic bag. Kim Hajin opened it and showed her the spicy rice cakes, sausage, fish cakes, hamburgers, fried chicken... It contained all the food she loved.

“I, I told you I don’t like these things.”

Yoo Yeonha almost fell for the temptation, but quickly snapped out of it. She reacted sharply to avoid showing any weakness.

“This is just a present.”

However, Kim Hajin forced the plastic bag into her hands.

“*Auu*, really.”

Yoo Yeonha wanted to refuse, but the smell prevented her from doing so.

“*Huu*, I’m going to throw them into the trash later. I can’t just have them lying out here.”

“Sure, do whatever. By the way, are your parents home?”

“They’re out dealing with what happened, but I don’t know if we can recover from this.”

Kim Hajin suddenly grinned and pulled out a large envelope from his pocket. Yoo Yeonha tilted her head.

“What’s that?”

“Bullets.”

“Bullets?”

Kim Hajin handed her the envelope. Yoo Yeonha opened it.

[Truth Agency] Thank you for using Truth Agency, the center of trust and honesty. The information you wanted has been summarized below. The following is a list of the individuals involved in the Yoo Yeonha Scandal.

The first page displayed a logo of a half-bitten apple with the words, *Truth Agency*.

“What’s this?”

“Truth Agency. You haven’t heard of them? They’re the hottest information agency right now. I splurged quite a bit of money.”

Kim Hajin sounded like he was joking. She asked him again

dumbfounded.

“What’s up with the half-bitten apple?”

“It’s their logo, I guess.”

“Why is something like this their logo?”

“I’m sure you’ll notice its charms once you stare at it long enough.”

“It looks bad though.”

Yoo Yeonha glanced over it again.

The following is a list of the individuals involved in the Yoo Yeonha Scandal.

The last line caught her attention.

“It’s fine. I can deal with it on my own. I’m not so shameless as to receive help for such a private matter.”

“Who said it was free?”

“*Eh?*”

Yoo Yeonha tried to return the envelope. Kim Hajin snatched it out of her hands.

“You make armors too, right?”

“*Um*, yes. Of course.”

“What about armors for beasts?”

“Why would we make that?”

“Try it.”

Then he gave the envelope back. Yoo Yeonha took it as though enchanted by a spell.

“And read that carefully.”

Kim Hajin turned around and left.

“What was that?”

Yoo Yeonha watched him leave with a blank face. Once he disappeared, she peeked inside the envelope.

[Perpetrators] [1. Park Sangho] Kept secret records of Yoo Jinwoong's dealings in his personal database. Greedy for money. Has participated multiple times in the vice leader's illegal dungeon campaigns.

Yoo Yeonha's eyes widened. The list inside didn't just contain the names of the perpetrators, but also definitive proof of their wrongdoings.

“W-What is this?”

Yoo Yeonha quickly raised her head. However, Kim Hajin already drove away on his bike. Her eyes chased after him in a daze.

* * *

The tide quickly reversed. Yoo Yeonha had been at the center, but that changed when the wrongdoings of the vice leader's faction came to light. Smuggling, illegal hiring of mercenaries, unreported dungeon conquests, and tax evasion... Of course, the guild couldn't avoid a temporary drop in rank and loss of public trust. However, only growth and prosperity awaited them after they pulled out all their rotten roots. Yoo Yeonha would undoubtedly lead Essence of the Strait to the world's rank 1 position.

[Thank you so much. Please convey my gratitude to Truth Agency as well.] [Thanks to you, the vice leader's faction are groveling at my feet ^^] [Oh right, what did you mean by armors for beasts?] [We've never made them before, but we can make as many as you want of the highest quality. Just

give us the details.] [(emoticon of a squirrel clasping its hands)]

I checked Cube's announcement on February 13 after replying to Yoo Yeonha.

[Cadet Rankings] [Kim Hajin: rank 334 → rank 121 (213↑)]

Cadet rankings had been updated. I climbed 213 ranks and reached rank 121, the top 10% of my grade. It was quite drastic considering I ranked 934 a year ago. I grew curious about how others would react and logged in to Cube's cadet community.

— Damn, Kim Hajin. He's shooting through the ranks.

— I mean, he's a god in theory. I heard he aced all the PRAII tests. I don't think anyone can deny that he's a genius. The professors said he could easily win a Nobel Prize if he focused on theory.

— Isn't there a rumor that he wants to become a mercenary?

— Why would he do that? Even with his gun gift, many high-intermediate rank guilds are after him.

— *Um*, I heard he might enter the English Royal Court guild...

— English Royal Court guild? lol Wait, is this Rachel?

— No, I don't know what you mean.

As expected, my name came up all around the community. For the record, PRAII stood for Phenomenon Realm Analysis II.

[Congratulations! ★ Rank 100 ★ (๑□∪□)!]

Rachel's suddenly sent me a message.

[Thank you.]

I checked Rachel's rank as well.

[Rachel: rank 3 → rank 3 (—)]

She remained at rank 3 since Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak occupied the top 2 spots. Chae Nayun also remained at rank 4 while Yoo Yeonha fell to rank 9. That didn't surprise me since she only cared about staying in the top 10.

[Oh right, when will you be coming to England? Winter break is ending soon.]

Rachel must've sent it without much thought, but it made me ponder. The new school year began a bit late for second year cadets. Classes would be reassigned and cadets could decide their own schedules like in college. I thought about dropping out.

[I don't think I'll be able to visit. I just don't have time.]

[Ah... really? That's a shame ∟.∟]

PeebeebEEP—

“I'm home~”

“Meow.”

The door suddenly opened and Evandel and Hayang returned.

“Oh, welcome back.”

I greeted the two kids. Evandel went out more frequently these days. However, I didn't worry since we lived in a rich neighborhood with plenty of safe playgrounds and cafes.

“Hajin, I went on a slide today!”

“Oh yeah? How was it?”

“It was like a cave! I went down like *shooooong!*”

“I’m happy you had fun. It’s time to study now.”

“...”

Evandel’s expression became sour. It was great that she had fun and made friends outside, but increasing her intelligence would further her potential as a witch. After all, Evandel would become a great boon for humanity in the future.

“I’ll do it after I eat.”

“Really?”

“Un.”

Evandel jumped out of my embrace and began to text someone on her smartwatch, probably her new friend.

“Evandel.”

“Un?”

I wanted to ask.

“Do you want to keep staying here?”

Even if I didn’t drop out, I could commute starting from the second year. It would be a bit tiresome to take the Seoul portal every morning, but that wouldn’t be a big deal.

“Un, no.”

To my surprise, Evandel shook her head.

“Eh? Why?”

“Hajin, are you leaving?”

Evandel replied with another question. She sounded afraid and worried. I smiled brightly.

“No, both of us... all three of us will always stay together as long as you want.”

“With Hajin?”

“Yep.”

“Then yes!”

Evandel happily nodded.

* * *

Baekdu Mountain’s [*Yoo Sihyuk Martial Arts School*]. Chae Nayun ran to the mailroom as soon as her hellish 12 hour training ended.

“Mister, is it here today?”

The man at the counter grinned and took out a letter.

“Here ya go, kid.”

“Ah! Thank you!”

Chae Nayun took the letter. Today was February 13. Almost 2 weeks had passed since she last received a letter.

“What is he even busy with?”

Kim Hajin hardly replied after the first letter. His replies went from 4 days to a week, then 2 weeks. However, she felt a surge of joy now that she received one and left with a big grin.

“Hm? What are you two doing?”

Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak waited outside. Chae Nayun had told them what happened, that her older brother passed away.

“Hello? Can you hear me?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

“Yeah, it’s nothing.”

They glanced at each other and scratched their cheeks.

Sigh.

“Just treat me like usual if you want to help. Got it?”

Chae Nayun acted the same on the outside, but she couldn’t hide her sorrow and practically cried herself to sleep every night. She only put on a strong front since her oppa would’ve wanted the same.

“Still...”

Kim Suho sighed with an uncomfortable face. Shin Jonghak suddenly stepped up.

“Chae Nayun, you can lean on me whenever you want.”

“Are you crazy? I’m leaving. Also, don’t follow me around. It’s gross.”

Chae Nayun pushed them away and ran to her room. She slammed the door shut and opened the letter.

[I’m glad you’re doing well. It’s almost time to come back, so make the best out of it. Don’t get hurt. I’ve been busy lately, so I won’t be able to write often. Sorry.]

“That’s it?”

Chae Nayun murmured in a daze. Was she being pranked by her masters? She checked the back, but it was blank. The letter only

contained a few sentences. Chae Nayun was confused. She didn't want to believe that this was it.

“Did I do something wrong?”

She felt a strong urge to leave the mountain.

Chapter 131

Crossroad (2)

A man sat reading a newspaper in a mansion lit by a dim lamp. He looked quite handsome with well-defined facial features, but seemed somewhat displeased.

“Haa...”

Soon, he dropped his head with a sigh. The door on the other side of the room burst open as a girl in a leather jacket stomped in.

“What, did something happen?”

She sat next to him and mockingly sneered, “Did you blow all your money on gambling again?”

“Yeah. Anyways, Sahyuk, there’s only a little scar on your forehead now. It’s barely noticeable,” the man calmly retorted at her mocking tone.

She angrily reacted, “What?”

“You know, where that kid’s coin hit you? I remember you furiously trying to wash it off.”

The memory of that day flashed across her mind. Three months had passed, but her fury and humiliation returned whenever she thought about it. She had never experienced such disgrace before.

“Don’t make me remember.”

Jin Sahyuk gritted her teeth and warned. However, the man had no plans of listening to her.

“You should’ve never allowed it to happen. I always tell you not to overestimate yourself.”

Tak. The man put down the newspaper. Jin Sahyuk glared at him without paying attention to the crumpling newspaper.

“Sahyuk, don’t misunderstand. You’re still a rookie. I can kill you with the flick of a finger.”

Jin Sahyuk’s eyebrows twitched.

“Then try it.”

The corners of her lips twisted as she fearlessly spoke.

The man’s eyes coldly flickered as she repeated, “Try killing me.”

“*Hmm.*”

“Try it.”

As expected, she always acted recklessly. The man closed his eyes and backed off with a smile.

“Sorry, I was a bit on edge today.”

Jin Sahyuk seemed somewhat appeased at his surrender, but soon brought up the topic again.

“I can win if I fight him again.”

“That’s what you think.”

“I just underestimated him.”

“So you lost to a single coin?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk shut her mouth. She couldn't refute him. Three months ago, that bearded man pushed her back with only a single coin and left a deep mark on her forehead. She still found it hard to believe that a coin could hold such power. The mark didn't disappear for a month and she was too embarrassed to even go outside.

"Bell."

"Hmm?"

A woman came into the room with food.

"Are you not feeling well today?"

"Ah."

The woman called him Bell. Bell grinned.

"I'm just a bit mad at myself. An important matter didn't go as planned. It seems I've stayed in Pandemonium for too long."

He tapped on the newspaper in front of him. The woman stared at the contents.

"Chae Jinyoon's death... What's this?"

"Just a little something. He was supposed to live, but someone killed him."

"..."

Jin Sahyuk stared at Bell before shooting up and flicking her long hair.

"I'm leaving."

"Where are you going?"

"To the arena."

“Pft.”

Bell laughed.

“What, you got a problem?”

“No.”

“If you do, then let me fight those guys.”

Jin Sahyuk had been throwing tantrums about fighting Kim Suho and Kim Hajin ever since Kim Hajin defeated her. She wanted payback. However, Bell never gave her permission. He needed Kim Suho and Kim Hajin to perfect Jin Sahyuk. He only had Kim Suho at first, but another one appeared by chance.

“I don’t have any problems. Go have fun at the arena, but it’s none of my business if Satan’s Servants beat you up.”

Satan’s Servants was the number 1 ranked organization in Pandemonium. All 33 members contracted with the infamous devil, Satan. They maintained Pandemonium’s laws and rules with overwhelming strength.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk silently left the mansion. The smell of blood and alcohol wafted outside. Pleasure and entertainment could be found on every corner. Jin Sahyuk walked to the center of Pandemonium and reminded herself of what happened. It angered her whenever she thought about it, but she carved it into her memory.

KWANG. The power contained within the coin. *KOONG.* The lightning force it held.

Without a doubt, he was a formidable foe like Kim Suho. Someone worthy enough to stay on her mind. Jin Sahyuk wondered how strong he would become and shuddered with her hands over her face.

“Ah... *hahaha...*”

I want to fight. No, I want to kill. I want to tear his limbs apart and slaughter him.

Her body shook with desire.

* * *

On a peaceful afternoon 1 week before school, Essential Armory's employee personally delivered a black envelope and a box to my apartment.

"Hmm."

The box should contain the beast armor, but I wasn't sure about the envelope. I opened the envelope first. It contained a black card.

[Essential Armory Special VIP card]

It also came with a letter.

[You can directly ask the armory without going through me if there's anything you need. It's the same card I use so there shouldn't be a limit. P.S. The card can be used for other businesses owned by Essence of the Strait.]

Yoo Yeonha's handwriting looked like a work of art.

"Isn't this abuse of power?"

I smiled bitterly. She only grew bolder after the scandal. *Did I help her too early? Oh well.* I couldn't complain about such a nice gift.

I placed the card in my wallet and opened the box. As expected, it contained the armor I asked for.

[Magic Crystal Armor] [Masterpiece] [Charged Mana 2000/2000] — Physical Body Reinforcement: Will increase stamina, vitality, and speed by 0.3 points. — Intermediate Durability Reinforcement — Damage Absorption: Will absorb damage equivalent to charged mana. — Multirole:

Installed with a body scanner. Can be worn by non-human beings.

This wasn't wearable armor, but high-tech armor that projected over the body. Armors that weren't partial artifacts couldn't compare. Still, it wasn't perfectly to my liking. I added another setting.

[The stat increase will be tripled when equipped by a non-human target.]

It only cost 150 SP thanks to the non-human requirement. I summoned Fenrir from my chest.

“Graawr.”

Hayang raised her tail and ran away when the huge wolf appeared out of nowhere.

“Ah! It's my wolf. Hehe.”

Evandel smiled and approached him.

“Grrr, grrr.”

The wolf enjoyed being petted by her soft and small hands.

“Fenrir, try wearing this.”

I placed the circular armor on his chest and infused magic power into it. Immediately, the armor expanded over his body. He seemed satisfied and happily growled. *Woong*. My smartwatch suddenly rang.

Woong. Woong. My wrist shook from the multiple alerts.

[You have obtained 144 SP.] [Magic power filled with rage and obsession has formed a spell from far away. You have been selected as the target.] [However, a stroke of miraculous luck has activated!] [A mysterious power has reversed the spell!] [An unknown individual's Targeting gift has been changed to benefit Kim Hajin!] [Narrow Escape from Death (4/9) – A special stat, accumulation of luck, has partly unlocked!]

“Huh?”

Why did my SP go up and what's with this target? Did I ever come up with a gift like this? I wasn't sure what just happened, but I couldn't complain about my accumulation of luck increasing.

“Ah, is it him?”

I suddenly recalled that guy named Heuk Jeon from Dark Moon Society who tried to kill Rachel and me during the final exam. It seemed like he tried to curse me.

“I'll tell Boss about it later.”

* * *

“It's finally over.”

March 13 arrived and tonight would be Chae Nayun's last on Baekdu Mountain. She packed her belongings and looked around the room she had stayed in for 2 months. She didn't bring much, but it held many precious items.

“...”

Several photos lined up on the shelf next to her bed. Chae Nayun and Chae Jinyoon smiled together in a photo. She held up the frame and lightly caressed it. Something surged within her.

“I thought you'd stay with me forever this time.”

She embraced the photo with a trembling voice. Reality still felt like a dream. Multiple times, she thought her older brother would be waiting for her when she came back.

“Sorry, oppa.”

She regretted it every night and blamed herself. She couldn't help but think he would still be alive if she hadn't left for Baekdu Mountain.

“Sorry.”

She continued to cry even after all this time. Chae Nayun quickly wiped away her tears.

“Wait just a bit, oppa.”

Then she placed the frame in her bag.

“I will definitely avenge you.”

She muttered with determination.

* * *

I picked up my belongings from Cube 2 days before the second year began.

“Here you go, Cadet Kim Hajin.”

“Thank you.”

I received everything from the dorm manager. Surprisingly, I had quite a lot: the VR gaming set, shirts, coats, jeans, slacks, etc. I walked to the portal with a big box.

“Eh? Hajin?”

I heard a familiar voice and spotted Rachel.

“Rachel?”

We coincidentally met and stopped by the park we often trained at. The grass still had signs of Rachel trying to call elementals. She bashfully smiled and hopped to the spot.

“I got hit with a lot of bullets here. I can’t believe it’s already been 3 months.”

“I feel the same.”

I set down the box as Rachel curiously looked at me.

“What’s that box for?”

“Oh, *um...*”

I smiled bitterly before scratching the back of my neck.

“I’m dropping out of Cube.”

“*Eh?*”

Rachel widened her eyes.

“W-Why?”

“Well, I’m more comfortable being a mercenary.”

“Mer... mercenary?” Rachel muttered in shock.

“I’ll stay for the first semester. *Ah*, I guess I’m leaving in the middle, but I should be here until the midterms.”

I had to stay in Cube for one final main story event. I needed to stay until that incident.

“Then, *um*, about the English Royal Court guild...”

“I won’t be able to. Sorry.”

“...”

Rachel looked sad. I never said I’d go to the English Royal Court guild.
What did she imagine?

“Who knows? We might work together, like in a mercenary

partnership.”

“Yes?”

Guilds commonly recruited more manpower to conquer dungeons and towers.

“Ah... You are always welcomed, but partnerships are done with an entire mercenary group...”

Only a few mercenary groups stronger than guilds existed. I could understand why Rachel felt that way since the English Royal Court guild was England’s top guild.

Of course, a single name would change that. *Jerónimo*. This mercenary group with a lame name always chose the guilds they worked with.

“You can worry about that when the time comes.”

“Ah, yes, you’re right.”

Rachel smiled bitterly and scratched her cheek. I stared at her for a moment before taking out the cadet handgun.

“Since it’s been a while, should I help you train?”

“What? Ah, cough,” she proudly exclaimed.

“Yes, let’s do it. I’ll show you how much I’ve improved.”

* * *

The new school year began on March 15. Spring arrived as cherry blossoms fell. I stood in front of my new classroom. I didn’t feel particularly nervous, but rather apathetic. Our new class was called Sacred Flame. My class contained Rachel, Yoo Yeonha, and Yi Yeonghan. Chae Nayun should be in Kim Suho’s class and Shin Jonghak should be by himself.

I opened the door and spotted 3 familiar faces. Yi Yeonghan slept at his desk, so I couldn't quite see his face. Many cadets already surrounded Yoo Yeonha. She would reign as queen without Chae Nayun and Kim Suho.

“Hm?”

She smiled and waved when she saw me. It seemed she didn't mind openly interacting with me now that my ranking neared the top 100. She silently mouthed.

— Nayun is asking why you aren't replying.

“...”

I gave her a thin smile and sat at the back.

“Good morning.”

Rachel also sat in the back and greeted me.

“Good morning.”

I greeted her with a smile. The door opened at exactly 8:00 as the instructor walked in.

“It's great to see you, ladies and gentlemen.”

The enthusiastic instructor released his magic power into the air. *Yi Yeong Jin*. He wrote out his name with red magic power.

“I am Sacred Flame's chief instructor, Yi Yeongjin.”

We listened to his introduction.

“Classes will be held a bit differently from the second year onwards. I'm sure you all know, but I'll briefly explain.”

Cherry blossoms fluttered through the windows as a sweet scent

drifted in.

“Other than the morning class, end-of-the-day class, and two common classes, all cadets will train according to their own schedules.”

I didn't have many days left in Cube. I had experienced plenty of painful and sad moments, but I could say that I had fun if I ever looked back on it.

“Our common class is joint stamina training. You will need to form groups of four.”

After 2 months, I would disappear from Cube.

Chapter 132

Crossroad (3)

Chae Nayun peeked into the Sacred Flame class.

“*Argh*, when does it end?”

Sacred Flame’s chief instructor, Yi Yeongjin, was rumored to be overly zealous. That seemed correct, considering he spent 20 minutes with announcements at the end of class.

“Is it still not over?”

“I know, right?”

Kim Suho walked up to her. Chae Nayun glared at Yi Yeongjin through the window. He didn’t plan on dismissing the class until the cadets in charge of cleaning duty finished.

“*Ah*, it’s finally over.”

The instructor tapped his desk as all the cadets stood up. The classroom door opened as a 190 cm giant walked out. It was Yi Yeonghan.

“Oh, were you two waiting for me?”

Chae Nayun only responded with a blank expression.

“What’s up with that face?”

“Shut up and move.”

Chae Nayun couldn’t see behind him even though she tiptoed. She still

couldn't spot Kim Hajin when Yi Yeonghan finally moved.

"Geez, why you gotta hurt my feelings like that?"

"Oh please. Where's Kim Hajin?"

Yi Yeonghan's expression turned into *schadenfreude*. His eyes formed crescents as his eyebrows danced up and down. Chae Nayun held back the urge to smack him.

"What?"

"*Ha*, so our little Nayun is finally being honest with her feelings."

Surprisingly, Chae Nayun didn't overreact to his teasing.

"Yeah, I am. Do you have a problem with it?"

Yi Yeonghan became speechless. She spoke as though it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"*Huh? Uh*, no... I don't."

Kim Suho watched her with a smile and interrupted, "So, where's Hajin?"

"Over there. Look, he's leaving."

Yi Yeonghan pointed to the back door. Chae Nayun turned and saw Kim Hajin walking out. Was it because she hadn't seen him in 2 months? He seemed to move in slow motion with light footsteps. His clothes and hair looked neat and stylish, but his face showed no expression like a dead fish.

"Wait, Kim Suho. You're also looking for Kim Hajin? What about me? Am I just livestock?"

"I'm leaving."

Chae Nayun sped away. Kim Hajin didn't expect to bump into her. Their eyes met as Chae Nayun smiled.

"Hey, Kim Hajin. Wanna go out for dinner?"

She stealthily locked arms with him and felt her heartbeat speeding up from the bold move. However, Kim Hajin didn't say anything and shook her arm off.

Chae Nayun felt someone else's gaze and turned around. Rachel walked out of the classroom.

"Oh, Rachel. It's been a while."

Chae Nayun waved. Rachel glanced at the two of them.

"Yeah."

She walked past them with a single word. Chae Nayun stared at the back of her head. Then she pulled on Kim Hajin's arm again, but he didn't budge.

"What, you're not going?"

Kim Hajin smiled bitterly. "I don't have time today."

"You don't even have time to eat?"

Chae Nayun pouted. First, he didn't reply to her letters or messages. Now he wanted to avoid her? Was he playing hard to get?

"I have work, so I'll be busy around dinner. We can eat lunch tomorrow."

Lunch. That wasn't quite the plan, but she was more than happy.

"Okay, then... promise."

She held out her pinky. Kim Hajin just stared and placed his hand on

her shoulder.

“See you tomorrow. Lunch will be on me.”

“*Eh?*”

Her cheeks turned red at his lighthearted touch. She looked up at him and shyly nodded.

“*U-Un.*”

* * *

I returned home at 6 P.M. Evandel paused her online lecture and ran up to me.

“Hajin, I learned subtraction today!” she proudly exclaimed.

“That’s great!”

“I can subtract now. Give me a problem!”

“*Hm*, then...”

I gave her a problem after thinking for a moment.

“What’s nine thousand eight hundred fifty-three minus two thousand six hundred fifty-six.”

“*Eh?*”

Evandel’s eyes trembled. She tried to count it out, but didn’t have ten thousand fingers. Eventually, Evandel muttered with a shaky voice.

“I, I didn’t learn anything like that...”

“Okay, then what’s twenty-eight minus seventeen?”

This time, Evandel didn't use her fingers and spoke after a while.

"Eleven!"

"Good! Such a quick learner, aren't you? You must be a genius."

"Ehehe."

I patted her head and walked into the bedroom. Then we ate some steaks in the living room after I changed into casual clothes. I left Evandel after she fell asleep at 9 P.M. and went to the park past the dorms. I planned to meet someone today.

"Haa..."

I sighed on the bench and suddenly felt depressed in the dark. Recently, I hadn't been feeling like myself. My 7.207 points of perseverance barely held my mind from crumbling.

Pssst— A tree on the right rustled.

"Are you here?" I greeted Boss as she walked out of the darkness.

"Yeah."

"Did you purchase the place I recommended?"

"I did, but..."

Boss asked me to set up an outpost in Seoul for Jeronimo Mercenary. I recommended an apartment complex next to mine. It was completely out in the open, which didn't suit Boss' style.

"Try living there."

"I asked for an outpost. Why did you recommend a residential apartment complex? I ended up wasting money for nothing."

Boss seemed unhappy at the price. Honestly, the apartment complex

was much more expensive than mine. It cost at least twice as much.

“Let’s go buy some clothes later.”

“Clothes?”

“Yeah.”

Boss’ fashion sense wasn’t as bad as Rachel’s. Her slender 170 cm figure would suit anything, but her choice of clothes was too manly.

“I’ll help you pick out clothes.”

Boss immediately shook her head. “I don’t need it.”

“*Cough.*”

I felt a bit awkward. I tried to open her up since she hadn’t mentioned anything about the Chameleon Troupe. She still wasn’t sure how to rate me.

“Boss, you bought a huge amount of stocks from Creator’s Sacred Grace, right?”

“*Hmm?*”

Boss faintly twitched. She was supposed to be dense, but her greed for money was an exception. She should already be a shareholder in Creator’s Sacred Grace.

“I have a little.”

“I think you should start selling it.”

“Why?” Boss’ eyes narrowed like a hawk. She acted stone-cold when it came to money.

“I don’t have a good feeling about it.”

Boss had no intention of listening to my advice.

“But I only ate 3% so far.”

“Don’t blame me if you lose all your money.”

Boss frowned at my remark.

“Kim Hajin.” Her voice sounded chilling.

“Don’t act so comfortable with me.”

“Huh?”

“I’m telling you not to be so arrogant. The difference between you and me is like heaven and earth.”

Her eyes turned sharp as she subtly threatened me. I quietly dropped my head. I shouldn’t have brought up money.

“The reason I called you today was for a proper test.”

“Test?”

“...”

Boss silently stared at me.

“What do you mean by test?”

“You said you wanted to become an official member.”

“Ah... yes.”

Indeed, I planned on winning over the Chameleon Troupe. They mercilessly killed djinns and humans in the original story, but would play an important role in the middle to late stages.

“To become one of us...”

Boss unleashed her magic power and created a human-shaped puppet around 200 meters tall.

“Your stats will need to meet our standards.”

I knew what she meant. Mercenaries cared more about stats than heroes. Clients judged them based on things like strength, speed, perception, etc.

“Attack that magic puppet with everything you’ve got. I’ll be the judge.”

I had to take this seriously. Boss probably wanted to see something. This could be the final test.

“You want me to attack with full power?”

“Yes, use a gun, your main weapon.”

Boss put a barrier around us. I didn’t have to worry about any outsiders with a dome shrouding us.

“My strongest attack doesn’t use a gun.”

Boss tilted her head. “Then use whatever to show your strongest attack.”

“Yes.”

I turned serious and transformed aether into a bow. Boss widened her eyes at the elegant black bow that appeared in my hands.

“A bow...”

I felt her interest as I formed a magic arrow with stigma. Then I infused an explosion attribute into it.

“Could it be... an anti-magic arrow?”

“...”

Boss seemed to want anti-magic, so I also added that attribute. Sssss— The bow emitted a cold mist as it turned bluish-black. This was the color of anti-magic. My arrow became smaller, but Boss seemed extremely satisfied. I wasn’t done yet though. I still had something left to add.

[Medicinal effect – External Magic Amplification]

The sixth medicinal effect I had memorized seeped into the arrow. It grew sharper like a harpoon. I nocked the anti-magic arrow onto the bow and pulled. I used 3 streaks of stigma like the time I fought the black ogre, but this arrow was on another level thanks to the aether bow and the medicinal effect.

“Mmm.”

I released it when Boss nodded in satisfaction.

Chweeeeek—

I fired at the puppet. The arrow shot out like lightning and magic power scattered in every direction. There was no delay between its release and strike. *Kooooong—!* Not only did it pierce the puppet, but it also erupted and shook the barrier. *KOONG! KOONG!* The entire area rumbled from the explosion as magic power thrashed against the barrier like a rising dragon.

“...”

Boss stepped in after realizing the arrow’s might. She unleashed her magic power before the barrier shattered. A shadow bloomed like a lotus from her back. It completely devoured my arrow as the lotus closed its petals. *Shadow Lotus*. That was one of Boss’ cheat defensive abilities.

“Haha.”

Boss laughed as she approached me.

“I stopped it since it looked like it would destroy the barrier.”

She put her hand out.

“Ah, yes.”

“I’m satisfied. As I thought, my eyes weren’t wrong.”

It seemed like I passed. Dizziness overcame me, but I braced myself and shook her hand.

“Thank you.”

Boss squeezed my hand and spoke in a serious tone. “June 1.”

“Yes?”

“On June 1, there will be a group meeting.”

I understood what she meant.

“Come find us if you still want to join and don’t mind completing dirty tasks.”

We exchanged gazes. Soon, Boss let go of my hand as I replied, “Yes.”

“Good.”

The moon peeked out from the clouds and shone on Boss. She wore a beautiful smile.

* * *

Sacred Flame was currently in the middle of theory class on the second week of school. Sssk, sssk. Rachel busily jotted down notes. She wore a pair of circular glasses that prevented eye strain and helped in

basic calculations.

“Difficult, isn’t it? Let’s take a break.”

The professor announced as cadets scratched their heads. Rachel placed her glasses down and leaned against her chair. She could hear her classmates whispering as she relaxed.

— Hey, didn’t Kim Hajin change recently?

— Yeah. Other guys are copying his hairstyle too, but they look better with it than he does. His face just isn’t that good.

— No, I think his face has gotten better too.

— Did you hear he has something going on with Chae Nayun?

— What? Really?

— Yeah, Chae Nayun said it herself.

They all talked about Kim Hajin. Rachel turned towards him, but he seemed focused on his smartwatch.

“...”

This wasn’t the first time she heard rumors about him and Chae Nayun. It didn’t seem groundless either. After all, they ate lunch together every day.

It has nothing to do with me.

Rachel picked up her pen. She might’ve wanted things to turn out this way now that she thought about it. She could treat Kim Hajin more comfortably if things went well between him and Chae Nayun.

“...”

However, she couldn’t focus on studying anymore. She glanced at Kim

Hajin again. He was still on his smartwatch. She couldn't help but wonder what he was so focused on. He seemed to be on it for the entire class. Was he messaging Chae Nayun? Did he not care about class anymore since he was dropping out? Rachel pouted and returned to her notebook. *Focus. Focus. Focus. Now is the time to study.*

"Ah, why is this so hard?"

Soon, she expressed her annoyance.

* * *

"Hmm."

I contemplated creating a new gift since last night.

*[Dexterity] [Low rank] [Null attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 10] —
Dexterity: Your hands will become more skilled and nimble.*

It didn't seem special, but it was classified as a gift instead of an art. Dexterity applied to everything that used hands from everyday tasks like cooking, drawing, and writing to combat-related things like martial arts and swordsmanship.

I debated between this passive gift and another active gift. I had an active gift in mind that I would need in 5 years. However, active gifts couldn't evolve. As such, I could create it whenever I saved up enough SP. It would be better to create dexterity first, but I didn't know if I could save up enough in time for the other one.

"Argh, whatever."

I hit enter after agonizing over it for a long time.

*[Dexterity] [Low rank] [Null attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 10] —
Dexterity: Your hands will become more skilled and nimble.*

This simple gift cost 2000 SP. Like I said, simple was best. Simple gifts had a wider usage. Of course, it would probably only help with simple tasks like cooking since it was still grade 10.

[Your gifts have become linked!] [With great luck, the link has become even more elaborate!]

I suddenly received some unexpected alerts.

[Master Sharpshooter & Dexterity] [Master Sharpshooter has been reclassified as a high rank gift and has awakened a new ability.] [Dexterity's proficiency has increased to grade 8.]

“What’s this?”

Master Sharpshooter gained a new ability and Dexterity increased by 2 grades even though I just created it a minute ago.

“Oh, right.”

I remembered writing something about gifts having synergy. I didn’t expect this, but I couldn’t complain. *Synergy between gifts*. I grabbed my pen to test it out. *Sssk, sssk*. I jotted a string of words. I never had bad handwriting, but I couldn’t call it pretty.

“Wow.”

I was practically Han Seokbong. [1]

1. A famous calligrapher. 🖋️

Chapter 133

Crossroad (4)

An office with a half-broken sign sat on the outskirts of North Hamgyeong Province.

[Yoo Jinhyuk's Office]

Ordinary shops and stores surrounded the office. No one would believe such a powerful ability user lived here. Honestly, this place used to be a wasteland. An office was irrelevant since his clients came from Violet Banquet. This hillside town didn't even exist before he arrived. Yoo Jinhyuk's arrival marked the birth of this town.

He drove away the monsters to build his office, killed them to get a peaceful night of sleep, and hunted for money. His selfishness transformed the 1 km area into a habitable area. Then the poor and ignorant began to flock to this place.

Yoo Jinhyuk didn't care who came to live there. They had to deal with monsters themselves when he was gone.

After 3 years, 5, 10, then 12... The tiny village became a town. He couldn't help but admit he was bound to this town now after witnessing familiar faces give birth to new lives.

So he chose not to run away from Chae Joochul's request. *Yoo Jinhyuk the Investigator*. Before he realized, he had become this town's patriarch.

Wiing—

His helmet vibrated, signaling that he ran out of magic power. Yoo Jinhyuk took it off and got up from the couch.

“What did you find out?”

His secretary asked. Yoo Jinhyuk silently walked behind her. Her computer screen displayed a large tattoo. Three streaks, 2 forming a cross and 1 forming a crescent moon above it.

“...”

Yoo Jinhyuk stared at the tattoo. He figured out the location of the murder, but this was the only thing he could find due to the magic power density in the area. He had prepared to suffer from magic power deficiency when the barrier around the area exploded along with demonic energy. Then he saw it, a shining tattoo on someone's upper arm.

“Is it Jesus?”

“Are you crazy?”

“I mean, there's been a monster like Fenrir and we've even seen a cyclops. Who says there can't be Jesus?”

The secretary scowled at his groundless remarks.

“Stop messing around and tell me what you saw. This is important.”

“I found something, but it's not related to the culprit.”

Yoo Jinhyuk couldn't identify the culprit from just a tattoo, so decided to trace the victim. He figured he could find the culprit's motive by doing so. However, he couldn't find any other clues even after exploring for dozens of days. Then he finally discovered a shocking truth today.

“What is it?”

“Chae Jinyoon... became a djinn.”

“Huh?”

The secretary's face stiffened.

"No, I shouldn't say djinn. The examiner said he became something more than a djinn. So... a devil, I suppose?"

"A devil?"

"I'm not sure, but Chae Shinhyuk wanted to hide this fact. The medical examiner seemed to have accepted his request."

However, the examiner couldn't abandon his conscience and duty. He didn't cremate the corpse and stored it in his basement. The cremated body was shockingly a fake made to look identical.

"Then... what about the culprit?"

"There's nothing more I can do. Finding the culprit is beyond my ability. It's impossible, but this tattoo..."

Tok, tok. Yoo Jinhyuk tapped the screen. Such a tattoo wouldn't be unique, but it wasn't entirely common either.

"Tell Chae Joochul that this is the only evidence. As for the information we found out about Chae Jinyoon, encrypt it and keep it archived in our Violet Banquet database."

"W-What if people find out?"

Chae Joochul. He became a sociopath after slowly losing his emotions from his gift's side effect. This old man terrified even the level-headed secretary.

"That's exactly why we should keep it archived. Not even that old man can touch Violet Banquet. Plus, don't you think we should hold on to the only card we have against him?"

"...You want to fight back?" the secretary asked with a trembling voice.

“No, I wouldn’t say I’m fighting back.”

Only a few could go against Chae Joochul. Most likely a member of the Nine Stars or Shin Myungchul, who died 5 years ago.

“If I’m killed, it’ll be on you to tell the world. You’ll avenge me, right?”

Yoo Jinhyuk smirked and looked out the window. The scenery felt outdated, as though he was looking at Seoul in the year 2000. He wondered when this town would catch up to modern times.

“I... still want to live. You see, there’s still a lot I want to do and see—*aak!*”

PANG—! A soccer ball suddenly hit their window.

“*Haha.*”

Yoo Jinhyuk feebly laughed and opened the window.

“Hey, you little brats! I made you a playground, so why are you playing soccer here?”

“*Huh?* Oh, we got chased out by the older kids.”

“That’s none of my problem! Don’t play soccer here!”

KWANG. Yoo Jinhyuk slammed the window closed. Then a lightbulb went off in his head. He could practically feel his synapses firing.

“Brats... children... a kid...”

Someone who didn’t have a grudge against Chae Jinyoon, but a grudge against Chae Joochul. One such person existed. His niece, Yoo Yeonha, once asked for a background investigation.

“No way.”

However, he laughed and shook his head. That boy couldn't cast such a powerful barrier. If he did, he would've attacked Chae Joochul directly. After all, a sociopath like Chae Joochul wouldn't care about his grandson's death.

"Oh right, Chief."

His secretary spoke as if she recalled something.

"Gangwonland contacted us. They've completed the anti-monster system."

"Oh? Great, tell them I'll be there to pick it up."

"There goes our money again."

"We need to pay for it somehow."

Yoo Jinhyuk sighed and looked out the window again. No matter what, he had to hide how much he cared about this town from Chae Joochul.

* * *

Friday's final afternoon training.

[Tactics Against Monster Armies]

I didn't have a special reason for taking this class. I just thought it suited me.

"Rachel, do you want to team up again?"

I only knew Rachel among the 40 cadets at the park.

"Yes, gladly."

She smiled and nodded. I received envious gazes from the other male cadets.

“Alright, hold your partner’s hand and gather in front of the cave!”

The instructor shouted. It was undoubtedly a figure of speech, but Rachel looked back and forth between our hands. She tried to reach out, but hesitated and looked at me like a puppy.

“Ah, um...”

“We don’t need to hold hands.”

“I, I see.”

She dryly coughed.

“Alright, line up! Each team will enter starting with Team 1!”

The cave didn’t feel so crowded even after all of us entered.

“Ah, there’s something there.”

Soon, we arrived at a 10 way crossroad. A sign that read O or X stood next to each road. Other teams probably already took the ones marked with an X, so we chose one of the open paths. *Ssss*— A chilling wind swept over us.

“It looks like we’re up against skeletons.”

“Skeletons?”

“Yes, at least 1000 of them.”

Clack, clack, clack. The sound of bones approached. *Sssh, sshh.* Wind blew through the army of undead.

“Two against 1000. Looks like we’ll be graded on how we deal with the situation.”

Rachel quickly concluded.

“Maybe not. They’re only skeletons. We should be able to take care of them.”

I held up my handgun with one hand and 2 daggers with the other.

“You’re using daggers?”

“Yes.”

I could use all 3 weapons together now with my new gift, Dexterity.

“They must have a commander. I’ll crush his head.”

I could see a skeleton commander sitting on a palanquin surrounded by 13 skeleton magicians. It should be a piece of cake to defeat the rest after dealing with those 14. Rachel looked at me with a bitter smile.

“Hajin is always full of confidence.”

“Yes? Oh... *um*, I guess that’s why I’m your master.”

“Oh, right.”

She snickered at our old joke.

“Then let’s go. Wait until I attack first.”

I released stigma’s magic power and infused the daggers with a light attribute. Then I threw them in opposite directions. First was the commander. The attack didn’t need to be strong. Just a simple snap of the wrist.

Whoosh—

The 2 daggers drew an arc, left and right, towards the skeleton commander.

Clack, clack.

As expected, it reacted swiftly and easily blocked the daggers with its hands, but I already shot a light bullet towards its head. It couldn't avoid all 3 simultaneous attacks.

The skeleton commander's skull cracked in half and crumbled.

* * *

"Haa... haa..."

Fighting 1000 opponents took a toll on Rachel's stamina as she sat on the ground to catch her breath. Her hair and clothes became disheveled with sweat.

"Are you tired?"

"Yes... haa..."

Honestly, I wasn't tired at all since all I did was pull the trigger from behind. A voice rang out from the speaker above us.

— Perfect! Team Rachel and Kim Hajin, perfect score! Catch your breath and come out!

The instructor sounded impressed. Rachel felt glad after hearing that. She widened her eyes and held up her arms.

"Whoa!"

I noticed her disheveled hair as she smiled.

"Ah, Rachel. Do you have a comb?"

"Eh? N-No, I don't."

"Mmm..."

I walked up to her with an unbearable urge.

“Sorry, your hair is too messy.”

“My hair?”

“I’ll fix it for you.”

I placed my hands on her hair. Immediately, she froze.

“W-Wait, w-why... *aahng*, that tickles.”

“Hold on just a minute.”

“Wait, why so suddenly...”

My hands moved by themselves as I ignored her resistance. Honestly, I didn’t know why I was doing this either. I just followed my instinct. Soon, I tidied up her hair with a portion of it tied in a pretty ribbon.

“There.”

Her eyes widened in shock when I showed her a mirror.

“H-How? You didn’t even have a comb.”

“I’m wondering the same.”

I looked at my hands.

“Maybe I have a magical touch.”

* * *

I practiced using stigma’s magic power in an empty park near my apartment at 11 P.M. I concentrated on instantaneous movement — dash. Emitting stigma’s magic power under my feet — jump. Teleporting dozens of meters away — blink.

“*Kuaa*.”

I sprawled out on the ground after spending all 3 streaks of stigma on different movement abilities.

Bzzzz—

My smartwatch vibrated with a call from Chae Nayun. I sighed when I saw her name. *Should I pick up or should I ignore it?* It ended as I hesitated, but then she immediately called again.

Bzzzz—

I stared at the smartwatch before closing my eyes and picking up.

“Hello?”

— Hey, where are you?

That was the first thing she asked.

“I’m home. Why?”

— I heard you’re commuting.

“Yeah, did you just find out?”

— What? That’s because you never told me! Do you wanna die?

Chae Nayun angrily blurted before falling silent.

— You should’ve told me earlier.

She sounded full of disappointment.

“What difference would that make?”

— I could live next door.

“...Someone’s already living there.”

— That can be solved with money.

“...”

— I’m rich, you know.

Chae Nayun quietly laughed.

—Did you forget? You won’t have to worry about money as long as you’re with me.

I slowly sighed and looked at the night sky. Seoul’s sky looked no different than any other night. The darkness suffocated me.

—... Say something.

“I’m just sleepy. Can I hang up?”

— N-No, wait. Don’t hang up.

Her desperate voice echoed in my ears.

— *Um...* not until I fall asleep.

She continued in a frail tone.

— I-It’s not like I have trouble sleeping. Just that, *um*, my room is a bit too big.

It was a Chae Nayun-like excuse. I lowered my gaze at an ugly rock on the ground.

— Just, just a little bit longer...

I knew I shouldn’t agree because of momentary guilt and sympathy. I knew very well it would only lead to a vicious cycle. Even so, I couldn’t hang up... because of my guilty conscience.

— I want to hear your voice.

A chill gave me goosebumps as my knees trembled. I looked helplessly at the sky. The darkness seemed to devour me with no stars, light, or moon.

— Hey, just so you know, you'll be a real jerk if you hang up after I said all of this.

Chae Nayun's feigned cheeriness couldn't get through to me. I quietly replied.

"I won't hang up."

—... Then reply quicker. You're making me embarrassed for nothing.

"Just talk. I'll listen to you at least."

— Talk about what?

"Did you hurt your head?"

— No, *hahaha*.

Chae Nayun laughed. Then she began to talk about what happened today. What she ate, what happened during class, etc. Eventually, she brought up something I didn't expect to hear.

— Oh right, Yeonha's uncle told me something about the murder...

"...Murder?"

Yoo Jinhyuk. His name made me nervous, but I still had a certain degree of confidence. Even his power should have restrictions.

—... No, it's nothing. I don't want to talk about these things with you.

"What, why? Tell me."

— No, I don't want to. I only want to talk about good things with you.

I couldn't bring myself to ask any further after hearing her bashful laughter.

— Oh, I'm getting sleepy now. Looks like the sleeping pills are working.

“...Don't eat too many of those.”

— What, are you worrying about me?

“...Oh please.”

I picked up my water bottle for a sip...

— Hajin!

“...!”

Her sudden shout almost made me snort water. I coughed as she began to yawn.

— Good night.

“Ah, erm, yeah. Good night. I'm going to bed too.”

—... Hey.

She kept going. *What was it now?* I strained my ears.

— I want to see you.

Those words that came out of nowhere left me speechless.

— Ah, wait! Never mind. I must not be thinking straight because of the pills. I'm hanging up! Sorry—!

She hung up first as I thought about what to say. I could only imagine how she must be reacting right now.

“Why is my face heating up.”

A familiar figure approached as I felt my cheeks.

“Boss?”

“*Hm?*”

Last week, she spoke like she wouldn’t show up until June, but seemed to be enjoying Seoul since this was the third time we ran into each other outside.

“Kim Hajin?”

“We’re running into each other quite frequently.”

Boss held onto a bag of ice cream. Not just a pint, but a huge bucket.

“Good, I’ve been wanting to see you.”

Boss hopped over.

“What, why? Is it another test—?”

“It went up.”

Boss angrily glared at me.

“Went up?”

“Stocks! It’s up 2% compared to when I sold them!” she blurted out uncharacteristically.

“Oh, you really sold all those?”

I thoughtlessly spoke. I felt confident it would plummet soon, but nothing about the tower campaign had been finalized yet. Their stock price naturally fluctuated.

“What did you say?”

However, Boss’ eyes flickered with real killing intent.

Chapter 134

Farewell (1)

“Auu, Chae Nayun, you crazy idiot...”

She scorned herself and smacked her head. Her drowsiness completely disappeared after what she said to Kim Hajin.

“Uuuu... ah, wait.”

She suddenly recalled something she had to do while circling the room in embarrassment and video called Yoo Yeonha. *Tuuu— Tuuu—*

— Yeah, Nayun.

As expected, Yoo Yeonha quickly picked up. She usually slept only 3 hours a day and it was still only 1 A.M.

“Hey, Yeonha.”

— Why did you call? Why is your face so red?

Yoo Yeonha tilted her head and asked. That was how red Chae Nayun’s face was.

“Ah, it’s, it’s nothing.”

Chae Nayun frantically fanned herself.

“Here, here.”

She nonchalantly pushed her hair back and sent a file to Yoo Yeonha. *[Tattoo.jpg]* It was a piece of critical evidence. Yoo Yeonha opened the file.

— Tattoo? What is this?

“Evidence.”

—... Evidence?

Chae Nayun’s voice turned serious.

“Yeah, this tattoo was on the murderer’s arm.”

Yoo Yeonha also turned serious.

— *Hmm...*

A cross with a crescent above it like an umbrella. Yoo Yeonha carefully scrutinized the tattoo.

“Is, is it not that useful?” Chae Nayun asked without confidence.

— It’s not a conclusive piece of evidence, but it’s still better than nothing. First...

Yoo Yeonha began to type on her keyboard like an IT expert. Chae Nayun stared at her in awe.

— I’ll look into arrested criminals or active villains and djinns.

“T-Thanks, Yeonha!... *Yaawn.*”

The tension left her body and drowsiness overcame her once again.

— Are you sleepy?

“Yeah, I’m going to collapse any moment now.”

—...

Yoo Yeonha grinned.

— Good, then sleep.

“Yeah, you shouldn’t overwork yourself either.”

Chae Nayun waved through the screen and promptly went to bed.

— Okay.

However, Yoo Yeonha remained busy with her pharmaceutical company, core technology development, information guild, dungeon research, resource distribution, and Essence of the Strait’s reformation. She still had to take care of many things.

— Hello? *Ah*, yes, Yi Jin-Ah.

She received a call from one of the former vice leader’s subordinates. Although this person had a previous conflict with Kim Hajin, Yoo Yeonha judged that her talent was too important to waste.

— *Ah*, don’t worry about it. I don’t think you were involved in that incident. No, you don’t need to thank me. Oh, rather than that, I’m going to send you a special image of a tattoo. I want you to...

Yoo Yeonha paused in the middle of her sentence and looked to the side.

— Hold on, I forgot to hang up a video call.

She waved her hand. — *Chweek*. The floating hologram disappeared and Chae Nayun’s room became silent.

* * *

I worked hard to convince Boss as her killing intent filled the park.

“Calm down, Boss. That’s how stocks work.”

“*Ha*, that’s how they work?”

Boss mockingly laughed. She was seriously angry. I couldn't blame her since she must've invested a huge sum. If she used leverage, even a mere 2% increase would've netted her hundreds of millions of won.

"It will drop soon. Trust me."

"..."

Boss shut her mouth. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath to appease her inner fury. Despite her cold personality, she greatly valued her comrades.

"From now on, I don't think I can trust you too much anymore. No, I can't trust you at all."

I couldn't prevent my loss of credibility. Her trust in me would probably drop from a C to an F if I left things the way they were. *Puuu*. Boss sighed like a kid and turned around.

"Ah, wait. I'll make up for it since you suffered because of me."

I stopped her from leaving.

"I'll give you some solid information."

"...Solid information?"

It seemed to pique her interest as her ears perked up.

"Yes."

I nodded confidently. Of course, even I couldn't predict the future economy with certainty, but I knew a few companies that would rise to the top.

"You'll become a billionaire if you invest a million. And if you invest a billion, you'll become the ruler of a country."

"..."

Boss shook her head after a brief silence. Her ears drooped back and her interest disappeared.

“I’ve lived my entire life with skepticism at my core. I won’t believe someone who isn’t an expert twice.”

“*Um*, I’m the rank 1 cadet in theory.”

“...”

Rank 1 in theory. Such a position was impossible without extraordinary intelligence. However, Boss still seemed doubtful. Without a choice, I showed her my stock portfolio.

“*Eh?*”

Her mouth immediately opened in shock. The total value of my various stocks reached 2.5 billion. My profit rate was almost 500%. Not to mention, these stocks would all multiply by at least 10... no, 20 times in the next 5 years.

“You see? Now you believe me? Take a seat.”

I sat on a nearby bench and tapped the empty seat beside me.

“...”

Boss seemed to trust me again as she looked around the park and modestly sat next to me.

“Right, you have to show me proof to earn my trust.”

“Makes sense. So, I’ll recommend a few companies. One still hasn’t been publicly listed—”

“Wait.”

Boss cut me off to take out a pen and notebook from her pocket. Her eyes flashed as she prepared to take notes.

“Go on.”

“...Right.”

I cleared my throat and continued.

“The non-publicly listed company is called SH Agency. Essential Pharmacy will also go public soon. Essential Corporation is a well-known giant...”

Boss nodded passionately and frantically took notes.

* * *

My remaining days at Cube flew by. May, the month of cherry blossoms, arrived in a flash. During this time, I maintained an appropriate distance from Chae Nayun. I could tell she felt annoyed and confused, but I believed it was for the best. That was the only thing I could do. Her feelings for me were so clear I felt like I would give in otherwise. I knew it was just an excuse, but I didn't have a choice. The final incident at Cube would soon occur.

“Today, we will sculpt with magic power.”

The class from 10 A.M. to 2 P.M. was called [*Advanced Magic Power Application*]. It had 2 familiar faces in it — Shin Jonghak and Kim Suho.

“You will not be given any tools. You must sculpt the bronze with only your magic power.”

Each of the 50 cadets received a single lump of bronze to sculpt something.

“You're free to make whatever you want, but don't think of this as simply a dumb art class. Dexterity plays an important role in magic power application and harmonization, so do your best to create the most beautiful sculpture. You can take your results home.”

I quite enjoyed the female instructor's relaxing voice. Then I cracked

my fingers and began.

Stigma's magic power formed a carving knife in my hand. *Who should I use as a model?*

“...”

Someone caught my eye as I looked around. Black hair in a 2 block pomade style that strangely resembled mine. A handsome popular boy who looked like the ideal model with his sharp jawline and facial features.

Alright, I choose you.

I began to sculpt while peeking at Shin Jonghak. My fingers moved mysteriously and transformed the bronze lump into a masterpiece. When I was halfway finished...

Ding—

The class took a break. I stealthily moved closer to Shin Jonghak, who was in the middle of carving something like a chimera.

“Wow, an abstract piece.”

I muttered subconsciously. Shin Jonghak immediately turned and glared at me.

“Kim Hajin?”

His eyes pierced at me probably because of the recent rumors about me and Chae Nayun.

“Oh, *um*, I was just curious. Who is this?”

“...Leave.”

Shin Jonghak waved without saying much.

“Is it Chae Nayun?”

He flinched and glared again with hawk-like eyes.

“Tsk.”

However, he only clicked his tongue and went back to sculpting.

“So it is Chae Nayun.”

“Shut the hell up.”

“Uwaa!”

Shin Jonghak changed his carving knife into an axe and I quickly ran back to my seat. Then I returned to staring at him.

“It must look like her.”

He murmured in satisfaction and focused on sculpting.

“He changed a lot.”

The current Shin Jonghak wasn't as bad as the one I wrote. Many things had changed and more was bound to change. *Did Chae Jinyoon's death and Yoo Sihyuk's hellish training affect him that much?* He still acted haughty like a young master though.

“Well, whatever.”

Jin Sahyuk gained a mysterious supporter, so having Shin Jonghak as an ally would only balance things out.

I unleashed my magic power and went back to sculpting. *Sssk, sssk.* The bronze lump became nothing more than tofu in front of my knife. I snapped out of my daze after about 30 minutes. The sculpture had already finished.

“...Oh.”

It was unequivocally a masterpiece.

“Wow, amazing job. This gets a perfect score, Cadet Hajin.”

I took the sculpture and walked over to Shin Jonghak after receiving my grade (although the class wasn’t over yet).

“Hey.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak focused on his own sculpture. However, it had become barely recognizable. It certainly couldn’t be gifted. I tapped his arm.

“Hey.”

“Argh, what now, you bastard?”

Shin Jonghak spoke harshly and glared at me.

“Do you really wanna die...”

However, he froze when he saw the sculpture in my hand. I named this piece the Shin Jonghak Bronze Bust. The model was also handsome, but the sculpture was even more handsome. *Just look at this jawline and these facial features!*

Shin Jonghak loved things like this. I didn’t make any detailed settings about this, but I could guess from his personality. He blankly stared at my sculpture as I spoke.

“You want it?”

Bzzzz— A series of messages popped up on my smartwatch.

[Devilish Dexterity has been luckily activated.] [The Shin Jonghak Bronze Bust has been judged as a low-intermediate rank art. It will receive a fitting special effect.]

[Special Effect — why art is needed in life] — When a person is touched by the beauty of this sculpture, their perseverance will increase by 0.1 points for 24 hours. — This sculpture's beauty will calm the heart.

[Aether has reacted to a beautiful object. The perseverance boost has been granted to aether (24 hours).]

“Oh right.”

My dexterity was at the level of a gift. It had the inherent power of creating such effects. Shin Jonghak looked back and forth between me and the sculpture. It seemed like he wanted it.

“You don’t want it?”

“Screw off.”

Shin Jonghak always acted differently than his inner feelings.

“Really? I guess I have no choice.”

I didn’t mind keeping it.

“Ehem.”

However, he grabbed my wrist as I was about to leave with the sculpture.

“You can’t do that. That’s facial rights abuse.”

“What?”

I laughed at his childish excuse.

“Why don’t you just say you want it?”

“...”

Shin Jonghak squeezed my wrist, but didn't say anything.

"Fine, I'll leave it here. Do what you want."

Shin Jonghak would be a suitable owner since this sculpture could calm one's heart and help him with his... anger issues.

Ding—

The bell signaled the end of class.

"Hey, Kim Suho. Let's go eat."

"*Huh?* Oh, wait a bit. Let me get mine graded."

I left the classroom with Kim Suho. He carried a sculpture that perfectly resembled Yun Seung-Ah.

"You sculpted Yun Seung-Ah?"

"*Huh? Ah*, yeah. I guess it looks like her, but no, it isn't."

"Please, it's practically a carbon copy."

"No, no. It's not."

"Fine, it's not."

Kim Suho acted quite stubbornly in his own right. I turned back and looked through the walls. Everyone had left except Shin Jonghak. He loitered around while whistling to himself. Then he suddenly snatched my sculpture from the table and ran out the door.

— *Uaak!*

However, Kim Horak stood on the other side.

— Jonghak, why were you taking so long? What's that?

— *Ah?* What do you mean?

— That. Oh, it looks like you! Someone made it for you?

— I, I guess? *Ah!* It, it must've been a fan of mine. Let's go. I'm going to stop by my room first, but I'll meet you at the training center.

Shin Jonghak gave a half-hearted excuse and ran away with the sculpture in his embrace. I snickered while looking at him.

Chapter 135

Farewell (2)

I went to a restaurant with Kim Suho. It was time to settle all my personal affairs and I needed to give him something.

“By the way, why haven’t you been eating with Chae Nayun lately?”

Kim Suho sat and looked around the restaurant.

“No reason. I have something to talk to you about.” [1]

“...”

Kim Suho had a mischievous expression.

“What’s up with that face?” I asked.

“Nothing. You sounded like Chae Nayun. I must be mistaken.”

“Screw off.”

I ignored his dumb comment and ordered my food. Then I placed a jar on the table.

“What’s this?”

“You forgot already? It’s the jar we got from fighting that snake.”

This Jar of Greed came with 2 uses. I thought about using both, but that would’ve been too greedy. Kim Suho should use the second. After all, an amazing greed would definitely adhere to Misteltein.

“I remember, but I said you could have it.”

“I already used it once.”

I cut him off before he could reject.

“Plus, I’m not saying I’ll give it to you for free. I found another dungeon, you see.”

“Another dungeon? Do you work part-time at an information guild?”

Kim Suho’s eyes widened as I grinned. I couldn’t clear this dungeon alone, but the artifact inside would eventually fall into the hands of djinns if we didn’t try.

“Let’s clear this dungeon together in exchange for using this jar. We’ll split the loot 7:3.”

“You’re 7?”

“Yep.”

Kim Suho silently looked at me. Then he grinned and pulled the jar closer.

“So how do you use this? Did you get it appraised?”

“Yeah, it’s called the Jar of Greed. You have Misteltein with you, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then you just have to put it inside for 10 days.”

“That’s it?”

“This artifact strengthens whatever’s put inside. I’m sure Misteltein will receive a huge boost.”

Misteltein would undoubtedly show great synergy with any type of greed. Well, as long as it didn’t receive a charm one like aether. Kim

Suho seemed satisfied. If I recalled correctly, his affection towards Misteltein should be at an all-time high. He should even be sleeping with it.

“Thanks.”

Kim Suho seemed apologetic and softly spoke, “You’ve only been helping me out recently.”

“It’s a give and take.”

“No, even in Busan. It was because of you that...”

Busan. He must be talking about Jin Sahyuk. I shook my head.

“No, you would’ve been fine without me.”

“You’re pretty stubborn, you know that?”

“Like you’re one to talk.”

“*Nu-uh*, you’re more stubborn.”

“No, you are.”

“No, you are!”

Kim Suho and I both frowned. Our sudden exchange of praises turned into a staring contest. Soon, we laughed and smiled.

* * *

That night, I went to Seoul through Cube’s portal. The weather had turned dull and unpleasant. My chest felt especially heavy.

“Hey.”

A familiar face popped out as I left the portal station like usual.

“Kim Hajin.”

Chae Nayun linked her arm with mine the moment she appeared.

“Why are you always late?”

“...”

I had dinner plans with Chae Nayun. I would say my farewell tonight.

“...Hey.”

I replied without an ounce of emotion. She slightly shrunk back, but soon smiled.

“Geez, what’s up with that reaction? Where are we going today?”

“I reserved a restaurant near Seocho District.”

Evandel and I often frequented a restaurant near the apartment.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, follow me.”

“Ah, wait for me.”

I walked over to the parking lot next to the portal station. I parked my bike in the best spot thanks to my 1 year VIP membership. Chae Nayun seemed overjoyed when she saw my bike. I drove much more skillfully than before (thanks to Dexterity) and arrived at the restaurant.

I felt somewhat nervous that the waiter would notice me, but I didn’t receive any strange looks since I always wore sunglasses when I came with Evandel.

Chae Nayun asked several questions from across the table as we waited for our food. However, I replied to all of them half-heartedly.

"Hmph."

She seemed to have grown tired of it and pouted. I didn't say anything even when the food arrived. Chae Nayun snuck glances at me as she quietly ate. We finished our dinner in complete silence.

"That will be 230,000 won."

"Hey, I'll pay—"

"No, I'll pay."

I paid and we left the restaurant. The sky looked fairly dark. I walked underneath this dreary sky as Chae Nayun followed from behind.

"Hey."

We arrived at an empty park after a few minutes of silently strolling. She finally spoke as I stopped and turned around. I could see faint tears in the corner of her eyes.

She glared at me and clenched her fists.

"Are you tormenting me on purpose?"

"..."

I didn't reply as she continued angrily, "Or are you just ignoring me, fully aware of my feelings?"

I closed my eyes at her tearful voice. Once again, I repeated my resolve in my head.

"Do you really not know?"

"..."

The only way I could remain in her memory was as a bad person rather than someone she had to kill.

“Sorry.”

I had to end our relationship before it progressed any further.

“About what?” she asked with a trembling voice.

“What are you sorry about?”

I spoke resolutely while looking into her eyes, “I’m dropping out.”

“...!”

Chae Nayun sighed in shock. “W-Why?”

“I’m going to become a mercenary. I already received a good offer.”

“Yeah, but why?”

“I don’t want to tell you.”

Her eyebrows twitched. “Then when are you dropping out?”

“Next week at the earliest.”

Next week. Chae Nayun laughed dejectedly at those 2 words.

“And when did you decide?”

“Before the second year began.”

She clenched her teeth and forcefully smiled. “So you decided that long ago? Without telling me anything?”

“Why would I?”

“Ah... r-right, right, right...”

Unable to speak properly, Chae Nayun dropped her head and smacked

herself. Her hair had grown fairly long and shook across her face. After a brief moment of silence...

“Fine, I get it.”

She wiped away her tears.

“Do whatever you want. It’s none of my business. It has nothing to do with... dammit.”

She silently cursed and turned away. *Tak, tak*. Only her lonely footsteps rang out in the empty park.

“...Yeah.”

I also turned around and bitterly sighed. Then I began to walk away. *Beeep— Beeep—* My smartwatch suddenly buzzed like crazy. Not just mine. Chae Nayun’s watch and even from people far away began to ring. It was an emergency evacuation.

“*Eh?*”

Puzzled, I turned on my smartwatch. It displayed breaking news that Creator’s Sacred Grace had failed their tower campaign. I didn’t think much of it since I knew it would happen.

“Hey! Kim Hajin!”

Chae Nayun suddenly ran into me. She embraced me before I could even react and covered me with her body as though to protect me from something. In the next moment...

KOONG—!

A giant explosion swept over us. I didn’t even have time to be confused. A huge shockwave struck my body after a flash of light. Then my consciousness faded.

Yoo Yeonha was currently in her dorm room, which was smaller than last year's thanks to her rank dropping.

“*Hmm...*”

She sighed at the report that came in.

[We looked into every known criminal, but no one had such a tattoo.]
[Our newest member, Kim Hosup, contributed greatly to this investigation.]

The complete investigation only took 3 weeks to finish. She felt surprised since she expected it to take at least 3 months.

“The new recruit must be quite useful.”

Yoo Yeonha positively replied about a bonus for the new recruit's hard work. Then she went back to looking at the tattoo. It looked ordinary, but wasn't so common. The deep color made it quite odd, but also more natural-looking.

“Where did a tattoo like this come from?”

Another message arrived as she curiously muttered. It shocked her more than the previous one.

[Master, Creator's Sacred Grace has failed its Tower of Miracle campaign.]

“What?”

Beep— Beep— A loud alarm suddenly rang from her smartwatch.

“*Kyak!*”

She jumped out of her seat from the emergency evacuation alarm.

“W-What is it!”

However, she soon calmed down and replied.

[Are you positive?]

[Yes. Their failure caused magic power to leak from the tower. Several magic power explosions occurred around the area.]

“...”

Yoo Yeonha made a strange face at the revelation. Failure to conquer a tower often caused its magic power to clash with the outside world, causing huge explosions. Either the tower naturally reacted like that or the guild that failed had been careless.

The Tower of Miracle was located in Umyeon Mountain in Gangnam. If explosions occurred because the guild acted carelessly...

“*Hmm.*”

That would be the end of Creator’s Sacred Grace. The corners of her lips subconsciously curled up. However, now wasn’t the time to celebrate. Yoo Yeonha quickly turned serious and contacted Essence of the Strait.

“Immediately deploy guild members to regions around the Tower of Miracle. Yes, as many as possible! Our foremost goal is to protect and rescue civilians.”

A competitor’s downfall served as an opportunity for growth. Yoo Yeonha would make full use of this situation.

“*Whew...*”

After spending about 10 minutes in her comfortable chair... *Tiriri*—Her smartwatch rang again. She picked up the call without much thought.

“Yes, hello?”

However, she turned grave at the contents of the call.

Yoo Yeonha ran to the Gangnam Severance Hospital where Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin had been hospitalized. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak hadn't arrived yet because of the slow news. The hospital was in a state of chaos. Patients arrived by the minute and most suffered from severe injuries.

"Yoo Yeonha, over here."

The hospital's chief resident greeted her.

"Um, where are the 2 patients you mentioned?"

"Ah, neither are seriously injured, so don't worry too much. They're currently in the VIP rooms."

She breathed a sigh of relief, but also couldn't help but wonder why such things always happened to them?

"What about other civilians?"

"We've yet to grasp the total damage, but several mana barriers reduced the impact from the explosions in Gangnam. The damages should be within a moderate range."

"Ah... then can you take me to my friends?"

"Yes, follow me."

She followed her contact and visited Chae Nayun first.

"It's here."

"Thank you."

[VIP – Chae Nayun] The nameplate indicated only one person inside. Yoo Yeonha opened the door and walked in.

“Eh?”

Chae Nayun was still unconscious. Her hair also seemed much shorter than earlier in the day.

“Her hair is... practically a short cut.”

“Her hair was burnt from protecting the other person, so we had no choice but to cut it.”

“Ah...”

Yoo Yeonha immediately knew that Chae Nayun had protected Kim Hajin.

“You know, he would’ve been fine even if you hadn’t protected him.”

“Hm?”

Chae Nayun slowly opened her eyes when Yoo Yeonha murmured. Startled, Yoo Yeonha quickly walked up to her.

“Nayun!”

“...Eh?”

Chae Nayun blankly muttered after seeing the hospital ceiling. Then she suddenly shot up. Her hands trembled uncontrollably and her eyes filled with terror.

“Nayun, everything’s okay.”

“W-What, what just, uu, uaaah...”

Despite Yoo Yeonha’s reassurance, Chae Nayun began to tear up. Yoo Yeonha couldn’t help but pity her struggle with unspeakable terror.

“Nayun, calm down.”

“Ah, uu, Hajin. What happened to Hajin?”

“Patient Kim Hajin is fine. He’s sleeping next door. He’s in much better condition than you.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Only then did Chae Nayun stop trembling. Then she began to hyperventilate and fainted.

“Ah! Is she okay?” Yoo Yeonha shouted in shock.

“Yes, as I said, she has no physical injury, but she keeps showing signs of a panic attack. This is already the third time.”

“Third time?”

“Yes, I believe she’s suffering from PTSD.”

“T-That’s...”

Yoo Yeonha quietly placed her hand on Chae Nayun’s forehead. It felt burning hot.

“Oh right, what about the other patient?”

“Patient Kim Hajin is next door.”

Yoo Yeonha left Chae Nayun and went next door. Kim Hajin slept on the hospital bed with no noticeable injuries like the doctor said.

“He suffered light burns to his legs and arms, but is completely fine otherwise.”

“That’s great to hear.”

Yoo Yeonha stared at him in a patient gown. He seemed relaxed and at peace, almost as if he had fallen asleep instead of fainting. Yoo Yeonha smiled at him sleeping like a child. She had an urge to poke his puffy cheeks. By pure coincidence, something suddenly caught her attention.

“Hm?”

Below his right sleeve, a black line peeked out from his upper arm. It looked strangely familiar and ominous. An image in Yoo Yeonha’s head overlapped with the line in front of her.

“What’s... this...?”

She softly murmured and reached out. Her instincts roared when her fingers almost reached his sleeve. It told her to stop, to step back, and not go any further.

“This...”

However, her hand continued and pulled up Kim Hajin’s sleeve. Regret only came after. His sleeve still covered half the tattoo. However, Yoo Yeonha didn’t need to see the full thing. Half a cross and half a crescent moon. Exactly like the picture of the tattoo.

“E-Eh?”

She murmured and let go. The sleeve fell back and covered his arm.

“T-This...”

She couldn’t find the words to speak. She couldn’t think. Only her head hurt. Her train of thought cut off to protect herself from the stress she couldn’t handle. Her brain stopped functioning and she could only breathe.

Yoo Yeonha clenched her head in a daze. She seemed to be burning up. Her hair tangled up from cold sweat.

“Ah...”

It hurt.

“Auk...”

Her head felt like it would explode.

1. He talks like Chae Nayun here. 🤔

Chapter 136

Farewell (3)

Yoo Yeonha blankly stared at the ground. Her vision spun and turned blurry as a mysterious chill strangled her.

“...Haa.”

She raised her head after finally managing to breathe. Kim Hajin still lay in the hospital bed. However, the bed shook like an earthquake in her eyes. She bit her lips.

No way. I must've seen it wrong. That must be it.

She raised her smartwatch with trembling hands. A clear picture of the tattoo appeared on her screen. It looked exactly like the one on Kim Hajin's upper arm. An indescribable shock struck her in the head.

“Uuu...”

“Hiik!”

Kim Hajin moved and Yoo Yeonha instantly shook. He slowly opened his eyes and stared at the ceiling before turning. Then they made eye contact.

“Yoo Yeonha?”

Kim Hajin called her as she swallowed her saliva and struggled to speak.

“...He, hell, hello.”

“What?”

“H-How, how has it been?”

“...Good, I guess?”

She couldn't maintain her composure as Kim Hajin looked at her. However, she refused to lose her mind. She told herself this was the one time she needed to stay calm. First, she collected her breath. A rush of oxygen flowed into her brain as if she hadn't breathed for a while. Her vision cleared and her thoughts came back.

“Huu...”

Calm down. Nothing is certain yet. Everything might just be a huge misunderstanding. Yoo Jinhyuk might've made a mistake or someone tried to pin the blame on Kim Hajin. For now, nothing is 100% certain...

“Oh right, how's Chae Nayun?”

Kim Hajin quickly asked. He sincerely worried about her, which confused Yoo Yeonha even more.

“Chae Nayun is, is fine. Uh, I, I'm going out for, a minute.”

Yoo Yeonha left as Kim Hajin stared at her strangely. Despite her emotional distress, Yoo Yeonha knew what she had to do. She quickly messaged her information guild.

[Gangnam Severance Hospital. Patient name, Kim Hajin.]

She found it difficult to type as her head spun. She felt sick to her stomach, but held back from throwing up. Most hospitals recorded their patients' identifying characteristics. Naturally, that included tattoos. All data gathered about Kim Hajin today had to be erased. It had to be wiped from existence before Chae Joochul or Chae Nayun found out. Only she would know about Kim Hajin's tattoo.

[Delete all data related to Patient Kim Hajin.]

A few doctors and nurses may have already seen his tattoo. However, no one would ask if nothing existed on paper.

“Um, Yoo Yeonha?”

The doctor in charge of the VIP rooms walked over.

“Ah, doctor. Can you get a jacket for Kim Hajin?”

“A jacket?”

“Yes, he looked quite cold.”

“Ah... sure.”

* * *

“Argh, my head.”

I clutched my head once Yoo Yeonha left. My body shook like I just took an ice bath.

“Auuu.”

First, I thought back to what happened before I fainted. I tried to get away from Chae Nayun, then... something exploded.

“What was that?”

I wasn't sure, but I remembered writing something similar. It felt a bit out of place for a rank 1 guild to fall to rank 7 from a single failure, so I added a bigger incident. *Why did it happen today though, and why in Seocho?*

“...”

I needed more information. I looked around and spotted my smartwatch on the shelf. As expected, only articles about Creator's Sacred Grace appeared when I checked the news.

“...Haa.”

My heart suddenly sank as I took in the information. I recalled Chae Nayun protecting me. The explosion must've struck me directly since I lost consciousness. The only reason I wasn't hurt was because of her.

Tok, tok—

Someone knocked on the door.

“Yes?”

A doctor walked in.

“Patient Kim Hajin?”

“Yes.”

“Here, you can put this on.”

He handed me a jacket and I put it on without much thought.

“Are you feeling okay?”

I felt my body here and there. I didn't feel any pain, but noticed that 90% of my stat points from energy conversion had disappeared when I checked my smartwatch. To think all those points I painstakingly saved instantly disappeared...

“Yes, I'm fine.”

I swallowed a sigh and replied.

“In that case...”

The doctor coughed and slowly spoke. My face stiffened as his somewhat envious voice continued. I could no longer hold back from my sighing.

“...So.”

What the doctor told me could be briefly summarized. Chae Nayun suffered from a severe trauma. She had developed a mental illness after losing another loved one.

“If it’s okay, can you go see her?”

“...”

I silently got up. I couldn’t feel much strength in my legs, but had no trouble walking. Chae Nayun was only next door. I took a deep breath and walked in.

“Nurse Kim?”

“Ah, yes.”

The nurse checking Chae Nayun’s pulse stepped back. I sat next to Chae Nayun with a bitter smile.

“I just have to stay here?”

“Yes.”

The doctor checked something on his clipboard and glanced at the nurse.

“Let’s leave them alone.”

“Ah, yes, doctor.”

I scratched my neck and waited for her to wake up. She seemed to be sleeping peacefully, but I could see a hint of tears around her eyes. I wiped away her tears with stigma’s magic power. Then I noticed something.

“Her hair...”

She recently started going to a beauty parlor to get her hair done. However, it was now cut short. I touched my hair, but mine was

perfectly fine.

Her hair should've been left untouched even if I had to go bald.

I sighed inwardly as Chae Nayun moved.

“*Kuuung...*”

Her eyelids shook from a nightmare as she tightly gripped her blanket. I tried to wake her up.

“Hey, hey. Chae Nayun.”

Chap, chap. She remained asleep even after I slapped her. She seemed to be in even greater pain now. *Chap, chap, chap.* I continued slapping her face, unsure of what to do. However, Chae Nayun still wouldn't wake. *Should I use stigma's magic power?* I continued slapping her for now. *Chap, chap, chap, chap.*

“*Kuaaaa, aaah...*”

“Hey, wake up!”

“*Ah...*”

I slapped her a bit harder one last time before she woke up. *Chap!*

“*Ah... it freaking hurts!*”

“*...*”

Her shout filled the room. I quickly pulled my hand back as she shot up with red cheeks. Chae Nayun subconsciously cursed and stared at me with half-cloudy eyes.

“*Ah...*”

A teardrop fell from her eyes and she began to sob.

“...Ah, I, I thought you...”

Something warm and soft embraced me. Chae Nayun jumped into my arms.

“I really, really thought...”

She only cried and couldn’t speak.

“...”

I deeply sighed. It seemed I was mistaken. Chae Nayun wasn’t stronger than in the original story. Of course, she might be physically stronger since she changed to a sword earlier and received Yoo Sihyuk’s teachings.

“I, I thought you would disappear too...”

However, the current Chae Nayun was weaker than in the original story no matter how strong she tried to act. Her mind was already half-broken. I couldn’t help but worry. *Would she be able to endure everything in the future? Alone?*

“Hng, hnng.”

“Stop crying, you’re always crying. I’m going to call you a crybaby on social media.”

“Hmph, I’m crying because of you, bastard.”

By the time Chae Nayun stopped crying...

“Hey, Chae Nayun!”

The VIP room shot open and Kim Suho appeared.

* * *

— Creator’s Sacred Grace failed in their Tower of Miracle campaign,

causing a huge magic explosion. Currently, the Hero Association is investigating if members of Creator's Sacred Grace are to blame for this incident.

"Haa..."

Kim Suho sighed seeing Yun Seung-Ah on the news with her head down like a criminal under arrest.

Honestly, Yun Seung-Ah couldn't be blamed for this failure. She displayed outstanding leadership as the vice leader. Of the 1000 members and 300 mercenaries that participated in their campaign, 75% had returned alive. Without Yun Seung-Ah, that number wouldn't have even reached 50%.

"Hajin, are you okay?" Kim Suho turned towards me and asked.

"As you can see."

"I'm glad. It looks like Chae Nayun... is also fine."

She had cried herself to sleep and still tightly held onto my hand.

"You should contact her."

"Hm?"

"Yun Seung-Ah. Call her, message her, do something."

"..."

Kim Suho shook his head with a troubled expression. The door shot open once more. Shin Jonghak stormed in and looked at Chae Nayun. I tried to let go, but Chae Nayun only frowned and held my hand tighter after murmuring.

"..."

Shin Jonghak only silently glared at me. His face was filled with rage,

but he didn't express any anger or jealousy. He didn't even try to separate us. He only softly caressed Chae Nayun's shortened hair before leaving.

"Hajin, I'll be back soon."

Kim Suho followed after him. Unfortunately, I couldn't do the same. I couldn't even leave for a smoke because Chae Nayun kept holding onto me, but I could eavesdrop on any conversation with my gift.

"...Hey."

Suddenly, a voice spoke from next to me. Chae Nayun stared at me with narrow eyes.

"I knew you were pretending."

"Pft." Chae Nayun laughed. Then she silently moved her mouth.

— Come, here.

"Speak out loud."

She continued to only move her mouth. She might've been speaking extremely softly or acting as a mime. I moved my ear closer. Then she suddenly wrapped her arms around my neck.

"Ah!"

"Got you."

We were close enough that our lips practically touched. Chae Nayun smiled and lightly bit my nose.

"Ah! Hey, what are you doing!"

I tried to get away, but I found it impossible. Chae Nayun was way stronger than me. I stared into her eyes without a choice after struggling and failing. Then I spoke.

“Don’t you remember?”

“Remember what?”

“What happened today.”

“I do.”

I tried to get away again, but she wouldn’t let me.

“Hey, can you let me go?”

“What if I drop out of Cube too?” I frowned and seriously glared at her.

“Then I’ll start to hate you for real.”

“Why?”

“Who would like a girl foolish enough to give up her dreams for a guy?”

“...”

Chae Nayun seemed to agree and slightly loosened her arms. I tried to escape now, but still failed. My pride as a man would only continue to fall, so I decided to just wait.

“But you know...”

Chae Nayun shook her head and continued, “I thought about it. Even if you drop out to become a mercenary, that doesn’t mean we can’t see each other.”

“No, that’s...”

“What, I can’t even see you? That doesn’t make any sense at all!”

“...”

I didn't know what to say as she turned serious. I could tell she spoke from the bottom of her heart.

“We can call each other and meet every once in a while. Then, when I graduate...”

Tok, tok. Someone knocked with a deep voice.

— Nayun, it's Dad. I'm coming in.

“*Uaat!*”

Chae Nayun quickly pushed me away.

Chapter 137

Farewell (4)

Chae Nayun helplessly looked at me with her father's sudden arrival.

“Ah, that’s my dad.”

“Alright, see you later.”

“N-No, you don’t have to leave. I, I’m not embarrassed to have you here...”

“I know.”

The door opened before we could finish and a light breeze blew in.
Tap, tap. A man in a suit walked in.

I stood up and greeted Chae Shinhyuk. I’d seen him several times in the news, but we finally met for the first time.

“Hm?”

He looked similar to Chae Nayun, but with a sharper appearance. His taller height made it seem as if he was coldly looking down at me.

Neither his appearance nor aura seemed ordinary. However, Chae Shinhyuk wasn’t particularly outstanding as a hero or businessman. He spent most of his youth in his father’s shadow. Despite his average talent, he became the Chae clan’s successor thanks to his righteous character and endless self-cultivation.

“Who’s this?” Chae Shinhyuk asked.

“Ah, I’m Chae Nayun’s friend. My name is Kim Hajin.”

“Kim Hajin...”

Chae Shinhyuk rubbed his beard.

“H-He’s just a friend. There’s nothing between us.” Chae Nayun scratched her cheek in embarrassment.

“I’ve heard of you. You’re quite well-known in Cube. Your weapon is a gun, correct?”

“Ah, yes.”

“I see.”

Chae Shinhyuk tapped my shoulder. I forced a smile and headed towards the door.

“I’ll let the two of you talk.”

I wasn’t used to such a bigshot and spoke as politely as possible. Chae Shinhyuk returned a big smile.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

“B-Bye. I’ll message you later.”

I left the room without replying to Chae Nayun. Then my smartwatch rang as I closed the door.

“Hello?”

— Yes, customer. The items you ordered are ready for delivery. I’ve called for your address.

I ordered some items from Essential Armory two weeks ago with the black card from Yoo Yeonha.

“Both of them?”

— No, we are still preparing the drones. They will be delivered next week.

I ordered 2 drones and 3000 12.7 mm heavy machine gun bullets. The bullets came out to around 500 million won in total. I urgently needed both for next week.

“Yes, the delivery address is...”

After giving my address, I accessed my laptop through the smartwatch to create a new setting. I should have about 1532 SP. I gained 2600 SP from killing Chae Jinyoon and 1532 remained after creating Dexterity. Right, destroying a change in the story rewarded me with 2600 SP. Of course, I could’ve gained more by revealing myself as Chae Jinyoon’s murderer, but that obviously wouldn’t benefit me in any other way.

[Current SP – 1572]

“Hm?”

I had about 40 more SP than in the morning.

“Oh right.”

I hit my knees. It must’ve been because they named me as one of the cadets injured by the magic power explosion. I walked through the hospital lobby and sat on a bench.

“Desert Eagle, heavy machine gun mode.”

Tok, tok. I tapped on the smartwatch’s holographic keyboard to create a new setting.

[Desert Eagle – Heavy Machine Gun Mode] — Will fuse aether and the Desert Eagle to form a heavy machine gun using a small amount of stigma’s magic power.

[The amount of SP required has increased due to the many additional functionalities added to the Desert Eagle.]

[1500 SP will be used.]

“That’s a lot.”

A heavy machine gun modeled after the M2. It was larger than an assault rifle and displayed far greater destructive power. It was a true weapon of war, but it wasn’t worth 1500 SP since it could only be used situationally.

“Hm.”

I tried to increase the amount of stigma’s magic power required to reduce the cost.

[— Will use 1.5 streaks of stigma.]

[1100 SP will be used.]

The cost decreased by 400 SP.

“This is good enough.”

Next week, I had to conquer a dungeon with Kim Suho. I found out the last stage would be defense from the Book of Truth. I had to get this heavy machine gun for the dungeon and future episodes.

I hit save.

* * *

Yoo Yeonha dragged her exhausted mind and body back home to Seoul.

“Oh, my daughter Yeonha! How was your—”

“It was okay. I’m going to bed.”

She left her worried father behind and buried herself under a blanket. Various thoughts swirled in her head and only grew more chaotic. *Kim Hajin and Chae Jinyoon. Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin. Did Kim Hajin really kill Chae Jinyoon? If so, why? Did he have to kill Chae Jinyoon?*

Tok, tok. A sudden knock on the door interrupted her train of thoughts.

— *Um, Yeonha?* Are you hurt?

Her father asked from the other side.

“I’m fine.”

— Really? I cut some fruits for you.

“It’s okay. I’m full.”

—...

The presence behind the door disappeared. Yoo Yeonha tried to refocus when the uninvited voice returned.

— Yeonha, do you want me to make you some ramen?

“Ah, geez. Just leave me alone!”

— *Huk, huuuk...*

Yoo Yeonha shouted and dug into her bed. She could feel her father’s disappointment, but this was partly his fault. He had to be punished too.

“ ... ”

After her father disappeared, Yoo Yeonha recalled everything she saw today. If Kim Hajin really killed Chae Jinyoon, what could be his reason? Did he find out the truth behind the Kwang-Oh Incident? No, that was impossible. Not even her information guild could gather any

information about it. She only found out the truth from her father's diary. Kim Hajin surely couldn't have found out...

"Wait, the Truth Agency?"

Yoo Yeonha shook her head. There were things information guilds could discover and things they couldn't. The Kwang-Oh Incident most certainly belonged to the latter. Plus, it just didn't add up. He wouldn't treat her so kindly if he knew the truth.

Then a slight suspicion crept up inside her. What if he forgave her? What if her efforts had appeased his anger?

"No."

That still didn't make sense. If he forgave her, he would've also forgiven Chae Nayun and Chae Jinyoon.

"What if there was another reason?"

If Kim Hajin murdered Chae Jinyoon, the only person who might know why was...

"Yoo Jinhyuk."

He was also the one who found out about Kim Hajin's tattoo. In that case, he might know more about it. Yoo Yeonha quickly made a call.

[You are unable to call the receiver because your number has been blocked.]

"Hah?"

Yoo Yeonha felt dumbstruck and murmured with a red face.

"You blocked me?"

I'll tell Dad! She suddenly thought as she gritted her teeth.

“Blocked...”

The fact that Yoo Jinhyuk blocked her only reassured her.

Why would he block me? He doesn't even know that I saw Kim Hajin's tattoo.

Yoo Jinhyuk must be hiding something from her.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha thought hard under her blanket, but the door suddenly shot open.

“Yoo Yeonha, get up.”

A cold voice rang out. Yoo Yeonha felt a chill down her back and peeked out of the blanket. Her mother, Jin Yeojung, sharply glared at her.

“M-Mom?”

“What did you do? Your father is drinking and calling your name.”

“*Eh?* No, I didn't do any—”

“Yeah right. Come out and apologize.”

“*Ah*, but I'm in the middle of something impor—”

“Hurry up!”

“*Ah*, wait. *Aah*.”

Jin Yeojung dragged her out of her room.

I arrived at a nameless dungeon with Kim Suho on the weekend. It was a stage-type dungeon hidden in a swamp with giant alligators.

I worried at first since I didn't know much about this dungeon, but I felt fully confident now with Kim Suho after I mapped out the dungeon with the Book of Truth. We made a cheat-like pair together. I guess you could say we complemented each other's weaknesses. Each stage contained dozens of mobs and one boss monster. I easily took care of all the small fries while Kim Suho slashed all the boss monsters in half like tofu.

"This looks like the final stage."

We smoothly arrived at the final stage, which carried a slightly different atmosphere. An ominous open field stood in front of us.

Kim Suho pulled out Misteltein. Then a message popped up in front of us.

[Final Stage – survive for 30 minutes against an army of high-intermediate rank, grade 8 monsters.]

"...High-intermediate rank?"

"Whoo!"

Kim Suho frowned as I cheered. The final stage was defense like the Book of Truth stated, which was advantageous for me.

"Surviving for 30 minutes. Does that include..."

"Them?"

Kim Suho and I turned around. Three high school girls trembled behind us in fear.

"Do you think they're NPCs or real people?" I asked Kim Suho.

"...I'm not sure."

“Geez, we’re not NPCs!”

They overheard us and one of them bravely shouted, “We’re cadets from the Military Agent Academy!”

“Okay, okay.”

NPCs existed in some dungeons and towers. Naturally, they were usually people of that world and not high school girls from Earth.

“I’ll set up a bunker just in case.”

“A bunker?”

I consumed one streak of stigma to form a bunker. I learned how to precisely use stigma after obtaining Dexterity. Stigma’s magic power manifested according to my will, but I required Dexterity to materialize exactly what I imagined.

“Wow, what’s this?”

I created a bunker that resembled one from the famous game Starcraft.

“Stay inside.”

“Yes!”

“Thank you!”

The high school girls scurried inside.

“Wow, that’s amazing. How long can it last?”

“It’s not that strong. I only used one... *er*, a little bit of magic power. It should be enough to protect them from getting caught in the crossfire.”

Kim Suho seemed more relaxed with the bunker protecting the girls.

“Alright, get ready. It looks like they’re coming.”

Clack, clack. Countless monsters began to appear in the field. Ghouls, zombies, banshees, flesh golems... They were all undead.

“30 minutes.”

I took out the Desert Eagle and set an alarm on my smartwatch.

“Kim Suho, have you ever played any games like this?”

“*Hm?*”

“In tower defense games, waves of monsters grow stronger as time passes.”

I transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle.

“I’ll deal with the front, so you deal with the back. You can dodge my bullets, right?”

“As long as you aren’t shooting too wildly.”

“Don’t worry.”

I fixed the assault rifle on the ground and infused more of stigma’s magic power. Then it grew in size and transformed into a heavy machine gun on a tripod.

“Oh? Isn’t that new?”

“It’s a bit stronger than an assault rifle. Should I shoot first? Or do you want to lead?”

“You can go ahead. I’ll dodge your bullets on my own.”

“Alright, run!”

Paat! Kim Suho shot forward faster than my bullets.

“Scan.”

I murmured as I held the heavy machine gun. This weapon of mass destruction hindered the movements of its user and prevented precise aiming. However...

Tududududu—!

Its destructive power made up for its flaws. The barrel flashed white as bullets shot forward like cannon shells, each striking 3-4 monsters.

Koooong—!

One magazine carried 300 bullets and the gun had a firing rate of 1300 bullets per minute. I could use up all my bullets in just 3 minutes. However, I purposely maintained a slow speed to avoid hitting Kim Suho and to kill several enemies with each bullet.

Clang, clang, clang—

Bullet casings rained down on the ground.

Chwiing—!

A claw suddenly shot towards me. The magic power reinforcement seal on my obsidian bracelet easily blocked such attacks.

“*Kueeek—!*”

Next, a ghoul ran towards me. I activated bullet time because of its unexpected speed. The world slowed as my awareness sped up. *Hunter Ghoul*. It was an intermediate rank monster many times faster than others at its level. It figured out that most of my attacks flew low and cleverly jumped.

However, a mob monster was still just a mob monster.

I instantly twisted the machine gun's handle at a sharp angle and fired. Two curving bullets pierced the hunter ghoul's head.

“Keuk!”

It fell to the ground with its head blown up. The battle had become messier since I focused on the ghoul. Thankfully, Kim Suho held back the stronger monsters. With bullet time still active, I turned the machine gun once again. I fanned it out in a cone and fired in every direction.

Dudududu—

My calculated barrage destroyed the enemy lines. A bullet pierced a ghoul's chest and blew up a zombie's head. Flesh and brain splattered everywhere. The zombie and ghoul fell to their knees without moving a single step.

The sight couldn't have been good for their mental health, even for undead monsters.

* * *

I used up around 1000 bullets. As planned, I took care of the small fries while Kim Suho cut down the elites. The final stage came to an end after 30 minutes. Then we approached the bunker behind us.

“Hey, you all there?”

However, the high school girls had disappeared. Kim Suho murmured with a sigh.

“They were NPCs.”

“Yeah.”

Modern people who appeared in dungeons as NPCs. We knew what that meant and couldn't express our joy in beating the dungeon.

“Hajin, look over there.”

Kim Suho pointed to 3 beads huddled together on the ground like the high school girls.

“Ah.”

Those who died in dungeons sometimes became NPCs. These beads were all that remained of them.

[Low-intermediate rank Pink Soul Bead] — Formed from the condensed soul of an individual killed inside the dungeon.

Soul beads could be used for magic seals and enchantments. Even low-intermediate rank beads easily sold for hundreds of millions on Violet Banquet. We looked at each other. Neither of us seemed too keen on using them.

“What should we do?” Kim Suho asked.

“We’ll have to give them back. To their families.”

That seemed like the best solution.

“Right.”

We knew full well what these beads would mean to the parents who lost their children.

“Let’s open up that chest first.”

I walked towards the chest in the middle of the open field. Kim Suho followed after me.

“Oh, there’s more than one this time!”

It contained 3 items: a bow, a wrist protector, and a leather belt. They formed a set together with their sand-colored appearances.

“Ah, this is it.”

“Hm? You know about them?”

“No, it’s nothing.”

[Blessed Bow of Horus] [Egyptian Archer’s Wrist Protector] [Leather Belt for the Strong]

The bow and wrist protector were supposed to become the main equipment for Valerion, an executive of the djinn group, Sin. I glanced at Kim Suho staring at the contents and asked in a cheerful voice, “How should we split these?”

“Hm?”

Kim Suho smiled.

“I’ll leave it to you since you found this place and we also beat the final stage thanks to you.”

“Okay.”

Honestly, Kim Suho didn’t need the bow or wrist protector. After all, he was a close range combatant. The only item that suited him was the leather belt, but there was just one problem.

“...You take this leather belt.”

“You’re taking the other two?”

Kim Suho didn’t mean anything by it, but I felt slightly guilty. This leather belt was simply an artifact for training.

[Leather Belt for the Strong] [Ancient Artifact] — When used, a maximum of 1000 jin can be added to the wearer’s body. — Will increase the physical growth of its wearer.

“Can’t you read the item description?”

I used my gift, Observation and Reading, but other people should be able to read the descriptions too. It only required enlightenment and the special stat called insight.

“Oh, enlightenment? I’m bad at these things, so I usually get items appraised.”

“I see.”

“So how do you use this leather belt?”

Kim Suho picked up the leather belt with a smile. I suddenly felt sorry.

“It’s... for training.”

“Training?”

Unlike what I expected, his eyes sparkled like he found a treasure.

“Y-Yeah, your body will get heavier if you wear it. Look over there, you can change the weight too.”

“Oooh.”

Kim Suho exclaimed in awe. However, my expression darkened. He only made me feel worse.

“It’s kind of like a portable gravity room, but a bit better. It’s an ancient artifact that speeds up your physical growth.”

“R-Really? That’s amazing! You’re giving this to me?”

“What I’m taking is better.”

Honestly, they were incomparably better.

[Blessed Bow of Horus] [Ancient Holy] [Ghost attribute] A bow blessed by Horus, son of the ancient Egyptian god, Osiris. — Power of Horus: Arrows shot with this bow are endowed with sacred flames. Sacred flames are

particularly powerful against evil spirits. You can form a healing arrow by imbuing magic power into the bow. — Sun of Horus: From 6 A.M. to 6 P.M., the user of this bow's vision will improve. — Moon of Horus: From 6 P.M. to 6 A.M., the user of this bow can move more quietly.

An artifact bow with 3 different abilities. I carefully picked it up. I would've felt bad enough just taking this, but received another unexpected benefit.

[Your gift, Master Sharpshooter, has linked with Sun of Horus and stigma.] [When you activate Sun of Horus while holding the Blessed Bow of Horus, it will fuse with thousand-mile eyes and allow you to use Eye of Horus for 5 seconds.]

[Eye of Horus] — Your vision will extend far beyond the horizon, piercing through people's feelings and the laws of the universe.

“...”

All sorts of jaw-dropping messages popped up as Kim Suho innocently asked.

“Oh right, Hajin. You're good with bows too, right?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. I am...”

“That's great! You got yourself a bow and also... a wrist protector, I think?”

He was too pure. I stared at Kim Suho and felt extremely sorry.

Chapter 138

Final Incident (1)

I ate dinner with Kim Suho and returned home after clearing the dungeon. *Beep, beep, beep*. I entered the password and opened the door. However, Evandel didn't greet me like usual. I could hear 2 kids having fun and wondered if Evandel was mad at me for coming home late when I saw an unexpected guest. Evandel was with a girl I had never seen before.

"Hajin."

Evandel smiled and waved. I curiously looked back and forth between Evandel and the pretty girl next to her. She introduced herself.

"Hello."

"Uh... Hi."

I greeted her and looked at Evandel for an explanation. Evandel simply smiled and introduced her.

"She's my friend."

"I'm Yun Haeyeon."

The 2 children bowed at a 90 degree angle. I couldn't help but smile at their adorable gesture.

"H-Hello. You must be the friend Evandel mentioned before."

"*Un!* Haeyeon said her parents were busy tonight, so I told her she could eat dinner at my place!"

"Oh? What did you order?"

“Haeyeon is giving it a go!”

“Giving it a go?”

Evandel giggled as Haeyeon sheepishly looked down and scratched her cheek.

“Yep, Haeyeon says she’s never ordered food before.”

“Oh...”

Everything was a challenge for children. I had trouble ordering food when I was 5 too.

“Don’t order anything. I’ll cook tonight since your friend is here.”

“Wow, really?”

Evandel’s face turned even brighter. Cooking was one of the skills I acquired with Dexterity. I could copy what most professional chefs did on TV as long as I knew the recipe. It surprised Evandel when I first showed her.

“Alright, then wait just a bit.”

I opened the fridge. We had more than enough ingredients.

“What do you want to eat?”

“I—”

“I’m asking Haeyeon.”

“...”

Guests first. Evandel pouted, but quickly smiled again as I patted her.

“I’m... fine with anything...”

“Steak please!” Evandel’s eyes sparkled.

“Haeyeon, are you okay with steak?”

“Yes, I like it.”

“Good.”

I took out 4 pieces of beef sirloin and some seasoning. Three were for Evandel and the other was for Haeyeon and Hayang.

“Can I watch you cook?”

“Sure.”

I began to cook under the curious eyes of 2 children. *Tak, tak, tak*— I quickly chopped up some onions and garlic. *Chwiik*— Then I made a 3 star Michelin chef’s steak sauce. *Tzzzzz*— After that, I plated the steak with garnish and topped it off with the sauce. Finally, I presented the completed dish to the awestruck children and cat.

“Here you go.”

“*Whoa.*”

Evandel and Haeyeon stared at the steak in anticipation as I checked my smartwatch.

[A sense of satisfaction and fatigue recovery seeps into your well-cooked dish.] [8:52 P.M.]

It was almost time for my appointment at 9 P.M.

“Alright, I’m going out for a bit. Let the steak rest for 5 minutes before you eat.”

“*Un!*”

“Thank you for the food.”

I left behind the 2 kids eagerly waiting to eat and arrived at a nearby park. I checked the items I obtained today while waiting.

*[Egyptian Archer's Wrist Protector] [Ancient Artifact] [Sand attribute]
[Stored Mana 3000/3000] — Ancient Archer Proficiency: Will increase
your proficiency with bows. — Blessing of the Desert: Will allow you to
cast a sand barrier using stored mana.*

The Blessed Bow of Horus and the Egyptian Archer's Wrist Protector. These 2 items, which I called the Egyptian set, would serve me well at least until the middle stages of the story.

"Hmm..."

I couldn't help but hesitate between a bow and a gun now. At this point, it was hard to say one was better than the other.

My gun wasn't ordinary. As my main weapon, I had attached all sorts of additional options to the Desert Eagle. First was the attack boost for every monster I instantly killed. This effect alone made my Desert Eagle 2.2 times stronger than any other Desert Eagle. It could also transform into a shotgun, anti-material sniper rifle, assault rifle, and heavy machine gun. I could display great firepower in various situations. The only flaw was that I couldn't use aether for defense since I fused it with the gun to change forms.

"I'll only use a bow as an ultimate ability."

That seemed to be the right choice. I stared at the sand-colored bow and tried attaching aether to it. Immediately, the ancient bow transformed into a more modern and elegant design.

"Is it because of its aesthetic greed? It keeps doing this."

Even my guns took on new forms ever since aether received the aesthetic greed. I couldn't quite describe it, but everything became more beautiful.

"Did you get a new weapon?"

The person I waited for finally arrived after about 10 minutes. Boss approached with a smile.

“You were right. Creator’s Sacred Grace failed their tower campaign. Horribly, at that.”

“Are you happy?”

“Of course, *haha*.”

The stock price of Creator’s Sacred Grace fell by 30% in just 4 days. It took a massive dip on the first day and steadily fell ever since.

“So, what’s your request?”

“Will you accept it?”

“As long as it’s possible.”

I requested her help for the upcoming incident in exchange for stock-related information.

“Have you heard of the Dark Moon Society?”

The Dark Moon Society would infiltrate Cube during this episode. This was Lancaster’s first real move in the original story and I already confirmed both using the Book of Truth.

“Dark Moon Society? How do you know about them?” Boss frowned suspiciously.

“Well, you see...”

I scratched my neck and awkwardly explained. I didn’t have a choice. The co-author would’ve surely made the upcoming incident messier. It was only natural to gain an ally or two to balance things out.

“They tried to kill me during the previous final exam.”

“What?”

Boss’ expression turned vicious. As expected of the Yaksha, she valued her comrades dearly. I felt proud.

* * *

I looked over Cube’s dropout form before class on May 1 and wondered what to put down for my reason. After much thought, I only wrote 2 words — *[career change]*. Then I signed the document.

“Good morning! I will announce the random teams. Remember, you will be in pairs.”

Our morning common class was more or less a walk in the park. We would train in a VR dungeon today. It was no different than the mock dungeon trial from last year, except the government sponsored it and we used VR instead.

“Team 6, Yoo Yeonha and Kim Hajin.”

Yoo Yeonha twitched in front of the VR capsule. She turned her head like a machine as our eyes met and sighed when I smiled.

“Now, sit together with your teammate.”

She slowly walked up and sat next to me.

“...Hello.”

“Hey.”

“Alright, listen up! The visual effects for this dungeon will be more realistic than the real thing, so stay on your toes! Now, put on your helmets!”

I put on my helmet after the instructor’s enthusiastic introduction. A vivid scene spread out in front of me.

— Wow, it's like I'm in a LAN café.

I murmured.

“...”

However, Yoo Yeonha remained silent. She wasn't even logged on from the looks of it. I took off my helmet and stared at her. She kept frowning at my right arm. I flicked her in the forehead.

“Ak.”

“Ak? What are you doing?”

“N-Nothing. Let's start.”

Yoo Yeonha put on her helmet and walked on eggshells around me. I ignored her and put on my helmet. She was probably up to her usual delusional antics. Then we teleported into a huge cave.

— Where should we go?

— Let's go straight.

— Okay... *kyak!*

[A giant bat has appeared!]

— Why are you so surprised? Oh right, you hate scary things.

Yoo Yeonha hated everything scary from ghosts to jump scares.

— N-No, I don't.

— How should we kill it?

—... Attack its ears.

Yoo Yeonha murmured. I shot twice according to her instructions and instantly killed it.

— Next up is a zombie. Weakness?

— Head.

— Got it.

We progressed smoothly and quickly reached the end. The 30 minute course only took us 20 minutes.

“...Um.”

“Hm?”

Yoo Yeonha carefully asked.

“I... I heard you were dropping out.”

“Did Chae Nayun tell you?”

Yoo Yeonha nodded.

“She’s quite a blabbermou—”

“She was crying.”

“What?”

Yoo Yeonha’s voice became heavier.

“She was crying?”

“Yes, she said she didn’t want you to leave.”

“Uh...”

I felt a mysterious gaze and turned to the side. Then I made eye contact with Rachel. However, she quickly looked away after seeming to have overheard us.

“...It’s not something I have a say in. I believe you’ll deal with it properly.”

Yoo Yeonha murmured before leaving.

“Team 6 has finished.”

* * *

Lunch came after the morning class. I ate alone at Cube’s cafeteria. Rachel also ate there, but a female agent disguised as a cadet stood next to her, so we only exchanged glances.

“I’ll take the special set.”

“Alrighty.”

Someone sat next to me as I sat with my food. It was Chae Nayun.

“H-Hi.”

She awkwardly waved as I looked at her plate.

“You can eat cafeteria food?”

“O-Of course.”

Chae Nayun courageously ate a sausage. *Nom, nom...* However, her chewing began to slow.

“So, *um...* when are you leaving?” she asked without swallowing the food in her mouth.

“This week.”

Kuhuk. She loudly coughed and almost choked. Luckily, she managed to swallow before anything bad happened. Chae Nayun looked at her plate dejectedly. Then she clenched her fists and slammed on the table.

“Hey.”

“...What.”

“Can’t you stay?”

I could only shake my head.

“Ah, okay. Well, you should leave if you have to. I can... I can also find someone else to be my boyfriend,” she mumbled as she glanced at me.

“Yeah, go ahead.”

“...I’m kidding. I won’t date anyone else.”

“You should.”

Chae Nayun immediately frowned. However, I quickly finished my food and stood up. She ran after me. I left the cafeteria after returning my tray and walked to a nearby park. There, a second battle began between us.

“Uuuu, it’s so infuriating the more I think about it! Don’t you know how to be tactful? You know, some lip service?”

“What?”

“I mean, didn’t you like me at first?”

“What are you talking about—”

Shooooong— We felt a strange undulation of magic power in the middle of our conversation. I immediately froze. A sharp, yet light aura

swirled near the ground and ominous magic power seemed to interfere with the earth. We looked at each other.

“Hey, what was that?”

I sighed at her question. I couldn't find the specific date because I didn't have enough magic power, but the day finally arrived.

“It should be a magic phenomenon.”

An extremely rare magic disaster that occurred when dragons in the depths of the East Sea touched the ocean's keystone. This phenomenon usually happened by coincidence, but djinns had orchestrated it this time.

“Magic phenomenon? *Ah*, look over there.”

Chae Nayun pointed to Cube's changing scenery. The green leaves changed colors and the cool breeze turned hot. Cube's state-of-the-art buildings all disappeared with only a dilapidated building and forest left behind.

“Follow me.”

“O-Okay. *Ah*, your hand...”

I grabbed her wrist and ran towards the only building at the center of Cube.

“W-What's happening?”

“Don't let go of my hand!” I shouted because she kept twisting her wrist.

“S-Sorry, but you should explain what's going on...”

“Space distortion.”

“What?”

“We learned about it in class, remember? It’s the broken mirror phenomenon.”

A magic phenomenon where space shattered into pieces like a broken mirror. I created this magic disaster using interesting random theories I heard about. Technically, this phenomenon was a barrier that formed when a dragon interfered with mana clouds that rose through convection currents. Djinnns had provoked a dragon and invaded Cube to find suitable hosts for devils.

They had carefully organized this invasion. Even if I was willing to sacrifice Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak’s growth, I couldn’t stop the djinnns’ plan since that required me to kill a dragon.

“What? Then...”

“Space might shatter at any moment, so stay sharp. See that building in the center? We need to get there as quickly as possible... *Uk!*”

The space distorted once again and forced me to let go of Chae Nayun. The scenery changed into a half-day and half-night world. The scent of blood filled the air. I ran towards the direction without hesitation and shouted as soon as I discovered the smell’s source.

“HEY!”

Twelve pairs of eyes turned to me. Ten or so djinnns surrounded Rachel there.

“Hajin!”

Rachel’s expression faintly brightened. First, I checked her condition. Thankfully, she didn’t seem to be the one bleeding. Rather, the blood came from the djinnns she already cut down.

“Oh? What a coincidence to meet again. It’s been a while.”

A somewhat familiar man clapped his hands and revealed himself. It was Heuk Jeon, the assassin who interfered in the final exam.

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

As expected, Lancaster and the Dark Moon Society worked together in this incident.

“Yes, yes. It’s been such a long time.”

Heuk Jeon unleashed vicious killing intent as he fanned out his daggers. However, I simply tilted my head. *Did he not hear the news yet?*

“Hajin, run away. There are too many of them. I’ll hold them back, so you should go find reinforcements—”

I faced Heuk Jeon while ignoring the serious Rachel.

“Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin. I’ve been waiting for this day ever since you humiliated me.”

“You haven’t heard the news?”

“...News?”

I pointed to the walkie-talkie on his belt. The djinns all carried walkie-talkies that worked in this distorted space. I had also prepared something.

“Hold on.”

I sent Boss a message using a magical device. *[Boss, those guys are bothering me again...]* It was similar to the magic letters that Yoo Sihyuk used at his school.

“What are you doing? I advise you to take out your weapon...”

— Heuk Jeon! Where are you, you son of a bitch!

Harsh words came out of his walkie-talkie. Heuk Jeon and the djinns around him all seemed shocked.

“Eh? I’m in the middle of the miss—”

— What? You motherfucker, I told you not to do that!

Sweating profusely, Heuk Jeon lowered his walkie-talkie’s volume. He clearly didn’t want to embarrass himself.

“Um, sir. I thought we already finished our talk with the Lancasters.”

— Do you think I give a shit about Lancaster right now! *That* person contacted me just now. I will kill you myself if something goes wrong.

The radio message came to an end.

— I’m not kidding! I will really kill you! I’ll tear your limbs apart and feed you to the highest rank monster I can find!

Then the walkie-talkie came back on with a final warning. Heuk Jeon stared at the walkie-talkie in his trembling hands before placing it back. Then he carefully asked while sweating.

“Um, Kim, Kim Hajin? C-Can you please explain what’s going on?”

I couldn’t tell whether he was slow or just shocked.

“Well, think about it this way. I make money on the side from investing in stocks. One of my clients happens to know your group, so I asked for a favor. Who knew one of my clients would be so close with all of you?”

“...”

Heuk Jeon looked like his soul was being sucked out. He seemed to be saying, *I’m being humiliated because of mere stocks?* It sounded like a decent excuse considering Boss’ personality.

“What are you doing?”

I pointed at a nearby rock. It was the perfect place to kowtow.

“If I were you, my head would be kissing the ground right now.”

Chapter 139

Final Incident (2)

“Um, what happened?”

Rachel whispered. I looked back at Heuk Jeon and his crew following us without answering her. I said I would let him off even if he didn’t kowtow, but he decided to follow me like an attendant.

“Who knows?”

“...”

Rachel seemed suspicious of my vague reply.

“Well, like I said before. I trade stocks on the side. That’s it.”

“Stocks?”

It wasn’t easy to come up with a good explanation. After all, I didn’t want to seem related to djinns.

“Yes, I gave one of my clients a valuable piece of information. That client just happened to be extremely influential around people like them.”

“Eh? Then is your client also a djinn?”

“No. It’s all about money. That’s why they’re here too.”

I wasn’t lying. Boss was a money-loving fool. Well, maybe calling her a fool was too harsh. She only focused on money while the Chameleon Troupe was relatively free, but would undoubtedly show why she was called the Yaksha once they became involved in the main story.

“...”

Rachel didn't seem to completely believe me, but didn't ask any further questions.

“Stocks... stocks...” she mumbled to herself until her eyes shot open.

“Ah, Ha-Hajin.”

“Yes?”

She called my name while stuttering.

“Then did you make a lot of profit with stocks?”

“Uh... my nickname is the Invisible Hand.”

Rachel's cheeks flushed with anticipation when I said that. The English Royal Court guild was currently in a financial crisis. They suffered from a lack of investors after last year's incident on Clancy Islet.

“I see... it makes sense since you're rank 1 in theory. You must be good at analyzing charts and data.”

However, she seemed too embarrassed to outrightly ask for any favors and fiddled with her fingers.

“I guess you could say that.” I acted obliviously.

“Ah... right.”

Rachel finally worked up the courage to speak.

“So, *um*, I heard guilds have recently started investing in stocks to make money...”

“Oh, is that so?”

I felt the urge to tease her. I could only relax in this situation thanks to Boss.

“Y-Yes... and *um*, the English Royal Court guild is looking to start a business at the moment...”

“Oh right.”

I cut her off to give her some important information. “Stay calm and head over to that building if the space distorts while we’re walking.”

“You don’t have to worry about that.”

Heuk Jeon interrupted me. I turned around as he flinched at my gaze, then took out a palm-sized orb from his pocket.

“Hajin doesn’t have to worry about that. We have a pathfinder orb.”

Pathfinder orb? That must be what they used to find Rachel.

“Give it here then.”

I put my hand out towards the black orb.

“...” Heuk Jeon scratched his neck, but didn’t refuse. Instead, he pleaded with me.

“*Um*, about this matter...”

“I know, I know. How many times do I have to tell you?”

I wasn’t interested in ordering him around. I’ve read this trope so many times in novels and even used it a few times myself until I got bored.

“Y-Yes, thank you.”

“He interrupted us in the middle of our conversation.”

Rachel pouted unhappily. I grinned and went back to the topic.

“So, Rachel. Do you want me to give you a recommendation?”

“Yes? *Ah*, well, you see...”

She quickly livened up and began to list all of the English Royal Court guild’s business plans. I found them lacking to Yoo Yeonha, but could see their passion and hardworking attitude.

“It’s going to be difficult to take all that on with just taxes. It’s a long-term plan, and with the economy so bad recently...”

We walked together while talking about the English Royal Court and arrived at the central building before we noticed. It looked like a small abandoned school in a rural town.

“We’ll talk about this later. Now isn’t a good time.”

“*Ah*, yes.”

Rachel nodded and looked at the worn-down building.

“Where are we?”

“It should be a building in Cube.”

To be exact, it was a lighthouse that went obsolete after Cube introduced portals. The spatial distortion dragged the building from the deepest corner of Cube here.

“Let’s go in.”

We entered while Heuk Jeon and his crew stopped at the entrance. I turned around and looked at them.

“We’ll go back, but Lancaster won’t give up.”

Heuk Jeon warned us before leaving. I didn’t stop him so others

wouldn't associate me with djinns.

"We'll stay in the area and stop Lancaster's subordinates if we spot them."

Yesterday's friend is today's enemy. Djinns had a thin concept of loyalty.

"Thanks."

Heuk Jeon was a trustworthy guy in terms of strength. He should be able to deal with Lancaster's djinns somewhat evenly with his number of subordinates.

"By the way, you don't need this pathfinder orb?"

"No, we have another one."

"Good, then see you."

I waved as they left. Then something rustled from a nearby bush.

"...!"

Rachel and I cautiously glared in the direction. However, we knew the person that popped out.

"Ah, Kim Hajin!" Chae Nayun shouted and ran up to me.

"Hey! Geez, I was so surprised. You suddenly disappeared..."

Chae Nayun almost ran into my embrace, but stopped when she saw Rachel.

"What."

"Are you okay? You're not hurt, are you?"

“I’m fine, but why are you with her?”

“That’s not important. Anyways, follow me. We have something to do. You too, Rachel.”

“Yes.”

“Ah, what is it?”

We entered the building and walked up the stairs to the broadcasting room on the highest floor.

“Aah, aah.”

I fiddled with the microphone and tested the sound. Using this, I planned to gather all the cadets and instructors to this building. Kim Suho was supposed to do it, but the earlier the better.

“Will everyone hear us if we speak into this?” Chae Nayun asked.

“Yeah, probably.”

At least 10,000 people resided in Cube. However, one needed to have enough magic power for this broken mirror phenomenon to pull them in. Only about 3000 people, including the instructors, should be here. I could confidently say it had also transported me because of stigma’s magic power. My arm had been constantly throbbing ever since.

“Aaah, testing, testing, 1 2 3.”

I turned on the microphone and spoke. As expected, the speakers properly worked.

“This is an announcement to all cadets and instructors who might be panicking. I repeat, this is an announcement to all cadets and instructors who might be panicking.”

I cut straight to the chase after grabbing everyone’s attention.

“Space has been distorted due to the broken mirror phenomenon.”

I paused to choose my next words.

“...Do not panic if you are a cadet. Head to the building in the center of the island. Continue heading towards the building even if you get lost. I repeat, continue heading towards the building even if you get lost.”

I placed the microphone down after repeating the same thing several times.

* * *

People began to arrive at the central building after 30 minutes. Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yi Yeonghan, and several others all arrived at the same time. Our former instructor, Kim Soohyuk, also ran over. First year cadets appeared after an hour, but didn't look to be in good shape.

“Instructor! Some strange people in robes kidnapped Hyunsuk!”

“What?”

The djinns' goal was to kidnap cadets with the potential to host devils. This invasion wasn't happening only in Cube. The same should be happening in several hero academies across the world as one of the largest planned attacks on humanity.

“Ah, what should we do?”

Kim Suho stomped and glared into the forest. He probably wanted to save his comrades and juniors, but couldn't because they would easily get lost.

“Hey, Kim Suho. Do you want to go?”

“Hm?”

Kim Suho's current strength was far beyond any other cadet. He should be even stronger than in the original story. With Misteltein also strengthened, he could join the rescue team without a problem.

"But if I go into the forest..."

"Here."

I threw the pathfinder orb to him. Kim Suho caught it with a curious look.

"That's a pathfinder orb. The space shouldn't suddenly distort with it. Go with the instructor."

"Really?"

"Are you doubting me?"

"Of course not. Thank you, Hajin!"

"Pathfinder what?' Kim Soohyuk joined in on our conversation.

"Pathfinder orb. You won't get lost if you have it around. Oh, Shin Jonghak. Do you want to go too?"

I also asked Shin Jonghak, who stood guard with his spear like a sentry. His eyebrows twisted up. It didn't look like he wanted to listen to me.

"Let's go, Shin Jonghak."

Kim Suho also chimed in. Shin Jonghak glared at us unhappily.

"I guess Yoo Yeonha isn't here yet."

However, he soon joined.

"I, I'll help too."

An unexpected individual hopped in.

“You want to go too, Rachel?”

“Yes, I want to help rescue them, ” Rachel spoke resolutely with her hands clasped over her heart.

“Mm...”

I understood where she was coming from since her trauma had to do with a rescue effort, but because of Lancaster... no. Objectively speaking, she was probably safer with Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, and Kim Soohyuk.

“Ah, then I wanna join too.”

Yi Yeonghan also raised his hand. Only Chae Nayun and I didn’t take part. Kim Suho grinned.

“Hajin, you stay here and protect the other cadets.”

“Like I’m strong enough for that.”

Of course, I planned to do just that. Now was the time for Kim Suho to shine. Thankfully, other high ranking cadets also remained to protect the place. For example, the samurai Yohei and supporter Yi Jiyeon.

“Don’t worry about us.”

“Yeah, be safe!” Chae Nayun also waved at them from the side.

“You aren’t going with us, Chae Nayun?”

Shin Jonghak asked while pretending like he didn’t care. Chae Nayun would’ve followed them in the original story even if it cost her life. However, she currently didn’t hesitate.

“You’re all going, so it’ll be a waste if I go too.”

“...I see.”

Shin Jonghak faintly sighed and turned around. Kim Suho followed him as he stormed off.

“Ah, hey! You have to stay close to the pathfinder orb!”

“Everyone, make sure you stay in this building!”

The rescue team led by instructor Kim Soohyuk departed. After they left, Chae Nayun and I climbed to the roof to look out for any djinns that might ambush us.

“Wow, look what we got ourselves into this time.”

As always, it was best to maintain the high ground over enemies. Chae Nayun looked out into the horizon and mumbled, “First, Creator’s Sacred Grace. Now this. These things just keep happening to us, *huh?*”

“Yeah. After today, many things will change...”

This incident served as an important turning point in the original story. I skipped over the main cast’s time in Cube after this incident.

“Yeah, you’ll be leaving too.”

“That has nothing to do with it.”

Chwaaa— The cool breeze blew my hair.

“At least the wind is nice.”

“I guess so...”

The gentle breeze suddenly turned violent while we leisurely talked. It sharply slapped my face as a waterspout rose from the East Sea in the distance.

“What’s that?”

A fierce tornado shook Cube's island. I couldn't help but frown at this supernatural phenomenon.

"Ah, look at that!"

Chae Nayun jumped in surprise, but I remained calm. The monstrous waterspout sent a chill down my back as my smartwatch buzzed.

[Criticism – It doesn't make sense that djinns, known to be vile and brutal, would only slightly provoke the azure dragon.]

"...But that doesn't mean you can do this."

You son of a bitch, how could you send a dragon after cadets! I quickly raised my head and looked into the distance. Then I became speechless. A single creature appeared from far away and I fell into a daze at its proud and noble figure.

A soft, beautiful azure body that resembled the clouds. A face that resembled a mix between a snake and a tiger. Two sacred horns protruded from behind its ears. The master of the East Sea, a creature that seemed too noble to be called a monster. The azure dragon was one of the cardinal guardians described in legends.

"..."

The beauty of this legendary dragon almost made me forget the gravity of the situation. However, the azure dragon wasn't so kind. *Krrrrr!* It glared in our direction and roared. His roar swept the entire island.

"Kyak!"

I was unaffected, but Chae Nayun screamed in pain and collapsed.

"Ah, hey!"

I quickly ran to her.

“Uuu, uuuuaa...”

Veins protruded from her neck to her face. This was magic convulsion.

“Dammit!”

The azure dragon was especially skilled in handling magic power. However, Chae Nayun was directly exposed to such a being’s breath. The azure dragon’s breath must’ve flowed into her body and suppressed her magic power, leading to this convulsion. This theory also explained why it didn’t affect me because my body didn’t contain any magic power.

“Uuugh, huaa, huaaa...”

“Calm down. Don’t panic and collect your breath.”

“Hu, huu, huuuu...”

“BREATHE!”

Well, fuck. That was all I could think. A creature that could do this to Chae Nayun with just a single breath... such a monstrous creature simply opened its mouth. Its rage wasn’t directed at us, but its tantrum after waking up was a matter of life and death.

My sense of time slowed. I could see blue magic power forming from the azure dragon’s mouth. I couldn’t dodge it. This magic power bomb would surely be catastrophic as I looked at the unconscious Chae Nayun in my arms. I didn’t need to think. I would protect her this time.

I held her in my arms and released the magic power reinforcement seal on my obsidian bracelet. Then I added the Egyptian Archer’s sand barrier on top of it. However, I wasn’t finished with just 2 layers of protection. Gritting my teeth, I poured in every ounce of stigma’s magic power. Immediately, the stigma on my upper arm shone brilliantly through my clothes. I squeezed out everything without saving a single drop. The pain on my arm grew sharper, but I clenched my teeth and held on.

The dragon's tantrum descended on us once my third barrier set in.

“...*Uk!*”

A mere tantrum, something that couldn't be compared to a real dragon breath, made my body feel like it was bending in half.

“...”

I looked down at Chae Nayun while enduring the attack. However, she only stared at the symbol shining through my clothes. Her eyes seemed hollow and out of focus.

Chapter 140

Final Incident (3)

Whish—!

Kim Suho swung Misteltein and suddenly twisted it at an odd angle. He had developed this new technique after watching Kim Hajin's curving bullets. The final djinn collapsed after his elegant sword technique.

"*Whew*, they just keep coming." Kim Suho sighed and wiped his sweat.

"Yeonha, are you okay?" Shin Jonghak asked her as he nonchalantly cleaned his spear after fighting a group of djinns.

"Yeah, thanks to you." Yoo Yeonha seemed a bit tired, but still smiled.

"I'm glad."

Kim Suho smiled back. Including Yoo Yeonha, they had already rescued 15 cadets with the pathfinder orb. More remained, but they prioritized getting these cadets to safety.

"Everyone!" Kim Suho clapped and gathered their attention. "We will guide you to safety, so follow us."

"Why are you talking like they're children? They're cadets just like you." Yoo Yeonha narrowed her eyes.

"*Huh?* Oh, sorry. I've been playing with my nephews recently."

"Cadets, stay on guard and follow us to the central building!" Kim Soohyuk gallantly shouted.

"See? It's the instructor's job to say those things."

“Yeah, yeah.”

The cadets began to walk towards the central building.

“*E-Eh?* Look over there!”

Someone pointed at the sky. *KOOOONG—!* The breath of a divine existence swept the island. Trees fell and clouds of dirt rose from the massive shockwave. Kim Suho kept his eyes open and watched. The point of impact struck the central building, which began to crumble.

“...!”

Kim Suho moved before his thoughts could catch up. He immediately ran towards the building, but stopped because of the pathfinder orb.

“Hurry up, everyone!”

Kim Suho urged them on. By the time they returned to the central building...

“T-This.”

A devastating scene lay before them. The building had toppled and many cadets collapsed on the ground unconscious. However, someone stood in the middle of this horrific scene.

“*Hm?*”

The mysterious man wore a half-broken mask and smiled at Kim Suho.

“Who are you?”

Kim Suho gritted his teeth and asked. However, the man only gave an ominous smile through his strange mask. Kim Soohyuk stepped up.

“Fall back, Kim Suho. He’s not someone you can handle.”

“*Ah*, so you’re Kim Suho.”

The mysterious man muttered. His voice changed as he spoke. He sounded like a woman in one phrase, then a man in another, and a child for the next. Kim Suho immediately frowned at his strange voice.

“What djinn are you?” Kim Soohyuk asked.

A deep smile emerged on the man’s face. “That’s an interesting question. *What* djinn? Are you asking for my name? Unfortunately, I don’t have one.”

He grabbed the neck of one of the cadets on the ground. “But I hear you guys call me Destruction.”

This title caused everyone’s eyes to widen in shock. Destruction snickered at their reactions and stared at the cadets who just arrived.

“There are many of you I want to take, but unfortunately I’m out of time. I’ll just have to take this child.”

Destruction formed a bundle of magic power and placed an unconscious cadet inside. Immediately, a crescent sword slash and a spear beam flew towards him. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak attacked as soon as he lowered his guard.

“*Huaa.*” Destruction breathed and unleashed a wave of magic power that scattered their attacks. Then he leisurely laughed.

“Unfortunately, you’re too weak to do anything against—”

Kim Soohyuk charged forward before Destruction could finish his sentence. He was within arm’s reach in the blink of an eye. Then he reached towards Destruction’s face as Destruction placed a hand on his neck. A magic power blast shot out from Kim Soohyuk’s palm and struck Destruction in the head. *KOONG—!* The ground rumbled, but Destruction only laughed.

“I praise your courage.”

His laugh sounded ominous. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak quickly charged forward, but... *PUAK—* Claws shot out from Destruction’s

fingers and pierced Kim Soohyuk's chest. Kim Soohyuk coughed up blood and collapsed. Only then did Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak reach him. Destruction closed his eyes and shook his head.

"How unfortunate."

Destruction snapped Shin Jonghak's spear and pushed Kim Suho back with a single wave of his hand. The difference in power was too overwhelming.

"I said I would let you live. What makes you so eager to die?"

Destruction muttered arrogantly while looking down at the weaklings. *Kiiiiik*— The sound of wind and lightning resounded in every direction.

"Hm?"

Everyone in the area looked up. Soon, a lump of magic power appeared in the middle of the sky and landed like a shooting star.

KWANG—!

The shooting star descended with an overbearing force. The shockwave caused a cloud of dirt to rise and the ground rumbled.

Pzzzt— Pzzzt— Electricity crackled in the center of the big crater.

"..."

A brief silence descended from this unexpected phenomenon. *Whiish...* The wind lifted the cloud of dirt to reveal a single man.

"D-Dad!"

Someone shouted in surprise. It came from Yoo Yeonha. Naturally, everyone correctly guessed the identity of their savior.

"..."

Yoo Yeonha's father, Yoo Jinwoong, glanced at his daughter and sighed in relief.

"You're... Yoo Jinwoong!"

Destruction and Yoo Jinwoong seemed to know each other as the former glared with hatred. Yoo Jinwoong nonchalantly muttered, "It's been a while, Changdong."

"..."

Destruction's face immediately distorted.

"I thought I told you never to call me by that name again."

"Mm... did you?" Yoo Jinwoong smiled.

"But you know..." His smile quickly disappeared and crimson electricity crackled around him. Yoo Jinwoong the Berserker tried his best to suppress his rage. "It's none of your business what I call you, you motherfucker."

The side effect of his extraordinary gift was rage. Yoo Yeonha and her mother were quite embarrassed about it. However, one person watched him with respect.

"...I can't believe it," Shin Jonghak muttered in awe.

* * *

The rooftop shook and the entire building crumbled. I briefly floated in the air before plummeting. Steel and concrete rained from the sky. The azure dragon's breath had caused complete chaos.

Koogoogoong— The building collapsed and I found myself instantly buried under the rubble. I looked down at Chae Nayun in my arms. She fell unconscious with her eyes tightly shut.

"..."

Soon, everything became silent. Darkness surrounded me, but I peered through the debris with the thousand-mile eyes.

“*Whew.*”

I looked for the azure dragon. Thankfully, its anger seemed to have subsided and returned to the ocean wagging its tail.

“*Auuu.*”

My head spun and I couldn’t feel my right arm anymore. Thankfully, my barrier still worked. The obsidian bracelet almost broke, but what was left protected us from the debris.

“Hey.”

I poked Chae Nayun’s cheeks. However, she had completely passed out. *Her magic convulsion stopped, so why did she faint?*

“This is a bit dangerous.”

I wasn’t sure how long my barrier would last or how long I would last. Yi Yeonghan or Kim Horak might’ve dug their way through, but for me...

“*Haa.*”

Our oxygen was running low and my blood boiled from expending all of stigma. Nothing changed even after I used my recovery potion medicinal effect. My vision grew blurry, but something shot out of my chest when I almost fainted.

“*Grrrr.*”

The wolf I named Fenrir moved quickly. He opened his mouth and gathered magic power. Then blasted it forward and cleared a path. I felt genuinely surprised that he had a long ranged attack.

“*Krrrrr.*”

Fenrir placed us on his back and walked towards the light on the other side.

* * *

Jain celebrated at her mansion near London.

“Ah, I’m so happy.”

She stared at the items she stole last night with an ecstatic smile. She had taken the shiniest and most expensive jewels from Pandemonium’s notoriously rich djinn.

“You’re all so pretty!”

Each of these jewels contained pure and high quality mana that made everyone who looked at them feel wonderful.

“I wonder what it feels like to live buried under jewels? Ah, my goal will be to make a swimming pool filled with jewels!”

Jain happily grinned as she rubbed the jewels on her face.

“Jain.”

A young boy called her name. Droon was watching anime in the same room.

“Yeah?”

“I’m curious. Why did you do it?”

“What do you mean?”

Jain retorted half-heartedly. She found it annoying having to deal with a 13 year old, but could listen to any of his requests today.

“I saw it. You showed it to them.”

“...”

Jain's expression slightly stiffened. “*Mm...* What do you mean? Show who what?”

“You know what I'm talking about.”

Droon was in charge of the barrier during Chae Jinyoon's murder. Boss only told him to set it up in a designated location, but Droon understood what he was doing.

“I saw everything.”

“*Ah*, that?”

Jain grinned as though she just recalled.

“It's nothing much. It's just that I'm quite fond of that child too.”

The silver bullet that could kill that man. Jain stood shoulder to shoulder with Boss when it came to her hatred for the Chameleon Troupe's traitor. If possible, she wanted to tear his limbs apart with her own hands.

“*Eh?*”

“You heard me.”

If Chae Jinyoon died, Chae Joochul would obviously employ Yoo Jinhyuk. However, Droon's Mimyo was a unique lifeform that Yoo Jinhyuk couldn't see through. ^[1] This lifeform existed only in the present, not the past or the future. As such, Yoo Jinhyuk shouldn't have been able to see anything from that day.

“Why did you do that if you're fond of him? That doesn't make sense.”

“*Mm*, that's because you're still too young to understand.”

Jain purposefully left behind a clue about Chae Jinyoon's murderer.

Revealing Kim Hajin's face would ruin their trust, so she only revealed a small piece of evidence. However, it would surely connect the incident to Kim Hajin. Thankfully, Kim Hajin had a special mark on him.

"You can only perfectly possess someone when they have nowhere else to go. That way, he won't betray us like that man."

Jain thought Kim Hajin would be found out when he was hospitalized from the recent magic power explosion. However, an unexpected ally ended up helping him.

"But Droon, didn't you know about this? We thought your rabbit would eat the corpse, but it didn't."

"It's not that it didn't. It couldn't."

A small rabbit shot out from Droon's back. It had red eyes and black fur. Just looking at this terrifying existence would cause anyone to shiver. Jain waved her hand in apology.

"Sorry, Mimyo. I didn't know."

"..."

The rabbit returned to Droon's body.

"Mimyo sure is pretty... Anyways, why couldn't it eat him?"

"I don't know. Mimyo didn't tell me when I asked and we didn't have time to properly investigate."

Dozens of heroes arrived at the scene after demonic energy exploded from Chae Jinyoon's body. Droon and Khalifa barely made it out after cleaning up the area.

Tzzzzzt— The anime Droon was watching suddenly turned off.

"W-What happened!"

An emergency announcement came on the TV.

“Oh, what’s happening now?”

[Emergency! Djinns have simultaneously invaded hero academies all over the world...]

“Aaah, I was just at the good part!”

“So they finally went mad...”

Unlike Droon, Jain had a big smile on her face.

* * *

The situation was quickly taken care of after Yoo Jinwoong’s arrival. He ran around the island like lightning and rescued every cadet with the pathfinder orb from Kim Suho. When reporters asked how he arrived so quickly, Yoo Jinwoong responded:

— I learned that Cube wasn’t a trustworthy organization. I have to protect my daughter with my own hands.

—... The United Nations and the Hero Association have condemned djinns for today’s attack and have declared that they can no longer tolerate the djinns’ tyranny. Clouds of war are filling the skies across the globe...

Most news agencies reported the same thing. Djinns attacked various hero academies and provoked an azure dragon, which was considered Korea’s guardian. The aftermath was on a completely different scale compared to previous incidents involving djinns. The president of Korea personally met with the Hero Association.

Many Cube cadets were hospitalized in the Gangnam Severance Hospital.

Kiiik—

Yoo Yeonha carefully opened the door to Chae Nayun's hospital room.

"Um... Nayun, are you feeling better?"

"..."

Chae Nayun silently stared at the window. Her usual lively eyes seemed especially withered today.

"Nayun?"

"...Ah."

Chae Nayun only responded when Yoo Yeonha called her a second time.

"You're here, Yeonha?"

She stared at Yoo Yeonha and feebly spoke.

"Yeah, but why do you sound so weak? You don't sound like the Chae Nayun I know."

Yoo Yeonha sat next to her.

"Weak, *huh*..."

Chae Nayun muttered and sighed.

"...Yeonha."

"Hm?"

Chae Nayun's hollow gaze lost focus. She fiddled with her fingers and thought about what to say.

"A-About the tattoo I told you about last time..."

Yoo Yeonha suddenly ran out of air when Chae Nayun brought up the tattoo.

“Y-Yeah?”

“Do, do you think it’s real?”

“W-What do you mean?”

Yoo Yeonha wanted to maintain her composure, but her damned voice kept trembling.

“*Haa...* you see.”

Chae Nayun deeply sighed and murmured, “Do you think... it’s real proof of the culprit? Can I trust it?”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t answer. She could only swallow her saliva and try to calm her heart.

“...Why are you saying this all of a sudden?”

Chae Nayun raised her head. Her gaze seemed to pierce Yoo Yeonha.

“I think I had a strange dream today.”

“Dream?”

“Yeah, but it was so vivid.”

Chae Nayun placed her left hand on her upper right arm. This simple motion caused Yoo Yeonha’s heart to sink.

“Kim Hajin. It’s about Kim Hajin. There was a tattoo on his upper arm...”

Chae Nayun smirked and stopped talking. Almost as if she couldn’t believe what she was saying.

“No, I think I must’ve been confused. I must’ve had a strange dream because of my obsession with it.”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t doubt what Chae Nayun saw. It looked like Chae Nayun was still only suspicious.

“It felt too vivid to be a dream, but it doesn’t make sense. Why would Hajin...”

Chae Nayun mumbled to herself and dug into her blanket. “Yeonha, I’m going to sleep now. I’m tired.”

“Y-Yeah, s-sleep. I’m going outside for a bit.”

“*Un.*”

Yoo Yeonha walked out of the room in a daze. However, she quickly snapped out of it and moved her legs towards that person’s room.

— *Tok, tok.*

She knocked on his door. However, he didn’t reply.

“Hello? Are you okay?”

Tok, tok. Yoo Yeonha knocked again. She couldn’t hear anyone inside and suddenly grew apprehensive. Then she barged in.

“*Waah?*”

No one was inside. A single document envelope lay on the table. Yoo Yeonha quickly grabbed it.

[Dropout Form] Cadet – Kim Hajin

“What!” She immediately ran out.

“E-Excuse me!”

She grabbed a nurse and asked where the patient went. The nurse simply tilted her head as Yoo Yeonha looked for another staff to ask. She clenched her teeth.

No matter what the situation may be, with everything we've gone through together, you can't just disappear without a farewell...

1. Mimyo means beautiful rabbit. 🐰

Chapter 141

Truth (1)

I forced myself to lie down, but I couldn't sleep. My stomach churned and my head spun.

“Haa...”

I opened my eyes in a daze. Vivid memories flashed before me. Kim Hajin held me in his arms with the tattoo shining on his arm. That was... undoubtedly proof of the murderer.

But why did Kim Hajin have that tattoo? And that shining symbol... was it really a tattoo?

“Ah.”

I kicked the blanket and got up. Then I threw the window open. I couldn't sleep when my body felt like burning. I could hardly withstand the pain.

“...?”

An acrid smoke flowed in from the window. The smell of cigarettes came down from the roof. Immediately, my eyes shot open. I recognized this smell. Ever since that day, I constantly smelled it near that person.

I turned around and faced the door. I had to check if what I saw was real or just a hallucination. The only way I would find out was to ask him. Only then would I be able to live.

* * *

I climbed up the stairs to the hospital's roof. The door was locked, but

I could easily pick it with Dexterity. I came to simply smoke on the roof. Of course, the hospital had smoking zones inside, but I was a cadet. I didn't want to smoke in front of everybody even though I would drop out soon.

“*Huu.*”

After a sigh, I lit a cigarette in my mouth. The smoke filled my lungs.

“...*Haa.*”

Leaning on the guardrail, I exhaled and looked down at the panoramic view of the hospital's entrance. The scene could only be described as chaos. The broken mirror phenomenon had pulled in a total of 3583 people. Of these 3583, 44 were killed, 66 were kidnapped, and our former instructor attacked by Destruction was currently undergoing surgery in critical condition.

“In the original story...”

Chak! I slapped my mouth. *Original story, the damned original story!* I kept describing it as a story, but what else should I call it? *Fate?*

“*Sigh.*”

The djinns kidnapped 66 people like in the original story. However, I hadn't expected Destruction's appearance. He was a boss character who easily ranked in the top 500 strongest in this world. As for Yoo Jinwoong who drove him away... I expected him to come. Speaking of which, I received a message from the helper who called Yoo Jinwoong.

[Hajin! I saw the news! Are you okay?]

[Yeah, thanks to you. The losses were minimal.]

[Hehehe, I got praised for it too!]

I could send messages without any signal since my smartwatch connected to my laptop. I sent my exact coordinates to Kim Hosup

when I realized Destruction had appeared. The current Kim Suho wouldn't stand a chance against Destruction. Thankfully, Kim Hosup quickly acted. He even hacked into Yoo Jinwoong's smartwatch and relayed my coordinates to him.

[Thanks again. Message me if you need anything in the future.]

[Got it!]

I turned off my smartwatch. Then I spotted 3 familiar faces talking to each other in the hospital garden. Kim Suho, Rachel, and Shin Jonghak seemed to have grown closer in their short time together rescuing other cadets. They talked about a rather serious topic.

— I couldn't move at all. My body froze when I heard the name Destruction...

Rachel criticized herself. Honestly, Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak were the strange ones for attacking Destruction in that situation.

Tak, tak. I heard the sound of footsteps. Someone was climbing up the stairs. The sound drew nearer as I put out the cigarette and waited. Moonlight touched my shoulders as the footsteps suddenly stopped nearby. She seemed to be hesitating.

“Haa.”

A familiar voice followed the sigh.

“Hey.”

She called me as I turned around. Chae Nayun stared from the door. She didn't look good. Her complexion seemed pale, and I could see her mental exhaustion.

“Kim Hajin.”

She called my name.

“How did you know I was here?”

I didn’t know what else to say.

“The smell of your cigarette came into my room through the window.”

“Oh, sorry.”

“...”

She silently trudged up to me. Then she leaned against the guardrail. I couldn’t see her eyes since her hair fluttered over them.

“Hey.”

“*Hm?*”

Her voice sounded heavy. She looked up at the night sky and continued, “Remember what I asked you a long time ago?”

“What.”

“I... I asked if you had a tattoo.”

“Did you?”

“Yeah, I vaguely remember. I overheard you talking about it in front of our cabin when we went to Norway.”

I recalled our Norway trip. I vaguely remembered it too.

— So you used to smoke? A real delinquent, *huh*. Do you also have tattoos?

Chae Nayun overheard me saying that I quit smoking almost when we went to Norway with the hunting club. It seemed Homer’s ring had improved my memory or did the memory remain because it surprised me?

“...Yeah, I remember.”

I bitterly replied. I would do things better if I could go back in time. Once again, I understood why so many main characters in novels went back in time. Things barely ever went my way in the present.

“...So.”

Chae Nayun interrupted my useless thoughts.

“I want to ask again.”

She wasn't looking at me. “I think I'm going to die if I don't.”

I couldn't understand what she was saying.

“I don't think I can live if I don't confirm that it's false.”

Chae Nayun slightly shook her head. Something glistened and scattered in the wind... tears.

“Kim Hajin... do you have a tattoo on your arm?”

“...”

The grave atmosphere and her strange question made me hesitate. I needed more time to analyze the situation.

“Answer me.”

However, Chae Nayun didn't give me any. She looked straight into my eyes.

“Answer me.”

“...”

I couldn't speak when I saw her trembling pupils. My body froze.

“Why won’t you answer me?” she asked again.

“...Why? You just have to say you don’t have one... *hic*.”

She suddenly sniffled and dropped her head. Tears began to fall onto the concrete.

“...Why, just why.”

“You should explain what’s going on fir— *uuuk!*”

Chae Nayun suddenly charged into me as I fell on my back and she jumped on top. Then she grabbed the hem of my clothes and tried to rip them apart.

“Ah, hey! What are you doing?”

I felt shocked and wondered if she was having a psychotic breakdown. I tried to get her off, but she easily overwhelmed me since I didn’t have any of stigma’s magic power left.

“H-Hey! Are you crazy?”

“Yeah, I’m crazy, so stay still!”

She shouted and ripped apart my shirt.

“...”

Her gaze immediately fell on my upper arm where stigma was located. I quickly covered it with the torn shirt.

“Ah...”

However, it was too late. Chae Nayun dropped her head with a dazed voice. Then she clutched her head and glared at me with teary eyes.

“...Hey.”

“...”

“What tattoo is that?”

She clenched her teeth. Many words came out of her mouth, but none of them formed a complete sentence.

“Some, some organization tattoo? Secret society? Some, something like that?”

Her eyes fiercely shook when I didn’t answer.

“What is it? I’m asking what that is! What is it!”

I began to grasp what was going on.

“Tell me!”

She shouted. However, I couldn’t say or do anything. My brain stopped working and I could only blankly stare at her.

“...No, no.”

Her face distorted. She grabbed my shoulders with enough strength to crush them and banged my chest with her head.

“Why... why would you kill oppa...”

Immediately, my heart sank. *How did she know about stigma?* And how did she connect it to the murder?

“Right? It’s not you, right?” Chae Nayun muttered as she cried. I could only listen to her desperate voice.

“...”

It’s not me. I didn’t do it. That’s what she wanted to hear.

“Someone... someone must’ve framed you. You have no motive... why would you...”

However, I couldn’t lie. A lie that could easily be proven wrong, a lie that she already wouldn’t believe, I just couldn’t bring myself to say it.

“But why... why aren’t you saying anything?”

Chae Nayun tightened her grip on my shoulders. Her pupils became empty.

“Just say it. Just say that you didn’t do it!”

A sharp pain filled my shoulders. My shoulders had broken. However, that was the end. *Tak*. Chae Nayun’s head touched my chest as she fainted from the shock. Her feeble body lay against me. I didn’t move and just remained on the ground like a puppet with severed strings.

“...Kim Hajin.”

The situation only continued to spiral further. Another voice rang out from the rooftop entrance and a familiar face looked down at us.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha slowly walked up to me. I wasn’t sure how to deal with the situation. My hands trembled, my head throbbed, and it all felt like a dream. If possible, I just wanted to faint and escape reality.

“You don’t have to panic.”

Yoo Yeonha calmly took Chae Nayun off of me.

“I already knew.”

“...”

My heart ached. *Where? Just where did I go wrong?*

“...Sorry.”

Yoo Yeonha slowly picked her up.

“I should have been here first.”

I looked up at Yoo Yeonha in a daze as she bitterly smiled.

“You’ll be long gone after tonight, right?”

“...”

“I’ll make sure Nayun rests well.”

Her voice was full of warmth.

“Honestly, I hoped she wouldn’t find out.”

Her calm voice and sympathetic look pained me even more.

“I didn’t believe it either. No, I couldn’t believe it. That you killed him. How you killed him, whether you had accomplices or did it alone, I just didn’t have any information. And to my knowledge, killing Chae Jinyoon was impossible for just one person to accomplish.”

Yoo Yeonha lightly bit her lip.

“But looking at you now... it must be true.”

A coldness enveloped my body and goosebumps rose on my skin. Yoo Yeonha looked down at me and asked.

“Why did you do it?”

I didn’t answer her. I couldn’t.

“Why did you kill him?”

“...”

“...Was it for revenge?”

Yoo Yeonha seemed frustrated as I sat on the ground in a daze.

“You look really pathetic right now... but unfortunately, I have no right to insult you.”

Yoo Yeonha turned around. Her footsteps seemed slow as if she wanted me to stop her. She walked ever so slowly. I pondered while looking at her. She was someone who treated her allies sincerely. *So why couldn't I tell her the truth?* Yoo Yeonha opened her mouth first.

“Sunshine Hotel.”

I flinched at her words.

“It's the hotel my guild runs. I'll be waiting on the penthouse floor.”

Yoo Yeonha continued with her back facing me.

“I still think of you as my ally like how you thought of me as yours.”

Her voice sounded soft and gentle.

“Setting aside what happened, I want to believe you. I want to help you.”

“...”

“Because that's all I can...”

However, she didn't finish her sentence.

“Haa. Anyways, I'll be waiting.”

Tak, tak.

Like a fool, I watched her leave.

Chapter 142

Truth (2)

Yoo Yeonha returned Chae Nayun to her hospital bed. Chae Nayun's complexion seemed pale and her body felt cold. The traces of tears around her eyes made her all the more pitiful.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha had an idle thought while looking at her. They weren't even that close a year ago. She might've entirely cut off contact if it wasn't for the relationship between their families. However, things had changed before she realized. So much that her heart ached looking at Chae Nayun's state. It was all because of that person. She barely knew him at the start of last year, but he took an important place in her heart and changed her.

“I'll be back.”

Yoo Yeonha stroked Chae Nayun's hair and left after feeling the cold sweat on her hand.

“Eh?”

She saw two familiar faces when she came out to the hallway. Kim Suho and Rachel peeked into Kim Hajin's room like meerkats.

“Ah, Yeonha. How's Chae Nayun? Is she doing okay?” Kim Suho spotted her and asked.

“Yeah.”

“That's great. Do you know where Hajin went? He's not in his room.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha shook her head.

“I don’t know. I haven’t seen him either.”

Rachel innocently stared at her. “You really haven’t seen him? I have something to talk to him about.”

“No, sorry.”

“Ah...”

“Anyways, I have to go now.”

“Okay, see you later.”

Yoo Yeonha walked past them and left the hospital. Then she immediately headed to Sunshine Hotel in her limousine. It only took 15 minutes. The hotel owner heard she was coming and waited for her at the back door. Yoo Yeonha showed him a picture of Kim Hajin.

“Let him in if he comes. Don’t forget to keep it a secret from Father.”

“Of course.”

The hotel owner gave her a wink. He seemed to have misunderstood, but Yoo Yeonha didn’t bother to correct him.

“He might not come.”

“Of course, of course. I’ll make sure no one knows.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha smacked her lips in dissatisfaction and went up the elevator. *Ding*— It stopped on the 88th floor and opened to the VIP penthouse. A well-decorated bar caught her attention first.

“Does he drink?”

She wondered if he would come. There was a higher chance he wouldn't. Still, Yoo Yeonha considered opening a bottle beforehand. Alcohol shouldn't be a problem since he smoked. Yoo Yeonha went up to the counter and looked at the different types of alcohol. Whiskey, brandy, vodka, scotch...

"But I don't drink..."

Yoo Yeonha took pride in not drinking or smoking. Her mother, Jin Yeojung, detested it.

"*Hmm...*"

However, that only made her more curious. She picked up a random bottle and opened it. *Sniff, sniff*. She carefully smelled it. Immediately, the strong smell stabbed her nose.

"*Uuk! Ueeek—!*"

Yoo Yeonha felt queasy and backed away.

"*Uek, ueek... auu, w-what is... ueek.*"

Dad drinks this every night? Yoo Yeonha pinched her nose. She had a sensitive smell, so her nose hurt even more.

"*Hmph, I'll throw all of these away later...*"

Then she was notified of a guest.

— Young Miss, the young man you mentioned just arrived.

Yoo Yeonha quickly turned around. She grabbed the bottle of alcohol she was about to throw away and placed it on a nearby table. Then she picked up 2 glasses from the cupboard and headed back to the table.

"L-Let him in— *kyak!*"

However, she tripped from her high heels. *CLANG. Crack.* The 2 glasses broke along with one of her heels and the bottle fell off the table and hit her head.

“...”

Her eyes dried up as she looked at the mess.

— Yes, he’s been let in.

“Ah, wa... it.”

However, the elevator was already going up. 1, 2,... 33. It seemed to move faster than normal. Yoo Yeonha quickly unleashed her magic power.

* * *

“Over here.”

“Thank you.”

I followed the hotel owner and stood in front of the VIP elevator. The interior appeared just as luxurious as the presidential suite I used before. I got on with a deep breath. The hotel owner kindly explained, “You don’t have to press any button.”

“Ah, yes.”

“Did you bring everything you need? If not...”

“No.”

I shook my head. I wasn’t in the mood for any chitchat. The hotel owner made an awkward expression and scratched his neck.

“Well, I hope you enjoy your stay.”

“Thank you.”

Koong. The elevator door closed. Then it moved up at a scary pace.

“W-What?”

Ding— I arrived on the 88th floor by the time I blinked 5 times. The elevator door slowly opened and I didn’t have any time to collect my thoughts. I held back my beating heart and walked out.

“*Hm?*”

The penthouse floor was empty and silent. A huge swimming pool appeared outside the wall-sized windows with a full view of Seoul.

“Y-You’re here.”

A voice rang out. I turned and saw Yoo Yeonha.

“...?”

However, something seemed strange. First, a broken heel was under the chair and Yoo Yeonha sat barefoot. Next, the table had 2 glasses and a bottle of liquor, but one glass was already filled. Lastly, Yoo Yeonha’s hair was wet and her cheeks were red for some reason. I couldn’t help but ask.

“What were you doing?”

“...”

She observed my expression for a moment.

“*Erm...*”

She smiled after about 30 seconds and gently swung her glass as she kicked the high heels under the chair.

“A-As you can see, I already had a sip.”

“You drank that?”

“Y-Yes. Anyways, come sit.”

I pretended to ignore her actions and sat in front of her.

“I didn’t think you’d come. I thought you would need a couple of days to collect your thoughts.”

“I took some helpful drugs.”

“Drugs?”

I wasn’t sure how sane I was at the moment.

[Perseverance 7.207 (+ 1.200)]

I forcefully increased my perseverance stat to a whopping 8.4. I used the sedative medicinal effect my body had memorized and used the Random Consolidation System to amplify a cigarette’s perseverance effect by 40%. As a result... I was insanely sane.

“But it won’t last long.”

“...Huu.”

Yoo Yeonha finished cleaning up her high heels.

“Well, I guess it doesn’t matter.”

“So, why aren’t you wearing any shoes?”

“Because we’re indoors.”

She crossed her legs with a well-planned excuse. She looked especially seductive in this posture, but none of it entered my eyes.

“...”

I checked the liquor on the table.

[Alcatraz Booze] [Liquor] — Aesthetics of Alcohol: Will decrease intelligence by 0.5-5 points depending on the amount consumed. Will increase strength and vitality by up to 3 points depending on the amount consumed. However, overconsumption will decrease them by up to 6 points. — Quality Liquor: This alcohol can make superhumans drunk. This alcohol will not cause hangovers.

A liquor with 64% alcohol and 1% mana concentration. It seemed strong and expensive. *Yoo Yeonha drank this?* I looked at her suspiciously.

“Do you want to try? It’s quite bitter.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha casually handed me the empty glass. I looked at it for a moment and felt like I could use some. Yoo Yeonha poured the liquor into my glass as naturally as possible.

“Thanks. By the way, do you have any ice?”

“Ice?”

“No, never mind.”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t prepare any ice, but now wasn’t the time to be picky. I gulped down the entire glass and felt a burning sensation. It made me close my eyes and clench my teeth.

“*Huu.*”

Then I opened my eyes again with a sigh. The first thing I saw was Yoo Yeonha’s shocked expression.

“...”

“What?”

“N-Nothing. I just didn’t think you would chug it.”

Yoo Yeonha looked at the glass in front of her with a complicated expression. She slowly grabbed her glass after peeking at me. However, I wasn't concerned about her and only focused on picking out the countless words that popped up in my head. Yoo Yeonha raised her glass and brought it to her mouth after much hesitation. *Slurp*. She barely took a sip.

“...”

Slurp. She drank a bit more after glancing at me again.

“*Cough*, it's good. *Cough*. *Ah*, I'm coughing because it's cold.”

“I see.”

“Yes, *cough*, so, by the way.”

Yoo Yeonha straightened her neck and looked into my eyes with flushed cheeks.

“I have many questions I want to ask.”

“Go ahead. I came here to answer them.”

I leaned against the chair. Yoo Yeonha cut straight to the chase after pondering for a moment.

“...Did you really kill Chae Jinyoon?”

I nodded. Yoo Yeonha's expression immediately darkened.

“And the reason... *ah*, I guess I shouldn't ask. You probably won't tell me.”

Yoo Yeonha swapped her crossed legs and scoffed at me. I sighed. Until now, I thought about everything on my own. At first, I thought that was my duty. That I had to carry all the burden alone, but now...

“No, I'll tell you.”

“...Yes?”

It must’ve been quite a shock since her nostrils also widened.

“W-Why?”

“*Mmm...*”

I stared at her. I knew what kind of a person she was as her creator, how she had lived, and how she would change. However, I didn’t come to this decision based on this superficial knowledge. The attitude and sincerity she showed me as a person. That’s what I decided to believe in.

“I just thought I wanted to be with you until the end.”

“...Yes?”

Yoo Yeonha seemingly fell into a daze as though her soul left her body. She blinked repeatedly and stared at me. Then she realized what I meant and made a complicated expression. She looked embarrassed, but her expression turned sad as she recalled something.

“Then—”

“But, I have conditions.”

“Conditions?”

“Yeah.”

I raised my index finger.

“First, don’t ask any questions. To be precise, don’t ask how I found out. I can tell you everything else.”

Yoo Yeonha nodded without complaints. I raised a second finger.

“Second, don’t tell anyone. Not even Chae Nayun.”

“What? But—”

“I know, but it’s already too late.”

The reason I killed Chae Jinyoon. Nothing would change even if Chae Nayun found out and understood why I had to do it.

“No matter the reason, I killed Chae Jinyoon.”

“But still...”

“Plus, it might be better for Chae Nayun not to know.”

I remembered writing this sentence. [*Despair, loss, and rage always nourished Chae Nayun.*]

“No, it’s definitely better.”

The one thing that Chae Nayun would hold onto after losing everything. That would be her anger towards me. Chae Nayun would only break even if I told her the truth and she believed me. The child that admired her older brother and wanted to become a hero wouldn’t be able to endure the fact that he became a devil.

“It will be better for you too.”

“Then what about you?”

Yoo Yeonha asked, making me speechless. However, I soon shook my head and grinned.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“What do you mean.”

“Never mind that. Now...”

I took a deep breath. *Where should I start?* I suddenly felt a surge of regret. *If I hadn’t already killed Chae Jinyoon. If I had thought more*

about it or consulted someone who would believe me. Would things be better now? However, regret was late no matter how fast it came.

“I won’t say it twice, so listen carefully.”

* * *

Boss thought about the strange message she received from Kim Hajin in the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout covered in webs.

[I was found out.]

She immediately summoned the Chameleon Troupe when she saw his message. To be exact, she summoned the members involved in Chae Jinyoon’s murder.

“Mmm... It must’ve been Yoo Jinhyuk. Looks like he improved.”

Jain spoke, but Boss remained silent. Khalifa took off his sunglasses and looked suspiciously at Jain.

“What? Isn’t that the case? Everyone knows Chae Joochul called Yoo Jinhyuk... *ah*, was it a mistake to leave Yoo Jinhyuk alive?”

“...”

“Boss?”

Boss glared at Jain, seemingly annoyed by her incessant talking. However, Jain leisurely received her gaze and even smiled.

“Boss, shouldn’t we get revenge now that things have turned out like this?”

“...”

“Yoo Jinhyuk helped us out a lot, but...”

“Shut it.”

Boss interrupted her. Jain shrugged without complaint.

“Well, I think it’s okay for now. It doesn’t look like Chae Joochul has gotten a hold of the news yet.”

“I’ll decide after hearing what Kim Hajin has to say. So Jain...”

Boss’ magic power erupted in every direction and a soul-crushing pressure descended on Jain.

“You better stay shut until then.”

* * *

I told her the truth. The concept of devils and the seed that gave birth to one. That this devil’s seed was stuck inside Chae Jinyoon’s head and there was no way to cure him (I couldn’t find anything even with the Book of Truth). I had no choice but to kill him.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha remained silent after listening to the entire story. I picked up my glass. However, it was empty because I kept drinking in the middle of talking. I had already finished the entire bottle Yoo Yeonha prepared.

“T-That...”

Yoo Yeonha finally opened her mouth after 10 minutes.

“You want me to believe that?”

“...”

I shook my head. After all, I had no evidence.

“You don’t have to if you can’t. Just don’t deny it.”

Yoo Yeonha silently dropped her head.

“Haaa...”

She sighed deeply and rubbed her chin. As if that wasn't enough, she began to rumple her hair. *Tik, tok*. After another 15 minutes...

“Ah!”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly shot up. Then she walked towards the elevator.

“Ah, hey. Where are you going?”

“To Uncle.”

“...Uncle?”

“Yes, he's the one who told me about your tattoo.”

“...Ah.”

So it was Yoo Jinhyuk who found out? Did his gift go through a second awakening?

“Huu...”

I grabbed the back of my neck. This is exactly why I wanted to quit relying on the original story.

“I don't think Yoo Jinhyuk knows what I just told you. There's no way he does, so talking to him won't help—”

“How do you know that without talking to him?”

“...”

“Anyways, I won't be back tonight, so don't wait for me. Also... if you had any strange ideas because we were in a hotel, put that aside too.”

“Do I look that crazy?”

Yoo Yeonha smiled as the elevator door closed. However, it immediately opened again. I looked at her with a curious expression.

“Don’t misunderstand.”

I could see her thin smile through the opened door.

“I’m going to him not because I don’t believe you, but because I want to believe you.”

Chapter 143

Truth (3)

“Go to North Hamgyeong Province.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke as soon as she entered her limousine.

“North Hamgyeong Province?”

“Yes.”

“...”

However, the driver felt uncomfortable. Less than 10% of North Hamgyeong Province was habitable and half of that 10% was an intermediate rank danger zone. Surprisingly, North Hamgyeong Province had a population of 200,000.

“W-Won’t it be dangerous?”

Only mercenaries and hunters looking for a quick way to get rich stayed there. The driver didn’t want to travel to such a dangerous place.

“Don’t worry. I sent in a message.”

Yoo Yeonha had one-sidedly texted her father and uncle. To Yoo Jinhyuk, she wrote: *[I’m coming to meet you. I told Father too, so don’t worry about it.]* To Yoo Jinwoong, she wrote: *[I’m going to meet Uncle.]* Yoo Jinhyuk feared Yoo Jinwoong, so he should come out to greet her.

“Step on the gas.”

“Y-Yes.”

The driver stepped on the accelerator as the limousine drove away. Yoo Yeonha fell into deep thought as she looked at the scenery outside. She couldn't organize her worries with mere words. Soon, the urban scenery disappeared and only an empty road to North Hamgyeong Province remained.

* * *

Four days passed since then. Chae Nayun still hadn't woken up. She remained asleep in her hospital bed for unknown reasons. Chae Shinhyuk stayed up all night with her as Chae Joochul appeared on TV with a somber expression.

[...Daehyun will continue to fight and march forward despite everything that happened. We will not forget our values and will fight back the lawlessness and violence as we did in the past!]

He put on a show to glorify the name of Daehyun after his family's tragedy and the recent organized attacks by djinns.

"Hmm..."

The world began to turn, but the May sky still seemed peaceful and warm.

"Haa..."

Today, I visited Cube's administrative office to submit my dropout form. The administrative chief glanced at it and deeply sighed.

"You're dropping out after working so hard to reach the top 100? Is there a reason?"

"..."

I silently nodded.

"The Hero Association already prepared a title for you because of your unique gift. The sole gun-using hero, Gunner. You'll be able to live like a celebrity if you graduate."

A hero with the life of a celebrity. I held myself back from laughing.

“Several guilds are already eyeing you. Even Essence of the Strait showed interest. Do you still want to drop out?”

“Yes.”

“...There will be no turning back. Are you sure you won't regret it?”

“Yes.”

I nodded resolutely. I had no reason to stay in Cube anymore. There was nothing left to learn or obtain here.

“I see.”

Koong. The administrative chief stamped a red seal on my dropout form. I briefly stared at it before standing up and could hear a faint prayer as I left.

“May this poor child's future be full of blessings...”

The administrative chief seemed like a good person. I closed the door and left the building. Then I headed towards the Cube portal. Someone blocked my path as I walked past the garden.

“Hajin.”

“...Ah, Rachel.”

Rachel looked sad. She approached and placed a small box in my hand.

“This. It's a present.”

“Ah... thank you.”

“Open it later.”

“Okay.”

I tried to walk past her, but she blocked my path again with a thin smile.

“In England, we hug to say goodbyes.”

“...Gladly.”

With a smile, I hugged her warm body. We separated after about 3 seconds. Rachel spoke first.

“See you later then.”

“Yes.”

“...Oh.” She grabbed my wrist as I started walking past her. “P-Promise.”

“Of course. Next time, we’ll meet in England,” I replied with a smile and pulled away. “I’m going now.”

“...Yes, goodbye.”

I began to walk towards the portal station again. I could feel Rachel’s gaze behind me, but I didn’t turn around.

“Kim Hajin!” Kim Suho suddenly shouted my name and ran up.

“Hey! You bastard!”

I couldn’t help but stop after he shouted a second time. *Wasn’t it still class time right now?* Oh right, cadets had free periods because of the recent invasion incident.

“What?”

“What do you mean ‘what’?”

Kim Suho seemed angry.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were dropping out?”

“Well, we’ll be seeing each other often, so I didn’t see the need to tell you.”

“*Eh?*”

“What, you were going to stop seeing me? Are you discriminating against non-heroes?”

“N-No, not at all...”

Kim Suho still didn’t relax.

“Then where are you going? Chae Nayun is still unconscious. Shouldn’t you wait until she wakes up?”

“That’s my business to take care of. Also, Chae Nayun will wake up soon.”

I asked the Book of Truth when she would wake up and it answered, *Soon*.

“By the way, don’t talk to her about me when she wakes up.”

“...”

Kim Suho frowned. “Did you guys break up?”

We weren’t even in a relationship... Kim Suho was just too dense. I guess you could say it was a basic trait for handsome main characters.

“We never even dated.”

I didn’t know how my relationship with Kim Suho would change if Chae Nayun exposed the truth. I wouldn’t be able to properly stand in front of him anymore.

“Then why—”

“I don’t have time. I’ll see you later.”

I put my hand out. Kim Suho grabbed it, but widened his eyes as though he remembered something.

“Oh right! I used the jar you gave me...”

Kim Suho took off the branch hanging on his back.

“It might not be the best time to ask... but I’m dying to know. Can you appraise it for me?”

“Of course. You can ask me whenever you want.”

“Sorry, I think I fell in love with this sword.”

“I know, I know.”

I gladly appraised Misteltein.

[Greed of Accomplishment] The desire to overcome difficult situations has adhered to Misteltein. — Misteltein will be strengthened each time a difficulty is overcome. — Misteltein will now change form to reflect its user’s character. — Current alignment: [Righteousness 99%]

A smile emerged on my face.

“It suits you perfectly.”

I handed the sword back to him.

“Really?”

“Yeah. Misteltein will grow stronger every time you overcome difficult situations. Also, its form will change depending on your character.”

“Um...”

Kim Suho looked like he didn't quite understand.

“That means it can become a demonic sword or a holy sword depending on how you use it.”

“Ah, then for me—”

“It will become a holy sword.”

Kim Suho and I exchanged glances. Then he burst into laughter.

“Thank you.”

This time, he put out his hand first.

“No, I should be the one thanking you.”

I gladly took his hand. His expression seemed to shine under the warm sunlight.

* * *

I went to an empty park in Seoul's Seocho District for an appointment after officially dropping out. I turned on my smartwatch while waiting for Boss.

[Yoo Yeonha – (0)]

She still hadn't contacted me. Did she leave after being disappointed? Or was she still trying to confirm the truth? As I passed the time sighing... *Tak, tak*. Boss' footsteps woke me up.

“You're here.”

“...Sorry.”

Boss apologized as soon as she saw me. I could see the sincerity on her face.

“Don’t be. It’s too late now anyways and it’s not entirely your fault.”

I would’ve never been able to murder Chae Jinyoon without the Chameleon Troupe’s help.

“...I see.”

Boss still acted sullen. Her usual perky ears drooped and I found this side of her quite cute despite the situation.

“Cheer up. It’s not like I can slap you, right?”

I already decided to join the Chameleon Troupe. I wouldn’t leave even if things didn’t perfectly go my way. I couldn’t return to Cube or become a hero. Joining the Chameleon Troupe would be the best way to interfere with the story.

“...”

However, Boss suddenly turned her face to me.

“What are you doing?”

“Hit me if you want. It’s my fault.”

“*Eh?*”

“Hit me as much as you want.”

I can take a slap to the face — is what she seemed to say. I scratched my neck and pretended to slap her.

“*Uuu.*”

Boss shut her eyes and shuddered when my hand touched her.

“I can’t. How could I?”

I decided to ignore what happened. Boss opened her eyes and coughed.

“Good. Your respect for your boss is excellent.”

I actually made fun of her, but Boss excitedly spoke.

“Are you ready?”

“Yes.”

“Then follow me. Khalifa is waiting.”

Boss pointed behind me at the familiar black man who waved.

* * *

We arrived in a dark cave using Khalifa’s portal.

“Where are we?”

“Our hideout in England.”

“Ah.”

It was likely their new main hideout. Currently, I had a grand goal to make the Chameleon my ally.

“No one would think this place was a hideout.”

“Exactly. No one can find this place and there’s nothing here.”

Boss nodded in satisfaction, but I didn’t mean to praise it.

“Mmm...”

This cave didn't seem to be in good condition. I could see bats everywhere and mysterious insects crawling in the crevices. I couldn't even stand properly with so many sharp protrusions on the ground.

"I always sleep here."

"Eh?"

I jumped in surprise at Boss' words.

"Don't you have a large mansion? Why don't you sleep there?"

"The mansion is a place to live in. I only need 5 hours of sleep a week and it's also when I'm most vulnerable. I don't want to let my guard down for even a second."

"I see."

I carefully looked around the cave, but just couldn't see where she could sleep.

"Oh right. Hold on a second."

I turned on my smartwatch and checked the area's description.

[Chameleon Troupe's Hideout] [Disaster] — The Worst Place: You will become tired the longer you stay here. Staying here for more than 8 hours will increase the chance of catching a disease. Staying here for more than 24 hours will decrease your stats by up to 5 points. Staying here for more than 96 hours will increase your chance of death. — Is there a demon here? Humans cannot stay in this place for long. Staying here for more than 8 hours will mentally exhaust you. Staying here for more than 96 hours will cause various mental illnesses.

I recently discovered the new environmental setting description on my laptop. However, I still couldn't change the settings. The laptop would likely learn how to do it in future updates since changing the environment could have great benefits.

"What kind of place is this?"

The Chameleon Troupe's hideout was rotten, to say the least. This hellish place made you weaker the longer you stayed. I got goosebumps from reading its description.

"Oh right!"

I suddenly thought of something. With Dexterity, I had sculpted Shin Jonghak out of bronze. This cave was half the size of a soccer field. Wasn't this the perfect opportunity to raise Dexterity's proficiency? Not to mention, these cave walls even carried mana (although it was more like demonic energy).

"Um, Boss. Do you mind if I refurbish this place a bit?"

"Refurbish?"

Boss tilted her head at me.

"Yes. That way, Boss and other members can rest easily when they're here."

"I don't mind, but how? As you know, outsiders are strictly prohibited from entering this place."

"That's fine. I'll do everything myself. Like this."

I unleashed stigma's magic power. I didn't even need to form a tool. The magic power moved on its own and smoothened the sharp protrusions on the ground. It took 2 streaks of stigma and roughly 3 minutes to smooth out about a tenth of the cave's ground.

"Oh?" Boss exclaimed in surprise. She squatted down and rubbed the floor.

"You refined magic power and... no, you emitted magic power... no, that's not it either. Little apprentice, the property of the ground also changed. How did you do it?"

"I don't know."

I smiled and looked around the large cave. Indeed, it was the perfect place to train Dexterity.

I wasn't an architect or a designer, but all sorts of ideas popped up in my head. Of course, it would take a long time to realize everything. Thankfully, I had a lot of time.

"So is it okay for me to do this?"

"Sure."

Boss agreed. The surroundings suddenly turned noisy and I faced forward with widened eyes. A group of 9 individuals approached us.

"Kim Hajin."

Boss called my name.

"Yes?"

"I said I would tell you about Jeronimo, correct?"

"Ah... yes."

"We are filthier, dirtier, and even more unforgivable than you think."

I nodded. *The Chameleon Troupe*. I had designed them to be this world's worst lawbreaking organization.

"Is that fine with you?"

However, that was in the original story and it wouldn't be until 3 years later that the world dubbed them as such. In addition, I was certain that I could change them.

"Of course. I'm a murderer too."

I'd already killed and planned to kill even more. Such ideals no longer tied me down.

“...”

Boss nodded and pointed in front of me. I followed her gaze to the other members. They all looked exactly as I described them. Seat of red, Cheok Jungyeong. Seat of yellow, Jain. Seat of blue, Khalifa. Seat of green, Jin Yohan. Seat of violet, Droon. Seat of indigo, Yoo Kyunghwan. Seat of silver, Kaita. Seat of turquoise, Setryn. Seat of brown, Hirano Arashi. And finally... the seat of white, Boss. She dressed in black from top to bottom, but Boss was actually the seat of white. *Ah, I guess her skin looks really white.*

“It’s been a while!”

Cheok Jungyeong’s shout shook the cave walls. Boss stared at me in embarrassment.

“Little apprentice, I heard the two of you have met before.”

“Yes, he tried to kill me.”

“I heard that too. I scolded him for that already.”

“Aha.”

“Huhuhuhu.”

Cheok Jungyeong laughed with his teeth showing. He resembled a small ogre.

“Is he also one of us?”

I pretended to be oblivious.

“Yes.”

Boss replied while glancing at me.

“He’s not all that evil despite how he looks.”

“I know. He just looks stupid.”

“Oh, looks like the newbie has good eyes.”

“What are you talking about?”

The other members came closer. Boss coughed and began her introduction.

“This is our newest member, Kim Hajin.”

I faced the 9 members.

“I’ve seen videos of you. You have quite an interesting gift.”

Setryn, the Egyptian assassin, smiled at me.

“Of course, didn’t I tell you all? This guy didn’t flinch in front of my fist! *Uhahaha*, he sure has guts.”

Cheok Jungyeong heartily laughed. Then the 9 colors each gave me a look. They all had their own opinions: apathy, interest, and dissatisfaction.

“I heard you use a gun. Take it out!”

“No, why don’t you show us that coin throw again!”

“Coin throw? What’s that?”

I felt like a gazelle stuck between a lion, elephant, hippo, giraffe, and other powerful beasts.

Chapter 144

Chameleon Troupe (1)

Every member of the Chameleon Troupe convened in the desolate cave.

They were all at least high rank and could interfere in any major incident. The cave was filled with their aura and magic power. Most cadets would faint from the pressure because of a phenomenon called magic power resonance, but it didn't affect me since my body didn't contain any magic power.

“Oi! Why don't we have a ranking tournament now that all 11 members have gathered?”

Cheok Jungyeong shouted as he cracked his neck and knuckles. He might not have meant to shout, but was naturally loud.

“I'm down.”

A gentle-looking man spoke. He was the Chameleon Troupe's seat of green, the spear user Jin Yohan. His current weapon should be the serpent spear, a historical artifact used by Zhang Fei of the Three Kingdoms. Its unique ability was limitless weight adjustment.

“Then do it outside. Don't destroy this place.”

“I'm out.”

Setryn and Jain both spoke. Setryn wore all sorts of jewelry since I modeled her after Cleopatra. Her beauty easily ranked in the top 10 of this world.

“Are you joining in, newbie?”

Cheok Jungyeong grinned at me. Immediately, I felt a chill run down my back, but managed to ignore him and spoke to Boss.

“Can I begin refurbishing this place now?”

Boss only blinked her large eyes.

“Shouldn’t we give the newbie more time? He’s still too young.”

However, Jain came to my rescue. *Yes, I still needed time.* A lot of time... although I would still rank dead last even in 10 years.

“It’s fine. I’ll go easy. Kids are supposed to grow by getting beat up.”

Jin Yohan took out his serpent spear as beads of sweat formed on my forehead.

“What do you think?”

Setryn licked her finger and seductively stared at me.

“Hey! I told you, he might look like a weakling, but he’s actually—!”

“Jungyeong, didn’t I tell you not to shout? Want me to stitch your lips shut?”

“*Haha*, bitch finally went crazy.”

Thankfully, Cheok Jungyeong and Setryn got into a fight. Only 4 members chatted around. The rest only silently stared or yawned out of boredom.

“I’ll crush your head outside. I won’t go easy just because you’re a woman.”

“Oh, our Jungyeong’s finally going to lose his neck.”

“*Haha*, why don’t we just do that tournament then?”

“Quiet.”

A single word from Boss cooled the heated atmosphere.

“I need to give you something.”

Boss rummaged through her pocket and took out a piece of crumpled paper. “Take this.”

“...?”

Puzzled, I took the paper. “What is it?”

“A grade 1 magic contract.”

I checked the paper’s description with my smartwatch.

[Grade 1 Magic Contract] [High rank magic item] — Contract Seal: Will recognize each party’s identity. Those tied together by contract seals must abide by the contents of the contract.

It was higher ranked than the ones I usually saw. I checked the contents.

[Contract] Clause 1. Kim Hajin cannot betray me. Clause 2. I will do my duty as his boss as long as Kim Hajin does not betray me. Clause 3. Whoever breaks the contract will suffer from magic power deviation. (Duration – 6 years)

The contract only contained 3 childish clauses.

“Um, Boss.”

“What.”

I thought about how to explain it. Of course, a magic power contract didn’t need to be as detailed as a real contract, but loose wording could always lead to loopholes.

“*Hmm.*”

However, Boss must’ve misunderstood my hesitation.

“Are you afraid of joining us?”

Immediately, 10 pairs of eyes fell on me. Their gazes sent a chill down my back. Each member simply gave off a terrifying aura.

“Of course not. I just thought these clauses seemed too loose.”

“*Ah*, you don’t have to worry about that. It’s an expensive contract, so it’s quite intelligent.”

“I see.”

An intelligent contract. I found it quite interesting and infused stigma’s magic power into it. Honestly, this contract probably wouldn’t work on me since stigma’s magic power didn’t reside in my body.

“Will this do?”

Stigma’s magic power seeped into the contract.

“Oh? What’s this? Your magic power is unbelievably pure!” Cheok Jungyeong exclaimed in awe when he saw my magic power.

“Look, Boss. It’s so clear and blue. It’s the first time I’ve seen such a thing.”

As Cheok Jungyeong said, stigma should be the purest form of magic power. I wasn’t exactly sure what it was or how it worked, but it did represent the creator’s authority.

“Wow, this kid sure is a treasure. *Argh*, I can’t hold back anymore. Come out and spar with me!”

“I’ll watch too.”

“Quiet, both of you.”

Even Jain started to show interest in watching us fight, but Boss thankfully held them back. Then she infused her magic power into the contract.

“There, the contract is done.”

She carefully folded the paper and placed it back in her pocket.

“Little apprentice, here’s a gift.”

Boss handed me an accessory. The jet-black necklace represented the Chameleon Troupe’s seat of black.

[Necklace of Black] [Artifact] [Unawakened] — Will increase all variable stats by 1 point. — Invisibility: This necklace can become invisible. — ??? (Item must be awakened.)

Each member of the Chameleon Troupe carried a symbolic item. The seat of black received a simple yet powerful item that could raise every stat by 1.

“Oh, looks like that thing finally found an owner. Now, let’s go spar to celebrate.”

Cheok Jungyeong suggested once again. *Why was this guy so interested in me?*

“Sorry, I need to do something now.”

“Do it later.”

No, I couldn’t do it later. I couldn’t win against a single member of the Chameleon Troupe. I wouldn’t last more than 10 seconds against anyone. I turned towards Boss.

“I have a mission.”

Someone suddenly grabbed my sleeve.

“Hyung, hyung. Can you show me your gun?”

A young boy who had yet to reach puberty asked. I turned towards Droon’s cute voice. The Caucasian boy was only around 11 years old. However, he couldn’t be underestimated because of his youth. Frankly, Droon could be considered the world’s strongest. To be exact, that thing stuck to Droon was that strong.

“My real weapon isn’t a gun.”

I made up a half-hearted excuse since I didn’t want to show him my Desert Eagle.

“Eh? Really? You use an even more amazing weapon than that cowardly one?”

Cheok Jungyeong shouted once again. What was I supposed to do with this numbskull?

“Haha, I knew it this whole time.”

“Um, I still want to see it.”

I gave in and took out my gun at Droon’s pleading eyes. I had nothing to lose by being nice to him.

“Do you want to touch it?”

“Yes!”

I gave Droon the Desert Eagle and he began to touch it full of interest. Suddenly, that thing shot out from his back. A fat, shadowy rabbit flashed its crimson eyes and stared at my gun. Soon, a smile emerged on the rabbit’s face. Droon also smiled and handed the gun back to me.

“It’s a good weapon.”

Droon also acted as the Chameleon Troupe's appraiser. I could take pride in my gun since he praised it.

"Thanks."

"If you're done with introductions, focus." Boss gathered everyone's attention.

"The reason I summoned everyone today isn't just to welcome a new member."

Boss put on a serious smile and clenched her fists. "We will begin our activities in 2 weeks."

The atmosphere in the cave suddenly changed. Cheok Jungyeong's expression was particularly noteworthy. He grinned from ear to ear in excitement at Boss' next words.

* * *

Sunlight shone through on a beautiful morning.

"Haaa."

Yoo Jinhyuk got up from his couch with a sigh. He didn't feel so good despite the beautiful weather.

"Tsk."

He clicked his tongue and opened the door to his office bedroom. *Drnk* — Beyond the sliding door lay a girl on his bed like a vampire sleeping in a coffin.

"When is she going to leave?"

Today was the fifth, no, sixth day. Yoo Yeonha declared that she wouldn't go back until he told her the truth.

"Sigh."

He thought she would leave after a day or two at most. However, his stubborn niece refused to give up. She bugged him more and more every day. It would've been one thing if she just holed up in his office, but she constantly looked around town for anything with business value. As a result, Yoo Yeonha became famous in the shanty town.

"Will you finally tell me the truth now?"

Yoo Yeonha's voice suddenly rang out. Startled, Yoo Jinhyuk swallowed his saliva. Yoo Yeonha continued as she lay in bed.

"Tell me."

"No, I really don't know anything."

Yoo Yeonha got up. Her flawless beauty made it hard to believe she just woke up.

"That's fine. I'll just stay until you do."

"You..."

Yoo Jinhyuk asked Yoo Jinwoong to take back his daughter. However, Yoo Jinwoong surprisingly asked him to have her stay, saying that being with him was safer than being at Cube. Of course, he didn't forget to mention that he would kill Yoo Jinhyuk if anything happened to Yoo Yeonha.

"I already know a few things."

"Oh yeah? Like what?" Yoo Yeonha hesitated, then sighed.

"I guess I have no choice. It doesn't look like we'll get anywhere if neither of us says anything, but I can't tell you my source."

"Sure."

Yoo Jinhyuk answered half-heartedly. As far as he was concerned, whatever information she had must be a groundless rumor.

“The information I have is simple. *Cough.*”

Yoo Yeonha continued, “Chae Jinyoon... became a devil.”

Yoo Yeonha muttered as though it was the truth. Immediately, Yoo Jinhyuk’s hairs stood on end. However, he maintained a commanding appearance and didn’t show any outward agitation.

“Devil? Like Satan and all those devils from the bible?”

“No, you know what I’m talking about. The existences above djinns. The evil gods who give them power.”

“What...”

Yoo Jinhyuk was about to brush it aside, but suddenly recalled a voice he heard with his ability. The medical examiner who spoke in front of Chae Jinyoon’s corpse.

— This is even more elaborate than the djinns’ devil transformation. It’s persisting even after his death.”

Something even more elaborate than the devil transformation... The pieces of the puzzle fell in place.

“So you do know something. Maybe I should’ve told you earlier.”

Yoo Jinhyuk’s expression revealed his brief thought and Yoo Yeonha didn’t forget to point it out. Yoo Jinhyuk had no choice but to sigh.

“Just so you know, I’ve been staying quiet to protect you. If we handle this wrong, even your mom and dad might end up killed.”

“...Eh?”

“So wouldn’t it be better if only I might die?”

Yoo Yeonha silently stared at him. “Are we that weak?”

“What?”

“Are we so weak that our entire family will be killed from defying a single person?”

Yoo Jinhyuk became speechless. He couldn’t think of a response.

“If so, I’ll make us stronger.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke daringly. However, that was impossible to achieve. The Yoo clan was the Chae clan’s hunting dog from birth. It grew by performing the Chae clan’s dirty work and remained at Chae Joochul’s mercy.

“So trust me.”

Her naive words cut off his thoughts. Yoo Jinhyuk could only smile at his niece. A kid who always acted like a grown-up finally became an adult. He couldn’t help but be amazed.

* * *

[Mission Commencement. D-10]

Four days have passed since then. With Khalifa’s help, I went back and forth between the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout and my apartment while continuing my *[Chameleon Troupe Hideout Renovation and Dexterity Level Up Project]*. During the past 4 days, I realized that Dexterity was quite difficult to level up. I couldn’t be more grateful to Master Sharpshooter for helping it become grade 7.

Jiing —

First, I created a small workshop in the cave. Currently, I worked on making a couch. Dexterity’s proficiency increased more when I crafted bigger objects, but I couldn’t make anything bigger than a couch due to stigma’s limited magic power.

I came up with a design with the help of aether’s aesthetic greed. Then I bought expensive materials and crafted the couch’s frame with

stigma's magic power. I stuffed it with the highest grade filling and covered everything with monster alligator skin.

The entire process took 9 hours to complete.

“Whew.”

I finally finished and clutched my head as I fell onto a chair.

[Dexterity's proficiency has increased by 1.5%!]

“1.5% for all that work...”

That felt too stingy, but I also had more than enough time.

[Devilish Dexterity has activated through your luck.] [The alligator skin couch has been appraised as high rank furniture. A special effect will be granted to its status.] [Special effect – Significance of Rest] This couch will quickly recover any of your exhaustion. Whoever sleeps on this couch will wake up refreshed.

I couldn't make furniture that gave temporary stat bonuses, but this was more than praiseworthy.

“Hmm.”

I picked up the couch. Lifting heavy objects no longer posed a problem with my superhuman strength.

“Here's a couch.”

I came out of the workshop and announced my creation. Boss was the first to see me.

“You built another one?”

Boss woke up from her sleep (surprisingly, she slept standing) and murmured apathetically. The other pieces of furniture surrounded her: a table, TV drawer, etc.

“Little apprentice, don’t you think you’re changing this place too quickly? I think I need some time to adjust.”

I’ve been slowly changing the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout for the past 4 days. I made a resting place for Boss by turning a 160 square meter space into a modern room and smoothing out all the walls, ceiling, and floor. Then I painted everything white.

“You have to at least live like a person. Also, why don’t you watch TV? There’s a lot of good variety shows.”

“I’m not interested in those.”

“Just try it.”

I placed the couch at an appropriate distance from the TV.

“Try sitting down.”

“...”

However, Boss shook her head.

“I’ve never sat to rest. I like standing.”

“Then I’m going back to the workshop.”

I returned to the workshop. After closing the door, I peered through it to observe Boss.

— Why is it so big?

She glanced at the couch, then poked at it here and there with her foot. It didn’t look like she would sit.

“That’s a bit sad.”

Would she use it if I made a better one? Unfortunately, more than one would be a waste since making furniture expended stigma’s magic

power. Now, I went on to train next. I needed a more threatening weapon than just a gun. Not to mention, having more options in battle would always help.

Shoo —

“Start.”

I held up 10 daggers and initiated my training program. Eleven holographic targets shot up 300 meters away, equally spaced around me. I threw my daggers at them. *Chweeek*— These daggers would undoubtedly strike all the targets. However, I wanted more. I took out the bow hanging on my back the moment I threw the daggers.

“Uwoah!”

My neck got caught on the bowstring and I fell forward.

“Argh, I almost died.”

That would’ve been a deadly mistake in a real fight.

“My neck...”

Dexterity’s low proficiency made simultaneously using daggers, a bow, and a gun quite difficult. *Unless I had another arm... Wait. Another arm?* Even stigma couldn’t create another arm, but I should be able to utilize it similarly. Of course, I would have to test it later since I already used 2.5 streaks of stigma to build the couch.

“I’ll try it tomorrow.”

I looked outside the workshop without much thought.

“Eh?”

A small grin emerged on my face. Boss sat on the couch and bounced on the cushion as though its softness surprised her.

— Swamp alligator skin? Indeed, their skins are known to be great.

After giving the big couch a review, she turned her attention to the small couch chair I made a couple of days ago. She brought it over after briefly glancing at my workshop and rested her feet on top. She seemed extremely comfortable.

— *Mmm.*

Boss closed her eyes with a satisfied hum. Then, as though something was missing, she reached out and grabbed the TV remote.

“!@#!@#”

— *Hiik!*

She quickly lowered the volume.

“How cute.”

Right, that was how people changed. My first goal to make Boss watch TV succeeded.

“I guess I’ll go back to practicing.”

I smiled and picked up the daggers. I couldn’t feel down just because of one failure. I had to give my best in everything, but I needed a cigarette first.

* * *

I went outside after practicing for 3 hours.

“*Hm?*”

I heard faint breathing when I went out to buy some more cigarettes. I tilted my head in that direction.

“Is she sleeping?”

Boss lay asleep on the couch with her arms out. Not too long ago, she said she preferred to sleep standing up. I grinned and took out my smartwatch. This was the perfect chance for a photo. I muted the sound and took pictures of her sleeping. She still didn't show any signs of waking. *Was my couch that good?* I suddenly received a message while being satisfied with myself.

[I confirmed the truth. Nayun is also awake.]

Yoo Yeonha finally messaged me after a week of silence. I tried to reply, but...

“...!”

A sudden pain struck my arm as if it was being ripped off. The feeling of another streak of stigma being added. I knew what this meant. However...

“Fuck...”

It's just too painful. I used the painkiller medicinal effect, but the pain only grew clearer. I clenched my teeth and forced my eyes open to confirm the alerts on my smartwatch.

[A fourth streak of stigma has been added.] [Stigma will require more total SP for the fifth.] [Your laptop is now updating.] — Adding New Functionalities...

My consciousness faded away and my vision turned dark.

Chapter 145

Chameleon Troupe (2)

Seoul looked cloudy today. The sky filled with grey as though it would rain at any moment.

“*Hmm...*” Yoo Yeonha sighed at the scenery outside her limousine. “I think Hamgyeong had better air and weather. Don’t you think so?”

“Pardon?”

That surprised her driver. He had also stayed there for a week since he didn’t want to risk any accidents while returning alone.

“Y-Yes, you’re right.”

“Hamgyeong Province would’ve developed a lot if it wasn’t for the shudderwock.”

The mountains there were deep and secluded. Pure magic power filled the atmosphere and the morning air felt especially refreshing due to the mountains’ life energy. Yoo Yeonha would’ve loved to visit more often if it wasn’t for the shudderwock that lived in Hamgyeong Province’s mountains.

“Y-You’re right,” the driver reluctantly agreed.

“*Hmm*, I’ll have to look into the price of land around there.”

Yoo Yeonha confirmed her desire to buy land in Hamgyeong Province. The driver stepped on the accelerator, afraid that Yoo Yeonha would want to go back.

“We’re here.”

The limousine soon reached the Daehyun Hospital. Chae Nayun had been transferred over from the Gangnam Severance Hospital 4 days ago and finally woke up today.

“You can go ahead. I’ll call you when I leave.”

“Understood.”

Yoo Yeonha got off the limousine with a nervous heart.

“Ah, it’s Yeonha!”

Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, and Yi Yeonghan all stood in front of the VIP entrance.

“You’re here, Yeonha.”

“Un.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled at Shin Jonghak.

“You waited for me?”

“No.”

“...Then why are you standing here?”

“No reason.”

“Whatever, let’s go in.”

Yoo Yeonha entered the hospital with them. They reached Chae Nayun’s room after walking past the beautiful garden and took a deep breath.

“You can go in. She’s fine.”

A nurse softly encouraged them as Kim Suho turned the doorknob.

Kiik. The door slowly opened and a soft breeze greeted them from the opened window. Chae Nayun stood in front of it and silently looked out. They hesitated to enter and Chae Nayun didn't seem to notice them.

"Nayun, your friends are here."

Chae Shinhyuk, who was already in the room, spoke. Only then did Chae Nayun turn around.

"...Hey guys."

Chae Nayun slowly approached them. Yoo Yeonha felt her heart thumping. She couldn't look at her straight in the eyes.

"I heard I slept for a week."

However, she laughed like usual as though nothing happened. Yoo Yeonha worked up the courage to speak.

"Y-Yeah."

"Are you feeling okay?" Kim Suho asked.

"Yeah, I wouldn't be standing otherwise."

Chae Nayun stretched to show that she was fine. Shin Jonghak gave her a warm smile.

"I wouldn't expect anything less from you."

"Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, do you guys have time today?"

"*Hm?*"

"I do, but..."

Chae Nayun spoke to both of them, "Help me train. I slept for a week, so I need to regain my dulled senses."

“Shouldn’t you rest for today?”

“No, I don’t have time.”

“Time?”

“Yeah.”

Chae Nayun smiled. “I want to kill someone, so I have to work hard.”

She sounded indifferent, yet resolute and full of hatred. Yoo Yeonha’s heart sank when she heard that.

“K-Kill?” Kim Suho asked in surprise.

“So? Are you going to help me or not? I’ll just train with Shin Jonghak if you’re not available.”

“Um, what about me, Yi Yeonghan? I’m here too, you know.”

“I can help you train, but I don’t think you should... kill someone.”

“Shut it and follow me. Oh, Yeonha, are you coming too?”

Yoo Yeonha shook her head. She couldn’t maintain her composure and left first. She could hear Chae Nayun’s voice behind her, but she couldn’t make out the words.

* * *

I opened my eyes and blankly stared at the white ceiling I had painted. The alligator skin couch I made felt quite comfortable. The boundary between dream and reality felt faint, but the sharp pain on my upper arm woke me up.

“Uuu.”

I couldn’t move my arm. The after-effect grew worse compared to when I received the third streak. Did stigma put more burden on my

body as its capacity increased? I simply sighed and couldn't move.

"Haa... I have to go home."

Evandel was waiting for me, but she did seem too busy lately playing with her friend. She might even be happy that I wasn't there to nag her.

"..."

Feeling wronged, I clenched my teeth and forced myself up. My eyelids trembled from the intense pain that followed any movement.

"You're up?"

A voice suddenly rang out. It wasn't Boss, but this heavy and deep voice belonged to... Khalifa.

"...?"

"Do you remember my name?"

"Of course, Khalifa."

I remembered everyone on the first day.

"Um, how long was I asleep?"

"At least 24 hours."

Khalifa tapped on the ground with the back of his foot and opened a portal.

"Boss asked me to stay since you wouldn't be able to return without me."

"Ah... thank you."

“You don’t need to thank me, but...”

Khalifa paused for a moment and looked around the cave that significantly changed compared to 5 days ago.

“I’d like to be next.”

“Next? Oh.”

He meant the next room.

“Of course, I don’t intend for it to be free.”

Khalifa tossed me something the size of a baseball.

“It’s a blue rock stone. It looks like you love making things, so you can use it as material.”

I gladly received the expensive gem that contained magic power and put it away.

“Then I’ll make your room next.”

“Thanks. So what do you think about the mission?”

“Oh, that?”

Four days ago, Boss announced to all the members that she would annihilate past traitors who scorned and ridiculed the Chameleon Troupe. She called it, Operation Old Revenge. Most of our targets were djinns in Pandemonium, but also some heroes and businessmen too.

“Are you confident?”

“...”

I looked at stigma on my upper arm. *Four streaks*. A circle now surrounded the cross.

“I am.”

* * *

I returned to Seoul using Khalifa’s portal and quickly ran home to Evandel. *BeebeebEEP*— I entered the password and tiny footsteps rang out. Evandel and Hayang stood right in front of the door by the time it half-opened.

“Hajin!”

“*Meow.*”

“Sorry, I’m late.”

I picked them both up. They didn’t blame me for not coming home every once in a while, but I still felt like I should apologize. I found someone else there when I arrived in the living room.

“Hello.”

“Oh, hey.”

Evandel’s friend, Yun Haeyeon, also came today. They seemed to be playing together with all the Lego pieces on the ground. I placed Evandel and Hayang down and patted Haeyeon’s head.

“Hajin Hajin, where were you?”

“*Hm?* Oh, I just had something to do. Anyways, did you eat dinner yet?”

“*Un,* we ordered food.”

“Chicken again? Good job. *Ah,* hold on a second.”

I had to check something. I remembered an alert about a laptop update when I received the fourth streak.

[Laptop Update]... (Currently in progress) Remaining time: 3y 13d...

What? It's still not over? And what's with 3y 13d? Don't tell me it's 3 years and 13 days!

Ding— The doorbell suddenly rang. I turned around and shouted.

“Who is it?”

— *Ah*, I'm Haeyeon's aunt... I heard she was here, so I came to pick her up.

“*Ah*, no... I want to stay and play more...”

Haeyeon cutely reacted to the voice outside and hid behind Evandel, who seriously announced, “I'll protect you.”

“*Ah*, yes. Hold on.”

I opened the door without much thought.

Click—

“*Eh?*” I doubted my eyes.

“*Hm?*”

In front of the door stood... Yun Seung-Ah.

* * *

Under the dark sky, I came to a nearby park with Yun Seung-Ah at 9 P.M. As expected, a rich neighborhood had all sorts of recreational equipment. However, Yun Seung-Ah and I went straight to the swings as though we had promised to sit and talk there.

“...”

“...”

Neither of us said much. We came out to give the kids more time since we knew each other. I started the conversation after riding the swing for about 5 minutes.

“*Cough*, I didn’t know the vice leader had a niece.”

“I also didn’t think Cadet Hajin had a... *um*, she’s not your daughter, right?”

“Of course not. She’s my... niece. Also, you don’t have to talk so politely.”

“Ah, okay.”

Yun Seung-Ah didn’t ask any further. She seemed exhausted because of everything that happened recently.

“Do you live here? I never knew.”

“Me? No, I used to have a mansion elsewhere, but I sold it. I’m living with my older brother right now.”

“...”

I ended up poking her where it hurt. She must’ve sold off her mansion to pay off the class action lawsuit among other things.

“Rather than that, I didn’t know you lived in such a nice place, Hajin.”

“I do stock trading on the side. I made a lot of money with it.”

“I see. I wouldn’t expect any less from someone ranked first in theory.”

That was the end of our first conversation. Yun Seung-Ah looked up at the crescent moon and fell silent. I didn’t say anything either. It just felt too awkward. Should I have just let her leave with Haeyeon?

“Cube’s cadets. Are they disappointed?” Yun Seung-Ah muttered.

“Disappointed? No, not really—”

“I’m thinking of dropping everything and joining the association.”

“The Hero Association?”

“Yeah. The Temple of Justice has an empty seat.”

“*Eh?*”

The Temple of Justice was the strongest even among the Hero Association’s numerous departments. They functioned similarly to the United Stations’ Peacekeeping Corps. No, I guess they weren’t that similar. After all, the Temple of Justice only had 13 members.

“Aileen is also in that group, right?”

“Yeah.”

Yun Seung-Ah snickered, “You didn’t care much about me, but it seems that’s not the case with Aileen.”

“She’s the human dragon. I’d be an idiot if I didn’t know her.”

Aileen, the hero who used spirit speech, and one of the most overpowered heroes I created.

“*Heh*, she’s too small to be a dragon. Her official height is 153 cm, but she’s actually shorter.”

“*Eh?*”

“I’m not kidding. She’s so tiny. All you’ll see is her head if you look down. *Ah*, but don’t do that. She’ll get mad if you look down at her head even though that’s not something you can control... *sigh*.”

Yun Seung-Ah mumbled randomly and suddenly drooped her head. It

seemed she suffered from depression like me. Maybe I should tell her to also smoke.

“Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I haven’t talked to anyone for a while.”

“No, it’s fine.”

The public and media now talked about Cube’s djinns invasion, but the amount of attention Creator’s Sacred Grace received before was astronomical. Yoo Yeonha probably had something to do with it since she always acted mercilessly when it came to exploiting her opponent’s weakness.

“Why don’t you try aiming for the guild leader position?”

“Guild leader?”

“I mean, it’s not your fault that they failed the tower campaign. It was the guild leader’s fault for pushing it. I think this is your best opportunity.”

I tried bringing up the topic. Yun Seung-Ah should be voting to fire the guild leader in the board meeting soon.

“You think like a kid.”

“I am a kid.”

“I guess you are. Well, I’ll think about it.”

“Sure. Honestly, Creator’s Sacred Grace doesn’t feel right without Yun Seung-Ah.”

I grinned and stood up.

“Pft, yeah. I think so too. Are you leaving?”

“Yep. Oh right, Haeyeon said she wanted to sleep over. What should

we do?”

“It’s fine. I’ll tell oppa about it.”

“Got it. Good night, vice leader. Oh, also...”

I suddenly recalled something and turned towards her. “Suho is waiting for you to call him.”

Yun Seung-Ah’s face immediately lit up. “*H-Hm?* W-What are you talking about?”

“You don’t have to feign ignorance. All of our close friends already know.”

“A-About what? I’m too old compared to Suho...”

Yun Seung-Ah was 9-10 years older than Suho on paper, but that wasn’t the case. Suho was 3-4 years older than his official age.

“Don’t worry. He’s into older women.”

“Older women?”

“Yep, only older women.”

“Only... *ah*, no. I keep telling you, that’s not it!”

I grinned at her girlish side.

“*Ah*, Hajin! It’s not like that! D-Don’t you spread that rumor!”

I ignored her shouting behind me.

* * *

Ten days quickly passed and the Chameleon Troupe’s mission finally arrived. Currently, I stood on the outskirts of Pandemonium for my

first mission as an official Chameleon Troupe member.

— Hyung, can you see that tower in the distance?

Droon's voice sounded in my ears.

“Hold on.”

I took a look around and discovered a tall clock tower. It easily measured 200 meters tall, but I headed towards it without hesitation. With parkour, I reached the peak in 30 seconds.

“*Whew.*”

I stood on the support fixture and looked into the distance. My clothes fluttered in the breeze mixed with demonic energy and blood. Pandemonium, a city governed by djinns, contained many buildings and a large population.

“Yeah, I see it.”

My target looked particularly eye-catching even in the bustling city.

— Yep, that's the one.

A 10 story tower with a sleek design and the giant obsidian on its rooftop made it look like a magic tower. This building served as their base.

— That building took 50 billion won to make. Let's crush it! Crush, crush!

“Yeah.”

Today's target was one of Pandemonium's private organizations, Hatred's End. My objective was to destroy their new base.

— By the way hyung, your clothes look cool.

“Thanks.”

— Did you make a special effort for your first mission?

“No.”

I wore clothes that I had made myself. I didn't design them with any special care, but they turned out pretty cool thanks to aether. The cape to conceal myself became an assassin's hooded cape, which looked like a main character's equipment, and the mask with a chrome decoration also became the mastermind's mask.

— It must be because of all the black. Can you make me something similar later?

Droon talked quite a lot, but I forgave him since he was a kid. It definitely wasn't because I feared him.

— Hyung, hyung. Will you be fine? That tower looks sturdy.

“I don't have a choice. I'm the only one here.”

— You don't have to do it alone.

“...Really?”

I thought about what I had: the Blessed Bow of Horus, magic amplification medicinal effect, Master Sharpshooter, Random Consolidation System, and 4 streaks of stigma. A small smile emerged on my face. Blowing up a tower should be a piece of cake.

“No, I think I can do it.”

— *Ooh*, are you going to use a bow?

“Yep.”

I couldn't use guns on the Chameleon Troupe's missions since the entire world knew I was the only gun-using hero.

— Okay, I'll leave the mark after you succeed.

“Mark?”

— Yep. The mark of a new black.

“Do you have to?”

— Of course. We're attacking as a warning to tell them we're back.

“Okay, okay.”

— *Un!*

I took a deep breath.

“Scan.”

I murmured and pulled out the bow on my back. Its wooden frame pleasantly clacked. *Sssss*— Aether adhered to Horus' bow and strengthened it. I held it in one hand and concentrated stigma's magic power into the other.

— Take this! Invisible sword!

“...Don't say weird things.”

— *Ah*, I forgot to turn off the radio. Sorry, hyung.

I refocused on transforming stigma. *Form, arrow. Property, explosion. Goal, destruction. Color, black.*

I only used 3.6 streaks of stigma just in case. *Shooooong*— Stigma's magic power danced and compressed into an arrow, forming what looked like a javelin. I added a medicinal effect with external magic power amplification on top of it.

“I'm ready.”

The arrow radiated with a black light as I nocked it.

“I’m shooting.”

— Count down.

Wasn’t he supposed to turn off the radio?

“Three. Two. One.”

Chweeeek—

The arrow shot through the sky in a beautiful, straight line. It hurled towards the target at least 1.5 km away and reached it in the blink of an eye.

KWANG—!

A huge explosion erupted and a fierce gale blew, sucking in air from every direction. Then a thunderous sound roared.

It took a second for total destruction and only dust remained where their tower used to proudly stand. Soon, I could see pieces of the obsidian raining down.

“Is that good enough?”

— Wow! It’s perfect, hyung.

“Then I’m leaving.”

I turned around without hesitation.

— So cool!

I reached into my pocket after hearing Droon’s praise and endured the throbbing pain on my upper right arm. Then I took out a cigarette and lit it in my mouth with stigma. It tasted bitter.

Chapter 146

Chameleon Troupe (3)

Bits and pieces of obsidian and concrete rained from the sky. *Koong. Koong.* The ground shook and smoke rose as the tower fell apart.

“*Haha.*”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Yohan laughed at the chaos. A tower that stood just 3 seconds ago completely collapsed and it only took a single arrow. The two of them couldn’t be more satisfied.

“Looks like we made the right choice.”

“See, I told you. My eyes are never wrong.”

They had achieved their first goal. Now, it was up to them. Cheok Jungyeong equipped his gauntlets as Jin Yohan held up his spear. Then they walked towards the fallen tower.

“Don’t forget. We’re only killing the executives. Boss is watching.”

“I know. Oh look, there’s one there.”

Cheok Jungyeong quickly found a person to kill. The man had jumped from the crumbling building and lightly landed. Cheok Jungyeong wasn’t sure who he was, but his gut feeling told him this man was an executive, so he gathered his strength and shot forward.

“*Huup!*”

A small crater appeared as he kicked the ground and leaped away like a cannonball.

“What!”

“Caught you—!”

Cheok Jungyeong grabbed the man’s head and slammed him to the ground. The man’s bones instantly broke and sheer strength crushed his head. Cheok Jungyeong’s eyes flashed after his first kill. He looked like a predator hunting for prey. It didn’t take long before he shot towards someone else running away. *KOONG!*

“Are you sure you’re not a beast?”

Jin Yohan mumbled as he shook his head. Meanwhile, Cheok Jungyeong already charged at another enemy. He seemed like an agile ogre.

“Fuck! Who is he?”

Jin Yohan heard someone shouting and turned to see a Caucasian man in his early 30s pointing at Cheok Jungyeong.

It was the third executive of Hatred’s End, Slavan.

Slavan also discovered the smiling Jin Yohan, who suddenly shot forward with a spear.

“Dammit!”

Slavan took out the sword from his waist. His sharp blade met Jin Yohan’s seemingly simple spear strikes.

Crack—

It seemed like a light clash, but the result was overwhelmingly one-sided. Jin Yohan’s serpent spear changed its weight to 10 tons and instantly crushed Slavan’s body and sword.

“I got one.”

Jin Yohan reported with a smile.

I contacted Khalifa as soon as I finished. He quickly appeared and opened a portal for me to return.

Our hideout appeared quite different now. Of course, only 2 weeks had passed since I began remodeling it, so I hadn't even finished 10% of the project. However, the cave felt much better now with separate rooms.

I turned it into a dome-like structure with a central lobby. The dome had doors that led to each member's room, a workshop, a research lab, and other facilities.

"I'm back."

"Good work."

Boss sat on the only couch in the lobby.

"You did well. The other members will take care of the rest."

Boss and I smiled at each other. Then she suddenly made a shooing gesture.

"Now move."

"Pardon?"

Droon's video projected behind me. Jin Yohan and Cheok Jungyeong were in the middle of a battle.

"Ah, yes."

It didn't feel right sitting next to Boss, so I stood behind the couch. I could see Boss' head right in front of me.

"..."

I noticed her hair looked quite disheveled. She had a few split ends as well. An unbearable urge rose in my heart, a side effect from aether's aesthetic greed.

"B-Boss, do you want me to comb your hair?"

"Hmm?"

Boss tilted her head and turned around.

"Hair?"

"Yes."

"...No."

"It'll feel good."

"I'm fine."

"...But I'm not."

I transformed aether into a comb and pulled Boss' long black hair. I began combing her hair before she could resist.

"Didn't I tell you... I don't... need... *nyaa*."

She stopped talking and joyfully hummed. She couldn't resist the pleasure. Not only was the aether comb a hundred times better than most, but my Dexterity also made me an expert.

"Mmm."

Soon, she relaxed and her eyelids twitched whenever she felt strong pleasure. I tied up her hair into a ponytail after combing it for about 5 minutes.

"There."

“...”

Boss opened her eyes and looked somewhat unsatisfied.

“*Cough*, you don’t have to do this to show your loyalty.”

“No, I’m doing this because I want to.”

“...”

Boss silently caressed her hair.

“What is this?”

“Oh, I thought you’d look good in it. Do you want a mirror?”

“No.”

Knowing Boss, I still formed a mirror with aether. She carefully looked at her reflection, turning here and there as though she found her wagging pony tail interesting. Then she suddenly twisted her head back.

“Oh, little apprentice. When will you officially enter Jeronimo Mercenary?”

“Oh right.”

For my disguise, I requested to join as a member of Jeronimo Mercenary. The official reason I dropped out of Cube was to become a mercenary. Plus, doing missions for Jeronimo Mercenary would help me gain SP.

“*Mmm...* let’s set the date to March of next year.”

“Alright, I’ll let Jain know.”

“Thank you.”

Soon, Fenrir would join Jeronimo. He would be a gunner and his specialty would be djinn assassination and monster slaughter. Jain would surely take care of everything else.

* * *

The Hero Association resided at the Hero Tower in Gwanghwamun, Seoul, the tallest building in the world at 900 meters.

[Temple of Justice Meeting Room]

It was also known as the foundation of modern civilization and consisted of 15 departments. Among them, the one tasked with the most dangerous and important duties was the Temple of Justice.

“I’m here, *geez*.”

Naturally, it only included the most elite members. Today, the group met for a round table discussion.

“Where is everyone?”

Aileen, one of the members, grumbled with her arms crossed. No one could blame her. Only 4 other members had shown up. The other 8 were busy with their respective missions.

“Good morning, Aileen.”

The 31 year old Yi Yongha greeted her. He was a high rank hero and also their youngest member.

“Good morning? Where is everyone!”

“Didn’t you hear what happened in Southwest Asia? They’re busy running around and putting out the fire.”

The chairman, Park Hanho, tried to calm her down with a tired expression.

“But shouldn’t they at least attend the meeting!”

“Give them a break. They’ll be notified of what we talk about anyways.”

“*Hmph*, they live in Seoul too. Also... why couldn’t they send me there instead? I’d only need a week to solve everything!”

Aileen had a lot to complain about since she felt displeased with her job as a hero. They kept her out of moderately dangerous incidents as a trump card. They also kept her out of not-so-dangerous situations and told her a guillotine couldn’t be used to behead a chicken. Everyone agreed she was one of the strongest members, but she had only been deployed 5 times in the past 5 years.

“Like we always say, you’re our ultimate weapon... Wait, Aileen. Did you get taller?”

“*E-Eh?*”

Park Hanho tried to appease her with sweet talk.

“...You’re doing this again! I’m 31 years old now, you know?”

“No, no, I’m not making it up. Maybe your bones grew longer.”

“B-Bones? *Mmm...* Maybe...? N-No!”

Park Hanho tensed up with nervousness. So the day finally came when telling her that she grew taller didn’t work!

“Maybe it’s because it’s morning. You know, they say you’re 2-3 centimeters taller in the morning.”

However, Aileen’s trembling lips declared that she felt extremely pleased.

“No, I think your bones did grow longer. Didn’t you say you stopped wearing high heels recently? Maybe that’s why.”

“Do you think I’m stupid?”

“*Haha*, I’m pretty sure you did, so get it checked out later.”

Clearly appeased, Aileen sat without complaining.

“Now, let’s start the meeting.”

“Yes!”

“*Uun.*”

Hearing Yi Yongha’s enthusiastic shout, Nicholas, the fourth hero woke up from his nap.

“Why are you always sleeping?”

Aileen blurted in disappointment, but Nicholas only leisurely laughed.

“Maybe that’s why I’m tall.”

“...”

Aileen gritted her teeth without replying.

“Now, now, quiet down. Terrorist attacks simultaneously occurred in Pandemonium yesterday at around 8 P.M.”

Holographic pictures shot up from the round table, showing destroyed buildings and corpses.

“As you can see, an entire tower was obliterated and a hideout was destroyed.”

“Isn’t it good that they’re fighting among themselves?”

“No.”

Park Hanho shook his head at Aileen's words. Then he played a video taken last night in Pandemonium.

Shooooong—

An arrow flew across the sky like a shooting star. The sheer strength of it warped the atmosphere.

KWANG—!

A single shot obliterated the tower. Yi Yonghan dropped his jaw and Nicholas slightly widened his eyes.

“Wow! Amazing, amazing!”

Aileen sarcastically applauded. She could obliterate a building with her eyes closed.

“That isn't the important part. Look at this picture.”

A man stood on top of the Pandemonium clocktower.

“Is he an assassin?”

He wore all black with a hooded cape that resembled an eagle and a mask that covered his mouth. He also held an elegant, black bow.

“It looks like he's a new member of that group.”

Aileen's face stiffened. Even the Hero Association only knew this mysterious group as that group. Park Sangho, the Temple of Justice's chairman, had been chasing them since he was 20 years old and even Aileen had a history with them.

“A new member?”

“Yep, you've seen this before, right?”

Park Hanho displayed another picture of a black symbol engraved on

the ground. Indeed, Aileen recognized the lotus symbol.

“Yeah, 7 years ago, but I don’t think they’re the same person.”

The person Aileen met back then didn’t use a bow.

“That’s why he’s a new member.”

“*Mmm...*”

Click. Aileen snapped her fingers.

“Okay, leave the investigation to me. I’ll look into them.”

“*Hm?* No, you don’t need to do it yourself.”

“No, I have to. We fought to a draw last time.”

“What?”

“I met him before. About 8-9 years ago.”

“What?”

Park Hanho pressed his forehead and sighed.

“Why haven’t you said anything until now. Well, it looks like that’s a different person.”

“Even if he’s not the same person, he should be just as strong if he’s the old one’s replacement, right?”

Aileen grinned and infused magic power into her voice.

“So give me those files.”

“Didn’t I tell you not to use that on me?”

Aileen's spirit speech moved Park Hanho's arm. However, he didn't resist since that would only make things more exhausting.

"Thank you."

"*Sigh*. Whatever... *Ah*, wait! Where are you going? The meeting isn't over yet!"

Aileen scurried out while whistling after she got what she wanted.

* * *

July came around in the blink of an eye. Springtime long disappeared under the blazing sun. *Chirp— chirp—* Birds sang and the hot breeze signaled the start of summer. Cube finished its first semester and cadets regained their energy after the finals. Many things had happened in the past few months. First, most of Cube's executives resigned after the previous djinn invasion and a few even went on trial. Second, active heroes began to patrol Cube for security measures. They also abolished midterms, which left only the character assessment and final exam to determine cadet rankings.

Ding—

Chae Nayun entered Cube's most popular coffee shop, Angel on Earth.

"Yo, Chae Nayun."

Yi Yeonghan called her. She thoughtlessly approached, but soon recognized an unusual face present. Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, Yoo Yeonha, and Rachel. *Rachel?* For now, Chae Nayun simply sat.

"How'd you do on your exam?" Yi Yeonghan asked.

"So-so."

She replied half-heartedly while staring at Rachel, who sat next to Yoo Yeonha. Chae Nayun couldn't understand why Rachel was there.

“Oh, we’re in the same class. We got close while talking about our guilds.”

Yoo Yeonha noticed her curious gaze and explained.

“Yep.” Rachel smiled and nodded.

“I see.”

Chae Nayun slurped the coffee in front of her without saying much. *Sniff, sniff*. Then Yi Yeonghan began to suddenly sniff.

“*Mmm*, I smell something weird. Chae Nayun, did you—”

“What.”

She glared at Yi Yeonghan with killing intent and he couldn’t finish his sentence.

“N-No, nothing.”

“You better not mess with me. Oh right.”

Chae Nayun set her coffee mug down and spoke, “I’m going to Baekdu Mountain over break. Do you want to come with me, Kim Suho?”

“*Hmm?*”

Kim Suho widened his eyes.

“That’s pretty sudden.”

“Shin Jonghak’s coming too.”

“*Aah*, no. Suho can’t go.” Yi Yeonghan bravely interrupted, “Suho has a little something-something going on with that person. He has to spend time with her.”

“W-What are you talking about?”

Kim Suho quickly covered Yi Yeonghan’s snickering mouth. However, Chae Nayun only stared at them emotionlessly, causing them to awkwardly scratch their necks.

“W-What?”

“Having fun?”

“...”

“So? Are you coming or not?”

“I...”

Kim Suho hesitated. Yun Seung-Ah had called him last week and they had been frequently talking since...

“If I can, then I will. It’s a good opportunity.”

“Okay, good.”

That was all Chae Nayun had to say. She gulped down her coffee and shot up. Yoo Yeonha quickly held her back.

“Are you leaving already, Nayun?”

“Yeah, I have a sparring appointment with some guy named Yohei. I’ll see you later.”

Chae Nayun rejected her gesture and left.

“You should stay a bit more...”

Yoo Yeonha meekly murmured and sadly watched her leave. *Tiriring*— Then she suddenly received a message. Yoo Yeonha’s gaze fell on her watch.

[Jeronimo's apprentice will become an official member in March.]

“Oh?”

She received some interesting news. Yoo Yeonha also saw Rachel reading the text when she turned off her watch and looked up.

“*Oho.*”

Like Yoo Yeonha, she also exclaimed with interest and raised her head.

Chapter 147

Three Years (1)

“Auu.”

Thud. I sat in my handcrafted chair drenched in sweat and my fingers felt numb from firing too many arrows.

“*Hm?* Are you tired already?”

We were currently in Chameleon Troupe’s training room, which was only 10% complete. Boss’ voice rang out from about 300 meters away. I grinned at her.

“No, not yet.”

Boss was helping me train. Well, it might be more accurate to say she was helping me grind Master Sharpshooter to grade 4. Trying to raise a growth-type gift felt like hell.

“You look tired.”

“I just have to change weapons.”

I placed the bow down since it required more strength.

“To a gun?”

“Yes.”

However, all I had to do was pull a gun’s trigger. I took out the Desert Eagle and transformed it into an assault rifle.

“Try to dodge it if you can.”

“Sounds fun.”

Boss leisurely stretched. I checked my proficiency EXP as I prepared the magazines.

[Master Sharpshooter – Proficiency EXP: 90%]

I was only 10% away from leveling up. I should reach grade 4 in a few weeks, especially with Boss as my practice target.

“I’m starting.”

“Okay.”

I pulled the trigger as Boss laughed. Blue magic power shot out from my gun and I emptied the 45 round clip in just a second as every bullet hurled towards a single target.

I couldn’t predict Boss’ movements, so I fired at different places with the highest chances of hitting her. However, she moved faster than the bullets. Her body weaved through them like the wind. I fired up to 400 bullets, but only 4 managed to graze her clothes.

“*Haha*, well done.”

Boss seemed satisfied with my performance and praised me with a hearty laugh. I sat back in the chair. Pulling a trigger wasn’t difficult, but I felt dizzy from using bullet time.

“I’ll rest for a bit.”

“We should stop here for today.”

“No, I’m almost at grade 4.”

“I don’t have time.”

“*Ah*, yes.”

I nodded and checked my smartwatch. I hadn't replied to several messages.

[It's been a month since summer break started ^_^ Oh right, I met the elemental, Shin Yeohwa. You've heard of her too, right? She said she would take me as her disciple!] [Come visit England later.] [Hajin?]

Rachel sent these messages about a week ago.

[Kim Hajin, I'm going to Baekdu Mountain, so you won't be able to contact me during summer break.]

Kim Suho also sent me a message. I didn't reply because I felt afraid. I didn't know if I would become their enemy one day.

"Huuu."

I took out a cigarette in frustration. Tzzz. Boss looked at me with interest as I lit it with a lighter since I used up all of stigma's magic power.

"Why do you keep smoking?"

"Pardon?"

"That. Cigarette."

"Uh... am I the only member who smokes?"

Boss nodded. That made sense. They probably enjoyed drinking more than smoking.

"One person used to smoke."

"Oh?"

I tilted my head.

Used to smoke.

Honestly, I didn't know much about the Chameleon Troupe. I only listed their members, but didn't know their history.

"Is he a former member?"

"Yeah, he said it was a habit from before he got strong."

"Ah, it's the same for me."

I went with the same explanation. Then she briefly looked at me and murmured.

— You share many similarities.

She deeply sighed.

"Pardon?"

"Nothing. I'm going back to my mansion now."

"Ah, yes, take care. Oh right, Boss."

I suddenly recalled the furniture I made yesterday.

"What is it?"

"I put a bed in your room."

"...I don't need it. I'm not fond of beds."

However, Boss firmly declined and left.

Koong—

The door shut behind her.

"Hm, let's see..."

I peered through the door as Boss headed to the portal, but she gradually stopped in front of it. Then she stealthily changed course after glancing back at the training room and headed towards her room. She made it look like she went through the portal, but... *Shashashak*— She entered her room and jumped on the bed before rolling around on the soft bedsheet with a satisfied expression.

“Pft.”

I retracted my thousand-mile eyes and turned on my smartwatch to check the news around the world.

[Trending] 1. Kim Hwanho. 2. Yi Hyojin. 3. Yun Seung-Ah.

“Yun Seung-Ah?”

Her name caught my attention.

[Yun Seung-Ah has been appointed as the new guild leader of Creator’s Sacred Grace. “I will give my all for the benefit of the guild and the world”.]

“Mmm.”

As expected, she chose to directly charge through the obstacle. I read the article about her appointment with a smile.

* * *

August 21, 2026. Even at night, numerous stars lit up Baekdu Mountain. Thousands of magic spheres also lit up the surroundings like fireflies.

“Auu, that felt great...”

Kim Suho walked out to the picturesque scenery after taking a bath. He looked at his wrist out of habit, but smartwatches didn’t function here. Kim Suho smacked his lips and headed back to his room.

“...?”

Suddenly, a strange odor came over his head. He slowly followed the acrid, grey smoke.

“*Huh?*”

Chae Nayun was smoking a cigarette on the balcony of the girls' lodging. She looked at the sky with melancholic eyes while puffing out smoke. This unexpected sight caught Kim Suho off guard as he simply stared at her in a daze. Then their eyes met as Chae Nayun flicked the ashes off her cigarette.

“What are you doing here, Kim Suho?”

“Me? *Uh*, well... since when have you been smoking?”

“*Ah?* You don't need to know that.”

“It's not good for you. It doesn't look good either.”

“I only smoke 3 a day.”

“Then why don't you just quit?”

Chae Nayun suddenly frowned.

“Shut up if you don't know anything.”

“What? Is that something you should say to a caring friend?”

“Shut up. I'm angry that you beat me today.”

“...”

Kim Suho scratched his head. He thoroughly crushed Chae Nayun in today's duel since he thought that would be best for her.

“How the hell am I supposed to beat you... *huu*.”

Chae Nayun deeply sighed and put out her cigarette on the ashtray. *At least she doesn't litter.* Kim Suho smirked, but she continued to glare at him.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Fight me tomorrow too.”

“Sure.”

“Don't go easy either.”

“Of course.”

Chae Nayun smiled in satisfaction.

“Then I'm heading back.”

“Yeah, good night.”

“Yeah.”

She waved and returned to her room as Kim Suho stood in the same spot.

“...*Sigh*.”

Eventually, he also sighed. He felt frustrated as looked at the sky full of stars on Baekdu Mountain.

“They must've broken up for real...”

That was Kim Suho's best guess.

December 17, 2026. Time flew by and the final day of Cube's second year arrived. Every cadet gathered in the auditorium for the closing ceremony. The second year was the last year that cadets received training. They would participate in real-life field training starting in March once their rankings were finalized today.

"*Whew*, I made it into the top 10."

Yoo Yeonha sighed in relief. She had already received her ranking, which would soon be announced with the rest.

"*Huaa*."

She no longer worried about anything as she stretched and glanced next to her. *Beep, beep*— Chae Nayun busily played a mobile game. Yoo Yeonha strained her ears to eavesdrop on nearby cadets since Chae Nayun wasn't interested in talking.

"Ah, I'm so jealous. You're going to Desolate Moon?"

"Yep, I'm going to work my ass off."

For field training, guilds from across the world would select up to 10 cadets (excluding magicians). Then cadets would choose a guild that selected them. This field training would continue for 6 months, giving cadets a chance to experience 2 guilds. After a year, the Hero Association would appoint them as official heroes in guilds or other groups.

"Jiyeon, didn't Essence of the Strait contact you?"

Yoo Yeonha's ears perked up. With the downfall of Creator's Sacred Grace, Essence of the Strait became the unrivaled... well, perhaps not yet. Essence of the Strait still competed for first place against Desolate Moon and Cradle of Glory.

"Yeah, I'm glad. Essence of the Strait was always my first choice."

“Oh right, I heard Kim Suho is going to Creator’s Sacred Grace.”

“Tsk.”

Hearing this, Yoo Yeonha suddenly felt displeased. Kim Suho chose Creator’s Sacred Grace most likely because of his relationship with their guild leader, Yun Seung-Ah. However, Yoo Yeonha didn’t feel too upset. She wanted Kim Suho, but he was also quite a tiring person to deal with.

“Oh right, why did you choose Essence of the Strait?” Yoo Yeonha asked Rachel sitting next to her.

“Huh?”

“Why didn’t you choose the English Royal Court guild?”

“Oh, it’s to learn. Guilds in Korea are more advanced, so I’m hoping to learn a thing or two for the English Royal Court guild to adopt.”

Rachel simply explained.

“I see. Well, there is a lot to learn from our guild.”

Rachel wouldn’t stick around after graduation, but Yoo Yeonha didn’t mind. She became a lot more generous compared to the start of freshman year. Suddenly, a deep voice rang out from the speaker.

— *Cough*. We will now announce the final rankings and commence the closing ceremony.

Every cadet faced the stage as a huge projector displayed the cadet rankings.

[Rank 1. Kim Suho] [Rank 2. Shin Jonghak] [Rank 3. Rachel] [Rank 4. Chae Nayun] [Rank 5. Yohei] [Rank 6. Shen Yu’an] [Rank 7. Yoo Yeonha] [Rank 8. Yi Yeonghan]... [Rank 13. Yi Jiyeon] [Rank 14. Kim Horak]... [Rank 33. Hazuki] [Rank 48. Jin Hoseung]...

“Dammit, I’m rank 4 again because of theory.”

Chae Nayun immediately grumbled. Rachel still ranked above her, but Chae Nayun showed tremendous growth in the second semester. She rivaled Kim Suho in combat training results. Yoo Yeonha stared at her and carefully asked.

“Nayun, I heard you’re going to Baekdu Mountain again.”

“*Huh?* Oh, yeah, sorry. I won’t be going to Essence of the Strait.”

Chae Nayun decided to go to Baekdu Mountain instead of participating in the practical field training. A special exception had been made thanks to Yoo Sihyuk’s recommendation letter.

“Don’t overwork yourself.”

“I won’t. Once I leave, I won’t come down for 2, maybe 3 years, so save me a seat.”

“You’re coming to our guild?”

“Yep.”

Yoo Yeonha should’ve been happy, but she couldn’t smile because she thought of that person every time she looked at Chae Nayun and the truth about Chae Jinyoon tormented her.

“Okay.”

That’s all Yoo Yeonha could say.

* * *

March 1, 2027. Cube’s third year cadets would now work as apprentice heroes. Yoo Yeonha stood in front of Essence of the Strait’s building with Rachel, Yi Jiyeon, Yohei, Hazuki, and Rose. She felt proud of their guild building, which had grown a lot fancier than 2 years ago.

“Young Miss, Essence of the Strait only chose the 5 of us?”

Yohei kept asking stupid questions, so Yoo Yeonha frowned at him.

“There are three other magicians and stop calling me Young Miss.”

“*Haha*, I apologize.”

“*Tsk*. Let’s go in first.”

Yoo Yeonha entered the building with everyone.

“Oh, welcome!”

Essence of the Strait’s new vice leader, Yi Jin-Ah, greeted them in the lobby and exchanged a smile with Yoo Yeonha.

“I’m sure you all know me. I also looked over your profiles, so let’s skip the introductions. I’ll give you a tour since it’s the first day. Follow me.”

Yi Jin-Ah walked to the elevator as the apprentice heroes followed her like ducklings.

[Lounge]

First, they stopped at the second floor lounge. It contained 30 of the most recent virtual reality gaming capsules, 50 supercomputers, over 100 tablets containing thousands of books, and all sorts of training and sports equipment. Yi Jin-Ah proudly opened the door to this world class lounge.

“This is the lounge we’re so proud of... *erm*, why are there so many people here?”

However, more people bustled inside than usual. At least 50 people crowded around a single computer monitor.

“Hey! It’s working hours, you know...”

“Ah, vice leader! Come here, a new mercenary joined Jeronimo.”

“Jeronimo? Really?”

Yi Jin-Ah’s eyes widened and she quickly joined the crowd. Even top guilds showed interest in Jeronimo Mercenary.

“...Mmm.”

“What do we do?”

Having lost their guide, the apprentices exchanged worried glances and stealthily moved closer to Yoo Yeonha.

“...Sigh.”

Yoo Yeonha led the ducklings to Yi Jin-Ah. Then she looked at the monitor with everyone else.

[Jeronimo’s New Mercenary] — Are you troubled by a large number of monsters? Then call this mercenary. He will slaughter monsters with satisfactory speed and power. Code name – Fenrir, a wolf that devours monsters.

“Fenrir? Is this the Fenrir that I know?”

“I think so, but vice leader, why can’t we see anything with our guild IP?”

“Huh? Oh, that’s because we aren’t partnered. Pay for it yourself if you want to see the extended introduction.”

“You know that costs 100 million won.”

Jeronimo’s special website required money for even the tiniest information. One couldn’t access their website without a membership and that wasn’t something that could be bought with just money. Even with a membership, one had to pay more to view details on individual mercenaries. Essence of the Strait had purchased a membership, but

hadn't paid for the individual member yet.

"Hmm."

Yoo Yeonha sneaked away to the back and turned on her smartwatch to quickly pay the 100 million won. The cinematic trailer began to show the new mercenary's specialty.

"...Eh?"

The video displayed a beautiful rain of bullets. Yoo Yeonha's eyes widened as she had seen it before. Then she suddenly received a message.

[Hit me up if you want to employ me.]

It came from Kim Hajin.

Chapter 148

Three Years (2)

The introductory cinematic trailer felt quite simple and direct. It featured imposing background music in a desolate wasteland. *Tap, tap.* Footsteps resounded as a man stood on top of a desert hill. His face was covered, but his jet-black armor and cigarette left a strong impression. The man spat out his cigarette and held up an assault rifle as the camera shifted to show several hundred monsters rushing towards him.

Click—

A magazine clicked into his assault rifle and the man aimed forward. Hundreds of monsters charged like a tidal wave from the horizon. However, he faced them with a single gun.

Tudududu—

Light flashed from the assault rifle and the bullets he fired took a mysterious course. They curved in every direction despite being fired in a straight line. He fired mercilessly as the metallic sound from all the bullet casings rang out against the ground. It didn't even take a second for him to empty and reload the clip and the thunderous gunshots never ceased.

Tudududu—

Hundreds of bullets left behind white trails of light like shooting stars. This barrage completely decimated the tidal wave of roaring monsters.

Soon, the desert turned silent and the video ended with the man sighing at the camera. A mountain of corpses stood behind him.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha got goosebumps from the video's powerful ending. As expected, the world's greatest mercenary group had spectacular marketing. Of course, she had to admit it felt a bit cringy, but that was better than lacking when it came to PR videos.

[I just saw the cinematic trailer. It gave me chills.]

He completely covered his face, but Yoo Yeonha could tell that was Kim Hajin. He quickly replied.

[I just did what I was told. By the way, that's not scripted. We actually took it in Africa.]

[Africa?]

[Yep.]

Monsters dominated more than half of Africa. Humanity still controlled Northern Sahara countries like Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, but Southern Sahara Africa was considered a human extinction zone. The lands there belonged to monsters and only the law of the jungle prevailed.

[Was it the Northern or Southern Sahara Desert?]

[Northern, obviously. Monsters in the south are all too strong.]

[I guess you're right. Ah, have you met the monster king?]

Yoo Yeonha jokingly asked. All sorts of monster tales came from Southern Sahara Africa. The most famous was about a monster king. According to tales, the monster king possessed intelligence rivaling that of humans and also had subordinates with equal intelligence. They gathered Africa's monsters to attack humanity.

[No, but you'll meet the monster king yourself in 10 years.] [By the way, how did you know about the monster king?]

"Pft."

Yoo Yeonha laughed. Kim Hajin sounded serious, but he had to be kidding, right? She changed the subject without much thought.

[Oh right, thanks for the ginseng you recently sent.]

[Sent? You mean sold.]

[It's the same thing. Thanks to you, we're almost ready to announce our new potion. It'll be Essential Pharmacy's official debut item. I'm sure it'll turn the field upside down.]

[Congrats, that means the stocks will go up. Oh right, call me when you're conducting the tests for that potion. I'll do it for free.]

[Hm? No, it's fine...]

Yi Jin-Ah returned as Yoo Yeonha excitedly texted to the point that the other apprentices grew suspicious.

“Ah, sorry. I got distracted for a moment.”

She bitterly smiled as Yoo Yeonha wrapped up her conversation and turned off her smartwatch.

“So *uh...* where were we? Oh yeah, everyone! Say hi to our new apprentices.”

Yi Jin-Ah turned around and yelled at the heroes staring at the computer.

“Oh? They're pretty cute. Good luck, kids.”

“Hit us up if you need any help.”

“You know that we're rank 1, right? You have to work hard if you want to survive here.”

They each encouraged the apprentices. Of course, they didn't forget to secretly bow to Yoo Yeonha.

“Alright, let’s leave. It looks like the lounge is going to be packed today. Let’s see... *ah*, let’s go to my office.”

Yi Jin-Ah led the apprentices out.

* * *

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan stood in front of Creator’s Sacred Grace. *Whish*— A cold wind blew dry leaves across the entrance.

“You should treat me better.”

Yi Yeonghan spoke as he nudged Kim Suho. They were the only cadets that chose Creator’s Sacred Grace. Yi Yeonghan would’ve chosen Essence of the Strait if Kim Suho hadn’t persuaded him.

“When did I ever not treat you well? You got rank 8 thanks to me since I helped you train.”

“Oh please, you ran away to Baekdu Mountain for summer break.”

“...Still.”

At one point, Creator’s Sacred Grace had fallen all the way to rank 20, but they had climbed back to rank 13 with Yun Seung-Ah as the new leader and their successful dungeon campaigns.

Cadets still didn’t choose Creator’s Sacred Grace even though the guild threw away its pride and selected cadets under rank 100. None of the cadets chose them and no one could blame them. They simply had no reason to choose Creator’s Sacred Grace, which was still under public scrutiny, when better choices existed.

“Let’s go in.”

“*Ah*, my future is going to be ruined because of you.”

“Oh please, what matters is what kind of a hero you become. Is what guild you’re in that important?”

“Of course it is, you bastard...”

While Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan argued...

“Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan.”

A soft voice entered their ears. They immediately stopped and turned to see guild leader Yun Seung-Ah.

“Thank you for choosing Creator’s Sacred Grace.”

She came out to greet the apprentice heroes despite her status. Ssss— A gentle breeze blew and Yun Seung-Ah’s long hair fluttered in the wind. Her sweet scent drifted towards them and she smiled. Both of them froze at her beauty.

“To think the guild leader would come to greet us. This feels quite nice.”

Yi Yeonghan murmured and ran up to Yun Seung-Ah.

“Guild leader Yun Seung-Ah! I’m such a big fan of yours—!”

* * *

August 10, 2027. I was 30% finished with remodeling the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout. I came out to the lobby and wiped away my sweat after finishing today’s work.

“Oh, newbie. What did you make today?”

The friendly voice belonged to Setryn, the seat of turquoise. I smiled back at her.

“Who knows?”

The hideout became fancier after more than a year of remodeling and the members often came by to hang out now after hearing the news.

“Anything interesting?”

“No, I wouldn’t say interesting.”

Currently, I had only finished Boss, Khalifa, Jain, and Setryn’s rooms. I also made a workshop, a training room (in progress), a gaming room, and a bathroom.

I received sufficient payment from each member for their rooms. Khalifa gave me a blue rock stone, Jain gifted me a bracelet for improving energy circulation, and Setryn handed me medicine that improved... stamina.

“I’m working on a hot spring.”

“Hot spring?”

Setryn smiled. “How did you know I love hot springs?”

I didn’t plan on making one, but I found an underground water reservoir.

“Um, it’s not ready yet. It won’t be finished for at least a week.”

“Is it mixed bathing?”

She licked her lips, a rather seductive habit of hers. I shook my head.

“No, it’s separated.”

“...But we can still go in together, right?”

Kiik—

The door to the cave’s biggest room suddenly opened and Boss came out. She seemed to have just woken up and looked drowsy.

“Boss is up. I’ll leave then. Tell me when the hot spring is done.”

Setryn smiled and returned to her room.

“*Haam.*”

Boss rubbed her eyes and trudged to the couch before lying down with disheveled hair. For the record, she wore black pajamas made from silk. No one had gifted them to her, but she began wearing them about 2 months ago. When I asked about it, she called them precious items for a wonderful sleep.

“What happened to only needing 5 hours of sleep per week?”

“...”

Boss suddenly raised her head and looked at me.

“Was that directed at me?”

“No.”

“I see... *huaam.*”

She yawned and buried herself in the couch. Boss was obsessed with my furniture now. I couldn’t blame her since they also turned out better than I anticipated.

[Boss’ Bed] [Superior grade] [Contains 3% magic power] — Magic Power Allure: Mental and physical exhaustion will be washed away while resting in this bed. Waking up in the morning on this bed will increase your perseverance by 0.3 points. — Artistic Design: This bed’s beauty will make you want to lie down.

[Creator: Kim Hajin]

I could now make furniture that contained magic power. It felt natural since I could transform stigma’s magic power into tools and refine magic power itself into furniture. The furniture I made became masterpieces. *Look at those brilliant effects!* Sleeping in that bed for just a day would wash away a week’s worth of exhaustion.

The most important detail was the final line, [*Creator: Kim Hajin*]. This meant the world acknowledged my furniture-making skills. If I continued, my name itself could add beneficial effects to items. Of course, I would have to keep working hard for at least 3 years.

“Newbie.”

Boss called me with her eyes still closed.

“Yes?”

“My hair feels itchy.”

She expressed her desire for me to comb her hair.

“You should wash your hair first—”

“It’s itchy.”

Boss bobbed her head up and down.

“It’s itchy, it’s itchy.”

She began to throw a tantrum and bounced up and down on the couch.

“It’s itchy.”

“...Alright.”

I began to comb her hair. It was cleaner than I expected. I wouldn’t have believed that she just woke up if I hadn’t just seen her.

“*Hm?* You’re combing her hair again?”

Jain walked out of her room. It seemed she just finished reading as she wore a pair of round glasses.

“Ah, yes. She asked for it.”

“Pft, look at Boss slumping on the couch. So cute. Oh yeah, newbie. Have you read the Violet Times?”

“Violet Times? The newspaper?”

“Yep, you’re in it as part of their top 10 rookies to watch out for. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a djinn or a hero as long as you debuted within the past 3 years.”

Jain showed me a copy of the Violet Times.

[Top 10 Rookies To Watch] 1. Pandemonium Arena’s Rising Star, Red Death — 2. Korea’s hero, Kim Suho — 3. Jeronimo Mercenary’s Black Wolf, Fenrir — 4. Descendant of the Past Era’s Savior, Shin Jonghak...

“Congrats, you’re third place.”

“Oh, this is the newspaper Violet Banquet puts out.”

“Yep. Wait, don’t tell me... you still don’t have a Violet Banquet ID?”

“No, I do. It’s just you have to be above a certain rank to receive these. It’s expensive too.”

Violet Banquet published their newspaper every week. You had to be at least red ruby rank to subscribe and I also heard it cost 3 million points per month.

“Still, take a look. It’s fun. Lots of countries have been asking for you recently, especially America and China.”

“Mmm... those two countries are huge, so they naturally have more monsters to worry about.”

My specialty was slaughtering monsters. Under the right conditions, I could decimate over a thousand monsters under intermediate rank, grade 1 without any help. No friendly fire would occur either with my

extreme accuracy. Just a month ago, I went to China's Guangdong Province and slaughtered hundreds of invading monsters in a single day. They treated me like a hero afterwards.

The most important aspect was time. The source of my fame came from the fact that I cleaned up the region in just a day without any civilian casualties.

"I'm going to rest this month. I've been out too much this past month."

"Sure, just make sure you accept at least one mission a month."

Jain placed a stack of documents on the couch.

"Pick one from here and tell me."

"Got it."

"I have something to do, so I'm leaving. Take care of Boss. Bye-bye."

Jain disappeared into the portal. I picked up the documents in one hand while combing Boss' hair with the other.

"Mmm."

I ignored Boss' joyful humming and turned the page with stigma's magic power.

"Eh?"

One document caught my attention and I stopped combing Boss' hair.

"...Newbie?"

"..."

"Newbie?"

Kong, kong, kong. Boss unhappily bounced up and down because I stopped for too long. *Kong, kong, kong.*

“Alright, alright, stop bouncing. Your hair is going to get messy again.”

I placed the documents down and began combing Boss’ hair again.

“Like always, I’ll only do it for 15 minutes a day,” I firmly spoke.

“Just 5 more minutes.”

“No.”

“*Hmph.*”

* * *

August 14, 2027. Essence of the Strait’s apprentice heroes went out on a dispatch mission on a blazing summer afternoon. Dispatch missions came from local governments, but guilds also had to perform them by the central government’s directive.

“Dispatch missions are rare. Guilds are only required to perform 6 a year, so we take one every other month.”

A total of 8 guild members took part in today’s dispatch mission. Three were apprentices and five were active heroes.

“Today’s mission is quite easy.”

The local government wanted them to destroy a goblin settlement. Goblins weren’t necessarily the easiest targets and apprentices also participated, so a high-intermediate rank, grade 6 hero led the team.

“Don’t underestimate them just because they’re goblins.”

The team leader, Im Joongjin, spoke. Rachel, Yohei, and Rose nodded with serious faces.

“But don’t be too tense either.”

“The most important thing in urban battles is to prevent civilian casualties. Be careful that your magic power doesn’t fly off somewhere.”

The vice leader of the team, Jeon Yohwa, also added. The goblins built their base in a run-down building on Incheon’s outskirts. These goblins boldly encroached on human territory.

“Alright, let’s wait 30 minutes for the police to finish blocking the roads. Then active heroes will go in first. Apprentices can slowly follow.”

“Yes!”

“Understood!”

Rachel firmly replied with a straight back.

Chapter 149

Three Years (3)

Essence of the Strait's dispatch team slowly entered the building that became a goblin settlement. *Cough, cough.* The acrid fog inside the abandoned building stung Rachel's throat whenever she breathed, so she covered her face with magic power.

"How long has this building been abandoned to be in such a poor state?"

Yohei asked as he cut apart the fog with his katana. His archaic manner of speech sounded a bit annoying, but Rachel wondered the same. They were still in Incheon, even if only on the outskirts. Residential and shopping districts existed only 2 km away. How could goblins have settled in this building?

"The settlement was reported 2 weeks ago. By the looks of it, someone's been doing goblin business here. It must've been easy for the culprit to avoid any eyes since the military is concentrated around the coastal area.

Im Joongjin murmured with a sigh. He didn't seem happy with how things looked.

"Goblin business?"

"Yeah. Goblins specialize in crafting. They can be used to obtain all sorts of items and materials if properly managed, but by the looks of it..."

Im Joongjin brushed his hair back and kicked a human corpse on the ground. Mushrooms and spores already infested the body.

"They must not have thought the goblins would trick them instead. What a bunch of fools."

Rachel finally understood what happened. The human corpses inside the building must've belonged to those who reared the goblins, but ended up being killed by them instead. Cube's textbooks recorded many such incidents. Human greed had no bounds.

— Air, here, bad.

Rachel's elemental whispered to her. She glanced to her shoulder at the winged, slime-like elemental that coughed.

— I want to leave.

“...”

Rachel finally learned how to talk to elementals after painstaking efforts. She even named this cute wind elemental, Sunday. She only had one complaint. Sunday spoke in Korean. It didn't make much sense to Rachel who natively spoke English.

“Hang in there.”

Rachel spoke in English.

— What, was, that?

However, the elemental couldn't understand her. Was it because Rachel's master, Shin Yeohwa, was Korean?

“Just hang in there.”

“The local patrol force estimated about 200-300 goblins in this building.”

Im Joongjin stopped in front of the abandoned building's entrance and gave a quick briefing. A goblin settlement with a population of 200-300 was similar to naturally occurring ones in the wild.

“Mercenaries are waiting outside, but it'll be troublesome if goblins escape to the city. Like I said before, we'll split into two teams with

Team 1 to the right and Team 2 to the left. Don't forget, our priority is to prevent goblins from escaping."

The 8 members divided into their respective teams. Rachel and Rose went with Im Joongjin's Team 1 while Yohei joined vice leader Jeon Yohwa's Team 2.

"Immediately send a signal if you encounter an emergency."

"Yes, sir."

The teams wished each other luck and split off. Rachel headed to the right with Im Joongjin. They easily took care of the first floor goblins with light attacks, but encountered a problem as soon as they entered the second floor.

— *Krrk*.

— *Keeek*.

Dozens of goblins rushed and surrounded them.

"Front and flank! I'll handle the front!"

Im Joongjin quickly ordered as the battle began. He took out his greatsword and sent sword waves flying. His attack instantly slashed apart 10 or so goblins. However, trouble lay on the other side with a group of goblins using poisonous darts.

"Sunday."

Rachel remained calm. No matter how threatening, they were only blow darts.

— *Un*.

Sunday unleashed a blast of wind that changed the darts' course. The goblins panicked as the darts flew back to them. Rachel stormed forward without missing this opening.

“Right side is done.”

“Left is finished too. Thank you for taking care of the darts.”

Rose smiled at Rachel. They became close friends perhaps because they both came from England.

“Good, well done.”

Im Joongjin praised them after their first battle. They continued to sweep through the goblins on the second floor. The building had all sorts of traps, but Rachel’s earth elemental, Okja, easily took care of them. The group smoothly proceeded to the third floor.

“Eh?”

The ground suddenly rumbled and Rachel’s earth elemental conveyed its thoughts to her. A huge explosion was rising from the basement. Rachel could feel it as well.

“Everyone, jump outside!”

Rachel quickly alerted them and telepathically ordered her elementals to fly towards the other members and form barriers.

KWANG—!

A huge explosion occurred and the concrete floor crumbled. The entire building began to collapse. Everyone jumped out before the explosion erupted and safely landed on the ground.

“Team leader!”

Team 2 seemed to have escaped as well.

“Are you all okay?”

“Yes, thanks to Yohei’s sixth sense.”

“Haha, thank you for compli... eh?”

“W-What is that?”

Destroying the entire building was plan b, so they weren't as surprised when the building suddenly collapsed. However, an unbelievable scene took place in front of them. The dispatch team simply stared.

“Well, I'll be damned.”

Im Joongjin smirked as goblins climbed out of the rubble and dug through the solid ground. An army of goblins appeared with too many to count.

“Would you look at that. They even have a goblin warrior.”

— *Krrr...*

One particular goblin stood out from the rest. He held a vicious club in one hand and puffed out smoke from his nose. Even among various goblin species, a goblin warrior boasted the greatest strength with an intermediate rank, grade 3 rating. To make matters worse, a total of 15 goblin warriors stood in front of the army, leading the smaller groups like centurions. *Koong, koong, koong*. Their tiny footsteps caused a huge rumble.

“Team leader, it looks like this settlement was made a long time ago.”

“I already sent a request for reinforcement. Don't be afraid and just prevent them from reaching the city. We'll only have to hold out for 5 minutes, or 10 at most.”

— *Krrrk!*

— *Kueeeek!*

There had to be thousands. The sheer number completely overwhelmed the dispatch team. However, they didn't give up and got into the most efficient formation to take on multiple enemies. They stood a decent distance between each other to prevent any goblin

from heading to the city.

— *Kueeeek!*

As expected, the goblin warriors led the charge. An especially strong one charged at Rachel. The troll-sized goblin emanated a red aura as Rachel's rapier clashed with its club. *KWANG!* She felt the difference in power as soon as they made contact.

“Be careful!”

Im Joongjin shouted before it was too late. He fought 4 goblin warriors by himself.

“The warriors are using drugs!”

Their red aura proved that they had used potions.

— *Kuoooo!*

The goblin warrior fighting Rachel swung its club again.

“*Kuuk!*”

Several dozen tons pressed down on Rachel's rapier. She leaped back since close combat didn't seem like a good idea. Goblins had no attributes, so she planned to unleash the power of her elementals using her weapon, Galatyn. However, she didn't have enough time.

The goblins practically threw their bodies at her. Tiny goblins jumped on her legs and hindered her movements. Archer goblins also shot poisonous darts from the back. Rachel could tell these goblins were well-organized for battle.

“*Huup!*”

She unleashed her magic power in every direction to blow off the goblins sticking to her.

— *Kuoooo!*

The goblin warrior didn't miss this opening and swung its club at her. Rachel held up Galatyn. However, the impact she expected never arrived.

“...?”

Instead, she could see strange flashes of light from the sky. A blue streak struck the goblin warrior's head.

KOONG!

The goblin warrior froze and bled from its orifices, but it glared at Rachel without dying. It tried to swing its club again even as its hands trembled, but she beheaded the goblin warrior with Galatyn. Then she turned to help the others.

— *Kueek!*

— *Krrrk!*

— *Kuoooo!*

However, the other goblins fell from the streaks of light that also struck the goblin warrior. Rachel lowered her weapon and fell into a daze.

“What's going on?”

Ssss— Blue raindrops fell from the sky. They left behind a trail like shooting stars as they struck thousands of goblins. The goblins' dull weapons couldn't block them.

“Oh?”

“Wow.”

The dispatch team stopped fighting after seeing the mysterious

reinforcement. They all turned around at the same time and became speechless.

“*Haa.*”

Hundreds of blue streaks fell from the sky like stars or heavy rain. They only targeted the goblins and none could escape their reach.

“*Um*, team leader. This is...”

“It must be magic. So pretty...”

The beautiful shooting stars didn’t suit the situation and felt like they came out of a fairytale.

“It must be the reinforcement team. Let’s go. We can’t just sit around. Looks like goblin warriors can withstand the attack. We have to deal the finishing blow.”

The group regained their smiles after the reinforcements’ overwhelming firepower. Only Rachel kept a serious expression. She had an idea as to who had helped them and turned in the direction of the shooting stars with a sense of nostalgia.

“A helicopter?”

* * *

Chuf, chuf, chuf— The propeller roared and my clothes fluttered from the wind. I sat on the edge of the helicopter 2000 ft in the air and aimed my anti-material sniper rifle at the goblin warrior in front of Rachel. *Click*. I immediately pulled the trigger. The recoil pushed my shoulder as the bullet pierced the goblin warrior’s head. However, it didn’t instantly die as Rachel dealt the finishing blow.

“*Mm*, I guess not all goblins are weak.”

A 6 year old settlement would surely produce some monstrosities. Goblin settlements rarely lasted more than a year before guilds or other monsters destroyed them. However, this one managed to grow

with the help of humans.

[We were rearing goblins and screwed up!] — I've been rearing goblins in an abandoned building in Incheon's outskirts. I must've been in this line of work for 7 years. At first, I was wary of everyone and cautious about everything, but I grew careless as I gained experience. I made over a billion won, which only hindered my judgment... The damned goblins were too clever. They dug a tunnel underground and expanded their settlement without any of us noticing! My employees and I found out about a month ago, but the goblins immediately killed everyone. I was the only one who escaped. I'm afraid of dying to goblins, but I was even more afraid of being arrested. In the end, I ran away without reporting it to the police... I'm writing this request with what little conscience I have left and am offering 3 million Violet Banquet points. Please destroy the goblin settlement in Yotongho's abandoned building.

I recently received this request. Honestly, this was one of the episodes I quickly glossed over without detail.

“I didn't expect this...”

I changed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle. I didn't feel anything in particular from the goblin army. I simply pulled the trigger while looking at the ground with my thousand-mile eyes. Hundreds of bullets shot forward in the sunset.

Tudududu—

My firing speed exceeded even the standard for superhumans.

[Rapid Fire] The ability to quickly shoot something. Will use a portion of stigma's magic power to exceed your weapon's structural and mechanical limits.

This was one of the low rank gifts I obtained from Master Sharpshooter and Dexterity linking. It only possessed the first effect when I received it, but I added the second line with quite a bit of SP. As a result, I could now empty 2 clips in 1-2 seconds.

“There.”

I had cleaned up the army by the time I snapped out of my daze.
Elapsed time: 4 minutes. Used magazines: 48. I thoroughly slaughtered every goblin, even the ones trying to escape. The other heroes finished off the goblin warriors that the assault rifle couldn't kill.

“About 1300 bullets.”

I didn't gain anything from this mission in terms of profit. I hadn't used the machine gun because of costs. It took 1320 bullets to kill about 4000 goblins. Assuming that each bullet was worth 100,000 won, that still added up to 132 million won. I wouldn't be surprised if Yoo Yeonha regretted giving me a black card. After all, I spent close to 500 million won per month for just bullets.

— Oi, Hajin. Is this stone tablet the item you wanted?

Khalifa's voice sounded from the transceiver in my ear.

“Stone tablet? Can you video call me?”

Khalifa offered to help today in exchange for expanding his room and setting up a pool table.

— Okay, take a look.

I placed the Desert Eagle down and looked at my smartwatch.

“Ah, yes. That must be it.”

— There are other things too. I'm grabbing whatever I can get my hands on.

“Just make sure you leave some behind. It'll be weird if nothing's left in the settlement.”

— Ok.

A portal appeared behind me and Khalifa walked out with the stone tablet along with a cane, urn, potions, a magician's hat, and other

loot.

“So what does this do? I understand what the other items are for, but I can’t quite grasp this one.”

Khalifa muttered as he examined the stone tablet.

“You know how goblins like to do ceremonies and rituals? This is a ritual item they created.”

The goblins in this settlement dreamed of rebellion. Humans had reared them in the beginning, but they secretly dug an underground tunnel and almost achieved an impossible dream. This stone tablet contained their grand dream that should’ve been... the conquest of Incheon. They were too ambitious and their opponent was none other than the Korean government. They simply stood no chance. In any case, I felt happy since I obtained this unique item.

“I see.”

Khalifa handed me the stone tablet without further questions.

“Anyways...”

He stared at me with interest.

“You sure took care of them quickly. I can see why you specialize in mass slaughter.”

“You don’t need to praise me. Those high-intermediate rank heroes would’ve been fine even without me.”

They might’ve taken more time and some goblins may have escaped to the city. However, I slaughtered every single one. That was what I excelled at.

“Don’t forget your promise.”

“Of course not.”

“Great.”

Khalifa smiled and waved before disappearing. I looked at the ground once again and made eye contact with Rachel. No, only I could see her. Rachel shouldn't be able to see me from this distance. My heart slightly thumped from seeing her after such a long time.

“...Haaa.”

Was this caused by luck too? Something came up and I had to come here in a helicopter. I originally planned to quietly take care of it with just Khalifa.

“Hmm.”

I had no reason to stay now that things had been settled. I should go home and check the items I obtained today. I sat in the driver's seat of my super helicopter, which had a 43% boost from the Random Consolidation System. For the record, piloting a helicopter felt quite natural.

[Horse Saddle] [Antique] A horse saddle used by a nameless cavalryman 500 years ago. You will be able to ride better if you sit on this saddle.

The saddle I bought in Clancy Islet applied to every rideable object. Of course, that included helicopters.

Chapter 150

Three Years (4)

I went home after returning my helicopter to Essential Armory. Once again, I checked my dimensional pouch as I stood in front of the door. I chose to keep some of the useful items Khalifa brought back.

[Ceremonial Magic Hat] [Low-intermediate rank] Will improve spirit-wielding abilities, including rituals and ceremonies.

[Ceremonial Ritual Wand] [Low-intermediate rank] Will improve spirit-wielding abilities, including rituals and ceremonies.

Not many items related to spirits existed. However, these items didn't suit me. I planned to give them to a cute girl much better at wielding spirits and she would look even cuter with them. *BeebeebEEP*— I entered the password and opened the door.

— Four apples grow on a tree and there are 8 trees. Suppose these apples are distributed among 16 people...

I heard an internet lecture as I walked in. She didn't come to greet me, but I still smiled. Then I sneaked into the living room and glanced at the desk.

"Four apples and 8 trees... so then you multiply 4 by 8..."

Evandel wriggled her fingers as she worked on a math problem. Hayang sprawled next to her and slept like a human. I sneaked behind Evandel as she glanced back and forth between the lecture and the problem set.

"...Evandel?"

I whispered her name. Startled, she slightly jumped and turned

around. She smiled when she saw me. — I'm studying. She proudly whispered and shrugged. Was she talking quietly because she was still in class? I decided to wait for now.

Tiring—

I received a message.

[Hajin, payment from China just came. Take a look.]

It came from Park Soohyuk, the CEO of SH Agency.

[Got it.]

Park Soohyuk probably grew the most in recent years. The SH Agency he founded 4 years ago rapidly expanded. His company motto, clear-headed honesty, attracted many hunters and mercenaries. The way his company operated earned everyone's trust. SH Agency rose into the top 20 of its field with Yoo Yeonha's full support and the monsters I killed.

[Oh right, have you tried contacting Kim Suho?]

[I did, but it's not easy to persuade him.]

SH Agency should continue to grow even without Kim Suho. However, it didn't feel right without Kim Suho. I wasn't too worried about Yun Seung-Ah next to him.

[Tell Creator's Sacred Grace that you'll provide them with information on dungeons.]

Park Soohyuk also had a gift called, Search. He could discover 4-5 dungeons a year.

[Yeah, good idea.]

— Well done. Now it's time for more practice.

Evandel's online lecture finally ended.

"*Aang*."

She stretched and jumped into my arms.

"Hajin."

Evandel rubbed her face in my chest like usual as I stroked her hair.

"I brought you presents."

"Presents?"

Her eyes widened.

"Yep, here you go."

Tada— I handed her the magician's hat and wand. Her mouth opened wide.

"*Oooh*, what's this?"

"Try wearing it. It will help you use your *um*... powers better."

I placed the magician's hat on her small head and made her hold the wand. She looked like a little witch. Now she only needed a cape.

"Wow, you're so cute."

"*Hehe*, really?"

Evandel jumped out of my arms and ran to a mirror.

"*Hmm*."

I fell in thought while looking at her. Soon, I would finish a space for Evandel to practice spirit magic. I wanted her to train for at least 3

hours a day.

“Hayang, look. It’s so pretty.”

She wouldn’t hate it, right? For Evandel, spirit magic should be like playing with Legos. I should ask her later.

* * *

October 3, 2027. I installed the stone tablet into Chameleon Troupe’s hideout as the autumn trees changed colors.

“What’s that?” Boss asked after watching me with interest.

“Our new employees.”

“Employees?”

“Yep.”

This was the main item I wanted from Incheon’s goblin settlement.

[Goblin Tablet] [Magic Vessel] [Flame attribute] A stone tablet that contains the life-long wish of goblins. Can permanently summon goblins. — Summonable Count: Goblin Shaman – 1, Goblin (normal) – 3 — Growth: Goblins can rank up and specialize after gaining experience. The number of goblins you can summon will also increase.

I couldn’t recall if it was Aileen or Nicholas, but an extremely lazy high rank hero had used the goblin tablet in the original story. This item was extremely practical, but didn’t have much use at home, so I brought it to the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout.

“Employees? This thing?”

Boss curiously stared at the stone tablet.

“Yep.”

“*Hmm*, my only flaw is with appraisal... to me, this just looks like a stone tablet with a goblin drawn on it.”

“You’re not wrong. I got it from the goblin settlement in Incheon.”

“*Mn*, I saw the news too.”

“I see.”

I scratched my head. The goblin settlement from a month ago had been reported worldwide. It caught everyone’s attention since it happened in Korea. The videos taken by the mercenaries who ran away only made the matter worse. The name of Jeronimo’s Fenrir rapidly spread and netted me a decent amount of SP.

“Boss, you like coffee, right?”

“What do you mean?”

She slowly shook her head.

“I don’t like anything, especially when it comes to food.”

“You’re lying again.”

“Lying? *Ehem*, you’re doubting your boss too much recently.”

Boss frowned and glared at me. I had no choice but to nod.

“Alright, if you say so. I’m planning on making a mini coffee shop.”

“Coffee shop?”

“Yep, one of these guys will operate it. They’ll be in charge of the hot spring too.”

“...”

Boss tilted her head, unable to understand.

“I’ll just show you.”

I infused magic power into the stone tablet. Then it shone and spat out 4 lumps of light that transformed into goblins.

“*Oho?*”

Boss’ eyes widened.

— *Krrk.*

— *Krrr.*

“Nice to meet you. I’m your owner.”

— *Krrk?*

— *Krr?*

“Be quiet. I’m going to assign you jobs.”

I pointed at the smallest and seemingly quickest goblin.

“You’re in charge of cleaning.”

Then I pointed at the goblin with the prettiest hands.

“You’re the barista.”

— *Krrk.*

“You’ll be making coffee. I’ll show you how to do it later.”

I brewed better coffee with Dexterity, but I would find it annoying and tiresome. Boss would also grow addicted once she tasted my coffee.

“Next, you’re in charge of the hot spring.”

I assigned the third goblin its job.

“And you’re... a shaman.”

— *Keruru.*

The last goblin held a wand, unlike the others.

“Alright, you’ll watch over the other goblins.”

They couldn’t rebel or go against my orders. Still, it didn’t feel right to give a shaman the same level of work as normal goblins.

— *Kererere.*

The goblin shaman seemed happy as it laughed.

“Oh right, if a magician comes by, help him.”

— *Keru.*

Chameleon Troupe also had a magician. Hirano Arashi, the seat of brown, was a master of destruction magic and stronghold creation.

“*Oho*, this is interesting.”

Boss muttered while watching the scene.

“Can I order them around too?”

“Of course. I’m their owner, but they should listen to Boss as well.”

Tirring — I got a call from Yoo Yeonha.

“*Um*, let me take this.”

“Sure. Oi, you come here.”

— *Krrrk.*

“*Mm*, this is fun.”

I left Boss with the goblins and entered my room.

“Hello?”

— Hello?

Yoo Yeonha sounded a bit thorny.

“*Ah*, what’s up?”

— Well, you see... I just saw your statement for this month.

I felt a pang of guilt.

— 6000 bullets and 3 drones... You used close to a billion won this month.

That was more than I thought, but I had no choice. Creating magic bullets required an expensive material called mana crystals. The cost would only be astronomical since I used hundreds of bullets per day on average.

“I thought you said I could use however much I wanted.”

— Well... that’s true. Honestly, I don’t mind too much.

“Then why did you call me?”

— I just had a good idea. Do you mind if I use Fenrir’s name for marketing?

“Marketing?”

— Yep.

“Quite greedy, aren’t you? How big are you trying to get? Isn’t your pharmaceutical company going public soon?”

— I’m still far from being satisfied.

Essence of the Strait grew bigger by the day. No, Yoo Yeonha grew bigger by the day and not in the bad sense. Essential Pharmacy’s debut potion blew up and the other businesses she had also showed great promise.

“So, what marketing?”

— Nothing much. We’ll just use your name for advertisement. You know, like ‘Bullets Used By Fenrir’ and so on.

“Will that be effective?”

— Of course! Mercenaries surprisingly have role models. Once they pick someone as their idol, they tend to use everything he does.

“I see... have your sales been bad recently?”

— No, it’s the opposite. Our bullet-making technology is improving by the day and the gun business is always profitable.

Ordinary people could only use guns to fight monsters. Of course, no one could reach my firepower. I had aether and my settings intervention had amplified my Desert Eagle with several effects.

“Well, go ahead.”

— Thank you.

“No problem.”

I almost hung up when Yoo Yeonha quickly added.

— Oh right, I saw the video of you fighting in Incheon. You were awesome.

“...I’m hanging up.”

I felt uncomfortable being a hot topic even though it earned me SP.

— Don’t worry. Nayun is on Baekdu Mountain, so she won’t see it.

I flinched.

“No, it’s not that...”

— Ah, I’m hanging up now. I have to go somewhere.

“Alright, have fun.”

— You too.

Tk. Yoo Yeonha hung up first. I briefly stared at my smartwatch before jumping into bed.

* * *

January 1, 2028. A new year dawned on us. Everyone hosted all sorts of celebrations across the globe. Pandemonium also held an exciting event called, Fight Club. They opened their famous Ten Thousand Demon Arena to the public.

“I’m surprised you’re sitting here so peacefully.”

The demon rank warrior’s waiting room remained peaceful despite the violence outside.

“Hello? Are you going to just ignore me?” Bell asked Jin Sahyuk lying in bed and reading a newspaper.

“What point is there in going down anyways. They’re all trash,” Jin Sahyuk muttered apathetically.

“Sigh.”

Bell scratched his head and sat on the couch. He suddenly thought back to a year ago when Jin Sahyuk announced her debut in the arena. At the time, Bell hoped she would get crushed. He wanted her to learn humility and modesty. However, his wish didn't come true. It turned out to be the opposite. Jin Sahyuk crushed her way through the arena until she gained over 40 victories and obtained a personal waiting room with the title, Demon.

“Wait, you're reading a newspaper?”

Bell grew curious. Jin Sahyuk liked reading books, but she never read newspapers.

“Take a look if you're curious.”

Jin Sahyuk opened this week's issue of the Violet Times. Bell widened his eyes and read the contents.

[Top 10 Rookies To Watch (New Year vers.)] 1. Demon of the Arena, Red Death — 2. Follower of Michael, Kim Suho — 3. Slaughter Wolf, Fenrir...

Violet Banquet strictly judged all the candidates and renewed the rankings monthly. The list meant quite a lot.

“Top 10 Rookies. You've been first ever since you debuted.”

Jin Sahyuk smiled as she stared at the newspaper.

“Kim Suho's second.”

Her face contorted with rage when Bell mentioned the second ranked rookie.

“Kim Suho, Kim Suho...”

She began to murmur his name.

“By the way, can’t you see the name below that?”

“What.”

“Below Kim Suho.”

Bell pointed at the name below Kim Suho. *3. Slaughter Wolf, Fenrir...*

“Fenrir? Is he a werewolf?” Jin Sahyuk tilted her head.

“No.”

Bell couldn’t blame her.

“This is him. The coin dude.”

“It’s him?”

Immediately, her face distorted and she stared at the name. “Coin, coin...”

She didn’t know his real name and began to mutter something about coins. Her voice contained the same level of rage as when she muttered Kim Suho’s name.

“What an idiot.”

Bell sighed. However, he didn’t mind Jin Sahyuk gritting her teeth. Her rage would surely serve as a foundation for further growth.

“I think he’ll come find me.”

Jin Sahyuk spoke with a somewhat serious expression. Bell sneered.

“Pft, and why do you think that?”

“I heard there’s going to be a huge event in the arena next year. I think we’ll meet then.”

Bell had also heard about that as well. The Pandemonium Arena owner announced that he would host a huge competition for an item in 2029.

“I see, then you might be right.”

Bell grinned.

“Do you always sound like an ass? Screw off before I kick you out.”

Jin Sahyuk hadn’t changed a bit.

* * *

March 1, 2028. The third year cadets finally completed their apprenticeships. Rachel stood in front of Essence of the Strait’s entrance to say goodbye to the comrades who had laughed, cried, and sweated together with her for the past year.

“*Haa...*”

She had steeled her heart before the day began. So many people she had grown close with stood in front of her. Team leader Im Joongjin and vice leader Jeon Yohwa had guided her for the past year. Her former classmates: Rose, Yi Jiyeon, and Yohei were now official members of Essence of the Strait. And finally... Yoo Yeonha.

Rachel felt sadness and regret. She smiled bitterly and straightened her posture as she came to terms with their parting.

“Thank you for everything.”

She bowed respectfully as the royal court had taught her.

“Goodbye.”

“See you.”

“I’ll come visit.”

Yoo Yeonha and everyone else waved at her. Rachel smiled and turned around. A limousine arrived to pick her up. She quickly got into it feeling like she would burst into tears if she hesitated any longer.

“Where should we go, Princess?”

Jeremy Bond, the agent who watched over her from the shadows, asked in her mother tongue. She replied with a trembling voice.

“To the English Royal Court guild, obviously.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

The limousine drove off as she looked outside to capture the moving scenery.

I'm finally leaving Korea.

She felt sentimental and took out her smartwatch to distract herself.

“Eh?”

However, a mercenary's trending name caught her attention.
Jeronimo's Fenrir has defeated another army of monsters.

“I'm hearing a lot about him recently.”

Rachel whispered to herself. Kim Hajin had chosen to become a mercenary. He displayed shocking results and already become famous throughout the world. Of course, most people knew him by his title, Fenrir, since his real name hadn't been officially revealed.

“He never contacted me.”

He said we would meet often. That he'd come visit me in England. Was everything a lie? Rachel pouted, but soon let it go.

He must've been busy. Unlike me who was an apprentice, he must've been

fighting much more difficult enemies in tougher places. He must be sleeping where his life is constantly in danger. That must be the life of a high rank mercenary... probably.

“Huu...”

Rachel tapped on her smartwatch and left a positive comment on an article about Fenrir.

Chapter 151

Three Years (5)

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan sat in front of Yun Seung-Ah. All three had their own worries and their expressions didn't look good.

“Here, it's the official application form.”

Yun Seung-Ah initiated the conversation as she placed two forms on the table. Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan each picked one up.

[Creator's Sacred Grace Application Form]

It offered a starting salary of 400 million won plus performance-based benefits. That was quite the sum compared to the 150-200 million won average that Cube graduates received, especially considering the guild's current situation.

“Oh?”

Yi Yeonghan's expression brightened. His worries seemed to have been monetary. However, Kim Suho felt the opposite. He looked worried at the high salary since Creator's Sacred Grace had been in the red for a while now. Everyone knew because of the daily articles. Creator's Sacred Grace had suffered astronomical damage in lawsuits and settlements to the wounded or deceased of their failed tower campaign. They had to conquer at least 30 small dungeons to make up for their losses.

“It might not be enough, but this is the best we can offer.”

Yun Seung-Ah misunderstood Kim Suho's expression. Honestly, the guild's budget was at its limit. They couldn't afford to give anymore and some of it had even come out of Yun Seung-Ah's pocket.

“No, it’s fine.”

“I’m happy with this amount too.”

Kim Suho didn’t say anything for the sake of Yun Seung-Ah’s pride and Yi Yeonghan signed the form in satisfaction.

“Great, then you can take a look at your offices.”

“Yes!”

“...Yes.”

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan left as Yun Seung-Ah remained alone.

“*Haa.*”

She deeply sighed. *Money. Money. Money.* This word continued to haunt her. She never thought money would be a problem, but she had incurred a 5 billion won debt in the past 2 years.

“My net worth used to be 5 billion won...”

Yun Seung-Ah laughed at herself and picked up her phone. She no longer hesitated to borrow money. Her pride had long disappeared after all the bank trips. Rather than worrying about today, she had to figure out how to survive tomorrow.

Tirring—

— Hello?

“...Hello? Unni?”

— Oh, what’s up?

“It’s me, Yun Seung-Ah.”

— I know.

“*Ha, haha*, right.”

Yun Seung-Ah awkwardly laughed. She chose the easy way out after hesitating.

“How have you been lately?”

— *Hah?* Do you want to reconsider? We still have seats open.

Aileen quickly made a counteroffer. Yun Seung-Ah became speechless.

— Why do you care so much about that guild? Do you want to be a guild leader that much? Even when you have to go through so much? Last time I checked, your guild still ranked 20.

“It’s rank 13 now. We recovered a bit. Plus, it’s always been my dream to become the guild leader of Creator’s Sacred Grace ever since I was young. I achieved my dream, so *um... unni*.”

— What.

Aileen’s words seemed to have loosened her tension. She decided to act a bit more shameless.

“Can you lend me some money?”

* * *

June 2028. Monsters all over the world went wild because of the silver moon phenomenon. Governments issued a state of emergency and ordered guilds to destroy the monster habitats. Kim Suho displayed fantastic results for Creator’s Sacred Grace. He destroyed a settlement of blood bears located in Suwon’s mountain range and became the youngest intermediate rank hero. Soon afterwards, Shin Jonghak also achieved similar results and became an intermediate rank hero.

August 2028. Essence of the Strait founded its monster corpse refinement business along with its mana crystal refinery. Even in Korea, these two factories boasted state-of-the-art mana technology.

“We’ll begin the ribbon-cutting ceremony.”

They held a grand opening to celebrate. Essence of the Strait’s guild leader Yoo Jinwoong, vice leader Yi Jin-Ah, SH Agency’s CEO Park Soohyuk, the mayor of Uijeongbu, and Yoo Yeonha all attended.

Clap, clap, clap— The ribbon-cutting ceremony ended with roaring applause.

“Good work.”

Yoo Yeonha shook hands with Park Soohyuk. These two factories were only possible thanks to Essence of the Strait’s partnership with SH Agency. Their numerous hunters provided the monster corpses and made the cost of production much cheaper.

“So from now on, we should transfer all the monsters that Fenrir kills to this place?”

“Yes, but you can just call him Kim Hajin in front of me.”

“Ah... yes, understood.”

“Then I’ll take my leave.”

“Yes, see you later.”

She bid farewell to Park Soohyuk with a smile and approached her father at the limousine.

October 2028. The number of aerial and oceanic monsters exploded. This sudden increase greatly impacted island countries like Japan and England. A portion of England’s islands and Japan’s Kyushu island had been immediately designated as intermediate rank danger zones.

December 2028. Japan requested assistance from Korea and the Hero Association while England recruited mercenaries to deal with the situation themselves. The rest of the world ridiculed their decision.

February 2029...

A fierce wind blew on the summit of Baekdu Mountain.

“Ready.”

A battle was about to take place. Even the spectators guarded themselves with qi reinforcement because of Baekdu Mountain’s wind. It felt no different than knives that could cut your skin.

“...”

Chae Nayun glared at a man amidst this iron wind. She felt slightly tense and nervous.

“Start.”

Chae Nayun immediately pulled out a 1.8 meter longsword. Chae Shinhyuk had gifted her this historical grade artifact, Highlander’s Claymore. Her opponent only held an ordinary saber.

“Come.”

Chae Nayun didn’t rush. Instead, she swung her sword from a distance. Her longsword instantly transformed into a 20 meter beam. However, her opponent calmly blocked and rushed towards her. *Woong*— As the man’s saber approached, Chae Nayun jumped high enough to touch the clouds. She reversed her grip in the sky and struck down with the ultimate technique she secretly developed.

“*Haaaaap—!*”

She descended with a roar. Objectively speaking, Chae Nayun simply jumped and attacked. Her opponent easily dodged it, but the simple attack made him suspicious. The real attack came next. Chae Nayun twisted her sword, which stabbed into the ground, and magic power

erupted from underneath.

“What?”

The man couldn't react as a thunderous roar rang out. Cracks appeared throughout the arena as though a volcano erupted and terrifying pillars of magic power shot out. One could see that the pillars all resembled swords if they looked closely. The man helplessly flew back as the wave of giant sword pillars swept him.

“...”

Their battle ended in just 3 breaths.

“Chae Nayun wins.”

The judge pronounced her victory.

“Thank you for the lesson.”

Chae Nayun sheathed her sword and bowed. The man she sent flying raised his body and gave her a thumbs up. The spectators watching also cheered and applauded.

“*Heh.*”

Yoo Sihyuk smiled at Chae Nayun as she wiped her sweat and bowed to him.

“You’ve grown a lot.”

Yoo Sihyuk felt genuinely impressed. Chae Nayun was only 21. Only 2 years had passed since she arrived on Baekdu Mountain. However, she grew faster than anyone else and poured every second into practice, allowing her to defeat the instructor who taught her for the past 2 years. Yoo Sihyuk felt a bit sad at the same time.

“As you said, you’re more than ready to return to the secular world.”

Chae Nayun would leave Baekdu Mountain today. She still had a grudge to resolve and debts to repay. Yoo Sihyuk wanted to hold her back as her master. She might've grown in might, but he knew her heart still wavered.

However, Chae Nayun stood firm in her conviction. *KWANG!* She set down her sheathed sword and bowed.

“Thank you for everything.”

Yoo Sihyuk stared at her somewhat dissatisfied. He decided to ask her one last question.

“Do you really plan on joining a guild?”

Chae Nayun became a hero without going through an apprenticeship with Yoo Sihyuk's recommendation. However, he knew her well. Being a mercenary suited her better for what she wanted to accomplish.

“Yes.”

Even so, Chae Nayun nodded. The twisted smile on her face slightly bothered him.

“If you want, I can introduce you to the Vast Expanse.”

“I will have to decline that offer.”

“Why?”

“You sure have a lot of questions.”

“What'd you say?”

Heh. Chae Nayun smirked.

“It's always been my dream to become a hero, so it's only obvious. I don't want to give up on it because of lame excuses.”

She remembered what someone once told her, that it was foolish to give up her dream because of a man. She agreed 100%. She became a hero out of spite and refused to lose.

“Fine, then pack your belongings and leave. I assume you can go down by yourself.”

“Of course.”

“...”

Yoo Sihyuk turned around to hide his hurt expression. Chae Nayun continued bowing as he walked away. *Koong*. She didn't raise her head until her master's door closed.

“You're the best, unni!”

“That was amazing!”

She waved at the younger disciples who treated her like an idol and returned to her room. She had grown quite accustomed to living in this place for the past 2 years.

“Let's see, what do I need to pack...”

She looked around after opening her suitcase. She didn't bring much in the first place. Then she spotted the pack of cigarettes on her desk.

“How many did I smoke today?”

She tilted her head and placed one in her mouth. The smoke entered her lungs as she lit it.

“*Cough*. *Auu*, so bitter.”

She couldn't get used to this acrid smell no matter how many times she smoked. It just didn't suit her. Even so, she still smoked 3 times a day. She felt it was her duty, so she wouldn't forget. It wouldn't weather away with time and she wouldn't forgive. For these reasons,

she took on this hated smell every day.

“Eh?”

She caught sight of a gaming helmet in the corner of her drawer and bitterly laughed. She remembered playing with it often 4 years ago and picked it up to reminisce.

“Hmm.”

Chae Nayun put out the cigarette and lay in bed. *Tok, tok*. She pressed the button on the helmet and found that it still worked.

“Should I give it a try?”

This was her first time in years. The helmet’s iris scanner activated and the world around her turned dark.

[Iris scan has been completed.] [Nayunjajangman, welcome back.]

“Yeah, hi.”

She didn’t plan on playing anything. She only wanted to reminisce, but an alert popped up when she logged in.

[Today is the last day of service for Gladiator of the Century. We would like to warmly thank everyone for all the support throughout the years.]

“Eh?”

The game she used to enjoy that once dominated the gaming scene would end today. It couldn’t withstand the test of time. She felt somewhat bitter and logged in to Gladiator of the Century.

— I logged in one last time T.T

— Me too. I used to love this game.

— Is anyone from the hero clan?

People also came to reminisce like her in the lobby.

“Should I play one last time?”

Chae Nayun looked through her friend list.

“Ah.”

She found someone who felt more like a memory than a friend.

[Extra7 (currently online)]

A smile emerged on her face. She opened the private message window, but her face stiffened at the private conversation she had with him before. It embarrassed and annoyed her.

“Auu, you crazy idiot loser.”

She almost deleted the message log, but stopped. She couldn't bear to watch her younger self's immature conversation, but knew it would disappear once the service ended anyways.

It'll disappear even if I don't erase it. She told herself and slowly typed a message.

[Um, hyung. Are you... awake?]

* * *

I lay in bed without much to do recently. The laptop continued to update and the next episode wouldn't start for a while. As a result, I'd only been training and playing around lately. I grew quite used to this lifestyle thanks to a few dramas and variety shows.

“...Sigh.”

I had trouble falling asleep with all sorts of thoughts constantly plaguing me and suffered from chronic insomnia.

“Oh right.”

The VR helmet by my bed suddenly caught my attention. I put it on thinking I might play a sleep-inducing video, but an alert popped up when I entered the lobby.

[Today is the last day of service for Gladiator of the Century. We would like to warmly thank everyone for all the support throughout the years.]

“Ah, so this is ending.”

I suddenly realized how much time went by. I remembered playing this game a lot in the past. I even made a friend, but never said goodbye as I naturally stopped after I grew busy. I logged in out of curiosity.

“A lot has changed, *huh*.”

I entered a waiting room that didn’t exist in the past. The game developers did everything they could to not fall behind.

“*Hmm*.”

I looked around and reminisced about the old features and observed the new ones.

[Um, hyung. Are you... awake?]

Ding— I suddenly received a message from Nayunjajangman and recalled the past. Honestly, I felt so happy my drowsiness disappeared.

[Yeah, I’m awake. It’s been a while, man.]

[I think so too.]

“Oh?”

The way he talked seemed to have changed after 4 years. He sounded more... mature. It made sense. After all, he had to be an adult now.

[Do you want to play a match?]

Nayunjajangman asked.

[Match?]

[Yep.]

[Sure.]

I felt more than happy to play one last time since the game would close soon. I suddenly stopped in the middle of pressing buttons to host a room. I used to be his master, so I didn't want to lose.

[Let me relog real quick.]

I took off my helmet.

— Scan.

Then I logged back in after consolidating it.

* * *

Extra7: [Go?]

[Go.]

The match began after a brief exchange. I used a saber and a shield while my old master, Extra7, used an axe and shield. The controls felt a bit weird since I hadn't played for a while, but my sharper senses and experience made up for it. At least, that's what I thought.

“Uuk!”

Boom. Extra7's axe struck my shield and pushed my character against the wall. I quickly rolled to the side and dodged his follow-up attack.

“Ik!”

Koong. This time, he attacked my face with his shield.

“Ah, dammit!”

I tried to counterattack after barely dodging. *Whoosh*— However, my character shot up into the air from his sudden summersault. That was it. He killed me with a 108 hit aerial combo. I completely lost the first set.

“Ha, what the hell was that combo? Jesus.”

I laughed out loud. It seemed my old master was still worthy of being my master.

“He’s so good.”

The second set began. This time, I took the fight more seriously and changed my weapon to a longsword.

* * *

[Victory]

“I almost lost.”

Nayunjajangman fought much better than before. Or maybe I got worse. His sharp and reckless counterattacks gave me a hard time.

[Thank you for the match. I see you’re just as good as before.]

Nayunjajangman messaged me as soon as the match ended.

[You improved a lot. Did you continue playing?]

[No, what about you?]

[I didn't play either. I just logged in after hearing that the service was ending today.]

[Wow, then you must be super talented. I'm impressed, hyung.]

"Pft."

The way he talked made me laugh. The kid who used to ask for dating advice had grown into a full-fledged adult.

[Ah, hyung, you're currently active, right?]

Jajangman suddenly asked a strange question. *Active?* This word meant multiple things in this world.

[Well, I guess you could say that. What about you?]

Did he also become a mercenary?

[I'm not active yet, but I will be soon.]

[Oh? Are you a trainee?]

[Something like that.]

I see, so that's why he became so serious.

[Good luck.]

[Thank you. Ah, don't you think we'll meet one day?]

I smiled. *Regardless of whether you're an apprentice hero or an apprentice mercenary, I'm no longer someone you can meet so easily.*

[Maybe, if you continue to work hard.]

[I see. Ah, the service is ending soon.]

[kk.]

I received an alert too.

— The service will end in 30 seconds. I smiled bitterly and slowly typed my goodbye.

[Good luck. Be happy.]

Jajangman's instantly replied.

[It's too late for me, but be happy too, hyung.]

I wanted to reply. I didn't know what happened, but I couldn't bear to watch a kid act so hopeless. However, my surroundings had changed before I could type anything.

[The service has ended.] [We offer our greatest gratitude to all the users who have supported Gladiator of the Century.] [Goodbye.]

Only the developers' final messages remained.

Chapter 152

Three Years (6)

April 3, 2029. I read a newspaper in our hideout by England's Bristol Channel while Boss played a game next to me.

[The English Royal Court guild partners with mercenary groups...] [The English Channel's high-intermediate rank monster, megalodon, has been defeated by the English Royal Court guild's Team 1. Rachel, the guild's youngest team leader, showed exceptional skills...] [Princess Rachel has been appointed as the Royal Court guild's youngest vice leader.] [Trust in England at an all-time low.]

The popularity of England's leadership steadily declined. Ordinary newspapers and even the Violet Times predicted a grim future for the country.

"Hmm..."

I sighed and put down the newspaper. I couldn't find what I wanted about entrance tickets that should be popping up soon. *How much longer did I have to wait?*

"Knnng."

I felt a bit sore and stood up to stretch. Then I looked around the hideout, which was about 65% complete. A lot had changed in the past 3 years. Honestly, I felt proud of the changes I made.

The dome ceiling featured crystal chandeliers and gem lights that beautifully hung down. The red vintage walls displayed art that Boss brought from her secret stash. The hideout also had many convenient facilities now. The goblin coffee shop provided the highest grade coffee. Many of my magical furniture also decorated the hideout. In the center... *what was that again?* An enormous mana crystal the size of Cheok Jungyeong's thigh purified the air inside the cave. For the

record, I took that almond-shaped crystal from Boss' secret vault. She threw a tantrum about not wanting to keep it and reluctantly agreed when I threatened that I wouldn't comb her hair ever again.

However, that was only the tip of the iceberg. Outside also had a hot spring, shooting range, training room, library, game room, cafeteria, etc.

“*Kuhaha—!*”

The door to the lobby suddenly shot open and a giant stormed in. Boss looked up with a frown while playing her game on the couch.

“It's crazy out there, Boss!”

“Did something happen outside?”

“Oh, newbie! You're here too?”

Cheok Jungyeong smiled as he held up a sea monster twice his size.

“Monsters underwater are going crazy!”

“Gyeong, what is that.”

“A sea monster. This blind bastard kept bumping into me, so I hooked it up. It's a blue ocean fish.”

It was a delicious species classified as a fish rather than a monster. Boss smacked her lips. Then she glanced up at me. Clearly, she wanted me to cook it for her.

“Blue ocean fish, *huh*.”

I started cooking for Boss three months ago because controlling her by combing her hair could get difficult. I wanted Boss to slowly grow addicted to everything I provided until she couldn't live without me.

“You know about it?”

Cheok Jungyeong laughed and threw down the blue ocean fish. For the record, other members didn't know I could cook. I only revealed it to Boss and felt too lazy to cook for everyone. She enjoyed the special treatment.

"You can keep it in the fridge and eat it later."

I took his kind offer and looked at the blue ocean fish. I wasn't sure if it was still alive or spasming after death, but it violently flopped around.

"Boss, come out if you're bored. It's really fun."

"I'm fine. You can enjoy it alone."

"*Hehe*, don't regret it later."

Cheok Jungyeong's latest hobby was fishing. I created a secret pathway connecting the hideout to the ocean since using a portal all the time felt quite troublesome. Obviously, we covered the path with illusion magic and a fortress grade seal to prevent outsiders from recognizing it. Cheok Jungyeon used it once a week to fight sea monsters. I recalled him saying something about wanting to overcome the ocean's restraint.

"I'm going back out!"

Cheok Jungyeong left the lobby. *KOONG!* He should really stop slamming the doors.

"Oh right—!"

He quickly came back in.

"I almost forgot. *Oi*, Bling, give me an Americano."

The barista goblin quickly followed his command. As expected, the goblin named Bling instantly made Americano after a year of experience.

“Perfect.”

Gulp, gulp— Cheok Jungyeong emptied the 2 liter cup in just 3 seconds before leaving.

“Guys.”

When I clapped, the 6 normal goblins gathered around the blue ocean fish.

— *Krrk*.

— *Kururu*.

The goblins discussed which part of the fish to grab and ended up equally putting it on their shoulders.

“Newbie?”

Boss silently watched from the couch and asked. She was already drooling.

“Yes?”

“When is breakfast?”

She honestly expressed herself when it came to food. Most strong people acted like that. They could control their desire for sex or sleep, but couldn't withstand hunger because of their bodies' high metabolism.

“Give me 30 minutes.”

“I see, *ssp*.”

Boss nodded with anticipation. I grinned and turned on my smartwatch. Just in case, I checked Violet Banquet for any news on entrance tickets, but only amusement park tickets popped up. Disappointed, I checked the trending topics.

[Fenrir unseen for 6 months! Was he just another seasonal mercenary?]

Another article came up about me. They criticized me for using my gift for money, but now berated me for another reason. I skipped the article and checked the comments.

[Rachel0418] You expect a mercenary to work for free? -. I'm sure Fenrir is taking a rest because people like you keep bothering him. -.

“Pft.”

As expected, Rachel commented again on another article. Did she look at online articles all the time? *Click*. I liked the comment without much thought. Then a lightbulb suddenly went off in my head.

“Oh right.”

The Royal Court guild would obtain entrance tickets before other guilds. Rank mattered most when it came to entrance tickets. Still, it would be nice to have some extra tickets. I also worried about England's situation, which was worse than I predicted.

“Boss.”

“Mm?”

“I have an idea.”

I began to choose my words for a negotiation. Boss would likely agree to anything with the blue ocean fish as leverage.

* * *

The Royal Court guild greeted its new apprentice heroes in April. In any other year, England would be booming with tourists who came to enjoy its beautiful spring.

“Haaa.”

The weather felt great, but Rachel sighed as the Royal Court guild's vice leader.

"I didn't learn any of this in Cube."

She became the youngest vice leader because a guild in Korea had scouted away the previous one. They practically pushed the position onto her and she didn't know how to handle the heavy responsibility. England and the Royal Court guild's situation was that bad. Rachel didn't blame the vice leader who ran away either.

"...Sigh."

She scrolled through the emails on her computer.

[Thank you for contacting Desolate Moon. We have received the Royal Court guild's request for aid, but military negotiations should be done through the association...]

Everyone declined the their request for help. Most had advised them to ask the Hero Association like the above example. However, Rachel knew all too well what that meant. The Royal Court guild would lose too much influence and control once the association intervened. Like how Roton Corporation schemed to take control of Clancy Islet, the association would likely ask for something similar. England couldn't afford to set its house on fire to catch a flea. Although the flea was absurdly big.

"Sylvie, how many representatives are we scheduled to meet today?"

Rachel called her secretary.

— Thirteen in total. Eleven are already waiting in the building.

The Royal Court guild decided to partner with mercenary groups after the number of monsters increased. It made sense since mercenaries operated separately from the association.

"So most of them are here."

Of course, the Royal Court guild and its heroes would also gain more experience against these monsters. Their guild ranking would naturally increase and they would obtain more monster corpses for research and development. However, the question was whether England could overcome the odds.

— Shall I send them in?

“Yes, one at a time.”

* * *

Ordinary citizens walked with tension in the streets of London. Nowadays, they didn’t feel safe even in the capital. The monsters living in River Thames threatened the public.

“I’m going to leave the country for a while.”

“Where are you going?”

“Korea. My older brother has residency there. He’s not in Seoul, but it should still be safer than here.”

“Ah, I’m jealous.”

They didn’t sound too hopeful as they worried about the country’s future and their loved ones’ safety. Almost as if to confirm their worries...

Wiing— Wiing—

The sirens suddenly went off that monsters had invaded. A manhole in the street shot open and monsters climbed up. Sea moles, greed toads, giant catfish, etc. They were all low to low-intermediate rank monsters, but there were just too many and ordinary civilians couldn’t deal with them.

“Uu, uwaak!”

The monsters quickly took over the streets. They flashed their bloodthirsty eyes and chased the people who ran away. Civilians did all they could to avoid being devoured.

— *Ribbit!*

A greed toad jumped on top of a woman.

“L-Let me go!”

She punched its face, but that was futile. The toad opened its mouth with a cheeky smile. *BOOM!* Its head suddenly exploded.

“*Uu, uuu...*”

A mysterious attack saved the woman. She couldn’t properly assess the situation after being covered by monster fluids, but knew someone had saved her and began to run again. Then a sea mole jumped towards her.

— *Grrr...*

“*Ah...*”

However, the sea mole’s head exploded before it could even touch her. The woman finally realized something was off. Other people running away also stopped to stare behind her. The woman followed their gazes and turned around.

“...”

Streaks of light rained down from the sky. She had seen a similar scene in a YouTube video.

Tudududu— Bullets obliterated monsters. This terrifying barrage lit up the sky and annihilated hundreds of monsters. Only 3 minutes had passed from beginning to end. The screams from the streets had long disappeared.

“Wow.”

“My god.”

The civilians all stared at a single man on a bike. No one could see his face because of his helmet.

Vroom— His bike roared and he quickly disappeared as everyone stared in awe.

“T-That, that must’ve been Fen, Fenrir!”

A motorcycle-enthusiast who loved to slaughter monsters with a mystical gun. Even ordinary people knew the famous mercenary.

* * *

Rachel currently met with different representatives of mercenary groups in her office.

“As you know, we achieved rank 10 in the most recent mercenary rankings.”

She first met with the Skid Row Mercenary Group. The group’s leader initiated the negotiation with a haughty attitude. Rachel could accept it, albeit reluctantly. However, she instantly rejected their offer because he asked for too much.

“*Ha*, I’m speechless.”

“You can speak.”

“How can you be so beautiful?”

“...Pardon?”

Next, she met with the Great Tiger Mercenary Group, which ranked 14. Their leader was in his mid-30s and showed too much interest in Rachel’s appearance. The conditions he offered seemed reasonable,

but he made the meeting feel like a blind date.

“England is in a bad spot, right? Sea monsters are the most difficult compared to aerial and land monsters. Why don’t you just ask the association for help?”

“That’s our business.”

“Are you looking down on mercenaries? You think we wouldn’t understand just because we’re uneducated?”

“No.”

Like that, Rachel continued her meetings. Most of the leaders acted arrogant or stupid, especially the ones from higher ranked groups. The leader of the world’s rank 5 mercenary group acted particularly distasteful. The way he ogled her with his lustful eyes made her want to pull out her weapon.

“*Huu.*”

All 13 meetings finally came to an end. She didn’t feel it was a waste of time. Rank 14 and rank 9 seemed reasonable.

— *Um*, vice leader.

Her secretary suddenly called her.

“Yes, what is it?”

— *Um*, someone from another mercenary group just showed up.

“Weren’t we done?”

— We were, but this one claimed to be a mercenary and asked to meet the vice leader.

Then why don’t you just kick him out? Rachel pressed her forehead.

— I wanted to send him back, but he seems to be someone famous.

“Oh... I see.”

Do mercenaries act more arrogant with fame? I didn't want to be biased for the sake of that person...

“If he didn't contact us before... *sigh*, just let him in.”

It's not like I'll lose anything by seeing another person.

— Understood.

The secretary replied as Rachel deeply sighed and tapped on her desk. After about 5 minutes... *Tok, tok*— Someone knocked on her door.

“Come in.”

Rachel spoke with an exhausted voice. *Kiik*— The door slowly opened and heavy footsteps resounded. She slowly raised her head and spotted the mercenary entirely in black. His hair was styled in a clean pomade and his well-kempt beard made him particularly handsome. Her eyes widened as soon as she saw him. It was only natural. Rachel knew him all too well despite his slightly different aura.

“It's nice to meet you.”

The man casually greeted her with a charming baritone voice. Then he naturally sat in front of her with a pleasant scent.

“Ah...”

Rachel became speechless at their sudden reunion. Her voice wouldn't come out and it felt as if her five senses had frozen.

“I'm Jeronimo's Fenrir.”

She couldn't tell if he knew about their situation. However, she could see his warm smile.

Chapter 153

Three Years (7)

On the Tower of Hero's 101st floor, the office workers stared at a pile of documents in Aileen's office.

"Hnnng..."

After painstaking effort, they summarized countless documents into 30 pages. These documents all had to do with the mysterious entity known as Black Lotus.

"This is all we have on him?"

Aileen asked as she glanced at their report. Black Lotus, the new black of that group. He was responsible for 11 recent terror incidents in Pandemonium.

"Yes, we compiled the most important details from our informants in Pandemonium."

"Ah, really. It sure is flawless."

Aileen tried her best to sound sarcastic, but no one blamed her. None of the documents included anything that might help identify Black Lotus and only boasted of his achievements. Aileen already knew everything such as the *[base destruction with a single arrow]*, *[black lotus symbol engraved on the ground]*, etc.

"He always immediately disappears, so there's hardly any information. He might have a gift related to teleportation..."

"Yeah, yeah."

Aileen ignored their excuses.

“It’s my fault for expecting anything use... *huh?* Wait a minute.”

A lightbulb suddenly went off in her head that gave her goosebumps. She widened her eyes and stared at her employees.

“He always leaves after a single arrow... Then... could he... no, could she be the Divine Archer?”

“Pardon?”

“Divine Archer. You know, Jin Seyeon the Divine Archer.”

The office workers couldn’t tell if Aileen was serious or not. They shook their heads.

“There’s no way it’s Jin Seyeon.”

“She should be busy doing volunteer work.”

“Right? I was kidding too.”

Aileen quickly changed her tone. Jin Seyeon the Divine Archer was a master rank hero known as the god of the bow. She was only rank 70, putting her on the edge of master rank. Furthermore, she had retired from active duty and only appeared every once in a while in North Africa.

“By the way, why is she even doing volunteer work?”

“...”

“...”

The office workers saved their breath. People in their early 20s and 30s idolized Jin Seyeon. Her kind heart and righteous deeds melted everyone’s hearts and her upright personality made her a popular master rank hero.

“I just don’t understand. Why did the association place her in master

rank?”

Aileen expressed her displeasure. The association excluded Temple of Justice members from its ranking system. Aileen acknowledged Jin Seyeon as the best archer, but wondered why Jin Seyeon was a master rank hero instead of someone like Yoo Jinwoong.

“I’d win If I fought her too,” Aileen grumbled unhappily.

“*Hmm...*”

She naturally grew curious about who would win between Jin Seyeon and Black Lotus? Aileen turned to her workers after mulling over the question.

“Girls, how strong do you think he is?”

“I’m not sure. Can you elaborate?”

“You know, try estimating his rank. How do you think he fares compared to Jin Seyeon?”

The 4 office workers fell in thought. They all graduated from top universities and passed the association’s difficult tests, but still couldn’t answer whether a lion or a tiger would win in a fight.

“*Um*, Black Lotus probably didn’t use 100% of his strength, right?”

The youngest worker asked. Aileen rubbed her chin in thought. Black Lotus’ arrow was undoubtedly powerful. He could destroy any target with a single arrow.

“Let me think...”

In reality, archers had difficulty amplifying the power of a single arrow. Every archer wanted to finish off their enemies in one blow. Otherwise, their location would be found out and they would be in great danger without a warrior to protect them.

Pouring too much magic power into a magic arrow made its form unstable and harder to control, so archers always limited their power to control their magic arrows properly.

“40%...”

However, Black Lotus always obliterated his targets with a single arrow. This meant his magic power control was superb, which also meant he didn't use his full power.

“Maybe it's only 20-30%.”

“*Eh?* That small?”

The surprised worker expressed her doubt. With only 20-30%, he destroyed a tower that could've withstood most explosions and a hideout with a high rank barrier? He even assassinated an executive of Pandemonium's rank 10 organization.

“Don't ask if you're going to doubt me.”

Aileen only considered them as bookworms who hadn't experienced the world.

“*Cough*, no. I apologize. Hey, you! Continue what you were saying before!”

The flustered worker quickly retracted her words and yelled at the youngest who spoke earlier.

“Ah, yes. So assuming that we've only seen 25% of Black Lotus' full strength...”

The youngest worker furiously typed on her laptop and performed some complex calculations. Her expression turned pale as she finished.

“This...”

“What? Hurry up and say it.”

“Well... in terms of numbers... he’s at the level of a master rank hero.”

“*Eh?* Really?”

Everyone in the office felt surprised.

“Yes, the estimated value of the magic power explosion he caused is similar to Divine Archer Jin Seyeon’s crystal arrow, which she used to defeat the basilisk 3 years ago.”

“*Oooh.*”

Where did she learn how to do this? Aileen smiled.

“That’s interesting.”

“This is only a theory.”

“Still, it’s interesting.”

Aileen was suddenly filled with anticipation. Two archers aiming at each other, releasing their bowstrings in tension, two arrows with different colors flying towards each other, and the final clash... Frankly, she hoped Jin Seyeon would lose. Aileen didn’t like women who always acted kind, noble, and refined.

“Alright, that’s it for today. You can all go home.”

“Yes!”

“Thank you.”

“See you tomorrow!”

The office workers smiled and bowed.

“Yeah, yeah. See ya.”

Aileen was certainly a boss with many complaints and outbursts. However, she remained popular among her subordinates because she always let them go home early.

* * *

Rachel had changed a lot in 3 years. She now had a perfect jawline after losing all her baby fat and her innocent eyes seemed more mature. Was it because of all the troubles she faced? She also carried thin dark circles under her eyes, but even that looked charming on her.

“It... it’s been a while.”

Rachel stuttered. Her voice still sounded the same.

“Yeah.”

I simply replied. Then I purposely remained silent to see how she would react.

“*Mm, mmn.*”

Her hands fidgeted around with the computer mouse. I couldn’t help but laugh at her awkwardness.

“Why aren’t you talking? Is it because I came too late?”

“Y-Yes? *Ah*, no, that’s not it.”

We stared at each other as I waited for her to continue.

“Your beard... you grew it out.”

I didn’t expect that.

“Oh, this?”

I rubbed my chin. I had a cool nickname like Fenrir, but aether kept

making me look younger, so I grew out my beard. I looked like a Western movie star now. For the record, it wasn't a goatee.

"A famous barber trimmed it for me. Does it look weird?"

I found the son of the master barber I met in the past. He wasn't as skilled as his father, but also worked as a barber.

"No, it looks great."

"That's nice to hear."

Thanks to him, I received a 0.4 charm buff. I put in some extra effort since this would be my first meeting with Rachel in years.

"But I'll shave it off soon."

"*Eh?* N-No, it looks nice on you."

She waved her hands as I smiled. Sometimes, I arrogantly thought I looked like Jake Gyllenhaal when I saw myself in the mirror. However, I planned to shave it soon since Evandel didn't like it.

"I heard you were taking a break from mercenary work."

Rachel carefully changed the subject.

"I've been busy with other things."

For the past 6 months, I focused on Chameleon Troupe missions. Robbing a rich djinn, hunting a jewel whale in the deep Pacific, destroying hideouts of Pandemonium organizations, etc. I tried to make the Chameleon Troupe attack djinns as much as possible.

"Well, we can catch up on personal matters later. For now, let's talk about our partnership."

"*Ah*, yes... wait, partnership?"

Rachel's eyes widened.

"Of course. That's why I'm here."

I smiled.

"Don't you remember? I said we'd probably work together through a mercenary partnership."

"Ah, r-right. I remember."

It didn't look like she remembered, but she nodded excitedly anyways.

"It's coming back to me. It was... really sunny that day."

"It was raining."

I narrowed my eyes at her.

"R-Right, it was raining. I got confused for a moment..."

"I'm kidding, it was sunny."

"Sunny—"

"Or maybe I'm remembering wrong."

"..."

Rachel closed her mouth and pouted at me.

"*Haha*, I'm just joking. Here are our conditions. Take a look."

I took out the contract and handed it to her. Rachel respectfully received it. Jeronimo Mercenary's conditions were as follows:

1. The Royal Court guild is not to interfere in Jeronimo's business. 2. England is to provide information on all dungeons within its territory. If the

Royal Court guild conquers a dungeon, all acquired loot is to be revealed to Jeronimo Mercenary. 3. Jeronimo Mercenary is to have first priority in purchasing loot acquired from dungeons. 4...

It only stated 6 clauses. Rachel looked up after carefully reading each clause.

“If you agree to these terms, we can help England deal with its monster crisis. We’ll be forming an official partnership.”

“Partnership!”

Rachel’s eyes immediately lit up.

* * *

[Royal Court guild forms partnership with Jeronimo Mercenary!] [How did England move Jeronimo?] [Fenrir slaughters thousands of sea monsters in 1 hour.]

The international community blew up as soon as news spread that the Royal Court guild partnered with Jeronimo. Headlines appeared all over the world and the Royal Court guild’s stocks skyrocketed. The prime minister even invited Jeronimo Mercenary’s leader (Jain in disguise) to a banquet. Additionally, they appointed Rachel as the successor to the guild leader for her achievement in this negotiation. A fair amount of negative rumors also floated around regarding sexual favors.

A month flew by.

England’s situation had mostly calmed. Jeronimo only had 24 members, but most were fake identities with only 5-6 active members.

The goal of their partnership was to destroy the monsters’ habitats. Monsters would naturally stop reproducing and their numbers would dwindle.

In only a month, Jeronimo destroyed 6 habitats of sea monsters, a feat Cheok Jungyeong achieved alone. I only had to tell him where and

Cheok Jungyeong would run over to destroy everything in sight. As an ally, he couldn't be more reliable.

"I'm glad it was resolved without any civilian casualties."

I walked with Rachel along the English Channel's beach.

"I agree."

We arrived 10 minutes ago after a report about a large number of carnivorous tunas.

"By the way, I'm going to make you pay for my bullets."

I took care of everything in just 7 minutes with my heavy machine gun. We strolled along the beach with some time left.

"..."

Rachel remained quiet. She watched the waves glistening under the sun with a relaxed smile. I felt a bit bored and raised a finger to my face. Then...

"Oh right."

Poke. Rachel suddenly turned around and my finger poke her cheek.

"..."

She froze and stared at me for an explanation.

"*Er*, anyways, Rachel or rather, vice leader."

I pulled my finger back and asked as if nothing happened.

"The Royal Court guild conquered several dungeons in the past few months. Have you obtained any paper as loot?"

“Paper?”

“Yes, something that looks like an entrance ticket.”

It shone in different colors and should be an entrance ticket to the Tower of Wish, the next major episode.

“*Mm...* I don’t think so.”

Rachel replied after mulling it over. I shook my head in regret. Then we went back to strolling around the beach.

Vrrr— My smartwatch suddenly rang and Rachel heard the loud noise as well. I quickly looked down at it.

[The laptop update has been completed.]

Chapter 154

Entrance Ticket (1)

[The laptop update has been completed.] [Stigma's recovery rate has increased.][You have received 3 points.]

New functions have been added.

[Overclocking] — Using your vitality, you may temporarily boost stigma's power. — The boost will depend on the amount of vitality spent. Note: You may die from expending all your vitality.

[Device Link] — You may link electronic devices to the laptop (max: 4). — Linked devices cannot be used by anyone else. You may operate linked devices at will.

[Spatial Modification] — You may now modify environmental settings. However, the specified environment must be limited in scope.

[1000 SP has been consumed for the update.] [Current SP: 3053]

...

▷Variable Stats [Points: 3] [Strength 6.4 (+6.000)] [Stamina 6.435 (+6.000)] [Speed 8.655 (+6.000)] [Perception 9.235 (+6.000)] [Vitality 6.105 (+6.000)] [Magic power 3]

Stat boost from your magic dysfunction physique has reached its limit (+6.000).

▷Invariable Stats [Intelligence – 4.470 / 10] [Perseverance – 7.207 (+0.5) / 10] [Luck – 9.100 / 10] [Charm – 5.535 (+0.4) / 10]

▷Gift 1. [Master Sharpshooter] [Intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 4 – Proficiency EXP: 87%] 2. [Random Consolidation

*System] [Low-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [3 stage consolidation]
3. [Dexterity] [Low-intermediate rank] [Null attribute] [Evolving] [Grade
5 – Proficiency EXP: 51%]*

▷*Physique (2/3) 1. [Magic Dysfunction Physique] 2. [Medicinal Memory
Physique]*

▷*Art (2/3) 1. [Parkour] 2. [Charming Voice]*

The information I'd been dying to know finally popped up. For 3 years, I could still modify the settings of objects and see their information, but I couldn't view my status (other than my gifts). I was seeing my stats for the first time in 3 years.

"The heck."

My charm stat was only 5.535? Aesthetic greed raised my charm by 0.002 points every 24 hours up to a maximum of 1. I also used the Random Consolidation System on aether every day, so my charm should've increased much higher. Well, I guess that's how it reached 5.535. For the record, I spent 1500 SP a year ago to raise the Random Consolidation System's maximum to 54%. Even with the charm buff from the barber, my charm stat only reached 5.935.

"Mmm."

I felt a bit bitter for some reason. *Jake Gyllenhaal... you're too far away!* Of course, I didn't take it too seriously. Everyone evaluated themselves like this at least once in their lifetime.

"What's wrong?"

Rachel asked as I stared at my smartwatch. I simply smiled.

"Let's head back for now."

Rachel tilted her head, not knowing what happened. Meanwhile, I tried using one of the laptop's new functions. I clicked on the device link button that appeared on my smartwatch. Then I clicked on the motorcycle icon after scrolling through the list of available devices.

[Kim Hajin's Agusta Vigilante has been found.] [Device Link completed.]
[Agusta Vigilante will now move according to Kim Hajin's will.]

I tried to send a thought. *Come to me. Come to me.* After about a minute, the motorcycle drove up. *Interesting.* I got on without much thought.

“Wait!”

A hand suddenly grabbed me.

“...?”

Obviously, it was Rachel.

“What’s wrong?”

“Hajin, wait a minute.”

“*Huh?*”

Rachel pointed at my bike as she slightly shuddered.

“Didn’t you park your motorcycle by the road?”

“*Uh*, I did, but...”

“Who is it—!”

Rachel pulled out Galatyn as soon as I said a few words.

“Hello?”

“*Shh*, I think it’s an assassin. That motorcycle just drove here on its own.”

She murmured in shock as she raised her sword, which shone with a golden light.

“Show yourself.”

Her voice carried a hint of killing intent, but no one answered. Then she repeated the same words in English.

“Show yourself.”

“...”

“Stop hiding like a coward.”

She spoke out against an invisible enemy, but sounded sure of her suspicion. From the looks of it, she must’ve experienced similar situations before. Just how many assassination attempts did she experience to react like this? I couldn’t help but feel sorry. However, I just continued on to my motorcycle.

“Hajin! That motorcycle is dangerous!”

“Don’t worry, it’s a self-driving vehicle.”

“...?”

“Look.”

I willed the motorcycle to move and voiced my command.

“Make a circle around us.”

Vroom, vroom. The motorcycle ran through the sand at a frightening speed as Rachel stared in a daze.

“Ah...”

“Technology has improved a lot in recent years. Try not to fall behind.”

“Ah, *uaah.*”

Rachel became speechless from embarrassment. She covered her face and simply shook her head. A sudden call saved her. *Tiriri*—

“W-Wait one moment. I need to take this. Hello?”

She walked away with the call as an excuse. It didn’t last long and she quickly returned with a serious face.

“Hajin.”

“Yes?”

“Some strange papers came out of a dungeon we just conquered.”

* * *

One week later.

[May Guild Rankings... The English Royal Court guild entered the top 20 with the help of Jeronimo, but Yoo Yeonha had wanted the same partnership for Essence of the Strait. She just never had the chance to bring it up to Kim Hajin.]

Yoo Yeonha read the Violet Times along with an ordinary newspaper inside her luxury limousine.

“*Hnn.*”

She pouted out of envy. The English Royal Court guild entered the top 20 with the help of Jeronimo, but Yoo Yeonha had wanted the same partnership for Essence of the Strait. She just never had the chance to bring it up to Kim Hajin.

“We’re here.”

The limousine stopped as she glanced out the window. She could see a luxury cruise ship anchored to the Han River’s dock. Today, she had planned a gathering for Noble Society.

“Thank you.”

She had started it as a fun project before entering Cube, but it expanded proactively in her second year. First, she invited high ranking officials with the help of her father. Then she donated to universities and charities under Noble Society’s name. Afterwards, she began to snatch up promising cadets with good family backgrounds. Now, Noble Society boasted over 200 members who would all undoubtedly become Korea’s future leaders.

“I will be waiting nearby.”

“Alright.”

Yoo Yeonha got off. *Tak, tak*. She had grown accustomed to high heels and arrived at the cruise ship’s entrance. The guards immediately recognized her and gave way as she walked onboard.

“Hm?”

She scanned the deck and quickly noticed a guest who arrived early, leaning on the railing and staring intently at something. Yoo Yeonha slowly walked up to her with a bitter heart.

“Nayun?”

“Uwaah!”

Startled, Chae Nayun quickly turned off her smartwatch.

“O-Oh, hi.”

“What were you doing?”

Yoo Yeonha glanced at Chae Nayun’s smartwatch.

“N-Nothing.”

Yoo Yeonha quickly found out through her own smartwatch.

[Master, a user by the nickname, imgosu, requested a background check on Kim Hajin as well as his current whereabouts.] [For now, we've put the request on hold.]

Yoo Yeonha read the message and looked back at Chae Nayun.

“...hui, hui.”

Chae Nayun was whistling in cold sweat. Yoo Yeonha forced herself to smile. She had already heard rumors that Chae Nayun was looking into Kim Hajin. She also knew Chae Nayun was scammed a dozen times because of her low Violet Banquet rank.

“Do you want to come inside? I prepared a private room.”

“Y-Yeah.”

Yoo Yeonha led her to a private room for close friends.

“What is this place for?”

“We can hang out here. You don't like parties, right? The others will arrive soon.”

“I see.”

Pool, VR, bowling, darts. The room was full of games. Chae Nayun sat on the couch without much thought.

“Oh right, what's this on my name tag?” she asked Yoo Yeonha.

“Name tag?”

“Yeah. Over here, it says executor. Shouldn't it say low-intermediate rank hero?”

[Essence of the Strait's hero, Chae Nayun] [Executor]

“Oh, that?”

Yoo Yeonha had created the title just for her. Chae Nayun easily surpassed low-intermediate rank heroes in power, but couldn't be promoted yet due to a lack of results.

“The association classifies heroes based on a rank and grade, but I don't plan on following their system forever.”

The association's rank and grade system didn't satisfy most people, so Yoo Yeonha created new titles to match a hero's diverse characteristics. For now, she had 5 titles: Executor, Destroyer, Guardian, etc. Of these, Executor ranked the highest.

“Yep, that would be the rank for most team leaders.”

“Oh? That's surprisingly good.”

Tok, tok— A knock suddenly came from the door.

— Guests have arrived.

“Looks like they're here.” Yoo Yeonha smiled at Chae Nayun.

“Yeah.” Chae Nayun nonchalantly nodded.

“Come in.”

Yoo Yeonha invited the guests and 3 familiar faces walked in. Shin Jonghak, Kim Suho, and Yi Yeonghan. All 3 superstars had risen to fame at only 21 years old.

“Hey, it's been a while.”

Kim Suho waved with a bright smile.

“Move it.”

“*Whoa!*”

Shin Jonghak pushed him aside and stood in front of Chae Nayun.

“How have you been?”

His voice sounded wistful and emotional. Yoo Yeonha shook her head as she watched him.

“So-so. What about you? You look even creepier now.”

“*Hahaha*, that’s a funny way of saying I’m handsome.”

“Are you crazy?”

“*Ah*, I’m so tired.”

Yi Yeonghan ignored them and trudged to the couch. He wriggled on his back like a giant cockroach.

“*Ah*, Creator’s Sacred Grace is too cutthroat. They’re sending me to 3 dungeons a month.”

“Didn’t you say you wanted to go? You said you wanted to buy that Lambo or something.”

Feeling guilty, Kim Suho poked Yi Yeonghan’s back.

“It’s Lamborghini. Oi, Team Leader Kim, you think you’ll be safe if I report you to the association for overworking me?”

“Oh please, you got what you wanted, right?”

“I did put in an order.”

Kim Suho had already become a team leader with Yi Yeonghan as one of his members. A big difference in rank between individuals who joined at the same time usually led to minor conflicts. However, nothing of the sort ever occurred between them.

“Chae Nayun, do you want to spar later?”

“Sure, but you might lose.”

“We’ll see.”

Yi Yeonghan turned on the huge flat-screen TV as Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak planned a spar.

— Emergency report.

“Hm?”

“What’s up?”

“There’s an emergency.”

The sudden news grabbed their attention.

— A mysterious tower has appeared in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. This tower of unprecedented size seems to have arisen from the depths of the ocean. Nearby sea monsters have begun to act more violently...

* * *

Yun Seung-Ah quickly turned on the TV after hearing about the emergency report.

— A mysterious tower has appeared in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean...

A newly discovered tower appeared on TV.

“What the hell?”

Yun Seung-Ah almost fainted from shock. Just 10 minutes ago, Violet Banquet had no reports about a new tower. This meant the event had been completely unexpected.

— There is currently nothing known about this tower. It seems to have arisen from the deep sea earthquake that occurred 8 minutes ago.

“...”

Yun Seung-Ah stared at the tower in a daze. She could only think about one thing. This was the perfect opportunity for Creator's Sacred Grace to reclaim their rank 1 spot.

* * *

[Chameleon Troupe's Hideout] [Comfortable] — A Comfortable Space: You will become rejuvenated the more you stay in this area. Staying here for more than 8 hours will cleanse your mind. Staying here for more than 24 hours will make you happy. Staying here for more than 96 hours will increase all stats up to 0.5 points. — What Great Air: The area's high mana density keeps the air fresh. Staying here for more than 8 hours will cure light illnesses.

The Chameleon Troupe's hideout transformed from hell to heaven. Four members of the troupe, Setryn, Jain, Boss, and Cheok Jungyeong, now lived here as well. They sat on the couch I made and watched TV.

— There is currently nothing known about this tower. It seems to have arisen from the deep sea earthquake that occurred 8 minutes ago. The Hero Association has already deployed investigators, but it is currently impossible to enter the tower because of how deep it reaches.

The Tower of Wish's enormous size seemed to contain all of humanity's hopes and fears.

“Oh? What's that?” Setryn asked as she received a back massage from the goblins.

“Newbie, is that the entrance ticket you mentioned?”

Jain turned to me with wide eyes. As expected, she had sharp senses.

“Yep.”

I nodded. Currently, I had obtained 1 entrance ticket into the Tower of Wish. It was an orange tier ticket.

“Let me see.”

Jain took the ticket.

“What is it? Let me take a look too.”

Boss woke up from her nap and glanced at it. Jain read the words written on the back.

“You may enter a designated place on the scheduled date with this ticket. The scheduled date is...”

July 1. All entrance tickets will disappear after July 1 and new tickets will be issued. The next date will be September 1. Note: Participants will undergo small changes to even the playing field.

“Oh? This sounds fun. Little apprentice, are you going to use this?”

“No.”

Entrance tickets had different tiers. Orange was above average, but I didn’t want it.

“Why not?”

“This color isn’t the one I want.”

“Color?”

“Yep.”

Entrance tickets had the following tiers.

White, which had no benefits and were even rarer than red tickets.

Green, which allowed its owner to choose the tower tutorial’s difficulty.

Yellow, which included the green ticket's benefits in addition to a tutorial-only food supply.

Orange, which included the yellow ticket's benefits in addition to a basic weapon.

Red, which included the orange ticket's benefits in addition to entering together with one other companion. Of course, they could enter alone if they wished.

"I'm looking for a black ticket."

Without the black ticket, I had no reason to enter the tower early.

"Black?" Boss asked.

"Yes, black."

The black ticket worked differently from the other tickets. Black ticket owners didn't receive benefits like the previous tiers. They could only choose the highest difficulty tutorial. In this sense, they were at a disadvantage. However, the black ticket had a benefit that far outweighed its disadvantages.

The concept of skills didn't exist in this world. However, it existed in the Tower of Wish. If used properly, you could win against someone you would normally never beat and achieve impossible goals. That was why it was called the Tower of Wish. This tower gave those abandoned by heaven a chance to shine.

The black ticket could be considered a VVIP ticket. I would obtain a bonus skill at no cost with a black ticket.

"Black ticket?"

"Yep."

"Do colors matter? How do you even know in the first place?"

“I have a good source of information. That said, I don’t know too much either.”

The distribution of tickets had already begun. They could appear anywhere: sandboxes where children played in, monster corpses killed by hunters, treasure chests found in dungeons. On the scheduled date, these tickets would become portals linked to the Tower of Wish.

“Even if you have a good source of information, it’s only been... no, never mind, I won’t nitpick.”

“Thank you.”

“It’s my policy not to nag.”

“I see... so, did we hear anything from Pandemonium?”

Many Pandemonium organizations now feared the Chameleon Troupe because of all the terror incidents. I used this to my advantage and openly declared that I would reconsider attacking them if they offered up any entrance tickets.

“Nothing so far.”

The moment Jain shook her head... *Woong*— Her smartwatch suddenly rang. Jain looked down without a change in expression.

“*Hm?*”

I could tell my luck had fully activated.

“I just received a message that these guys found a ticket...”

Jiing— Jain projected the picture of an entrance ticket that someone sent.

“*Haha.*”

A smile emerged on my face. The hologram of the black ticket looked

as beautiful as I had imagined.

Chapter 155

Entrance Ticket (2)

Pandemonium's 30th ranked organization, Hounds of the Demon Realm. Its executive, Kim Goohwan, walked in stifling nervousness. He didn't know where he was and only focused on following the puppet.

After about 30 minutes... *Clunk*. The puppet stopped and pointed into a desolate alleyway. Kim Goohwan nodded and took a deep breath. He entered the alleyway after the puppet disappeared and found a portal.

"Gulp."

They waited for him beyond this portal. The ones who shook Pandemonium. His stomach churned and he began to regret coming forward. However, Kim Goohwan clenched his fists and courageously stepped into the portal.

He could feel himself traveling through space.

Chwaaa... Was it the sound of leaves rustling? Or was it the sound of waves crashing? He opened his eyes in an unknown place.

"You're here?"

In a completely dark space, an excited voice rang out from a dilapidated staircase. Kim Goohwan looked up and saw an Eastern woman with white hair. The mysterious woman greeted him.

"Hi."

"Y-Yes, it's an honor to meet you. My name is Kim Goohwan."

He tried to maintain his composure. However, he sweated profusely and his breathing became rough.

“Where’s the item?”

“H-Here.”

He felt dizzy as though he would faint at any moment. Thankfully, he practiced what to say and do over a hundred times. Kim Goohwan reached into his pocket and took out a ticket. He maintained respect without showing any weakness or submissiveness.

“No.”

“Pardon?”

However, the woman didn’t take the ticket.

“I won’t be taking it. Someone else wants it.”

Kim Goohwan didn’t expect this situation, but quickly adapted.

“Yes, understood.” He backed off and waited.

“Oh, there he is.”

Tap, tap. Footsteps echoed as Kim Goohwan turned. At first, he thought a shadow was walking towards him, but soon realized it was a man dressed entirely in black. Kim Goohwan calmly stared at him. Unlike the woman, he didn’t give off any imposing aura or pressure. However...

“I heard you guys call him Lotus.”

The woman’s next sentence caused him to freeze. Kim Goohwan stared at the man and couldn’t breathe as if he was being choked. A ghastly aura seemed to emanate from the man. Of course, Kim Goohwan had only imagined it.

Black Lotus. The man who destroyed several towers and hideouts with a single attack. He even assassinated an executive of Blood Poison, Pandemonium's rank 10 organization.

This man currently stood only a foot away. Kim Goohwan felt a chill throughout his body. He wanted to introduce himself, but his mouth refused to move. The man wore a black mask and hood, but his eyes seemed to pierce through everything.

"What's wrong? He's waiting."

"Ah, y-yes, here. Here you go."

Kim Goohwan snapped out of his daze and presented the item. The man stared at the ticket before taking it. Kim Goohwan gulped and waited to see what would happen next. Suddenly, the man raised his hand.

Was he unhappy about something? Kim Goohwan couldn't bring himself to close his eyes. He simply stood in terror, waiting for the man to behead him... *Tak*. However, the man simply placed his hand on Kim Goohwan's shoulder. *Tak, tak*. And lightly hit him a couple of times as though to compliment him. Kim Goohwan briefly forgot who he was, where he was, and what he was doing. After barely holding onto his consciousness for a long time... *Thud*. Kim Goohwan fainted and fell to the ground.

"What, what happened?"

The person most confused by this was the man who praised Kim Goohwan, Kim Hajin.

* * *

After the exchange, I returned to the Chameleon Troupe's hideout.

"Is that what you wanted?" Jain canceled her disguise and asked.

"Yes, but..."

I thought about the man who fainted from a single praise. Jain seemed to understand and playfully smiled.

“You can add that to your resume.”

“...”

Honestly, my notoriety in Pandemonium felt too extreme. People began to fear me after I killed Blood Poison’s executive, but that djinn wasn’t physically strong at all. He seemed decent with magic, but only became an executive because of his craftiness.

“Oh, by the way, can I enter the tower if I have a ticket too?” Jain sounded interested.

“Yep. You can use the orange ticket.”

It didn’t hurt to have extra tickets since they could be used in several ways. The most obvious was to sell them. You could also give them to someone who would become an ally inside the tower. The scarce amount of tickets made them quite valuable.

Only 200 whites, 1000 greens, 800 yellows, 500 oranges, 300 reds, and 5 blacks existed. The total number who could enter was at most 3105 people every 2 months (each red ticket counted as 2 people). Considering the size of the tower, 3105 felt quite small.

“Will we see each other once we’re inside?”

“Probably. I don’t know for sure.”

“This sounds fun.”

Jain seemed interested in going. I took off my hood and placed the black ticket in my pocket.

“Then I’m leaving.”

“You’re going home?”

“Yes.”

“Alright, I’ll take a nap then.”

Jain returned to her room as I went back to Seoul through Khalifa’s portal. However, I didn’t go home right away. Instead, I headed to an underground facility located in the Seocho District. I had created this huge, 650 square meter space with high rank mana density as a training room for Evandel. It was originally an underground bunker that I had purchased from some rich guy.

“Let’s see... *ah*, there she is.”

Evandel looked so small in the huge space.

“*Hiyaap, hiyaap!*”

She wore a magician’s hat and held a wand while performing a rhythmical dance routine. A small army of ghosts followed her. *A horse, a tiger, a crocodile... wait, is that a unicorn? And that’s... a velociraptor!*

“Yep, that’s talent alright.”

I planned on bringing her home, but she made a new friend every time I visited. Perhaps this was why children should be exposed to movies and fairytales.

“Wave of Honor!”

Evandel worked hard in her own right. She had added names to her moves ever since she started watching PreCure.

“Spinning Swirl!”

“...”

“Shooooot—!”

I wanted to ask exactly what she watched.

“Evandel?”

I called her as I approached. She stopped training and turned towards me. Then she smiled and hopped over.

“Hajin!”

“Did you have fun?”

“*Un!*”

“Then you must be tired.”

“I’m fine.”

“Really?”

“*Un!*”

Evandel smiled brightly and nodded. She liked training more than I expected, but I didn’t have too much time. Then I recalled the wolf sleeping in my chest.

“You can play with Fenrir for 10 more minutes. We’ll leave afterwards.”

I summoned Fenrir.

“*Grrrr—*”

Fenrir ran out excitedly and licked Evandel.

“My wolf!”

As expected of Evandel’s first servant, Fenrir grew a lot over the past 3 years.

[Ghost Wolf] [Servant] [High-intermediate rank] — The first servant created by Evandel the witch.

▷*Basic Stats [Strength 9.950] [Bite 10.850] [Stamina 6.535] [Speed 11.550] [Perception 11.605] [Vitality 6.750] [Magic power 7.850]*

His incredible stats didn't lose to most low-intermediate and intermediate rank heroes.

"Ebebebe, ebebebe."

"Krrrr, rrrrr."

Fenrir acted like a gentle puppy in front of Evandel. I bitterly laughed while watching them play. I wouldn't be able to see Evandel for at least a month and a half once I entered the Tower of Wish. However, I should be able to come back for 2-3 days after the tutorial.

"Evandel."

I called her in a slightly more serious tone.

"Hnn?"

"I need to tell you something."

I already asked Haeyeon's parents if they could take care of her for 1-2 months and they happily agreed.

"I'm going to be away for a month starting in July."

"..."

Evandel froze.

"It's nothing dangerous and I'll be back soon."

"..."

She remained quiet. I worried if she would cry for the first time in 4 years. After a long period of silence, Evandel asked instead of crying.

“A month? 30 days?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t go?”

I shook my head.

“...”

Evandel bit her lips. Her eyes watered and her lips trembled, but she still didn’t cry.

“I’ll come back soon. You can think of it as a month-long vacation and play with Hayang and Haeyeon or sleep in and watch TV late at night.”

I consoled her and even picked her up to give her a peck on the cheek. Or at least I tried.

“No beard!”

“...”

Evandel rejected me and turned away with a pout. She refused to look at me.

“I’ll shave tomorrow, no, today.”

“...”

Evandel looked back with watery eyes. I could only smile.

2029, middle of May.

The biggest tower in history became known as the Tower of Wish and information about entrance tickets quickly spread. Many ordinary people commented online that they had picked up a ticket.

The association wanted to establish a system to control the tickets ordinary people found, but it was too late. Everyone soon found out about the tickets' values and began to sell them online.

“*Hmm.*”

Yoo Yeonha stared at a computer monitor inside Essence of the Strait's team leader office. *Entrance ticket*. She wasn't sure how it worked, but she knew she had to obtain as many as possible.

“Why do something so risky?”

She muttered in frustration. Many people who posted online about tickets had gone missing. Most likely, djinns had attacked them.

“Having 13 might be enough...”

She had already purchased 13 entrance tickets thanks to the Falling Blossom guild. Now she wanted information about the tower to avoid losing any precious guild members in an unknown tower.

—*Tok, tok.*

Someone knocked on the door.

“Who is it?”

— Team Leader Yoo Yeonha, a package arrived.

“Come in.”

A guild employee entered with a mysterious piece of furniture.

“What’s this?”

“*Um*, a chair.”

Indeed, it looked like a chair with a strange futuristic design. First, it had two legs instead of four and the back looked like a tidal wave.

“Who sent this?”

“It’s from *uh*... Kim Hajin.”

“Kim Hajin? Oh right, it’s my birthday present.”

“*Ah*, yes. That’s what it says here.”

A week ago, Yoo Yeonha received a text from Kim Hajin that he would send her a birthday present.

“He sent a chair as a birthday present?”

A bit weird, not that I have any problems with it.

“Thank you. You can go back.”

“Yes.”

Yoo Yeonha tried sitting in it.

“It’s not like I’m lacking chairs in my...”

She paused in the middle of talking. No, she couldn’t speak. She felt a strange sensation and leaned against the chair. An indescribable comfort wrapped around her as if the chair hugged her.

Kwang, Kwang!

“Hey!”

Someone suddenly kicked open the door.

“Hey, Yoo Yeonha!”

Chae Nayun startled her and she shot up.

“A-Ah, geez. I’m a team leader, you know!” Yoo Yeonha shouted at Chae Nayun who didn’t give her any face as a team leader.

“Oh, sorry. I was just in a hurry.” Chae Nayun smiled and scratched her head.

“Geez... *huu*. So, what’s up?”

“Send me there!”

“Where?”

“The tower! The Tower of Wish. I heard you have tickets. The guild can keep whatever I bring back, so just let me go.”

“Oh, it’s about that.” Yoo Yeonha knew she would want to go.

“Let’s talk about it.”

“Oh, what’s up with this chair? It looks weird.”

Chae Nayun sat on the chair Yoo Yeonha just received as a birthday present. Yoo Yeonha could only blink a few times and stare at her.

“It looks... weird... but, wow... this feels... amazing...”

She felt an unknown sense of anxiety watching Chae Nayun feel comfortable and happy.

“Hey, get up. That’s mine.”

“*Eh?* It’s not for guests?”

“N-No. It’s a super precious chair I got for my birthday.”

“Oh.”

“Can’t you tell just by looking at it? Now, get up.”

“Alright, alright.”

As soon as Chae Nayun stood up, Yoo Yeonha exchanged the chair she had been using for the one Kim Hajin made. She didn’t want to put it off since Chae Nayun might ask for it.

* * *

2029, early June. Guilds like Essence of the Strait, Desolate Moon, Frost Sanctuary, and Creator’s Sacred Grace managed to obtain entrance tickets and met for discussions. Meanwhile, the English Royal Court guild also held its own meeting to discuss the newly discovered tower.

“We have a total of 7 tickets.”

The English Royal Court guild had luckily obtained 10 tickets: 8 greens, 1 orange, and 1 red. However, they sold their only orange and red along with 1 green to Jeronimo Mercenary, leaving them with only 7 green tickets left.

They met today to decide who would use the entrance tickets.

No one actively came forward since everyone secretly feared what might be inside such a giant tower. The entrance ticket stated, *Participants may freely exit after the tutorial*, but no one knew anything about this tutorial.

“I’ll go.”

Someone volunteered and everyone in the room immediately stood up.

“N-No!”

“If something happens to vice leader...”

“The guild master won’t agree.”

However, Rachel had made her decision as the vice leader.

“No, I’m going. And you don’t need to worry...”

She slightly hesitated before continuing, “*Um*, Jeronimo’s Fenrir will be entering as well.”

“*Ah*.”

“In that case, I’m sure it’s fine.”

The atmosphere instantly changed since everyone loved Fenrir in England. No one knew, but Cheok Jungyeong’s achievements had all been credited to Fenrir.

“*Ah*, could it be? Did Fenrir say he would protect you!?”

“Pardon?”

“I’m curious too. Did he say he’d protect you?”

The meeting suddenly transformed into a press conference.

“I can see that you’re flustered.”

“F-Flustered? N-No! Everyone be quiet!”

“Now you’re angry.”

“No, I’m not! We need to proceed with the meeting...”

The young, 21 year old vice leader served as an easy target for the

more experienced members in the room. Many of them knew Rachel since she was young and the English Royal Court guild felt like a family.

* * *

July 1, 2029. The scheduled date finally arrived. Currently, I waited for the portal to open in the Chameleon Troupe hideout.

“*Yaawn*, I’m so bored. Newbie, when is the portal opening?” Cheok Jungyeong asked.

“Just wait a bit.”

Other than me, Jain, Cheok Jungyeong, and Boss also had tickets. Other members showed interest, but were either too busy or didn’t mind waiting for the second round.

“*Ah*, I’m itching with excitement. Jain, you’re following as my companion, right?”

“...You’re *my* companion, idiot.”

Jain glared at Cheok Jungyeong uncomfortably. She had obtained a red ticket, but Cheok Jungyeong kept annoying her until she agreed to let him follow her.

“Everyone be quiet and wait.” Boss spoke. At that moment...

Ssssss—

Our entrance tickets glowed and we threw them on the ground. Immediately, the tickets sucked in the nearby magic power and formed 3 pillars of light. They all had different colors: orange, red, and black.

“So we just walk in?” Cheok Jungyeong asked as he smacked his lips.

“Yes.”

“Alright, I’ll see you inside, newbie.”

“Ah, before you go, you should choose the lowest difficulty for the tutorial. We want to meet up as soon as possible.”

“I don’t mind, but I doubt this idiot will do that.”

Jain smiled wryly while Cheok Jungyeong agreed.

“Obviously, I’m going for the highest difficulty.”

“Then Boss, at least you should—” I turned to Boss.

“Hm?”

Recently, Boss’ trust in me had greatly increased.

“Oh, o-okay, then I will go with the, *um*, lowest difficulty.”

By the looks of it, she planned on doing whatever she wanted.

“Alright, I’m going in.” Without hesitation, I walked into the black portal. Immediately...

“Uwoah!”

The world flipped upside down and I landed on my back.

“Uuu... what the heck.”

The cold ground, a chilly wind, an unusual sensation. Even my voice sounded like static from a broken television. I had described it the same way in my novel, but it still felt strange experiencing it firsthand. I quickly got up and looked around. It seemed to be pitch black.

“I wonder when it’s going to start.”

Blue words popped up in front of me after about 5 minutes.

[Welcome to the tower.]

The 3D text looked more realistic than in VR games.

[Please choose a nickname before you start.]

The tower seemed to have the same setting as the one I created.

“Nickname, *huh...*”

I already knew the nicknames of everyone. Kim Suho would be MasterHolysword, Shin Jonghak would be YoungFly, Jin Sahyuk would be StrongestWill, and Chae Nayun would be ImGosu. After thinking for a moment...

“I guess I’ll go with this.”

[Extra7]

I decided on my nickname.

[Welcome Extra7.] [Your nickname will serve as your ID in the tower community.]

Chapter 156

Tutorial (1)

— Members of Essence of the Strait, Desolate Moon, Frost Sanctuary, and other top guilds have entered the Tower of Wish. The Hero Association is worried the tower campaign will become a free-for-all, but they acknowledged that what happens is out of their control.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk stared at the TV with sunken eyes inside Pandemonium Arena’s demon rank waiting room.

— Entrance tickets will transform into portals on the specified dates. This mechanism, which cannot be explained, has shocked researchers all over the world.

On TV, heroes walked into the portals that spawned from the entrance tickets. Seeing this, Jin Sahyuk’s eyes filled with regret and rage.

“That son of a bitch...”

She gritted her teeth and spat out resentment. She should’ve already been inside the Tower of Wish instead of sitting in this empty room and watching TV.

“I’ll kill him. I’ll tear his limbs apart and grind them into bits!”

Her anger drove her insane. She had obtained a ticket (given to her by a fan) and leisurely waited for July. She even bragged about it to Bell and others who couldn’t find any. She thought she would be the one having fun while they sat at home, bored.

Yesterday, she noticed her entrance ticket had disappeared while excitedly packing her stuff. She ransacked the room, but couldn’t find

it anywhere. After about 6 hours, she suddenly thought of Bell and noticed she hadn't heard from that son of a bitch in a while. As she expected, he didn't pick up when she called with trembling hands. Clearly, he had run off with her ticket.

— The public is now focused on the first wave of challengers...

“Just wait 2 months, you motherfucker...”

Jin Sahyuk mumbled in blood-boiling rage.

* * *

Tower of Wish, tutorial waiting room.

[Please put on the tutorial uniform after taking off all your clothes and equipment.]

“Got it.”

I followed the instructions and changed into the tutorial uniform. The leather armor looked rather shabby, but felt tightly woven.

“Done.”

[Confirmed. Please place all your belongings inside the storage. Items from outside cannot be taken into the tower.]

A black storage box appeared in front of me. I placed everything inside. Of course, I hid my smartwatch, the Desert Eagle, and aether inside stigma.

“Done.”

[Please place all your belongings inside the storage. Items from outside cannot be taken into the tower.]

“I did.”

[Please place all your belongings inside the storage. Items from outside cannot be taken into the tower.]

“...”

It seemed I couldn't avoid the eyes of that existence. I took out the items inside stigma and placed them in the storage.

“Will they be given back?”

[The black entrance ticket has been confirmed. You may retrieve some of them after the tutorial.]

“That's good.”

The Desert Eagle was one thing, but I definitely needed aether.

[Player scanning will now commence.]

A handprint scanner appeared in front of me and I placed my hand on top.

[Scanning in progress... 33%]

I felt a strange sensation of magic power running through my body.

“Auu.”

[66%... 99%... completed.] [Player Kim Hajin has been confirmed.]

[Kim Hajin]

▷Variable Stats... ▷Invariable Stats... ▷Traits [Master Sharpshooter]
[Intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 4 – Proficiency
EXP: 89%] [Random Consolidation System] [Low-intermediate rank]
[Spirit attribute] [3 stage consolidation] [Dexterity] [Low-intermediate
rank] [Null attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 5 – Proficiency EXP: 55%]
[Magic Dysfunction Physique] [Medicinal Memory Physique]

[During the tutorial, your variable stats will decrease by 65%.] [5 traits have been detected.] [All traits have been sealed inside the tower. As a player, you may choose 1 trait to use.] [Please choose.]

“Huu.”

I finally experienced the balance patch. In this tower, traits included both gifts and physiques. I could only choose 1 of my 5 traits (excluding arts, which were considered acquired abilities). However, I didn't find this too disadvantageous. The same restrictions also applied to every other challenger and I knew a secret no one else did.

“I'll go with Master Sharpshooter.”

This secret would allow me to acquire a second trait later. I didn't need to think about what to select since Master Sharpshooter was practically my identity.

[Will you choose the trait, Master Sharpshooter?]

“Yes.”

[Master Sharpshooter has decreased to grade 7 for the sake of balance.]

“Understood.”

I didn't feel happy about it, but I should treat the system politely.

[The black entrance ticket has been confirmed.] [You have been assigned the highest difficulty.] [In exchange, you will receive a bonus skill.]

“Thank you very much.”

This bonus was practically a cheat code. The number of skills you could acquire from the tower was limited to 1 unique skill, 3 normal skills, 2 special skills, and 1 ultimate skill. Players could only learn 7 skills in total. An extra skill would give a huge advantage.

[You may choose one bonus skill from this catalog.]

“Thank you.”

Players who performed well could return to the outside world with half the skills they acquired. However, I had a grander goal to keep all 8 skills. Recently, my stats had stopped rising and I planned to use this tower to forcefully grow.

▷*Vitality Recovery: Instantly recover 30% of your lost vitality. One charge is restored every 24 hours. Can be used twice a day.* ▷*Rage Gauge: Rage builds up as you strike and destroy. This rage...*

I scrolled through the list with nothing catching my eye. Then I found one.

▷*Blink: Teleport to a point within a 15 meter radius. One charge is restored every 8 hours. Can be used 3 times a day.*

Kim Suho would choose this skill in 2 months when he entered the Tower of Wish with a black ticket. It seemed like an excellent skill, but didn't suit me.

“Pass.”

After scrolling some more...

▷*Random Dice: Obtain 1 dice every 9 hours. Random dice will transform into raw material or a completed item once rolled. The chance of obtaining a completed item is much lower. You may select a category as you roll the dice.*

“This is it. Um, I'll take this.”

A bonus skill that utilized my luck and synergized with Dexterity. I chose it without hesitation.

[Random Dice has been chosen as a bonus skill.] [You may view your status by saying, status window.] [The tutorial will begin in 1 minute.] [You will enter the highest difficulty.]

One minute later. I teleported to an unknown place after a burst of light and found myself in an open field dyed in sunset. Dirt, rocks, leaves, and weeds filled the area.

[This tutorial will allow you to estimate your basic battle prowess.]

Like most tutorials, you simply had to defeat monsters.

“Damn.”

However, these goblins didn’t seem like ordinary ones.

“How am I supposed to kill them without a weapon?”

— *Kerrek.*

— *Krrrrk.*

The goblin shaman sat on the goblin warrior’s shoulder.

“Sigh.”

I felt confident before coming in, but my future seemed bleak now that I couldn’t use my Desert Eagle.

[You have spotted a goblin warrior and a goblin shaman.] [Their information has been recorded in the player encyclopedia.]

The player encyclopedia served as one of the Tower of Wish’s support systems and stored all information discovered or experienced by players.

“Open player encyclopedia.”

Information could be vital in situations like these. I decided to read up on the 2 goblins.

*Monster Encyclopedia [Goblin Warrior] [Intermediate rank Grade 7]
[Goblin Shaman] [Intermediate rank Grade 8]*

“That’s it?”

Well, it’s true the encyclopedia only held cursory information. At least I found out they were weaker than the ones I fought in Incheon.

“*Hmm...*”

For now, I should recall how Kim Suho got through this situation in the original story.

Right, he simply slaughtered them with the metal attribute of a Sword Saint. Being able to bring one gift was enough for Kim Suho.

Let’s think again since I’m different from Kim Suho.

— *Krrk.*

Thankfully, the goblins spoke among themselves and hadn’t noticed me yet.

“...”

In that case, I should probably search for the stage’s hidden secret first. I narrowed my eyes and used stigma’s magic power.

[Warning! The activation of an unnatural power has been detected. This power may not be used in the tutorial!] [Ignoring this warning may result in grave consequences!]

Seems like I would have to search for it directly.

I lowered my body and silently sneaked around. Sneaking became natural thanks to my mercenary work over the past 3 years. I reached the closest boulder and flipped it over. *Thud.* It had nothing under it and only felt like bait. I began to walk again. *Crack.*

“*Huup.*”

I accidentally stepped on a branch and anxiously turned around.

— *Krrrk.*

— *Guoooo.*

Thankfully, they seemed busy arguing about something.

“*Whew.*”

I sighed in relief and continued onward. Searching half the length of a soccer field took about 1-2 hours because of how carefully I moved.

“...!”

Then I found a leaf on the ground. Of course, the ground had other leaves, but this one glowed and practically shouted special. A window popped up as soon as I picked it up.

[Yggdrasil leaf]

I found it! I held my breath to prevent my excitement from leaking.

[The Yggdrasil leaf has blessed you with calmness and adventurous courage.] [Hidden Secret — You may select 1 of the following 3 blessings.]

— *Acquire an additional trait. — Restore 10% of lost stats. — Cradle of Wisdom.*

I had to choose the first option. The second option was only for stat monsters like Boss and Kim Suho. The Cradle of Wisdom was useless. I created the Tower of Wish in detail, so I knew exactly what to pick.

— *You may acquire an additional trait.*

I hesitated to choose between my Medicinal Memory Physique or Dexterity. The tower should have all sorts of precious medicine I'd never seen before. My future would become much easier if Medicinal Memory Physique remembered just one of them.

“Medicinal... no.”

However, choosing the Medicinal Memory Physique involved too much risk. I didn't know how much medicine I would have to consume to remember it.

“Dexterity, I'll go with Dexterity.”

With Dexterity, I could make items without having to buy them. Since I knew another way to acquire an additional trait (it would be a lot more difficult), going with Dexterity seemed to be the right choice.

[Yggdrasil's blessing has unsealed your trait, Dexterity.]

“Whew.”

Now, I could finally fight. I turned to the goblin warrior and shaman. Then I suddenly received a system message.

[You may store the Yggdrasil leaf inside your inventory.]

I almost forgot.

“Ah, thank you. Inventory!”

Players could access the highest quality extradimensional space inside the tower. I stored the Yggdrasil leaf inside and took out the random dice.

“Huuu.”

I held the dice, which had a question mark on each side. An unbelievable nervousness filled me. I needed these dice to turn into a weapon or I wouldn't be able to defeat these goblins.

“Blade. Give me something with a blade, please.”

I rolled the dice as I prayed. *Drrr*— The dice transformed into a primitive dagger.

“YES!”

I thought of my next move while holding the precious dagger. This dagger seemed too dull to kill the goblin warrior. However, it should be possible to kill the goblin shaman as long as I struck it in the head.

“Wait a minute.”

I suddenly thought of a different plan. A method to kill both of them at the same time.

“...”

I began to dig a hole with the dagger. It had to be deep enough to trap the 2.5 meter goblin warrior. I quietly dug the trap like a mole.

[Warning! You have 2 hours remaining.]

I was covered in sweat after digging for dozens of minutes. The goblin shaman and warrior had separated.

“Done.”

I finished digging a huge hole large enough for the goblin warrior to have no way out. I covered it with leaves and branches before getting up with my dagger.

— *Kieek!*

Immediately, I caught their attention. Then I threw my dagger at the shaman, instantly piercing its head and killing it.

— *Kieek...*

The shaman staggered for a moment before collapsing. Its defense couldn't even compare to a low rank monster.

—...

Now I only had to deal with the goblin warrior. It only blankly stared at the shaman's corpse.

“You’re not gonna move?”

— *Kuooo!*

Suddenly, it roared and angrily charged. I simply stood without moving. The clever shaman would’ve noticed something, but the warrior only threw a fit.

— *Kerek?*

Soon, the goblin warrior stepped on the trap and fell into the hole.

— *Guooo!*

I quickly ran to retrieve my dagger as it struggled inside the hole. Then I stabbed down at it stuck in the hole. *Die, please just die.* An alert finally popped up after about 2 hours.

[You have cleared the first stage, Basic Battle Prowess Assessment.] [You will be transferred to your private waiting room.] [After 12 hours of rest, you will be sent to the second stage, Way of Survival.]

“Argh, I’m exhausted.”

[Rest well.]

“Thank you.”

I told myself to treat the system politely no matter the difficulties. Only I knew about this ironclad rule in the Tower of Wish. Honestly, I had designed it with Kim Suho’s righteous personality in mind. After all, who else other than Kim Suho would talk to a system so politely?

* * *

Every player in the Tower of Wish possessed a private waiting room.

[Player Extra7’s waiting room]

Waiting rooms could be modified or decorated however their owner wished. Once the tutorial ended, players could invite others to their waiting room as well. Using points, they could expand the size of their room and also purchase furniture.

“It’s so empty.”

Of course, it only contained a single wooden board for now. I didn’t think the waiting room mattered all that much in the past, but it felt quite important now. Players could return to their waiting room once every 4 days to escape enemies or even death.

“Let’s sleep for now.”

I felt too tired to properly think and decided to rest until I gained another random dice.

“*Huuu.*”

I lay on the hard wooden board. Just like that, 7 hours went by.

“*Argh*, my back.”

My body felt sore after sleeping on such a hard surface. I hadn’t felt such a sensation for a long time due to my high stats. I frowned and checked my inventory.

[Random Dice] [Yggdrasil leaf]

“*Haa.*”

I took out the dice and immediately rolled it. *Ore, ore, give me an ore so I can make a fishing rod and a weapon.*

Plop!

The dice stopped and transformed into an ore.

“Oh?”

I became speechless at the translucent, red ore.

“This is...”

[Red Crystal] A crystal formed from compressed fire magic. A crystal specialized for crafting equipment.

This low-intermediate to intermediate rank crystal sold for a hefty price in the real world and was worth even more in a situation like this.

“Ooh...”

Raising my luck to 9.1 was one of the best things I ever did after being sent to this world.

“Ah, I should get to work now.”

Private waiting rooms didn’t count as part of the tutorial, so I should be able to use stigma’s magic power to craft items.

“Huhu.”

Even the tower’s system couldn’t have known I would craft items in the waiting room.

[An administrator has detected the activation of unnatural power.]

Unfortunately, the administrators’ eyes were better than I expected. One of them, most likely the mythical divinity in charge of the third floor that could see everything, Heimdall.

“I’ll just use a little bit.”

I tried to bargain. After all, the waiting room wasn’t the tutorial.

“Hello?”

The system didn’t reply, but I didn’t receive any more messages to

stop.

I used a bit of stigma's magic power to form crafting tools. *Ssk, ssk*.
Then I began to handle the red crystal like eggshells.

Chapter 157

Tutorial (2)

I worked on crafting equipment for the next tutorial and separated the red crystal into 3 equal parts using stigma's magic power. I would use the sharp part for a spear, the wide part for an axe, and the remainder for a fishing line.

The spear, axe, and fishing rod seemed quite simple. I just had to take apart the waiting room's wooden board, trim it, and fix the crystal pieces onto the tips. I wasn't sure what to do about the fishing line, but stigma's magic power had solved it for me. The crystal transformed into a squishy, semisolid substance when I infused it with stigma. After some tinkering, the substance became a long, sturdy fishing line.

"Hmm."

I looked over the items. They didn't look too aesthetically pleasing since Dexterity's proficiency had decreased and I didn't have aether. Still, they should be better than most mass-produced goods and should serve me well enough for the tutorial. A system window suddenly popped up.

[You have obtained the technique, Lv.1 Crafting.]

"Oh right."

The tower had a technique system as well.

[Crafting Lv.1] You can easily craft Lv.0 items.

The Tower of Wish functioned like an RPG game. Performing certain actions awarded players with unrealistic bonuses. The crafting technique would allow me to instantly craft items, skipping intermediate steps. It also included a leveling system like most RPGs.

[The second tutorial will begin in 10 minutes.] [You may access the community.]

The system gave me another recommendation as I practiced swinging my spear and axe. The community was one of the tower's most important systems.

[Tower Community] [Public Forum] [Auction House] [Group Creation]... [Messenger] [Player Profile]

As expected, the community featured several functions. The auction house was self-explanatory and players could form parties with group creation. The player profile resembled a social media page with additional functions.

[Player Profile]

Players could create 2 profile pages, one with their nickname and one anonymously. Each player could fully decorate their profiles and turn it into a shop to sell items or buy and sell information.

I tried clicking on each function.

[Player Profile will be unlocked after the tutorial.] [Auction House will be unlocked after the tutorial.] [Messenger will be unlocked...]

As I thought, only the public forum was currently available.

[Public Forum]

[Am I the first poster?]

[Wow, this is interesting. Someone comment on this thread! I need to know if anyone else is alive.]

[Has anyone cleared the tutorial yet?]

Only 3 posts existed so far. It seemed everyone was busy trying to clear the tutorial. I created a post as well.

[Let's share information.]

The view count went up as soon as I posted and someone commented.

— Extra7? Why are you here? Wait, are you the Extra7 I know?

“How does this guy know me?”

I tilted my head and checked the commenter's nickname. It was... *Nayunjajangman*. The Nayun part made me a bit uncomfortable, but the familiar nickname surprised me.

“He's here too?”

[The second tutorial stage, Way of Survival, will now begin.] [Please get ready.]

I tried to comment, but another system alert popped up. I turned the community off and stood up with all my equipment.

“I'm ready.”

[You will now be transferred to the second tutorial stage.]

“Yes.”

A white light surrounded me after the system alert. I closed my eyes and felt the warmth. It felt strange like I was floating in the air. Tssss. Soon, I landed on a soft surface and opened my eyes.

“I'm here.”

Chwaaa... I could hear the calm waves and a boundless ocean spread across the horizon. I stood on a sandy beach with a dense forest of palm trees behind me. This place appeared to be a tiny uninhabited island.

[Tutorial Goal – Survive for 14 days.] [From the second tutorial, you will be ranked based on your performance and will be rewarded accordingly.]

I simply had to survive in this boundless area for 14 days. However, the performance-based reward would be worth the risks.

[Try viewing your status window.]

Another system alert popped up.

“Status window.”

[Nickname – Extra7] Vitality 43/100 — Magic Power 30/30 — Skill Count ^[1] Bonus Skill [Random Dice]

My vitality and magic power basically represented my HP and MP. My magic power probably wasn't 0 because I had lost my magic dysfunction physique. *Why did the system want me to see this?*

*[Vitality is affected not only by damage, but also hunger and fatigue.]
[When your vitality reaches 0, Player Extra7 will die. Players who die in the tutorial cannot revive.]*

I see, so it wanted to tell me to eat. It must've been worried about me, a kind, polite... cough.

“Thank you.”

I answered energetically and looked around. There didn't seem to be anything edible on land. I would have to forage from the ocean. I had already prepared a fishing rod and axe to fish and build a boat.

Growl—

I started to grow hungry and took out the fishing rod from my inventory. I should prioritize finding food since I could drink the coconuts from the palm trees.

“Let me think...”

I stared at the fishing rod in my hands. I had practiced fishing for this exact purpose before coming into the tower.

“Huup!”

I swung the rod in a big motion. *Whish*— The line drew an arc and felt more natural than I thought, probably because of Dexterity and Master Sharpshooter.

Plop!

The hook sank into the ocean and time passed in silence. I grew hungrier as the fishing rod remained still. I didn't use any bait, but the red crystal hook didn't need any. Sea monsters should smell the scent of magic power.

“Yaawn.”

I continued to wait and firmly believed in my luck. Finally, the water's surface showed a hint of change after about 30 minutes.

“Ah!”

The fishing line tensed up with something clearly biting it. Whatever it was, it felt incredibly powerful and bent the wooden rod.

“...”

I picked up my spear after repeatedly trying to reel it in. It felt like a waste of time as my vitality decreased. Killing it and reeling it in would be the same as reeling it in and killing it. I held the spear and calmly observed the fish underwater. *Chweek!* I threw with all my strength, which should still be above 2 even though it was 65% sealed. The fish stopped moving and I easily reeled it in.

[You have obtained the technique, Lv1. Fishing.] You have an increased chance of fish biting your hook. [You have spotted a glossy seafish. Its information has been recorded in the player encyclopedia.]

“A sea monster.”

Monster Encyclopedia [Glossy Seafish] [Low rank grade 7] — A sea monster that tastes like a mackerel.

I retrieved the spear from its back and started a campfire. I simply rubbed some wood together. Then I cooked the glossy seafish over it. Tssss. It dripped deliciously as it cooked.

* * *

Boss cleared the first stage with the hardest difficulty in the blink of an eye. Currently, she sat on a sandy beach in meditation.

“...”

She took several deep breaths and tried to move her shadow into the water. However, the shadows couldn't stretch far enough because of her 93% stat restriction.

“Huuu.”

She tried over a dozen times, but always failed. In the end, she gave up on fishing with magic power. *Growl.*

I'm hungry. I have to eat something. Should I have saved the orange ticket's emergency food?

She stood up and walked around to forage. Soon, she found a large boulder and hoped to find some crabs underneath.

Boss threw the boulder aside and found a startled hermit crab. She quickly grabbed it.

“...”

Now, she needed to cook it and opened her inventory. She already ate all the food that came with her ticket, but still had the burner and frying pan.

Tak, tak.

She turned on the burner and placed the hermit crab on the pan.

“...*Ssp.*”

Food. Food. Food. The sun began to set as she mumbled.

* * *

It had been 18 hours since the second tutorial. *Koong, koong, koong.* I struck down a tree with my axe. The tree didn't last long against the red crystal axe with a fire attribute. *Kiiik*— It fell in just 5 swings.

“That should be enough.”

This was my 30th tree. I used all of them to build a boat. The highest difficulty island had no food and the second tutorial onwards would have a performance-based ranking system. How far I adventured and how many sea monsters I hunted would all contribute to my ranking. Leaving the island was a must.

“Inventory.”

I had filled my inventory with useful materials like bones and sea monster skins. Then I took out an item the system labeled as, *red fish's tough skin*.

“Craft.”

It instantly transformed into a string.

[Red fish's tough skin has been used to make a twine.] [Dexterity has been applied to crafting.] [You have crafted a Lv.1 Tough Twine.]

Using crafting, I could skip intermediate steps like in a real game.

“*Whew.*”

I picked up my axe and went to the logs. *Ssk, ssk.* With Dexterity, I began to shave the logs to make a proper sailboat. I needed to make them as smooth as possible. *Sssk, sssk.* After about an hour of hard work...

[Your efforts have impressed the Yggdrasil leaf.]

I received another system alert.

[Try checking the Yggdrasil leaf.]

“Ah, hold on a bit.”

I immediately set everything down to open my inventory.

[Yggdrasil leaf] — Blessing of Adventure: Your body will grow lighter with this item in your inventory. (Slightly boosts your physical ability.) You may grant minor blessings to items. Blessings will grow stronger the more they relate to adventures.

The Yggdrasil leaf gained a new effect.

“Nice.”

The first effect only gave a slight boost, but it applied to all my physical abilities. The second effect with blessings just seemed good all-around.

“Thank you.”

I closed the inventory and continued working on the boat. *Ssk, ssk*. I began to cut the logs. *Chwaak, chwaak*. And tied them together with strings.

“Uuu!”

I finally finished after 3 hours of hard work and felt a bit lightheaded when I stood up to stretch.

“Next up is...”

I began to throw coconuts into my boat for something to drink. One, two, three, four, five... twenty-three. I filled almost half the boat with coconuts.

[Try granting the vehicle a minor blessing.]

“Oh right.”

I almost forgot. Being friendly to the system also benefitted me like this. The Yggdrasil leaf might’ve gained a new effect because I had been so polite. I took out the Yggdrasil leaf and waved it over my sailboat.

[Yggdrasil’s blessing envelopes the sailboat with magic power.] [You will now have a smoother adventure.]

“Status window.”

I wanted to check the sailboat’s stats.

[Lv1. Sturdy Sailboat with Lv.2 Yggdrasil’s blessing] — Lv.1 Sturdy Sailboat: Durability Lv.1, Speed Lv.1, Safety Lv.1 — Lv.2 Yggdrasil’s minor blessing has increased all effects of the Sturdy Sailboat by 1.

“Oh?”

Yggdrasil’s blessing raised an item’s levels? That wasn’t a minor blessing at all!

“Thank you very much.”

I won’t forget this gratitude. Until I conquer this tower, that is.

Now, I prepared to set sail and pushed the sailboat into the water. Then I hopped on with a paddle. A pleasant breeze blew as I paddled forward and the sailboat began to drift away.

My goal for the second tutorial was simple. I would adventure as far out as possible and kill as many sea monsters as I could. It might become dangerous, but that would only increase my ranking.

“Huh?”

I spotted another island after paddling for about 30 minutes. The silhouette of the person on the beach...

“Am I seeing this correctly?”

I narrowed my eyes and focused into the distance. My vision instantly expanded and the island came into view.

Chapter 158

Tutorial (3)

“Who is it?”

Someone was on the island. He didn’t look too familiar. I couldn’t recall his name, but I think he was a high-intermediate rank hero who often appeared on variety shows.

“Wait...”

Could it be that all players on the highest difficulty shared the same sea? I never thought about that when I created my setting.

— *O-Oi! Oiii!*

The man also spotted me and waved as I sailed past. I had no intentions of letting him on board, but I didn’t mind giving him some food.

“Must be a green ticket.”

The man didn’t have anything, not even the basic weapon and food supply. Honestly, choosing the hardest difficulty with a green ticket was suicide. The system should’ve warned him, but he probably didn’t listen.

— Here! Here! *Uhaha!* Over here!

The man jumped excitedly as I took out a glossy seafish from my inventory. Then a dark shadow appeared underneath the island. I didn’t have time to think at all.

Puaaaa—

The giant fish's mouth suddenly shot up from the water. It had 2 sharp fangs on each side of its jaws and promptly swallowed the entire island.

[You have spotted an island devourer.] Monster Encyclopedia [Island Devourer] [Tutorial-only Monster] — This monster hates those who only stay on one island. However, who it seeks depends solely on luck.

A system alert popped up.

“Whoa, whoa.”

I broke out into cold sweat. However, I didn't have time to sit still. The shadow that swallowed an entire island crept up on me. I quickly began to paddle away. However, it only grew closer. I couldn't do anything against it with a mere paddle, so I quickly opened my inventory.

[Inventory] [Random Dice x3]

I could keep a maximum of 5 random dice, so I saved them for emergencies since they could become anything I desired. I picked up the dice and thought hard.

Please become something that can save me from that thing. Something like an attachable engine to my boat...

Drrr—I rolled the dice while praying.

“What?”

However, it mercilessly betrayed me and became a strange mango. At first, I didn't even notice it had turned into a mango. It just looked like a yellowish-orange fruit, but as big as a watermelon.

[Lv.3 Big and Juicy Mango]

I would've thought it was some kind of exotic fruit if it wasn't for the status window.

“The hell is this?”

I checked the item description just in case.

[Lv.3 Big and Juicy Mango] — A big, juicy mango. A very precious fruit that can sometimes be used as medicine. Lv.2 Vitality Recovery, Lv.4 Satiability

A Lv.3 item! Most items in the tutorial were only Lv.0-Lv.2. This mango was certainly a good item, but it was useless in this situation. What would filling up my belly do when I was about to enter a belly myself?

—Drrk.

“Shit...”

The island devourer’s fin grazed my boat. I had a strong hunch it wanted to eat me. My heart violently thumped, but I had grown used to this by now. As a mercenary, I had lived through much more dangerous situations. I didn’t even have time to throw another dice and frantically racked my brain. *Mango. A delicious, juicy mango.* A lightbulb suddenly went off in my head.

“H-Hey! Eat this instead of me!”

I held the mango forward and wafted it back and forth. The shadow slowed down, at least that’s what it looked like.

“This is a precious food you can never taste in the tutorial.”

As I said, Lv.3 items couldn’t be found in the tutorial.

“So take it!”

I threw the mango as far away as I could. *Whiiish*— With Master Sharpshooter’s help, the mango drew a beautiful arc and landed 400-500 meters away.

Plop!

Water splashed on my face as the giant creature changed course and swam towards the mango.

“*Whew.*”

The giant shadow grew farther away. *Thud.* I fell on my butt without any energy left. I definitely never created such a creature in my tutorial.

“I knew this would happen.”

It didn’t surprise me. I often received comments about the original story like, *Isn’t the highest difficulty too easy?* I always gave the excuse, *It’s not that the tutorial is easy, but Kim Suho’s gift is just broken.*

“*Haaa...*”

I barely avoided death. The scene of an entire island being swallowed still lingered on my mind.

“Mango, mango, mango...”

I murmured the same word in a daze.

* * *

“*Auu*, I’m getting seasick.”

Six days had passed since then. Today, the waves became fiercer than usual. The past few days had been quite spectacular. I almost fell overboard from a sudden storm and an intermediate rank, grade 8 sea monster almost ate me. I barely managed to survive both using my red crystal weapons and the random dice.

[Lv.2 Sea Tiger’s Oil] — An oil that will drive away sea monsters. Lv.1 Low-intermediate rank or lower monster repellent, Lv.1 Shock absorbent, waterproof coating

[Lv.2 Magical Repair Ointment] — A mystical ointment that will work on items. Will restore the durability of items under Lv.1

These two items served me especially well on my journey.

“I want to be on land.”

I started to miss the land after being on a boat for 6 days.

[Your sailing technique has improved to Lv.2] — You can now sail across waters more easily. — Your sense of direction at sea has improved.

No, please just give me some land! I widened my eyes and peered into the distance. Then I caught sight of a small island.

“Nice.”

I paddled towards my new destination. *Splloosh*. The boat seemed faster than before perhaps because of my improved sailing technique.

I could finally see the island up close after about 20 minutes of paddling.

“Eh?”

I exclaimed in shock when I reached it and saw a familiar face.

“Boss!”

* * *

Yoo Yeonha chatted with Yoo Jinhyuk in Essence of the Strait’s team leader office.

[Why are you so curious about this?]

[I’m not curious. I just want to know the truth.]

Yoo Yeonha shared what she knew about the Kwang-Oh Incident. However, Yoo Jinhyuk still kept some matters secret, which Yoo Yeonha was now in the process of investigating. She assumed Kim Hajin was the survivor and wanted to know why Chae Joochul's assassin didn't kill him and who the assassin was.

[Honestly, I don't know.]

“He's lying again.”

Yoo Yeonha frowned.

[You're lying.]

[No, I'm serious.]

[You said you saw him being admitted to the orphanage.]

As she typed, Yoo Yeonha suddenly wondered. *What would Kim Hajin look like as a baby?* She found it difficult to imagine it with his face.

[Yeah, some kid left him there.]

[Kid?]

[Yeah, 5-7 years old or 8 at most. Black hair... er, actually maybe that kid wore a hijab or something.]

[Do you have dementia?]

[Heh, I'm getting old. Time travel isn't what it used to be.]

Having more information wasn't always better since inaccurate information introduced needless bias.

[Anyways, it was a young girl.]

[Okay, thank you. Ah, by the way, have you thought about my offer?]

[No.]

“Tsk.”

Yoo Yeonha wanted Yoo Jinhyuk to join her information guild, Falling Blossom. He lazed around most of the time in his office.

[Think about it. I'm already being watched by Chae Joochul. What would he think if he sees you with me?]

[I get it.]

[Good, then send me some assault rifles.]

[What do you need those for?]

[I decided to form a small militia. You know how to go about it without being discovered, right?]

[Yeah, no.]

[What? Oi, niece, you—]

Yoo Yeonha left the chat and leaned against her chair. Ssss— Her eyes automatically closed.

“It feels amazing.”

She could only describe the sensation as leaning on an angel's wings or sleeping peacefully in Noah's Ark while the world crumbled. Her new chair was the best gift she'd ever received since she spent 16 hours a day in her office.

“Hnnng...”

Yoo Yeonha thought about many things while relaxing in her chair. Her guild members in the Tower of Wish, the high-intermediate rank monsters, the dungeons her guild planned to conquer, a cup ramen... hamburger... ssp. She began to drool.

Boss seemed skinnier since the last time I saw her. I wanted to give her a big hug, but we were both too dirty from staying in the wild for several days.

“It’s been a while.”

Boss leisurely smiled as she spoke. However, she didn’t seem to be in good shape.

“Boss, did you eat?”

“I did.”

She nodded, but I grew suspicious.

“What’s your vitality right now?”

“Vitality?”

“Yes.”

She blankly looked at the air, probably at her status window.

“...90.”

“90?”

“Yes.”

Boss nodded.

“Are you sure it isn’t just 9?”

“*Pft*, as if.”

Her unnatural smirk confirmed it. Her vitality was definitely 9. In fact,

it couldn't be anything but 9. Boss' stat restriction must be incredibly high. Kim Suho received an 80% stat restriction, so Boss should easily surpass 90%.

"It was hard at first, but I got used to it."

"You've been here the whole time?"

"No, I went back and forth to find food."

"Ah..."

Thankfully, the island devourer didn't target her.

"Then let's eat something first."

"Okay."

I took out a seafish from my inventory, but Boss left first.

"Follow me."

She turned around with a smile and walked into the forest.

"Boss? Where are you going?"

"I thought this might happen, so I kept some emergency food supply."

"Ah... okay."

I followed her for now. Boss walked into the middle of the forest and stopped in front of a giant palm tree marked with an X. Then she removed the leaves underneath and took out the tutorial-only food bag.

"Here."

Boss proudly opened the bag with all sorts of seafood inside: clams,

sea pineapples, crabs, snails, and two small fish. It certainly seemed decent enough for a meal.

“Wow.”

I felt genuinely surprised since Boss’ main stat was magic power. This stat displayed exponential power as it grew, but only became more unless it surpassed a certain point. Boss must’ve caught all this food with only her physical abilities.

“There’s quite a lot.”

“Of course. I got to relive my old days of training thanks to this place.”

Boss proudly stuck out her chest. She clearly had good survival sense since she kept the food inside the tutorial bag instead of her inventory. The tutorial bag kept food fresh, unlike the inventory.

“You must be hungry since you paddled all the way here. Wait for a minute.”

Boss seemed to worry about me as she took out a pan and burner to cook. *Tsss*. I stared at her watching the food on the frying pan. After flipping it a couple of times, she turned the burner off and handed the pan to me.

“It’s done. You can eat now.”

“What about you, Boss?”

“*Ehem*, like I said, my vitality is 90.”

She meant she didn’t need it.

“...”

I suddenly felt something warm in my heart. Was this why she was the boss? Was this a boss’ duty? I couldn’t quite describe my emotions.

“Aren’t you going to...”

I took out a fish from my inventory.

“...eat?”

Boss’ eyes lost focus at the large glossy seafish. She glanced back and forth between the frying pan and my fish. She had only gathered tiny seafood together, but the glossy seafish couldn’t even fit in the frying pan.

Boss’ face turned red.

* * *

We ate all the glossy seafish in my inventory 30 minutes later.

[Cooperation is an important factor in climbing the tower.]

The system messaged me while I sat on the ground to digest my food.

“Alright, let’s start moving.”

“Moving?”

“Yes.”

The second tutorial’s performance-based points used an absolute and relative evaluation. You had to surpass a certain threshold to receive the reward even if you achieved first place.

“Let’s set sail. It’s dangerous to stay on the same island.”

“Sail?”

“Yes, there’s a monster called the island devourer. It’ll attack you if you stay on the same island for too long.”

“I don’t quite understand, but sure.”

Boss and I returned to my boat at the beach.

“*Hmm.*”

My boat seemed a bit too small now.

“We’re going to ride that thing?”

Boss seemed doubtful as well.

“*Mm...* hold on.”

I took out a random dice. It should be fine to use one since I saved up five.

“I don’t know if this will work though.”

I wished for a boat or materials to build a new one as I rolled the dice.

Tk. The dice became stuck in the sand without rolling. It seemed my wish was too much as the first dice simply turned into a wooden plank.

“Oh? What was that dice?”

“*Uh...* hold on.”

I rolled another one. *Tk.* It also got stuck in the sand again. However, the dice strangely shook this time. Then it grew in size.

“Oh?”

And transformed into a boat. It was only half the size of my sailboat, but it looked like an actual boat.

“What is this mysterious thing?”

“...”

“Newbie?”

“...”

Newbie?”

I couldn't answer Boss. I only felt... betrayed. Why did I chop down trees, shave them, tie them together, and repeat all those tiring tasks? All I had to do was roll the dice a couple of times.

* * *

Boss and I set sail after I tied my old sailboat to the new one. Voyaging became more fun with someone to talk to. I obtained food from fishing while Boss focused on training her magic power.

“Ah, my magic power stat just rose by 0.3 points.”

Boss spoke with a bright face after about 6 hours of sailing.

“Wow, it's increasing fast. When do you think you'll be able to hunt sea monsters?”

“Now.”

“What is it at?”

“2.3”

“Let's just eat.”

“Okay.”

I began to cook while Boss meditated. Today's menu would be seafish sashimi. Sashimi didn't have much calories, but eating it could increase your magic power. While I sliced up the fish...

Pssssh—

A large waterspout shot out from the ocean. The surface of the ocean split and a fish as big as a house emerged. It had fierce eyes that took up half its face and a mouth that sharply protruded. This ugly fish blocked our boat and stared at us.

[You have spotted a giant fish. Its information has been recorded in the player encyclopedia.]

Monster Encyclopedia [Giant Fish] [Intermediate rank, grade 9]

“Boss?”

“Don’t worry.”

Boss stood up and reached out towards the fish. *Gueeee—* It opened its mouth with a strange roar to swallow us, but trying to fight Boss at close range was foolish despite her stat restrictions.

— Pervading Shadow.

With a soft whisper, black magic power shot out from Boss’ fingers and entered the fish’s mouth. Soon, its body began to distort as though something dug inside of it.

Gueeee—

A different scream rang out. The pain didn’t last long as black thorns pierced out from inside its body.

“...”

Boss sat on the boat with a peaceful look. I pulled the giant corpse closer to check for any useful materials, but it had nothing.

* * *

[The second tutorial will end in 10 minutes.] [Good work surviving until

now.]

A system alert notified us that the stage would end. Boss spoke from next to me.

“Looks like the tutorial is ending soon.”

“I heard.”

She smiled.

“Good job.”

“Thank you, but Boss is just dead weight here.”

“Dead weight... is a bit harsh. Didn't I kill all the sea monsters?”

“That's because I kept us fed. You starved every time you used your magic power.”

Boss narrowed her eyes. She glared at me, but I didn't find it scary at all.

“I'm kidding. Good work.”

“You too, newbie.”

We smiled at each other.

[You have cleared the second tutorial.] [Player Extra7 has obtained 2008 performance points.] [You are currently ranked 1st out of the 78 players who cleared the hardest difficulty.] [You are the only player with over 2000 points and will receive the second tutorial's reward of honor.] [You will be transferred to your waiting room in 3 minutes.]

Chapter 159

The First City (1)

[You will be given 24 hours to rest.] [Prepare for the final tutorial.]

A warm light enveloped my body as I closed my eyes. My feet touched a hard surface after a brief floating sensation.

I opened my eyes and found myself in the waiting room. Then I smirked and sat on the floor.

[First place reward – you have obtained a tutorial reward box.] [You have obtained 1000 TP (Tower Points)]

All I did was adventure, but easily obtained first place since the first wave of challengers had no idea how the tower worked. The competition would only increase after the third wave and Kim Suho should place first in the second wave.

[TP can be used on all floors of the tower.] [Try opening the Lv.1 Player Shop.]

“Yes, thank you.”

I politely thanked the system. This shop could only be used by players and sold special items like tower re-entrance tickets and earth return tickets. Of course, neither of them could be used during the tutorial.

“Player shop.”

A window popped up as soon as I spoke.

[Lv.1 Player Shop] — Physical Ability — Magic Power Development — Faith — Consumable — Special Items [TP: 1000]

The Lv.1 didn't refer to my level since players didn't have any, but everything else in the tower did: equipment, techniques, skills, NPCs, the player shop, and even the system. I clicked on the physical ability category.

[Muscle Growth Catalyst]... [Vitality Boost Pill]

The shop sold items that increased 0.05-0.10 stat points for 1000 TP. The magic power development and faith categories sold similar items. With 1000 TP, I could only buy a few consumable herbs.

[Blue Herb 30 TP] [Luminescence Herb 50 TP]... [Magic Power Clover 100 TP]

"There's nothing but herbs."

I recalled putting vitality and magic power recovery potions in level 1 player shops, but that seemed to have changed. The items listed here didn't seem cost-effective at all. TP could be used throughout the Tower of Wish, so it might be better to buy items from NPCs or other players in the auction house. Of course, crafting items would be the cheapest option.

[Earth Return Ticket – 1000 TP]

"This got more expensive too."

Even the return ticket cost 1000 TP without factoring in the other 1000 TP required for the re-entrance ticket. Going back and forth between Earth and the tower cost 4 times more than the original story.

"Looks like I won't make it back in a month."

TP was especially important on the early floors. I promised Evandel I'd return in a month, but I would probably need at least 2 months. Next, I checked the reward box.

[Tutorial Reward Box] You will obtain 3 random upgrade scrolls. (This box will disappear unless it is opened within 12 hours.)

My luck probably didn't apply to this box since it contained similar level scrolls. I opened it without hesitation and 3 scrolls popped out.

[Skill Upgrade Scroll] [Item Upgrade Scroll] [Upgrade Scroll] [All scrolls must be used within 12 hours.]

All 3 scrolls were quite rare and hard to find even after the tutorial.

"They're different, *huh*."

Kim Suho would obtain different scrolls. The only common one was the skill upgrade scroll. Obviously, I had to use it on the random dice. I wanted to save it, but it would disappear in 12 hours. First, I tore the skill upgrade scroll in half.

[Would you like to upgrade the bonus skill, Random Dice?]

"Yes."

[Please select an upgrade.] [Lv.1 Efficiency] Will decrease the Random Dice's recharge time. [Lv.1 Limit Increase] The rank of items you can obtain from the Random Dice will increase. [Lv.1 Intelligence] Random Dice will recognize your intentions better.

Three upgrades popped up in front of me. I clicked on limit increase without thinking for too long. *Thunk*. The sound of a metallic bar rang out.

[Random Dice can now transform into Lv.4 items. Its recharge time has increased by 30 minutes.]

Next was the item upgrade scroll.

"What items do I have anyway?"

I opened my inventory.

[Random Dice] [Lv.1 Fleshfish's Skin] [Lv.2 Black Horn Octopus' Heart] [Lv.1 Red Crystal Spear] [Lv.1 Red Crystal Axe] [Lv.1 Red

Crystal Fishing Rod] [Lv.2 Yggdrasil leaf] [Glossy Seafish's Tough Skin]

My inventory only contained 8 items since it was still at level 0.

“Hmm.”

None of the items from the tutorial seemed worth it. Upgrading the red crystal spear seemed... wait.

“The Yggdrasil leaf.”

Could I upgrade it? I tried rubbing the scroll on the leaf.

[Would you like to use the item upgrade scroll on the Lv.2 Yggdrasil leaf?]

“It works?”

I immediately confirmed it.

[Lv.2 Yggdrasil leaf has increased to Lv. 3] — The effectiveness of Yggdrasil's blessing has increased. — The Yggdrasil leaf's physical ability boost has increased. Your strength, vitality, stamina, and speed stats have increased by an additional 0.1 points.

“Alright, that does it for items.”

Now, for the upgrade scroll. It didn't have a prefix to specify its use, but I immediately decided on how to use it.

“I'd like to upgrade the system.”

I ripped the scroll in half. One second, two seconds, three seconds passed. The system, which always responded immediately, replied slightly late.

[Are you sure you want to upgrade Lv.0 Extra7's System?]

It seemed taken aback, perhaps even happy.

“Of course.”

I smiled and nodded.

[Lv.0 Extra7's System has increased to Lv.1 Extra7's System.] [Your waiting room has grown larger.] [Your inventory has increased to Lv.1] [The community...]

A string of alerts confirmed that I made the right decision.

“Great.”

I looked around the waiting room that I would often visit. I planned to bring my friends here as well. Of course, the tower had an incredibly large floor called the residential area, which was almost the size of Korea. However, you could only rest in the waiting room while on all the other floors.

“Let's make some furniture now.”

Crafting should help increase my stats and Dexterity's proficiency. First, I needed some material and took out the random dice.

[Well-cut Oak Tree]

Not having a level meant it was Lv.0, trash that could only be used for drawers or floor tiles. I rolled another one.

[Lv.3 High-quality Black Wood]

“Sweet.”

A large log popped out. I should be able to make a bed with it. I formed a tool with stigma's magic power and got to work.

“Huup.”

After 12 hours...

[Dexterity has increased to grade 8.] [Crafting has increased to Lv.2] — Can add finishing touches to handmade equipment. — Automatic crafting will become more elaborate. — You have obtained, Blueprint-seeing Eyes. [Your strength has increased by 0.1 points.] [Your stamina has increased by 0.1 points.] [Your vitality has increased by 0.1 points.]...

Dexterity had fallen to grade 9, but managed to improve. My physical stats also increased again.

[Lv.3 Comfortable Bed] Lv.3 Recovery: Will completely restore vitality in 6 hours. Lv.3 Comfort: Will clear your mind.

I built an amazing bed and had 12 hours left. Unfortunately, I didn't have enough time to rest. I worked so hard so I could bully that bastard... or I guess that bitch Jin Sahyuk. I had to grow strong enough to defeat her.

“Argh, I feel sore all over.”

My shoulders felt like they would pop off, but I still had to do many things. Next, I planned on crafting more equipment. I thought about a mask and hood to hide my face. I also wanted some simple armor. I rolled another random dice for more material.

* * *

I crafted 3 more pieces of equipment in 9 hours.

[Lv.3 Black Hooded Robe] Lv.2 Temperature Control, Lv.3 Auto-fit, Lv.1 Sound Muffling [Lv.2 Black Eagle Mask] Lv.2 Air Purifier, Lv.2 Face Protection [Lv.3 Leather Armor] Lv.3 Defense, Lv.3 Durability, Lv.3 Ease of Movement

“Auu, I'm so tired.”

Thankfully, stigma's magic power worked quite well and they all ended up with desirable effects. I probably had better equipment than everybody else.

[You have acquired the technique, Lv.1 Magic Power Infusion.] — The

effect of magic power infused in items has improved.

[The final tutorial will begin in 1 hour.]

The final tutorial wasn't that hard. The first tutorial's concept was battle, the second was survival, and the final one would be society. I entered the community before the final tutorial began.

[Public Forum] [Read this if you are Extra7.]

“Huh?”

I found a post looking for me as I scrolled through. I could tell who posted it before even reading.

[Read this if you are Extra7.] [Nayunjajangman] — Are you still alive? If so, answer me.

He must've thought I died since I suddenly stopped responding last time. I laughed and replied.

— What, you finished your tutorial?

He quickly responded.

— As expected, you're still alive, hyung. I'm waiting for the final tutorial.

— What difficulty are you in.

— You first, hyung.

— I'm in the highest.

— Wow... hyung must be someone amazing... so scary.

[The final tutorial will begin soon.]

“Ah, I don’t have time to chat.”

I wouldn’t be able to enter the community during the tutorial.

— Hey, I’m starting the final tutorial. Don’t die and follow me properly.

— Lol Yes hyung!

“Hmm.”

The lol sounded like he looked down on me, but I didn’t bother replying.

[Final tutorial – Maintaining Profit] [You will now be transferred to the Tutorial Town.]

A light burst out like thick fog as I closed my eyes and felt the warmth.

* * *

[You are in the highest difficulty of the Tutorial Town.] [For 10 days, obtain as much TP as possible in the tutorial’s society.] [After 10 days, you must possess more than 1000 TP to clear the final tutorial.] [All TP earned by players will be theirs to keep.] [Lv.??? Mercenary’s Pub]

A flurry of system alerts popped up along with the status window of the building in front of me.

“It’s practically a city.”

I looked around. The houses behind me with yellow bricks looked like medieval shops. A pub built out of wood stood in front of me. The whole scene came out of a fantasy novel.

I entered a pub for the first time in my life. *Kiiik*— The floor creaked as I opened the stiff wooden door.

“Uhahaha.”

“Hahahaha.”

Rowdy laughter greeted me as I entered. First, I took a good look around. Many muscular NPCs chatted while having fun. For the record, NPCs and players looked quite similar. It would be best to act like an NPC. I lifted my hood and sat at the counter.

“What can I get ya?”

The owner asked. I glanced at the menu and casually ordered.

“One gin.”

“That’ll be 50 TP.”

[You can take out 50 TP from your inventory.]

“It shouldn’t be that expensive.”

“...20 TP.”

The owner lowered the price by more than 50%. However, 20 TP still cost too much. I pretended to reach into my pocket and took out 5 TP coins. The owner poured the gin into a glass without saying anything.

[Lv.1 Gin] Lv.1 Alcohol

At least the drink wasn’t drugged. I chugged the glass. Then...

Kiik—

The wooden door opened and I instinctively turned around. Immediately, my eyes widened at the man and a woman who just entered.

The woman was a short Caucasian. Her white hair would stand out even at a distance and her puppy-like eyes shone like jewels. Anyone

looking at her would wonder how such a small face could contain such beauty.

Next to the woman stood a well-built Asian man. His appearance was just as praiseworthy.

“Where is this? How mysterious.”

They were heroes from the Temple of Justice, the strongest members of the Hero Association. Aileen, the Spirit Speech Master, and Hellfire Yi Yongha.

Chapter 160

The First City (2)

According to the system, 78 people had passed the second tutorial at the highest difficulty. The Tutorial Town's size seemed similar to Yeouido and all 78 challengers now resided in this town. Among those 78, the 2 heroes closest to master rank appeared. I hid my nervousness and observed them.

"Where is this? How mysterious."

They walked into the pub as I pulled my hood over my head.

"It says this is the Mercenary Pub. Look, the bulletin board has missions on it."

"Ah, so we have to make money by completing them."

Aileen nodded at Yi Yongha's words. They looked like an uncle and niece pair at first glance.

"Looks like it."

"How much do we need to make again?"

"1000 each in 10 days."

"That should be easy."

Players with more than 1000 TP would move on to the real tower, but those who didn't would remain until the next tutorial in September.

"Destroying a goblin settlement, wiping out bandits, shutting down an illegal gambling house..."

Yi Yongha read the missions.

“We can probably complete them all today,” Aileen spoke impatiently.

“Please, you’re going to be dead tired after a single mission.”

“What? Are you underestimating me?”

“I’m being realistic. Your magic power is restricted right now.”

Aileen must’ve entered with a red ticket with Yi Yongha as her companion. *Kiik*— The door creaked open again.

“Where the hell is this? The last tutorial seemed more interesting.”

“Can you be quiet?”

I could tell who they were just from their voices. A giant and a seductive Western woman walked in. It was Cheok Jungyeong and Jain.

“How the hell are we supposed to make... *eh?*”

“Oh?”

They spotted Aileen and Yi Yongha in front of the bulletin board. Aileen and Yi Yongha also spotted them and exchanged glares. None of them said anything, but the atmosphere grew hostile.

“Owner, give me two of your strongest alcohol.”

I ordered 2 drinks and paid 20 TP. The owner took the 2 silver coins and handed me 2 glasses of highly concentrated alcohol. I pulled my mask up as if I would drink it.

“You two know me, right?” Aileen broke the tension first as she spoke to Cheok Jungyeong and Jain.

“*Haha*, that’s right, kid. We’ve seen you once before,” Cheok

Jungyeong replied.

“Kid?”

“Maybe it’s more appropriate to call you a brat.”

“*Ha, haha*, I dare you to say that again.”

Aileen’s face turned red from Cheok Jungyeong’s provocation. However, now wasn’t the time to fight.

“Both of you, come...”

Aileen’s gift, Spirit Speech, neared the level of an authority. I quickly twisted my wrist. Vodka shot out of my glasses and flew into Aileen’s mouth. Yi Yongha tried to block it, but I prepared two for this exact situation.

“Here— *kek!*”

Yi Yongha blocked one stream of vodka, but the other still entered her mouth. Aileen coughed, but couldn’t spit out the hard liquor.

“*Aak!* Neck, m-my neck is... burning... *haak...*”

Spirit Speech was useless if you couldn’t speak. Aileen was weak with alcohol to begin with. She started picking up and drinking other NPCs’ drinks.

“*Ptui! Ah*, this is also alcohol! W-Water—!”

“*Um*, Aileen, calm down. Take a deep breath.”

“You think I can calm down!”

Normally, Aileen would’ve quickly recovered with her magic power that rivaled Boss. No, she wouldn’t have been affected by alcohol in the first place. However, her stat restrictions made her more vulnerable.

“What the hell’s up with that brat?”

“Cheok Jungyeong,” I walked up to them and whispered.

“*Huh?*”

Cheok Jungyeong’s eyes widened. I held up my index finger, signaling him to keep his mouth shut. Then I dragged them outside and ran for 5 minutes straight.

“*O-Oi!*”

Cheok Jungyeong shook off my hand once we arrived at an alleyway. I let him go now that we reached far enough away from the pub.

“The hell’s wrong with you? Why’d you drag me here?”

“It looked like you might start a fight, so I brought you outside.”

“What, I can’t fight?”

“...”

I looked at Jain standing next to him. I wanted her to do something about this muscle-brained idiot, but she only shrugged.

“Their stats are restricted like the rest of us, right? I want to beat up that brat too.”

“You’ll be arrested if you fight inside the town. Haven’t you seen the town’s vigilante group?”

I carefully looked around. Thankfully, no players were around.

“By the way, where’s Boss?”

“Who knows? We just arrived too. Oh wait, there she is.”

Jain pointed to the middle of the street as I turned.

“She’s really there.”

Boss tilted her head in front of a street vendor selling candy and chocolates.

“Looks like Boss wants some sweets.”

Like Jain said, Boss smacked her lips and rummaged through her pockets.

“I guess so. She does like chocolate.”

“Oi, newbie, what’s up with your clothes?”

“Oh yeah, where did you get those?”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jain seemed interested.

“I made them.”

“Oh! Make one for me too.”

“Me too, me too.”

“Sure, if you pay.”

“Then never mind.”

Jain gave up, but Cheok Jungyeong persisted.

“How much? I have 300 won right now.”

“300 TP?”

“Yeah.”

I stared at Cheok Jungyeong and carefully spoke, “All of it.”

“*Hahaha*, brat. Do I look like a pushover?”

“...”

He wasn't that stupid despite acting and looking like an idiot. I quickly changed the subject.

“*Cough*, let's go to Boss first.”

Boss seemed to have figured out how to use TP and pulled out a gold coin. Gold coins were worth 100 TP each. She must've gained it as a reward from the second tutorial. Boss stared at the street vendor with the gold coin. The vendor's face was full of greed.

“She's going to get scammed at this rate.”

The Tutorial Town sounded kind and helpful, but 70% of its residents were scammers.

“*Oi*, Boss!”

Cheok Jungyeong called her and she turned around before she could hand over her gold coin.

“Oh, it's Gyeong. Jain and newbie are here too.”

Boss greeted us expressionlessly as Cheok Jungyeong stomped towards her. I also quickly approached and took away her gold coin.

“*Hm?* Newbie, why are you taking my money?” Boss frowned.

“I'll give it back to you later.”

I faced the candy vendor instead of Boss.

“This chocolate, how much is it?”

“Pardon? *Uh...*”

I could practically hear him racking his brain. However, NPCs thought the same way as humans. Seeing Cheok Jungyeong towering behind me...

“They’re 10 TP each.”

“...”

Wow, he’s trying to scam me in front of Cheok Jungyeong.

“Give me one, no, two.”

Boss sounded pretty desperate since she hadn’t eaten chocolate in over a month.

“No.”

“W-Why? I have 20 TP...”

“I know, but that’s enough to buy 10 chocolates.”

I left the struggling Boss to Cheok Jungyeong and faced the candy vendor once again.

* * *

With 20 TP, I bought 20 chocolates and 20 candies. We headed to an inn after I took care of the purchase. Boss happily ate her junk food as we arrived.

“Let’s see, 4 people... that’ll be 300 TP per night.”

Even the innkeeper tried to scam us, but I knew the real price and only took out 6 silver coins.

“Let’s make it 60 TP.”

“Hey, that won’t cut it. Go somewhere else.”

“I’ve been to all the inns in town and it only gets cheaper every time. This is the last stop.”

I glanced at Cheok Jungyeong. He noticed my signal and glared at the innkeeper.

“...Let’s do 150 TP per night.”

“60 TP.”

“60 TP for a 4 person room? That’s impossible...”

“60 TP, but we won’t be needing any food. Only a room.”

“...”

“Let’s not make it difficult.”

The innkeeper went silent for a long time. I also kept quiet. After about 3 minutes of dead silence, the system alerted me of my successful haggling.

[You have acquired the technique, Lv.1 Haggling] — You can see the rough estimate of minimum prices desired by NPCs with low-level haggling.

[Lv.1 Haggling has linked with your charming voice.] — Extra7’s voice will now contain slight persuasion.

So charming voice could be used like this. I grinned and looked at the innkeeper.

“F-Fine, 70 TP!”

He still wanted an extra 10 TP. I threw 60 TP on the counter and took the key. Then we all entered the large 4 person room upstairs.

“So what are you going to do now?” Jain sat on the edge of the bed

and asked.

“I’m planning to go steal something. I’m sure you plan on doing your own thing as well. The problem is...”

Jain looked at Boss and Cheok Jungyeong.

“These two with low social experience.”

“I’ll take Cheok Jungyeong with me. You should take care of Boss.”

“What? You? You’re going to take me with you? *Ahahaha*, you’ve gotten funnier, kid.”

Cheok Jungyeong laughed as he smacked my shoulder. My bones would’ve been broken if this was the outside world, but I unexpectedly turned out fine thanks to the balance patch.

“Also, invest all the money you have in me.”

Jain’s eyebrows twitched. “What for?”

“Gambling.”

“What? Are you crazy?”

The Tutorial Town also had a gambling house. The problem was over half the gamblers were scammers, making victory or loss not completely dependent on luck.

“*Ah*, is that why you bought a pack of cards before coming here?” Cheok Jungyeong asked.

“Yes.”

I stopped to buy a pack of cards on our way to the inn. You just had to be the best scammer to make money in a room full of scammers.

“Are you confident?” Jain asked full of doubt.

“Of course, would I ask you for money if I wasn’t?”

Money was life to Jain. Stealing from her was no different than declaring war.

“Really?”

“Of course.”

I had studied and practiced cheating before coming into the Tower. Double dealing, hand mucking, base dealing, sleight-of-hand, etc. Thanks to Dexterity, I was practically a professional scammer.

* * *

One hour later. I asked nearby NPCs for directions and arrived at a gambling house with Cheok Jungyeong.

— Threes full of fives.

— Fucking hell, you cheated, didn’t you?

— Oh please.

The gambling house was loud and full of smoke. I sat at an empty table until a scammer smoking and looking bored approached.

“Oh, are you two new here?”

“Yes.”

“A bodybuilder and a skinny boy, what a strange combination. Are you two friends?”

I smiled without answering. Cheok Jungyeong also grinned.

“It’s true, this guy is quite skinny.”

“Anyways, welcome. I’ll treat you two well.”

I could tell he was a scammer, but I didn’t care since I would cheat too.

“Alright, why don’t we begin?”

The man picked up a pack of cards. I simply smiled.

* * *

It only took 2 hours for me to win most of the money in the gambling house. I cheated when I played against scammers and relied purely on luck when I played ordinary people. Of course, scammers caused a scene knowing that I somehow cheated, but Cheok Jungyeong stopped them every time.

“How boring. You’re all cowards.”

Scammer NPCs could only shrink away in front of Cheok Jungyeong’s muscles. I found it quite funny.

“We should leave now.”

“Eh? Why? We can still make more.”

“No, look over there.”

I pointed to a fierce-looking man that I had just beaten. He glared at me as he chewed on a cigarette.

“He should be a scammer hired by this gambling house’s owner.”

“So?”

“The owner will come soon with hired hands. Let’s exchange our money and leave before then.”

We had no reason to fight NPCs. I brought Cheok Jungyeong with me

to the exchange.

“10200 chips, confirmed. Hold on a minute.”

The employee at the currency exchange confirmed my chips. I received 300 TP from Cheok Jungyeong, 200 TP each from Boss and Jain, and brought my own 1000 TP. I started with 1700 TP and more than quintupled it in 2 hours.

“Here you go, 10200 TP.”

The employee handed me ten 1000 TP notes and 2 gold coins.

“How much do I get?”

I put everything in my inventory without answering Cheok Jungyeong. Ssss— The 2 gold coins and some of the banknotes transformed into dust and entered my inventory. Right, only some. Five banknotes remained in my hand.

“These are fake.”

I stared at Cheok Jungyeong.

“What? Really?”

“Yeah, that’s why they didn’t go inside the inventory.”

Cheok Jungyeong’s face immediately contorted and turned red with rage. His muscles bulked up and... *KWANG!* A thunderous sound erupted.

“You son of a bitch!”

“*Hiik!*”

“Do I look like a pushover? I dare you to try that again, you...! Mother... father...!”

He spat out all sorts of curses I couldn't describe with words.

* * *

I returned to the inn with 10200 TP. Boss had been working out and Jain prepared to go steal something in some sort of disguise.

“Oh, you're back? Where's my money? If you lost it all...”

“Don't worry. First, take a seat.”

I gave Boss, Jain, and Cheok Jungyeong their money back and an additional 1000 TP.

“*Whew...* good.”

“You'll be able to go up to the next floor with the 1000 TP I just gave you.”

“Well, that was easy. Is this it for this floor?”

“No, stay on your guard. There are pickpockets all over town. They can even steal the money inside your inventory.”

This place was still the highest difficulty of Tutorial Town. No one could imagine that most people in this town were scammers. Even a great sage would be tricked once.

“Do we get a performance-based reward like the last tutorial if we earn the most?”

“Probably not. The system would've told us if that was the case.”

The third tutorial's reward was simple.

“The TP we earn should be our reward.”

* * *

In a goblin settlement some distance away from the Tutorial Town.

“What? You said it was 700 TP!”

Someone’s angry voice rang out. Birds on the branches flew away and squirrels fell in surprise.

“*Agh*, do you need to be so loud?”

Aileen glared at the mercenary leader who hired her. “You think I can be quiet? *Huh?* You said it was 700 TP before!”

“As I said, that’s if we didn’t suffer any damage. Look at the state those guys are in.”

“What?”

Aileen looked around her surroundings. The mercenaries clearly suffered from great pain. She bit her lips.

“It’s written in the contract that the amount paid might change depending on other mercenaries’ conditions.”

“I don’t think it’s right to not even give us half the listed amount.”

Yi Yongha spoke up this time. The mercenary leader was unreasonably lowering the 700 TP reward to 300 TP.

“No, no, that’s just how it is.”

“At least give us half.”

“I can’t. We can’t spare even a single TP considering how much it’ll take to get these guys treatment.”

“You—”

“Fine! I don’t need your dirty money!”

Aileen shouted and snatched the 3 gold coins from the mercenary leader's hands. She wanted to use Spirit Speech, but had spent most of her magic power already.

"You better pray we don't see each other again. If we do, I'll kill you for real."

"I-I'm just going with what's written on the contract. You don't have to be so mad."

"What, you son of a bitch—!"

"Stop Aileen. We won't gain anything from fighting."

"B-But this bastard is...!"

Yi Yongha dragged her away as she struggled with her short legs. They walked back to the town after separating from the mercenary group.

"Forget about today. Let's just buy some potions on our way back," Yi Yongha spoke as he wiped his sweat.

"The player shop doesn't sell potions."

Aileen sounded especially meek today. She had been lively even on an uninhabited island, but a few people had managed to make her depressed. Yi Yongha bitterly smiled.

"No, not the player shop. I've seen some potion shops around. *Ah*, there's one right there."

Yi Yongha pointed to a nearby potion shop.

"You're low on magic power, right? Let's buy some magic power potions."

"Yeah, good idea."

The two of them ran up to the potion shop.

“100... 100TP?”

“Yes, magic power potions have gotten expensive recently.”

“Still, they can’t be that expensive.”

“It’s true. It’s the same everywhere else, but I don’t think many shops are still open since it’s so late.”

“*Haa...*”

They couldn’t believe the price, but the shopkeeper looked too honest and righteous to lie. Even Yi Yongha had no choice but to believe her. He looked at the dejected Aileen.

“*Haa.*”

Yi Yongha deeply sighed and suddenly wanted to see his wife back home. Aileen needed a magic power potion to regain enough energy for tomorrow since she overused her magic power today.

“I guess it can’t be helped. We’ll take one.”

“*Ah*, yes, sorry about that...”

“No, it’s not your fault.”

“I’ll add in some additional bonuses next time you visit.”

“*Ah*, thank you.”

Yi Yongha used up all his money to buy a magic power potion.

“Here you go, Aileen.”

“*Ah*, thanks.”

Aileen took the magic power potion and placed it inside her inventory.

[Poor Magic Power Potion] Lv.0 Magic Power Recovery. Will restore 10 magic power upon consumption. Lv.1 Food Poisoning. Will increase your chance of food poisoning upon consumption.

The item description seemed a bit weird, but Aileen didn't think much of it since magic power potions normally cost a lot.

"Then let's find an inn."

"Un!"

They found an inn 10 minutes later. However, the innkeeper glanced at them and delivered more shocking news.

"Let's see, two people... that'll be 150 TP per night."

"Pardon?"

They felt as if their souls had left their bodies.

Chapter 161

The First City (3)

[Highest Difficulty Tutorial Town]

A new morning arrived. I left the inn after waking up and began stretching. Then a loud voice struck my ears.

“Oi, what are you doing?”

I turned around and saw a topless Cheok Jungyeong. He seemed to have been working out since his body looked red and his muscles bulked up.

“Just some morning workout.”

“Workout? *Ha*, you call that a workout?” Cheok Jungyeong sneered as he approached.

“Listen, newbie, doing push-ups is for kids.”

“Pardon?”

“Breathing is the most important thing when it comes to training your body. Got it? To breathe properly...”

Cheok Jungyeong began to lecture me about breathing. I half-ignored him, but my mind also grew clearer. He pushed his face closer.

“Listen, breathing isn’t just done with your body. It’s done with your mind.”

The man who stood in front of me was the famous Cheok Jungyeong of the Goryeo era. No one could argue against his understanding of martial arts as the most powerful general in the history of Korea.

“Look, this is what’s known as inner core breathing.”

Ssp, haa... Cheok Jungyeong began to breathe. It might look like normal breathing, but was completely different. I carefully observed his body as his muscles moved with every inhale and exhale.

“I’m moving the muscles in my body by breathing. Get it? We’re on a completely different level!”

Cheok Jungyeong proudly stood after finishing his demonstration. I watched his muscles for a bit before muttering.

“I don’t think I’ll ever be able to do it.”

“It’ll be hard for sure. Lots of rookies swing their swords claiming they’ve achieved oneness with the blade, but remain ignorant that becoming one with your mind and body is the hardest thing in the world. Do you know why I can do it?”

I gave him an apathetic look, but Cheok Jungyeong continued without minding my disinterest.

“The strongest man in all of Goryeo, the martial god who could uproot trees with his bare hands and change the fate of countries alone.”

Cheok Jungyeong proudly banged his chest.

“That’s who I am.”

He smiled with an expression that contained ineffable pride and self-conviction. I silently stared at him.

“Are you starting to respect me now?”

“No, I’m just cringing. Isn’t that your past life?”

“What? I dare you to say that again.”

I obtained a good hint about breathing with the entire body. I couldn’t

do it now, but I should be able to imitate it using stigma's magic power.

“Hajin.”

Jain peeked her head out of the third floor window.

“Yes?”

“Do you know how to cook? I think Boss is hungry from all the training she did last night. She wants you to cook for her.”

— Jain! W-When did I say that!

“Boss says you're a good cook. She wants bulgogi rice.”

— Jain! Y-You!

I could hear Boss as well. I chuckled and looked at Cheok Jungyeong.

“Let's go shopping, Mr. Cheok Jungyeong.”

“Mister? Just call me Cheok Jungyeong.”

“Alright, Cheok Jungyeong.”

“...You wanna die?”

Cheok Jungyeong and I went out into the busy streets.

“Isn't it interesting?”

“What is.”

“The scenery here.”

This place looked exactly like a town from a fantasy novel. Most houses were made of bricks or wood, they only used horses and

carriages, and shops sold potions and magic supplies.

“I guess so.”

Eventually, we arrived at the town’s market district, a long stretch of alleyways filled with street vendors that sold food. I looked up at the vendor after picking the freshest ingredients.

[Lower limit – 30 TP]

“How much for all this?”

“Let’s see. Onions, mushrooms, pork... That should be about 100 TP.”

“I think 35 TP should be enough.”

In this town, talking politely meant you were a pushover.

“35 TP? That’s a bit...”

“Make it 35 TP.”

“Then you can go elsewhere. I doubt you’ll find any place with such dirt-cheap prices.”

The vendor tried to refuse, but he was only an NPC with low haggling skills. It didn’t take long to crack him.

“*Sigh*, fine. Take it.”

I successfully haggled the price with the help of Cheok Jungyeong’s intimidating aura behind me.

“Are you done?”

“Yes, let’s go back.”

Boss and Jain welcomed us with our hands full of bagged ingredients.

Boss sat at the table before I even started cooking.

“Wait just a bit.”

Grade 8 Dexterity should be enough for cooking. I quickly made a 4 person meal with a recipe I had memorized.

“Wow.”

“Oh, you’re a good cook, newbie!”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jain expressed their surprise while Boss quickly ate like a vacuum.

* * *

The four of us blankly stared at the ceiling after our meal.

“Oi, newbie, what are you doing next? Gambling?”

“No, we went yesterday.”

I already beat the casino hard. I should be on their blacklist since they knew my face. They wouldn’t allow me to enter or would probably kidnap me the moment I showed up.

“Then what are you going to do?”

“I’m going to open up a street stall.”

“Street stall?” Jain’s eyes widened.

“Yep.”

The Tutorial Town’s NPCs had a lot of money. Of course, this town didn’t provide any Lv.3 equipment or items as part of the tutorial. NPCs were at least Lv.2 or Lv.3 and the captain of the vigilante corps could potentially be Lv.10 or more. The Tutorial Town was located at the base of the Tower of Wish and every NPC should have lived here

for at least 5 years.

“Why a street stall? Aren’t you just going to get scammed?”

“No, opening a street stall is the easiest way of making money as long as you sell above the lowest price. NPCs can’t force you to sell something.”

“Mmm, then what are you going to sell?”

“This.”

I took out my red crystal axe and spear. They came in handy during the second tutorial, but I no longer had any use for them.

“I’m also going to make more.”

The random dice would provide me with plenty of materials. I wouldn’t be able to use stigma’s magic power, but I could make up for it with this special leaf.

[Lv.3 Yggdrasil leaf] — Lv.3 Blessing of Adventure: Your body will become lighter with this item in your inventory. Will improve your physical abilities. You may grant minor blessings to items. Blessings will grow stronger the more they relate to adventures.

“Jain, I need you to do something.”

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“What is it?” Jain tilted head as she pointed at herself.

* * *

I set up a stall at the end of a street leading to an inn where not too many, but not too few passed by. I made sure to wear my mask and hooded robe in case I ran into other players.

[General Store] [We sell everything from weapons, armors, herbs, fruits...]

I set my sign down and sat on the ground. Before I could even pull out my items...

“Hey, who are you?”

Five thugs from the street vendor union on the same street surrounded me, but I maintained my composure.

“I got permission to sell here.”

“What? Whose permission...”

“Mine.” A deep voice rang out at just the right moment. The thugs all turned around.

“Ah, Boss!”

The NPCs immediately bowed at a 90 degree angle. *Tak, tak*. The man they called boss walked up imposingly and stood in front of me.

“I gave this person permission.”

“Ah, our apologies, we didn’t know...”

“It’s fine.”

The boss frowned. His eyes of contempt showed that he didn’t want to bother himself with trifling matters. As expected, her acting always felt superb.

“I’m not the one you should be apologizing to in the first place. Why don’t you buy something from him.”

“Y-Yes, understood!”

The five NPCs faced me once again with a single command from their boss.

“This looks nice. How much is...”

The first NPC pointed at an armor I took out without much thought. However, his eyes suddenly widened.

“Whoa, h-hey, isn’t this a Lv.3 armor?”

“Lv. 3?”

“Ha, as if that’s possible.”

Their attention all fell on the armor.

“This is Lv.3?”

“I think so.”

NPCs couldn’t check item descriptions like players, but their discerning eyes could appraise the level of most items.

“But there aren’t any Lv.3s around here!”

They remained doubtful and suspicious.

“This isn’t a Lv.3 armor.”

I explained.

[Lv.3 Leather Armor with Lv.3 Yggdrasil’s Blessing] Lv.3 Defense, Lv.3 Durability, Lv.3 Ease of Movement — Lv.3 Yggdrasil’s Minor Blessing: Will increase all effects of the leather armor by 1 level. This blessing will disappear after 24 hours. However, the owner of the Yggdrasil leaf can choose up to 5 armor to receive permanent blessings.

“See, he says it isn’t. I’ve never seen a Lv.3 equipment in my life.”

“It’s almost Lv.4.”

“Exactly, it’s only... what? Lv.4?”

“Yes, you should be able to tell if you look close enough.”

I made this armor in the waiting room with stigma’s magic power. It felt a bit wasteful to sell it, but gaining TP was currently more important.

“Here, let me see.”

“Ah, let me see too.”

The five NPCs took turns looking at the armor.

“Ah, fuck, stop being so selfish!”

“You don’t even have money!”

“I do, you fuck!”

They even began fighting amongst themselves. I looked past their shoulders at Jain, who silently mouthed.

— Hajin, don’t forget to give me 5%.

I nodded.

“This, I’ll buy it! How much?”

“Mmm... it’s going to be a bit expensive.”

“How’s 500 TP?”

“8! I can do 800 TP!”

“1400!”

The sudden auction caught the attention of others in the streets. More

people began to wander over in curiosity. After hearing about the Lv.4 item being sold...

“3000!”

“3000. Is that the final bid?”

“...”

“Good, 3000 it is.”

The leather armor I made sold for 3000 TP. The NPC who bought it seemed quite wealthy. I gave him the armor after checking the TP wasn't fake. The NPC happily left, but the other customers had no plans to leave yet. They began to ask all sorts of questions about the other items for sale, some of which were Lv.3. Cheok Jungyeong caught the fools who tried to steal any items and taught them a lesson.

A familiar voice rang out as I dealt with the influx of customers.

“What's going on here?”

This faint voice immediately caught my attention as I turned towards it.

There, I saw a girl on tiptoes, trying to peek at what was being sold.

“A general store?”

I knew her all too well. I could never forget her face and my heart almost skipped a beat when I saw her. It was... Chae Nayun.

“Argh, move over if you're not buying!”

Chae Nayun worked her way in front of me. I couldn't say anything. I quietly thanked the mask and hooded robe before lowering my head.

“Red crystal spear? *Um*, do you have a red crystal sword?”

I shook my head at her question. Her voice still sounded the same.

“I see... then how much is this spear?”

I had no choice but to speak now, so I cleared my throat and changed my voice.

“250 TP.”

“250 TP?”

“I’ll give you a bonus too.”

“Uh...”

Chae Nayun fell in thought. She didn’t seem to find anything suspicious about my voice. Once again, I thanked my charming voice.

“Hm... I really want this, but I only have 200... no, 150 TP.”

“...”

“I-It’s true. I’ll just go to another shop if that’s not enough.”

Her haggling made no sense with zero logic, technique, or emotion behind it. I pretended to be tricked.

“Then you can take it for 150 TP. Here, have this too.”

I threw in a money pouch with a bento box I made for lunch along with the red crystal spear.

“Oh, I don’t need the bonus. How about you shave off another 50 TP instead?”

“...Are you crazy?”

She made an absurd offer.

“...I’m kidding. Thank you. Have a nice day.”

Chae Nayun turned around with the red crystal spear in one hand and the leather pouch in the other. She left just like that with light steps. She must be thinking her haggling technique had cut down the price. I watched her leave for a long time. Her hair was still short, but dyed black. I grabbed my chest and felt my beating heart refusing to calm down.

“Oi, answer me.”

Some man walked in front of me and blocked my line of sight. His face looked oily and unpleasant.

“How much is this?”

He pointed at the red crystal axe.

“1500 TP,” I briefly retorted.

“What? You just sold the spear to that girl for—”

“1600 TP.”

“What? Why did it go up by—”

“1700 TP.”

“You...”

* * *

Five minutes later. Chae Nayun sat at a nearby bench.

“Let’s see... Oh? It even has a blessing.”

[Lv.2 Red Crystal Spear with Lv.3 Yggdrasil’s Blessing] Lv.2 Burn Damage, Lv.2 Fire attribute — Lv.3 Yggdrasil’s Minor Blessing: Will increase all effects of the red crystal spear by 1 level.

“Huhuhu...”

What's this, I bought a half Lv.3 item for 150 TP? Chae Nayun smiled as she read the item description.

“Looks like NPCs can't read item descriptions. Should I sell it? No, why would I sell such a good item?”

She tightly hugged the red crystal spear.

“Oh right.”

She suddenly recalled the leather pouch from the street vendor NPC. Chae Nayun opened it without much thought and found a warm bento box inside.

“A bento box?”

First, she checked the item description. Thankfully, it wasn't poisoned. She felt hungry and took it out with a smile.

“Oh?”

However, the pouch contained even more. Five gold coins. It had 500 TP.

“...”

Chae Nayun blankly stared at the coins. She thought about it and concluded that the street vendor NPC must've mistakenly placed their sales inside. However, greed filled Chae Nayun's heart as she looked at the shining gold coins. Five gold coins were worth 500 TP. She only had 150 TP on her.

“N-No.”

It's only right to give it back. You already received such a great item for 150 TP. Don't lose your conscience, Nayun. She shot up and went back.

“There he is.”

Thankfully, the street vendor hadn't left yet. Chae Nayun worked her way through the crowd to return the gold coins.

“Um, here. You left 500 TP inside the leather pouch.”

“What?”

“I came to give it back. Take it.”

However, the NPC refused to take the coins and glanced at the giant man behind the stall.

“Oi.”

The giant walked in front of the confused Chae Nayun.

“Screw off if you're going to argue with what you got.”

“N-No, I'm not arguing with what I got. I just found 5 extra gold coins inside. These are yours.”

“Hmm?”

The giant glanced at the street vendor NPC. Chae Nayun couldn't hear what the vendor said, but the giant only sneered back at her.

“Screw off, idiot.”

“What? Idiot? Say that again!”

“Just leave, brat.”

The giant man raised his arm to threaten her. He must've thought he could intimidate her.

“What? Are you crazy!”

Chae Nayun kicked his leg without cowering away. *Kwak!* Her foot dug into his calf.

“*Uk!*”

A sharp pain coursed through the giant’s body, causing him to fall on one knee. Then Chae Nayun quickly ran away.

“Y-You crazy bitch—!”

“*Hmph*, I was doing you a favor!” She stuck up her middle finger at the giant.

“I, I’ll remember your face! You little—!”

Cheok Jungyeong’s angry roar echoed throughout the streets.

Chapter 162

The First City (4)

The sky had already turned dark by the time Chae Nayun completed a mission. She trudged back to the same inn from the night before after only receiving 200 TP for a 500 TP mission. She only had 125 TP left once she paid for her lodging.

“Hey, you need to pay another 75 TP.”

“Ask my companion for the other half.”

“*Hm*, fine.”

“Alright then, I’m heading back to my room.”

She walked past the greedy innkeeper to her room. Chae Nayun stared at the ceiling as she lay in bed. She felt tired, but couldn’t fall asleep. Suddenly, her heart rate slowed and her mood turned sour. Lonely thoughts began to distract her. *Tk, tk, tk*. Rain began to fall.

“It’s raining.”

She opened the door in case she misheard, but it really was raining. She sighed and recalled how much easier the first two tutorials were compared to this one. Back then, she felt so exhausted she couldn’t think. Now, she had idle time in solitude and everything came alive again. Fragments of memories swept through her head. Her mental illness had grown worse since she entered the tower. Was it because she stopped taking her pills? Her breathing became rough and her head hurt.

“*Uk!*”

An unbearable headache struck her as she clutched her head. *Beeeeep*

— A ringing noise buzzed in her ears. She felt like the strange sound shook her surroundings.

“Ah... fuck...”

Blood dripped as she bit her lips. Things she couldn’t understand flashed before her eyes. The conversation from that day rose in her foggy consciousness. She still had many questions left unanswered.

“Argh...”

Was it really him or did he just make up an absurd lie? If he did murder her brother... *Why, why, why? Just why did he do it?* Her questions repeatedly rattled in her mind. The resentment and sadness formed a chain around her.

Click—

The door to her room slowly opened. Chae Nayun slightly raised her upper body. She could see a man with disheveled hair trudging in. He had that man’s face. *Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin, Kim Hajin.* The face she could never forget appeared in front of her. She reached for the spear next to her bed.

“You’re already back?”

However, her hallucination scattered away with a single sentence from the man. With a sigh, Chae Nayun closed her eyes before opening them again. Then she saw who the man really was.

“Why you are sitting in bed like a ghost?”

Shin Jonghak asked. Chae Nayun examined his dirty clothes that looked like he spent the day rolling in mud.

“Did you make any money?”

“*Pft*, is that the first thing you ask? Is this what it feels like to have a nagging wife?”

“Shut up.”

Chae Nayun encountered Shin Jonghak purely by coincidence. He suddenly appeared with a stupid smile as she looked for a mission at the mercenary’s pub. It freaked her out at first, but she decided to share a room with him to save money.

“What’s this bento box?” Shin Jonghak pointed to it on the bed.

“Oh, this? It came with an item I bought.” Chae Nayun glanced at the half-empty bento box.

“I didn’t finish it though.”

“Why? Is something wrong with it?”

“No, it’s actually pretty well-made according to the status window.”

“Then why didn’t you finish it?”

“No reason. It just wasn’t to my taste. Why do you keep asking? For the record, I didn’t save it for you.”

Honestly, she couldn’t taste it. After that incident, Chae Nayun lost her sense of taste. Ironically, she finally overcame her pickiness because of that. She merely treated food as fuel now.

“You bought an item? Are you sure you didn’t get scammed?”

“Please, if anything, I’m the one who scammed the seller.”

Chae Nayun proudly held up the red crystal spear.

“Is it good?”

“Yep. It should be worth at least 1500 TP, but I bought it for just a tenth of that price!”

Huhuhu— Chae Nayun made a big smile.

“I went on a mission with this thing and it slashed through goblins like butter!”

“...”

However, Shin Jonghak didn't react. His serious expression made her feel awkward.

“Don't force yourself to smile.”

“What?”

“It hurts to see you like this.”

“What are you blabbering about.”

Chae Nayun brandished her spear in front of Shin Jonghak, who promptly raised his hands and backed away.

“I'm kidding. Anyways, doesn't that mean you spent TP?”

“Yeah, but I ended up making money from it.”

“What?”

Shin Jonghak frowned as if he doubted her. Seeing this, Chae Nayun took out 5 gold coins from her inventory and told him about the lucky incident.

“I was going to give it back, but they chased me out while calling me an idiot.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak normally would've made a snarky comment, but remained silent. Chae Nayun caught him looking at the coins with a complicated expression.

“So how much do you have?”

“H-Huh?”

As expected, he became flustered and she sneered at him.

“*Pft*, I bet you’re poorer than me.”

“*Pft*, as if. Of course, I have more than you. Who do you think I am? I’m the man who will become the world’s youngest high-intermediate rank hero, Shin Jong—”

“Then show me.”

“I’m feeling tired all of a sudden.”

Shin Jonghak pretended to be drowsy and collapsed on the ground when she put her hands out. She snickered and looked down at him.

“Oh right.”

She suddenly recalled something and nudged his shoulder with her foot.

“Stay on the floor if you’re going to sleep. If you try to put a leg over the bed like last night...”

“I’ll do my best, but my only flaw is my bad sleeping habit.”

“Try it if you want a broken leg.”

“...”

“Actually, I’ll sleep on the floor tonight since I slept on the bed last night.”

“What? You don’t need to—”

“Hurry up and move.”

Chae Nayun dragged Shin Jonghak onto the bed despite his resistance.

* * *

Tk, Tk. I closed the stall late at night under the drizzling rain. Cheok Jungyeong already left to go drinking, but I returned to the inn. I felt like someone threw a huge rock at my head and couldn't bring myself to stay outside.

"Ssp... huu."

Boss was the only one inside the room. She sat cross-legged and focused on regaining her stats.

"..."

For some reason, her attire looked more daring than usual with only a black tank top and hot pants. Her well-developed muscles showed through every time she breathed. I quickly walked past her and lay on the bed.

"Did something happen?" Boss asked with her eyes still closed.

"No, nothing."

"Did the stall not go as expected?"

"No, I sold everything. I made a lot."

"Then did you get scammed?"

I shook my head. Before going to sleep, I took out 2 random dice as part of my daily routine. I wished for good items to sell and rolled the dice.

[Lv.4 Krill Dragon Leather] [Lv.3 Big and Juicy Mango]

A good material and a nostalgic fruit from the second tutorial. I could sell these tomorrow.

“...”

I turned around after feeling a laser-like stare. It came from Boss. *Heh*. I grinned.

“Are you hungry, Boss?”

“No.”

She frowned with a pout. “Do you think I’m a glutton?”

“No, it’s just that you were staring at this mango.”

“That’s a mango?”

Her eyes flashed with greed when she looked at it. However, Boss soon retracted her gaze and stood up.

“*Cough*, it’s not that. You don’t look so good today, newbie.”

“I just get a bit depressed on rainy days.”

Things that made me angry, sad, apologetic... For a long time, I’d been burying emotions deep inside. Otherwise, I would be in pain every day. However, these emotions subconsciously surfaced and always caused me distress.

“Anyways, Boss.”

“*Hmm?*”

“How are your stats looking?”

Honestly, Boss currently lived like a NEET. After I gave her 1000 TP, she stayed indoors all day without doing any work and spent all her free time either eating or training. She must’ve made some improvements.

“My magic power is at 3.5 and the other stats have entered the 2 point

range.”

“Oh?”

Her growth speed was still incredible despite the tower’s increased stat gain. This was why division of labor was important.

“You’re like a max level NEET.”

“What’s that?”

Boss narrowed her eyes. It meant she was a bum who played around all day without working, but could easily dominate whatever she set out to do.

“It’s a good thing.”

“I don’t believe you. I’m hurt. I think I need to eat that mango to feel better. Give it here.”

Boss reached for the mango, but I stopped her by putting it inside my inventory.

* * *

I continued to make and sell equipment at my street stall for the rest of the third tutorial. I couldn’t increase my stats much because of that. However, the most important aspect of the third tutorial was money. I felt more than satisfied with over 20000 TP.

“I should be able to buy it.”

Today was the last day of the third tutorial. I stood in front of a dilapidated shop on the outskirts of town. The pouch in my pocket overflowed with money.

[Miscellaneous Item Shop]

It looked like the town didn’t sell anything special, but one shop sold

rather unique items. This shop only existed in the highest difficulty tutorial and made it worth all the trouble.

Kiik—

I walked into the shop with a trembling heart. A burst of dust spread out as I passed through the door and I could smell the aged wood.

“Uh...”

The shop looked quite battered and the shopkeeper continued reading a newspaper without even greeting his customer. First, I took a good look around.

“You have quite the collection here.”

“...”

The shopkeeper NPC didn't say anything. However, his silence made him more trustworthy. After all, being talkative was one of the key characteristics of a scammer. I pretended to look around the shop again.

*[Lv.2 Magic Contract] [Lv.2 Cure Illness Potion] [Lv.2 Speedwell Grass]
[Lv.2 Sprite Shield] [Lv.2 Kim Joonghon's Claymore]...*

The shop contained all sorts of items. However, its real specialty sat on the counter. I walked up to the counter and pointed to an egg.

“Is this egg for sale too?”

[???

An egg with question marks as its item description. The shopkeeper finally reacted.

“That egg is from a special bird that only lives in this town. It's not something a nobody like you can buy.”

The man spoke with a husky voice that didn't sound hospitable in the slightest. I smiled back.

“Who else would buy it if not me?”

“That costs 40000 TP, kid.”

That much TP was impossible to acquire in only 10 days even if someone knew before entering the tower. However, this egg was certainly worth every TP. It was laid by Muninn, a raven that belonged to the god Odin. Since Muninn was a god's pet, this egg would surely be... Well, I didn't know the answer. I only introduced it as an Easter egg that not even Kim Suho could buy in the original story. Instead, the shop NPC would see through his sense of justice and gift him a different item. Of course, I had to make do with money since I didn't have Kim Suho's disposition.

“How about half of that amount? 20000 TP.”

“...”

The shopkeeper gave me an odd look.

“Isn't that reasonable? I don't have any more than that and you can't sell this egg here anyways.”

A 40000 TP item would never sell. Not even a business god like Yoo Yeonha could earn that much in 10 days.

“You have 20000 TP?”

“Of course.”

I took out twenty 1000 TP notes from my inventory and showed them to him. His eyes flickered.

“Why don't you take that hood off first? It's rude, don't you think?”

“Ah, yes, sorry.”

I should be one of the only polite customers he would've met in this town full of scammers. I quickly pulled my hood down.

"Do you know what this is?"

"Yes, I do."

"What is it?"

"The egg of an eagle, I think?"

The shopkeeper's eyes widened. As I said before, Muninn was a raven, but I thought it was an eagle when I wrote my novel. Of course, many commenters pointed out my mistake, but it was too late to make edits. I recalled saying something like, *An eagle sounds cooler*.

"You have good eyes. You're right, it's the egg of an eagle. However, most people won't be able to raise this beast. In fact, they won't even be able to hatch it."

"Ah... but you see, I'm not an ordinary person."

"..."

The shopkeeper gave me a meaningful look.

"Otherwise, how would I have made 20000 TP?"

I received the shopkeeper's gaze and spoke with ease.

* * *

[The third tutorial will end in 3 hours.]

A wooden tent barely stood in front of a campfire near the outskirts of town.

"This dumb, stupid town."

Aileen's face had turned haggard and impoverished after only 10 days.

"Everyone in this town is trash! Every single one of them!"

The humiliation she suffered flashed before her eyes. Having to eat a restaurant's leftover food, her money being pickpocketed out of her inventory, accidentally spilling juice she worked so hard to buy on a noble's clothes, then having to kneel and beg for his forgiveness... She would've never experienced such things on Earth.

"We somehow managed to earn enough TP."

Yi Yongha went through similar circumstances. Their sense of accomplishment felt overwhelming because of all the trouble they went through. They slept outside, skipped meals, and gave up on living like decent humans to scrape together 2000 TP.

"...I know, *hic*..." Aileen began to tear up.

"Are you crying?"

"*Uun*... They're tears of joy."

Aileen felt proud of herself, so proud of gathering 2000 TP with restricted stats that she wanted to shower herself with kisses.

"Oh, by the way, that was them, right?"

"Them?"

"You know, the ones we met on the first day at the pub."

"Ah, yes, they should be members of that group your chasing."

Aileen didn't know their names. However, she recalled their faces from an artifact scramble long ago. She had almost arrested them both with an impeccable strategy.

"Wasn't there someone else?"

Another member had been in the pub other than those two.

“You know, the one who made me drink alcohol.”

“I’m not sure, but only one person comes to mind when I think of a mask and hood.”

“I agree.”

Aileen nodded. Honestly, she felt quite confident that Black Lotus also entered this tower.

[The third tutorial has ended.]

“Finally, this damn tutorial is over.”

“I’ll bet my honor that less than half gathered more than 1000 TP.”

Aileen and Yi Yongha leaned against a tree exhausted and read through the system alerts.

[50/78 challengers currently possess more than 1000 TP in their inventory.] [Congratulations. You have managed to protect your profits from pickpockets, robbers, thugs, and scammers.]

Aileen turned towards Yi Yongha, who awkwardly laughed.

“There’s a bit over half, *haha*.”

However, the system alerts hadn’t finished.

[Hidden Reward – Profit Master] [The profit of victorious challengers will be revealed along with their nicknames (expenses excluded).] [The top 5 challengers will receive 100% of the profits they earned as a bonus.] [Rank 1 – Extra7, 21300 TP.] [Rank 2 – PhantomThief, 7800 TP][Rank 3...]

“Eh?”

“What?”

Aileen and Yi Yongha became speechless. The difference felt too overwhelming.

“It’s not 2130 TP, but...”

“21300 TP? How the fuck is that possible!”

Aileen inadvertently cursed in a mix of Korean and English.

“Who is it!”

Aileen felt so wronged. She had suffered through one humiliation after another to scrape together 2000 TP, but someone had earned 21300. *He must’ve used a cowardly method!*

“Who’s Extra7!”

* * *

Three hours later. A burst of light brought me back to my waiting room. I didn’t say goodbye to Jain, Cheok Jungyeong, and Boss since we could contact each other soon through the messenger system.

[Congratulations on achieving first place.] [21300 TP has been deposited.]

“Ah, thank you, thank you. You did well too, system.”

I bought Muninn’s egg with 20000 TP and only had 3000 TP left. However, the hidden reward returned 100% of my profits and made me rich again. I hadn’t expected such a setting change. I thought the co-author only made things more difficult, but it seemed I was wrong. A little bonus wasn’t so bad every once in a while.

“Ah.”

I took out Muninn’s egg from the inventory. *Huu, huu.* I blew on the 20000 TP egg in case it felt cold and carefully placed it inside my bed. I wondered what cute eagle would pop out and pulled my blanket over it. However, the good news didn’t end there.

[Your black entrance ticket has been confirmed.] [You may now retrieve 3 items you deposited since the tutorial has ended.]

I had been waiting for this. Equipment that could make up for the stats I neglected while crafting and selling items. I kneeled respectfully and already decided long ago what items to retrieve: aether, the Desert Eagle, and my laptop-linked smartwatch.

[Soon, your equipment storage will be transferred over.] [Please decide within 1 hour.]

Of course, the number of bullets available would limit the Desert Eagle, but I chose it for a single reason despite its disadvantages.

“Jin Sahyuk.”

My only reason was to kill Jin Sahyuk.

Chapter 163

Waiting Room

Shoong — The storage box from before the tutorial appeared. A window popped up with the list of items and I picked out three.

[Aether] [The armament, aether, will have its battle prowess restricted by 50%.]

Aether, which I hadn't seen in a while, sagged like a sad slime. I reached out and it twitched like a cute caterpillar before coiling up my arm. I smiled and took out the next item.

[Smartwatch]

I wore the laptop-linked smartwatch on my wrist as aether seeped into it and made it more elegant. Aether had great taste and it looked somewhat like a Patek Philippe watch now.

[Desert Eagle]

Finally, I grabbed the Desert Eagle. The platinum handle's size and coldness felt nostalgic.

"Hmm..."

I examined the Desert Eagle and transformed it with aether into a shotgun, sniper rifle, and assault rifle. The Desert Eagle had one magazine loaded for each form: 1 handgun magazine, 1 assault rifle magazine, 2 shotgun shells, and 5 sniper rifle bullets. That was all I had.

"Um, system?"

I felt like this wasn't enough and raised the Desert Eagle to the tower's

system, which should be watching me. The storage box contained all my magazines. I didn't expect to receive hundreds of bullets back, but just a small portion would be enough.

“Um, you see, this is a gun. It might be a bit special, but a gun can't be used without bullets.”

I tried asking just in case.

— Extra7 has used Lv.2 Haggling.

— Extra7's Lv.2 Voice of Trust has been activated.

I hoped the system would listen to me.

“With that in mind, can you give me some extra magazines? I don't need too many.”

The system didn't reply even after a long time. I felt dejected and lowered my hand. It seemed the system couldn't make an exception. As I gave up...

[Your request has been accepted considering that this weapon is a gun.]

“Oh!”

I bowed respectfully as soon as I heard the message.

[However, we hope you will not use the mysterious power you possess at lower levels of the tower.] [The administrator of the lower levels may consider it an unfair advantage and punish you accordingly.]

“Understood. Thank you.”

I nodded. The mysterious power most likely referred to stigma. It didn't matter too much since I could currently only use 2 streaks. Any more than that and my body wouldn't be able to handle it.

[The magazines will now be transferred over.]

Soon, various magazines appeared in the air: 2 handgun magazines, 1 assault rifle magazine, 3 sniper rifle bullets, and 6 shotgun shells. This should be more than enough as I stored them in my inventory.

[After 24 hours of rest, you may advance to the tower's 2nd floor.] [You may now use all the system functions.]

[Here is a brief explanation.] [Waiting Room] — Normal Entrance: You may teleport to your waiting room when there are no hostile players nearby or when you are not in a combat zone. — Emergency Teleportation: You may teleport to your waiting room no matter where you are or what situation you are in. (This function has a 96 hour cooldown.) — Waiting Room Entrance Ticket: You may provide other players with entrance tickets to your waiting room.

[Deaths in the tower] — After the tutorial, players are given 7 lives in total. Once killed, players will revive at the nearest residential area and will receive a penalty based on their circumstances. (Note: If you die on the 2nd floor, you will lose all stat gains you've acquired and will restart from the tutorial.)

[Auction house...]

I already knew everything and nothing seemed to have changed from the original setting. Then I turned on my smartwatch and stared at the egg on my bed.

[???

I wasn't able to read the egg's information with the tower's current system. However...

[Lv.6 Muninn's Egg] [Tower – Mythical] — An egg laid by Muninn, the Eagle of Memory.

My smartwatch could perfectly read the egg's description. As I thought, my laptop was superior to the tower's system.

“Hmm... What do I do now?”

The 24 hours seemed needlessly long, but was barely enough to utilize each of the system's functions. Currently, members of various guilds should be having conferences.

“Oh right.”

I infused stigma's magic power into the blanket covering the egg. The little blanket nest I made for Muninn's egg became incredibly warm. Next...

“24 hours...”

I lay on the floor and thought about what to do.

[Remaining time – 23h 35m 39s]

I couldn't just waste an entire day.

“I'll fix this place up until random dice's cooldown ends. Then I'll start making more equipment once I get more materials.”

I came up with a plan.

“Um, can you please bring up a list of items from the player shop to renovate the waiting room?”

The system immediately pulled out a list of items from the player shop's miscellaneous category.

[Lv.1 Marble Slabs – 30 TP] [Lv.1 Timber – 20 TP] [Lv.1 Warehouse – 300 TP] [Lv.1 Training Room – 500 TP]...

“There's even a training room?”

I bought the marble slabs and thought about making a warehouse or a training room.

Shoong, shoong—

A bundle of marble slabs appeared. The Lv.1 marble still looked better than wood. I began to tear out the waiting room's wooden floor to install them. Of course, even such a menial task took a lot with my low stats.

[Your strength has increased by 0.003 points.] [Your vitality has increased by 0.003 points.] [Your strength has increased by 0.003 points.] [Your vitality has increased by 0.003 points.]...

I received many similar alerts after about 6 hours of work.

“If only I had the goblin tablet with me.”

I wiped off the sweat from my forehead. *Tiring*— A message suddenly popped up in front of me.

[Player PhantomThief has invited player Extra7 to a group chat.] [Would you like to accept?]

PhantomThief was Jain's nickname. It seemed she figured out how to use the messenger system. I accepted.

[Extra7 has entered the chat.]

PhantomThief: Hey newbie. There's even a group chat. Isn't this interesting?

Goryeo'sStrongest: Whadup?

PhantomThief: Look at Cheok Jungyeong trying to type lol what an idiot.

Goryeo'sStrongest: The screen is too small for my fingers. You're next to me, so why do I even need to chat?

[Boss has entered the chat.]

PhantomThief: Hey Boss.

Boss: Hi.

PhantomThief: Look, our nicknames are similar. [1]

Boss: Similar? How?

PhantomThief: Isn't that obvious?

Boss: No.

A holographic keyboard popped up when I reached out to the chat window.

Me: What's everyone doing?

Boss: I'm training.

PhantomThief: I'm looking around the community for more information. There's already an anonymous information café. People sure are quick-witted. It looks like a great way to earn TP.

Me: Is the owner a djinn or from a guild?

PhantomThief: I don't know yet. I think I'll set up my profile too.

Boss: Profile? How do you

Boss didn't finish her sentence since she typed slow.

Boss: do that?

PhantomThief: It'll be too hard for you, Boss. No matter how well we explain it.

Boss: I can do it. Teach me.

[9 hours and 30 minutes have passed. Your random dice have recharged.]

My random dice came back at just the right moment. I placed the chat window aside and took them out. My inventory was still empty after

selling everything.

“Good materials, good materials.”

I rolled the dice as I wished. They hit the marble floor and transformed into a shining piece of leather.

[Lv.4 Black Gargoyle Leather]

“Oh.”

It practically screamed special.

* * *

In player CaptainBritain’s waiting room 12 hours later, Rachel opened her eyes on the shabby wooden floor. She shivered and rubbed her arms.

“Huuu...”

She sighed after her teeth chattered and had woken up again in the middle of sleeping. Not from the cold, but because of her body’s clock. She checked the community page after waking up.

[Confirming members of the Royal Court guild. Please leave comments.]

Rachel had posted as soon as she finished the second tutorial so she could meet up with her guild members. She still hadn’t met Kim Hajin and wondered what he was up to. Of course, she believed he was doing just fine on his own. Then she left the community page and lay back on the ground. Her current living space felt uncomfortable without even a blanket or pillow.

“...”

She struggled to fall back to sleep. Although she had cleared the high-intermediate difficulty tutorial, all sorts of worries rose in her head: England’s current situation, the Royal Court guild, and the person

whose life or death remained unknown. Rachel decided to work out and shake off those complicated thoughts.

“Huu.”

She began to do push-ups. Three sets of 40 followed by 3 sets of 60 curl-ups, then squats and the Royal Court’s basic sword training routine...

After 4 hours of training, she accessed the community again.

Public Forum [Tutorial clear records.] [Is there anyone with a Lv.2 sword willing to trade for a Lv.2 axe?] — Me. I’ll put it up on the auction house. — The auction house has high fees though... [Difficulty doesn’t matter from the 2nd floor onwards, right?] — Looks like it.

The public forum seemed quite busy. Honestly, Rachel was also busy until about 8 hours ago. At the time, all 7 Royal Court guild members had gathered in Rachel’s waiting room for a meeting.

“Hmm?”

An interesting post caught Rachel’s attention with dozens of people commenting.

[Everyone, someone earned 20000 TP in the third tutorial.] — No way, who? — Don’t lie, please. — No, no, it’s already been confirmed by everyone who cleared the highest difficulty tutorial. His nickname is Extra7. — Extra7? — Yes, people are guessing it’s either the Vast Expanse or a member of the Nine Stars.

“Eh? 20000 TP?”

Rachel’s mouth opened in shock. She only managed to collect 3500 TP in the high-intermediate difficulty Tutorial Town. Even then, other players labeled her as vicious. To have 6 times as much... Rachel refreshed the page while feeling a bit jealous.

[Oh! Hey, there’s a Lv.3 armor in the auction house!]

A new comment popped up.

“...!”

Rachel slightly jumped and immediately entered the auction house.

[Lv.3 Gargoyle Leather Armor (J – White Order)] Lv.2 Resistance, Lv.2 Ease of Movement, Lv.3 Durability [Starting Bid – 500 TP] [Current Bid – 600 TP]

A Lv.3 item had appeared when the tower climb hadn't even begun. Rachel didn't know what white order meant, but it still sounded cool. She wanted it as soon as she saw it. *I want it. I want to make that armor mine.* She clicked to make a bid.

* * *

In Player Nayunjajangman's waiting room.

[Wow, someone from the third tutorial earned 20000 TP!]

Chae Nayun looked at the same post that Rachel had read. She already knew that Extra7 had earned 20000 TP in the third tutorial. After all, she had seen it with her own eyes.

“Could he really be Vast Expanse?”

The thought that he could be the famous Vast Expanse never crossed her mind.

“Who?”

“Who are you talking about?”

The Essence of the Strait members in her waiting room also seemed interested. Chae Nayun had invited them over with the waiting room entrance tickets.

“Extra7.”

“Oh, him? The public forum is filled with people talking about him. Did he really make 20000 TP?”

This cheerful voice belonged to Yi Jiyeon, a former classmate from Cube who had chosen the lowest difficulty tutorial.

Chae Nayun briefly replied, “Yeah, I saw it with my own eyes. He earned slightly more than 20000 TP.”

“No way, really? How the heck did he make 20000?”

“I’m not sure. By the way, aren’t you being a bit rude?”

“Hm? What do you mean?”

“Don’t use words like heck when you’re talking about him. Do you think he’s your friend?”

“...”

Yi Jiyeon became speechless. Chae Nayun retracted her sharp gaze and opened the list of encountered players, a system functionality only available in the waiting room.

List of Encountered Players — [Goryeo’sStrongest]... [Extra7]

“Eh?”

To her surprise, she spotted Extra7 on the list. However, she quickly accepted it since it wouldn’t have been strange to pass each other at least once in the highest difficulty tutorial. Clearly, neither had recognized each other. With a small smile, she sent a friend request to her old master.

[You have sent a friend request to player Extra7.]

* * *

[You have crafted a Lv.4 equipment.] [Your Lv.2 crafting technique has

improved to Lv.3]

“Huu.”

I sigh in exhaustion after 9 hours of hard work. I finally succeeded in crafting a Lv.4 equipment, the best I had made so far. It required both aether and stigma’s magic power and I called it the Black Messiah’s Horrible Suit.

[Black Messiah’s Horrible Suit] Lv.3 Resistance, Lv.4 Durability, Lv.3 Temperature Control, Lv.3 Stealth

“My naming sense... sucks.”

I had become a bit crazy before finally succeeding. Well, I could just change the name before selling it.

I put the suit on. It felt light, yet stuck to my body. This armor made moving easier.

“Amazing.”

It felt much better than the failed products from before. At first, I used half of the Lv.4 material to make a Lv.3 armor, which turned into a complete failure. I randomly named it and tossed it in the auction house. If I recalled correctly, I named it: *[Lv.3 Gargoyle’s Leather Armor (J – White Order)]*. The J stood for Jin, the second part of my name, and white order meant the lowest grade.

“I guess I’ll see how it’s doing.”

Feeling bored, I went to check the auction house when...

Tiring— An alert popped up from the group chat.

PhantomThief: Ahhh, this waiting room sucks. How am I supposed to stay here for 24 hours?

Jain complained.

Me: Lol why don't you buy a bed? There's one in the player shop.

PhantomThief: Are you crazy? That's such a waste of TP. Auuu, Cheok Jungyeong reeks of sweat.

The red entrance ticket's waiting room was twice the size of other rooms since 2 people would share it.

Boss: Jain, you should train like Gyeong. A beautiful flower only blooms in solitude.

PhantomThief: Stop making typos, Boss.

Me: Boss, have you eaten anything?

Boss: Of course.

Me: Hold on, I'll send you a ticket to my room.

I planned to invite Boss to my room since she probably hadn't eaten anything. However...

[Player Nayunjajangman has sent you a friend request.]

"Hm?"

I suddenly received a friend request and tilted my head at the familiar ID.

"What?"

How did he send me a friend request? Didn't I block everyone from sending me friend requests through the public forum? A sudden suspicion crept up inside me.

"Erm..."

I hesitated before accepting.

Ding— Nayunjajangman immediately messaged me.

[Hyung! What happened? I heard you made 20000 TP!]

1. Their nicknames share the same first character in Korean. 📎

Chapter 164

Jungle (1)

[Player Nayunjajangman has sent you a friend request.]

How did he send me a friend request? Didn't I block everyone from sending me friend requests through the public forum? A sudden suspicion crept up inside me.

"Erm..."

I hesitated before accepting.

Ding— Nayunjajangman immediately messaged me.

[Hyung! What happened? I heard you made 20000 TP!]

I checked my system settings once again.

[Allow friend requests through the public forum (OFF)]

It remained the same. I had blocked friend requests since things would get annoying after my name spread from the third tutorial. Players couldn't send friend requests unless they had been within 20 meters at some point.

[Hey, how did you add me as a friend?]

I messaged Nayunjajangman as a strange feeling rose inside me.

[Lol We must've passed by each other in the third tutorial. I saw hyung's name in my list of encountered players.]

[You're also in the highest difficulty?]

[Yeah lol]

“Eh?”

I took my eyes off the chat window for a moment. My neck suddenly began to hurt and I needed some time to think. Only 50 people managed to clear the third tutorial. The first part of his name always bothered me even though he always called me hyung and spoke like a man. Was it just a coincidence? Or had I changed fate?

[Hyung, how did you make so much TP? I have mad respect for you.]

I closed the chat window and typed *ImGosu* into the public forum.

[There is no comment or post under that player name.]

Next, I typed *Nayunjajangman*.

— *Anyone clear the highest difficulty tutorial? — The highest difficulty tutorial is filled with scammers. Be careful, everyone. Pickpockets can also steal money from your inventory. — Yep, I got 150 TP stolen from my inventory while walking in broad daylight. — Also, there are thugs all over the dark alleyways. They’re gunning to steal your money. — I don’t know if the hardest difficulty tutorial has any benefits. — Lol I am in the highest difficulty tutorial. — Screw off if you don’t believe me. — Fuck you too!*

Cold sweat began to form after reading through his comments and posts. I brushed my hair back and felt a chill down my spine. My head grew hot and my hands trembled as I tapped the holographic keyboard.

[It just happened.]

[You just happened to make 20000 TP? Hyung, are you really Vast Expanse? I’m a big fan.]

[By the way, are you really a guy?]

I asked a seemingly random question after a bit of back and forth.

[Why? That was kinda sudden.]

[Just asking. You know, your name is jajangman. Do you run a restaurant? How did a restaurant worker clear the highest difficulty tutorial?]

[Lol I'll tell you when we meet. Like I said, I think we'll meet one day.]

Nayunjajangman avoided the question. I didn't dig into it too much, afraid my suspicion would be correct. He sent me a few more messages, but I told him I was busy and left. Then Boss suddenly messaged me.

Boss: Newbie.

Me: Yes? What's up?

Boss: Do you have anything to eat?

Me: Lol Didn't you say you already ate?

I laughed in the chat, but my expression remained stiff as I subconsciously touched my lips. It felt cold.

Boss: W-Well, the player shop has bento boxes for sale.

Boss: I just thought I shouldn't waste TP on bento boxes.

Me: Oh, okay, hold on a second. I'll invite Boss to my place. We can eat together.

Boss: Ok.

I sent Boss an invitation as I sighed on the edge of my bed. I wouldn't be alone thanks to Boss, but she didn't show up even after a long time. A message arrived 15 minutes later.

Boss: How do I use the invitation letter?

“...”

Me: Just take it out of your inventory and rip it in half. You can just ask the system if there's anything that you don't know.

Boss: Ah, okay!

Soon, a light flashed in my waiting room and Boss appeared. She stood imposingly with her eyes closed, then slowly opened them.

“...?”

Her eyes widened. “W-Where is this?”

“It's my waiting room.”

“What?”

Marble tiles, a comfy couch and bed, a storage closet made from the wooden flooring, a table, tableware, etc. It probably looked quite different from Boss' empty waiting room.

“You know how it is, I like decorating things. Wait just a moment. I'll cook something for you.”

* * *

[The final bid has been completed.]

“Yes!”

Rachel clenched her fists. After a fierce 3 hour battle, she managed to obtain the *[Lv.3 Gargoyle Leather Armor (J – White Order)]*. Her heart filled with happiness and she considered it a strategic victory. She had raised the bid by 500 TP in the last 30 seconds, shocking other players from bidding any higher.

“Huu, huu.”

Rachel collected her thoughts and calmed herself. The coldness that made her shiver had disappeared a long time ago.

[Lv.3 Gargoyle Leather Armor (J – White Order) will be transferred to player CaptainBritain’s waiting room.]

Shoong—

A cluster of light descended from the ceiling and changed into the gargoyle leather armor. Rachel held up the incredibly light and elegant black armor. She especially liked the white symbols engraved on the leather.

“Hehe...”

What a good purchase! Rachel joyfully stared at it and carefully put it on.

[The equipment’s size will be adjusted to fit your body.]

The armor shrunk to snugly fit Rachel. It felt so light like she wasn’t wearing anything at all. Plus, she also didn’t need to tie the strings in the front. They came together like magnets and automatically tied themselves.

“Oh.”

Rachel happily hummed as she looked in the mirror. Then she entered the community to brag.

[Whoa lol the Lv.3 armor got sold for 3000 TP] — Isn’t that too much? — Must be someone rich. I’d pay that for a Lv.4 armor, but not Lv.3.

“You’re just jealous.”

Rachel pouted and commented.

— *That’s quite cheap considering the tutorial just ended. — Are you the one who bought it? — No. — Don’t you remember what you had to go*

through to earn 1000 TP? 3000 TP is a lot.

“Sigh.”

Rachel shook her head. As far as she was concerned, she bought it for cheap. Then she moved on to the next post.

[What is everyone using their TP for?] — I bought some furniture for my waiting room, a bed and a blanket. Oh, and some bento boxes. — Same. Sucks to sleep on a wooden board. It was money well spent. — How’s the player shop’s bento box? — The 5 TP one is trash, but the 10 TP is pretty good.

Rachel felt a bit proud after reading those comments since she gave up those comforts to buy the Lv.3 armor.

[In 10 minutes, you will be transferred to the tower’s 2nd floor.] [The system’s help will decrease starting from the 2nd floor.]

“Sunshine.”

A system window popped up as Rachel summoned her wind elemental, who became a lot smaller after entering the tower.

— Yeeeah?

“Get ready.”

— Okay.

Sunshine entered Rachel’s leather armor. As expected, the combination of wind and leather felt especially good. Her body became even lighter as she prepared to enter the second floor.

* * *

[Lv.3 Gargoyle’s Leather Armor has been sold for 3000 TP.] [You will receive 2700 TP after a 10% deduction.] [You have obtained 3 auction house trust points. Your trust level will increase to grade 9 with 7 more

trust points.]

“Oh? That much?”

The amount shocked me. I even double-checked to make sure I wasn't seeing things. I really received 2700 TP.

“I guess people don't know the market price since it's still early.”

Of course, some NPCs in the highest difficulty Tutorial Town also bought Lv.3 armor for 3000 TP. However, they naturally possessed more TP.

Lv.3 items were quite common outside the tutorial. They could easily be acquired starting from the 3rd floor. That said, the armor I made would most likely be the best Lv.3 armor around.

“Was it Jain?”

The buyer and the seller remained anonymous in the auction house, so I messaged Jain. However, she said, *I'm not interested in such things.*

“Then who was it?”

Could someone else spend 3000 TP so easily? Another system alert popped up as I pondered.

[In 10 minutes, you will be transferred to the tower's 2nd floor.] The system's help will decrease starting from the 2nd floor.]

“Ah, it's starting soon. Boss, wake up!”

I shook Boss, who slept on my bed. However, she tightly grabbed the blanket and refused to get up.

“It's time to leave, Boss.”

“Uaaaauu.”

“What?”

“Auuuuii...”

“What?”

I yanked the blanket away. *Koong*. Boss fell to the ground with the blanket. Only after her head slammed on the ground did she open her eyes.

“*Mm, mmm...* Your bed feels very nice...”

“Get ready.”

I wore the *[Lv.4 Black Messiah's Horrible Suit]*, placed the *[Lv.3 Temperature Control Robe]* over it, equipped the *[Lv.2 Protection Mask]*, slipped on the *[Lv.3 Utility Footwear]*, and placed the *[Lv.3 Ice attribute Dagger]* made from frozentium into the holster around my thigh.

“Now this is what you call overgeared.”

I fully loaded myself with various equipment made from the random dice, stigma's magic power, and dexterity.

[Desert Eagle (firepower restriction: 60%)] — A portion of the restriction (10%) will be lifted when you reach the 3rd floor. — A portion of the restriction (20%) will be lifted when you reach the 5th floor. — A portion of the restriction (30%) will be lifted when you reach the 7th floor.

I felt confident in my Desert Eagle despite the restricted firepower.

“Ooh...”

I turned around and saw Boss staring at me in envy.

“Oh right, I have something for you too, Boss.”

“Oh?” Boss shot up in surprise. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“*Hahaha*, I see you treat your boss with respect. So, what is it?”

Boss walked up to me with a hearty laugh. I took out a black robe from my inventory. It looked quite beautiful thanks to aether.

“How is it?”

“*Mm*, I like it. Very good.”

Boss smiled in satisfaction and pulled the hood over her head. A system message popped up at the perfect timing.

[You will now be transferred to the 2nd floor.] [Please prepare yourself.]

* * *

Whoosh— It felt like being carried away by the wind as my feet touched down on the 2nd floor. This would be the real start to the Tower of Wish. I opened my eyes and saw Boss next to me with 2000 other players in a huge field. They stared at each other in surprise and began to look for their companions.

“Where are Jain and Gyeong?”

“Let me see... Oh, they’re there.”

I pointed behind us. I easily spotted Cheok Jungyeong among the crowd with Jain next to him.

“Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

We walked up to them.

“Oh, Boss and newbie. Hey.”

Hundreds of groups began to form like how we did.

“Hello.”

A man suddenly appeared on the other side of the field. His hair, unique clothes, and ringing voice distinguished him from everyone else.

“My name is Luke. I am the administrator of the 2nd floor.”

He only gave a simple self-introduction. However, his voice echoed across the entire field.

“Nice to meet you.” Luke lightly bowed. His respectful tone, formality, and voice captured all of our attention.

“I’d love to talk to every one of you. Unfortunately, we don’t have the time, so I will cut straight to the chase.”

Luke received everyone’s gaze and pointed into the distance.

“As you can see, the 2nd floor is quite chaotic. It is filled with frightening scenes of nature.”

The 2nd floor’s scenery could be considered chaos itself. You couldn’t tell a jungle from a volcano or a glacier from a swamp. I widened my eyes and peered into the distance. My thousand-mile eyes pierced through the dense leaves. However, this floor’s strange mixture of land wasn’t something a grade 7 thousand-mile eyes could comprehend.

— Interesting.

— An impossible terrain...

Other players didn’t seem all that surprised. They probably expected something like this from a tower of this magnitude.

“Your goal is simple. Travel through this chaotic land filled with traps and monsters to find the elevators that lead to the 3rd floor.”

I looked around for a specific person as Luke continued. I couldn't find Jin Sayhyuk, but found someone else instead. A girl with blonde hair and the armor she wore caught my attention.

"Vice leader, where did you get that armor?"

"Oh, it's nothing."

"It's so pretty."

"*Huhu*, it's nothing special."

Rachel proudly stood contrary to what she said. So Rachel was the pushover who bought my armor. I wanted to say hi, but the Chameleon Troupe members stood next to me.

"There are 10 elevators hidden on the 2nd floor."

Luke continued to explain.

"Each elevator can hold 50 people, which is quite a lot. Unfortunately, they are very slow and take 8 hours to travel back and forth."

Many players would remain on this floor for a long time, but that didn't matter too much. Entering the 3rd floor early didn't have any benefits. Honestly, it would be better to go there later.

"That is all."

The 3rd floor would be the first residential area that players could access. However, its poor conditions made staying on this floor a much better choice.

"Oh, I'm sure you all know, but I will explain it once again. You will have to start over from the tutorial if your vitality reaches zero."

Luke sat under the shade of a tree and began to read a book after finishing his explanation.

— What are you going to do?

— We don't have much of a choice.

— Shouldn't we hold a meeting first?

— I don't see the need for it. We only have to find the elevators.

Players quickly left and didn't want to stay in this strange place for too long.

"How interesting. We should hurry up too," Cheok Jungyeong spoke. However, I didn't follow them.

"You can all go ahead."

"Eh?"

"What are you going to do?"

"I have something to do," I simply replied.

"I see."

"Don't worry, I'll chase after all of you soon."

"Mm... I'm sure you'll be fine. Alright, we'll go ahead."

Boss, Jain, and Cheok Jungyeong chose to head north. I climbed a zelkova tree to locate Jin Sahyuk from a higher vantage point.

"Huu, I should be able to see everyone from here."

By the time I arrived at the peak of the tree...

"Yeah, you should."

"...?"

Someone replied to my murmuring. A chill immediately ran down my back. I turned to the right where the voice came from. Amidst the leaves, a man I once met stared at me.

“Hello.”

“...”

The handsome man who accompanied Jin Sahyuk appeared out of nowhere and placed his hand on my shoulder.

“Are you looking for someone?”

I quickly jumped down as he followed suit. *Tak*. Both of us lightly landed.

“Good landing.”

The man applauded as I took a deep breath. I felt so tense my tongue went stiff, but I didn’t need to be scared. I shouldn’t lose to anyone inside the Tower of Wish and silently walked forward.

“Oi, you should answer when someone asks you a question. I’ll ask again. Are you looking for someone?”

He continued to follow me. *Huu*. I stopped walking and turned around.

“Yeah.”

“Who?”

I didn’t know if he expected me to actually tell him, but I did so anyway.

“Your companion.”

“My companion... Oh, the girl who fought you in Busan?” the man asked full of interest.

“Yeah.”

“Why?”

“Do you need to ask?”

I took off my hood. By the looks of it, he already knew my identity.

“I’m looking for her so I can kill her.”

“...”

His expression immediately turned stiff as I took out my gun. The man who didn’t exist in my setting glared, but soon smiled again.

“*Iya*, so cool. Unfortunately, you’re going to have to wait.”

I furrowed my brows without replying.

“You see, I stole her ticket. I used it instead of her.”

The man grinned.

“What?”

“I used her black ticket. I even got something called a bonus skill from it. Want me to show you?”

That completely shocked me. He didn’t seem to be lying since he mentioned the bonus skill.

“Oh... I see.”

I quickly regained my composure. It didn’t matter all that much. It might be delayed, but Jin Sahyuk would undoubtedly enter the Tower of Wish. I could always kill her then.

“In that case—”

As I spoke... *Chweeek*— *Puuk*. Something sharp or blunt struck my back. Was it a dagger, an arrow, or a club? I couldn't tell because I didn't feel anything, not even pain. Was this the power of a Lv.4 armor?

“What's this?”

I found a dagger on the ground.

[Lv.1 Well-sharpened dagger]

A blade without a handle. Someone had attacked me.

“Oh, sorry, sorry. My companion must have gotten angry. She likes Sahyuk a lot, you see.”

“...That's good to know.”

“Sorry, I only told her to stand by and watch.”

“You don't have to be sorry.”

I raised my gun and easily pinpointed the attacker's location from the dagger's trajectory. Then I fired towards a tree in the north.

— *Uk!*

Soon, a short scream rang out and something heavy fell to the ground.

“You shouldn't do something in the first place if you're going to feel sorry, right?”

I said with a confident smile. I wouldn't lose against anyone inside the Tower of Wish, especially at the earlier stages.

Chapter 165

Jungle (2)

I pondered about the man in front of me. I didn't know his abilities and couldn't detect any changes in the setting. Was it because he was too strong? Or was it because he wasn't in the original story? Regardless of his gift, I had no reason to fear him inside the tower. I couldn't guarantee my victory, but I felt like I wouldn't lose against anyone.

"I guess you're right."

The man retorted. His expression constantly changed from a glare filled with killing intent to a serpent-like smile.

"I shouldn't do something if I'm going to feel sorry."

Suddenly, his body flickered. It happened instantly, but I noticed his body had transformed into magic power.

"Yeah, it was my fault," the man murmured and laughed. The corners of his mouth practically hung on his ears. I raised my gun as he transformed into a current of magic power and flew back.

"What..."

I wasn't mistaken. He definitely transformed into magic power. However, I could trace his movements. Then I pulled the trigger. Two bullets passed through his body. On the third bullet, I infused stigma's magic power along with an anti-magic attribute.

"Up!"

The bullet struck his shoulder and he materialized before falling to the ground.

“That hurt.”

He sat upright and rubbed his wounded shoulder. I remained calm and transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle as I approached him with more anti-magic bullets.

[The administrator of the second floor, Luke, is watching you.]

However, I could feel the administrator’s gaze on me. I slightly flinched, but still pointed my gun at the man.

“It’s not easy having my power restricted.”

The man got up and sighed, “*Sigh*, fine. I’ll admit it. You’re the strongest person in here. My shoulder hurts so much, I can barely move.”

I could feel the sincerity in his words.

“I should have brought a gun too. My weapon is so heavy I can’t even hold it yet.”

The man grumbled and slowly walked away. Meanwhile, I thought about the system alert. It said Luke was only watching, so I judged it would be fine to fire another bullet. The man joined up with his companion, the woman who threw the dagger at me. She seemed to be heavily wounded and clutched her chest as she gasped for breath.

“*Lacors...*”

The man murmured an ancient language as symbols appeared on the ground below him.

“...?”

“Interesting, isn’t it? It’s the skill I chose with my black ticket.”

“Mass teleport?”

“You know about it?” The man grinned.

“You took the worst one.” I coldly shot back and aimed.

“Really? It sounded pretty useful to me.”

I carefully infused stigma’s magic power into the bullet to kill him before he left. *KWANG!* I fired, but pillars of dirt shot up from the ground to form a shield. *Tudududu*— My anti-magic bullet easily tore through the mixture of magic power and dirt, but all the layers managed to halt the bullet’s momentum.

— *Kuk!*

The man blocked it with his body.

— *Huu...* It’s been a while since I’ve felt this much pain.

His exhausted voice rang out from the other side of the shields. A spiraling current of magic power signaled the activation of mass teleport.

[Warning! Luke, the administrator of the 2nd floor, is watching you carefully!]

A warning popped up. It seemed I fought too close to the administrator. I felt confident I could’ve killed him at least once if we fought farther away. I should take this into account when I kill Jin Sahyuk.

I put my gun down. Then I put on airs and spoke generously, “Alright, you’re free to go. I’ll let you live this one time.”

— *Hm?*

I heard a flustered voice and simply retorted, “I’m letting you go since I’m quite touched that you stopped to pick up your friend.”

The man didn’t reply. I wanted to hide my weakness and prevent him

from finding out that I couldn't freely use anti-magic bullets in front of an administrator.

— Thanks.

I didn't know whether he bought it or not, but that's what he said.

— Then I'll let you live once too in the future. My name is Bell. Remember it.

“Yeah, yeah.”

Shooong— Two clumps of magic power shot into the air as I watched them fly away.

“*Sigh.*”

I didn't expect Jin Sahyuk to not be here, but this worked to my advantage. If she entered the tower 2 months later, that meant I would have more time to display an overwhelming difference in power.

“For now...” I peered in the direction my companions took.

Kuoooo—

A large gorilla roared in the distance.

— *Kuhahaha!*

Cheok Jungyeong fought the gorilla and seemed even more like a gorilla himself.

— Come, I'll fight you!

They began to wrestle, but he naturally couldn't surpass it in pure strength inside the tower. Their hands interlocked and the gorilla pushed him back. Then...

Cheok Jungyeong roared like a beast and his muscles bulked up. The tide of battle suddenly turned as he strangled the gorilla's neck. Cheok Jungyeong strangled it to death despite its fierce struggle.

— Little imp, don't get so eager...

With those words, Cheok Jungyeong passed out on the ground. Jain looked down at him and shook her head.

— Do you think he knows this place isn't a dueling arena, Boss?

I chuckled at Jain's question and ran towards them. I wasn't sure if they purposely walked slower for me or if the gorilla had delayed them, but I quickly caught up.

"I'm back."

"Oh? That was quick." Boss spotted me first.

"Hajin, what were you doing?" Jain spoke like we were close friends and Boss gave her an odd look.

"..."

I looked around our surroundings without replying. The 2nd floor exploration had only just begun, so many other players wandered around in a 1-2 km radius. I spotted Chae Nayun among them with Essence of the Strait members and purposely looked away.

"Hajin?" Boss asked again.

"Yes? Oh, it's nothing. Have you run into anyone?"

"No, I don't think other players want to cooperate with strangers," Jain replied. Most traveled with their guild members.

"*Mmm...* Let's sit for now."

"Sit?"

“Yes.”

“Why? Shouldn’t we walk?” I pointed at the gorilla Cheok Jungyeong hunted.

“I want to dismantle this first. Wait for a bit.”

“Do you need to?”

“Its leather is important and we also need food. We’ll be staying here for a long time.”

“Long time? *Nah.*”

Cheok Jungyeong, who passed out a moment ago, suddenly shot up. He recovered at a frightening speed.

“Didn’t that white-haired guy say 50 people could go on each elevator? He said there are 10 of them... so 2 days should be enough. Can’t you do multiplication and subtraction?”

“No, it’s not a matter of math.”

It had more to do with efficiency, ethics, selfishness, and altruism. Each elevator could fit 50 people. However, that was the maximum. The elevator didn’t need to be full.

“The administrator said 50 people at most.”

“Yeah, so if 50 people get on each one...”

“Use your brain, you dimwit.” Jain stepped in and made my job easier.

“You don’t need all 50 people to get the elevator going. That means even a single person can leave with it.”

“Exactly.”

What Cheok Jungyeong said was only the best-case scenario. Considering the innate greed and selfishness of humans, probably only 20 or so people would go up each day. In other words, we could be stuck here for over 100 days.

“Hm, I see... but doesn’t that mean we should try to find an elevator as quickly as possible?”

“Don’t worry, it’ll be fine if we’re a little late.”

The 3rd floor was a terrible place. I needed at least 3-4 days of preparation before going up.

“Argh, fuck. Then what do you want us to do?”

Unfortunately, I couldn’t explain in detail.

“Let’s take things slow rather than rushing.”

I sat near the gorilla and began to dismantle it. I skinned it with a knife, cut out its flesh, and pulled out its teeth. I had grown accustomed to this while dismantling fish during the second tutorial. I found it hard at first, but it became easier after I pretended everything was clay. Of course, a huge gorilla was still more disgusting than a fish.

[Lv.1 System can use sanity defense mode.]

The system messaged me as I dismantled the gorilla.

“Ah, thank you for the suggestion, but I can handle this.”

“Hm?”

“Why are you talking to yourself?” Boss and Jain gave me a strange look.

“Oh right, don’t yell or get angry at the system messages you see.”

“Why?” Jain tilted her head in bewilderment.

“Well, we should be grateful to it if you think about it. It’s helping us climb without receiving any compensation.”

“...”

When I said that, Jain and Cheok Jungyeong gave me strange looks and took a step back. They treated me as though I had gone mad. Only Boss fervently nodded. Soon, I finished dismantling the jungle gorilla.

[You have acquired the technique, Lv.1 Dismantling.] — You may now instantly dismantle low level monsters.

[Lv.2 Jungle Gorilla’s Leather] [Jungle Gorilla’s Meat] [Lv.2 Jungle Gorilla’s Teeth]

I stored everything in my inventory and stood up.

“Let’s get going now.”

* * *

Three hours later, Rachel and 6 other Royal Court guild members walked through a fierce snowstorm.

“Vice leader! The snowstorm is too harsh!”

“How did a jungle suddenly change into Antarctica? *Auu*, I’m freezing.”

Rachel’s Royal Court guild chose the northwest jungle. However, a large snowfield suddenly appeared as they toiled through it.

“Let’s stop and rest!”

Rachel shouted. Her companions stopped and huddled together. They didn’t need to build an igloo as Rachel faced the blizzard and took a

deep breath. Then 2 elementals that only she could see formed a circular barrier around them.

“Huu... There’s just no end to this. We don’t know where the elevators are and what’s in this place.”

A guild member spoke inside the warmth of Rachel’s barrier.

“Vice leader, I think we should split into 2 teams. We can still use the tower’s messenger.”

A system window suddenly popped up as various members brought up different ideas.

[The first elevator has departed with 9 people.]

“Hah?”

Everyone yelled in shock. Nine people? Fifty could have taken it, but only 9 had departed.

“Nine? Dammit!”

“These fools blinded by greed!”

“Let’s split up.” Rachel immediately decided after seeing this message.

“We’ll split into the teams discussed before and locate an elevator as quickly as possible. The first one to find an elevator can send everyone else the coordinates.”

With that, Rachel took off the 3000 TP gargoyle leather armor and handed it to the second team’s captain, Davin.

“Um, vice leader, what’s this?”

“Wear it, Davin. My team can deal with the cold with my elementals, but that’s not the case for you. This armor has a temperature control function, so you can rotate it amongst yourselves if needed.”

“Yes, thank you.” Davin accepted the armor with a touched expression.

“Now let’s go. We need to hurry!”

The 7 Royal Court guild members split into 2 teams.

“Don’t forget to send periodic reports. Good luck.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“Thank you.”

As the leader of the first team, Rachel went east with 2 other guild members. They paved through the fierce blizzard for 10 minutes, 20 minutes, 30 minutes... After walking for a long time...

“Wait, what’s that?”

One member pointed into the distance. A sharp, golden object shone in the snow.

“It kind of looks like a... snowmobile.”

“Let’s go. It might be a hidden piece.”

With bright expressions, the two male guild members walked up to the golden object. Rachel had an eerie feeling, but followed after them.

“It’s a snowmobile!”

“Hurry, vice leader!”

The guild members stood in front of the mysterious object and called her over.

“A snowmobile?” Rachel felt excited. It would undoubtedly be one of the best methods of transportation here.

“Yes, I’m certain!”

“Wait, how do we use this?”

“I got it. I’ve driven this befo—”

They couldn’t hold back their excitement and touched the golden snowmobile. Immediately...

“Uk!”

“Huup!”

Pzzt—! A powerful spark shot out. They couldn’t react to the instantaneous current of magic power and fainted on the spot.

“Re... Refel! David!”

* * *

“Dwarven supercar?” Jain tilted her head in a jungle cave that served as our temporary base.

“Yes, there’s an artifact by that name that you can’t normally touch.”

“And how do you know that?”

“Ah, well, you’ve seen it too, right? The administrator was reading a book.”

“Huh?”

The administrator of the 2nd floor sat under a tree and began to read a book the moment he finished his explanation. Being kind and social, Kim Suho would provide Luke with some company before setting off. He would then spot the book in Luke’s hands and ask about it. Luke would smile meaningfully and give the book to Kim Suho.

“I sneaked a peek. The elevators and the supercar are both artifacts

left behind by dwarves.”

“Ah, so that’s why you were late? What does this supercar look like?”

“It should look like a snowmobile.”

This floor contained several hidden pieces considered dwarven artifacts. I wanted to find all the hidden steles and the supercar on the 2nd floor.

“So things will get easier if we find it?”

“Yes, it’ll be helpful on other floors as well.”

The Tower of Wish mainly used horses for transportation. However, low level horses couldn’t be used in battle. Famous steeds like the Red Hare, Bucephalus, and the slightly lesser Reckless could, but would be difficult to obtain.

“Do you know where to look?”

“No, but I’m confident I can find it with my eyes.”

The 2nd floor should have 3 dwarven supercars. I planned to give Kim Suho a map of the 2nd floor, so there should be no problem if I took one.

Koong. Koong.

Huge footsteps rang out from outside. I glanced sideways and saw Cheok Jungyeong return from hunting. As always, injuries riddled his body. However, they looked even worse today. A huge cut on his side revealed his ribs and something seemed to have bitten off a part of his calf.

“...Off doing weird things again?”

Jain remarked as she shook her head. Cheok Jungyeong received it with a big grin.

“I tasted ecstasy inside the boundary between life and death.”

“So... where’s the corpse?”

“...”

However, he didn’t reply.

“You didn’t bring it again? You should have brought it back if you could.”

I grumbled as I handed him a potion I had made with herbs from the player shop. It was only Lv.0 since I didn’t have a proper recipe, but would be better than nothing.

“*Cough.*”

Cheok Jungyeong took the potion as he scratched the back of his neck.

“Where is it? I’ll go bring it back.”

“It’s not that far. Keep going straight and you’ll see it.”

He gulped down the potion and immediately passed out on the ground.

“Eat, fight, sleep, eat, fight, sleep... What is he if not a beast?”

“Jain, take care of the food. You just have to cook it.”

“*Huh?* Oh, okay.”

I left the cooking to Jain and went outside.

“*Hm?* Where are you going?”

I ran into Boss, who also just returned.

“Cheok Jungyeong left a monster corpse behind so I’m going to fetch it.”

“Then let’s go together. You’ll need someone to guard you.”

“Thanks.”

Boss and I began walking forward. After about 15 minutes, we discovered traces of a fierce battle. A huge area in the jungle had caved in with crushed trees and a huge monster lay lifelessly in the middle.

“He killed a Lv.3 grizzly bear?”

Was that even possible bare-handed? Once again, Cheok Jungyeong’s strength awed me. *KOONG!* I chopped off the bear’s head and began to dismantle it.

“Hm?”

[Lv.3 Grizzly Bear’s Head] Lv.3 Durability, Lv.1 Air Purifier, Lv.3 Face Protection, Lv.-1 Hygiene

The bear’s head could be used as a helmet without any refinement. If treated correctly, it could become valuable equipment. I cleaned the inside with stigma’s magic power and the Lv.-1 Hygiene disappeared. Then I placed it aside.

I guess I could make a helmet and gift it to Cheok Jungyeong.

I went back to dismantling the bear.

“Mmm.”

Then I heard a satisfied murmur and briefly glanced to the side before returning to the bear. However, I immediately glanced to the side again.

“Um, Boss?”

“It looks a bit weird, but feels fantastic.”

Boss wore the bear head with her face peeking out from the bear’s mouth. She looked happy like a child.

“Look, newbie. It defends my entire face if I close the mouth.”

“...”

Boss closed the bear’s mouth and I silently stared at the girl wearing a bear mask in front of me.

— Isn’t it cool? *Huhu*.

A satisfied voice rang out from the bear’s mouth.

Chapter 166

Jungle (3)

— Hit me. I need to test its durability.

Boss spoke while wearing the bear head. I hesitated before weakly striking it.

“How is it?”

— I don’t feel anything. Try hitting harder. Is that all you’ve got?

“*Hmm.*”

I raised my hand and clenched my fist. After a light stretch, I struck down with full force. *KOONG!* A small echo resounded in the jungle.

—...!

Boss’ neck trembled and shrunk on impact.

“How is it?”

—...

Her head creaked after staying still for about 30 seconds and 2 deceased bear eyes glared at me. I should probably take them out and use them as glass eyes.

“*Cough.*”

I returned to dismantling the grizzly bear. Meanwhile, the bear head continued to glare at me without the slightest movement.

[Lv.2 Grizzly Bear Leather] [Lv.3 Grizzly Bear's Gall Bladder] [Your dismantling technique has improved to Lv.2.] — You may now instantly dismantle monsters Lv.2 and lower. — Monsters you dismantle will receive a boost in hygiene.

“Done.”

The grizzly bear couldn't be eaten because of its tough muscles. I only collected its leather, which could be used to make various equipment, and its gallbladder, which could be used for medicine.

“We're done, so let's head back.”

I got up. However, Boss still sat on the ground and looked up at me. Was she still in shock that I hit her? I grinned and grabbed her wrist.

“Let's go eat. We have deer meat.”

—...

“And you should take off that bear head.”

—... It's not a bear head. It's a helmet.

Boss finally opened her mouth and seemed to be sulking.

We returned to our temporary camp and smelled the savory meat. Boss smacked her lips. Today's menu was the deer meat marinated in my special sauce.

“Oh, you're back?”

Jain greeted us as she grilled. Then she tilted her head after seeing Boss, who still wore the bear head.

“Boss, did you get eaten by a bear?”

“No, it's a good helmet despite how it looks.”

Boss proudly took off the bear head and gave it to Jain, who examined its description.

“Wow, it’s Lv.3! Isn’t this the same as the armor newbie sold on the auction house?”

“Yes, but the one I made is better.”

Not all Lv.3 items were equal. That’s why the Hero Association evaluated heroes with a rank and a grade. The difference between intermediate rank, grade 9 and intermediate rank, grade 1 was huge. Even 6 grade 9s couldn’t defeat a single grade 1 unless their gifts directly countered each other. This difference only became larger between ranks. The gargoyle leather armor I made could be considered a grade 1 item and this bear head could be considered grade 9.

“*Mm*, I see.”

Jain nodded as Boss snatched away the bear head and stored it in her inventory. It seemed she liked it a lot.

“Alright, let’s eat. I cooked a lot.”

“Yes.”

We gathered around the frying pan.

“These are done, right?”

“Yes. Go ahead, Boss.”

I respectfully let Boss take the first bite. She nodded and placed the deer meat in her mouth.

“*Mmm*.”

I enjoyed seeing Boss happily eat as the cook who marinated the meat. Jain also tried the meat and her eyes widened.

“Oh, shi... *cough*, this is amazing! You made this sauce?”

“Yes.”

“Wow. Oh, then is it not worth spending TP to buy bento boxes from the player shop?”

“Bento boxes? *Mm*, they were only for the tutorial. You shouldn’t be able to buy them anymore.”

“What? Really?”

“Yep, you can easily check it.”

Food was important in conquering any tower since starving to death and being killed in battle shared the same result. The Tower of Wish contained residential areas that sold food, but not on mission floors like the 2nd floor.

In this tower, dying meant that the number of skills you could bring back to the real world would decrease. You could lose all 7 lives simultaneously depending on how you died.

Simply put, you should avoid dying at all costs.

“You’re right. They’re not being sold anymore.”

Of course, I didn’t worry about the bento boxes. I would never have to worry about starving with Lv.2 dismantling, Lv.3 cooking, Lv.3 crafting, and the random dice. I grabbed a piece of deer meat with my chopsticks. As expected, it tasted delicious. I could practically feel my HP going up.

“*Eh?* Why can’t I access the public forum?”

“What? Really?”

I tried to access the public forum after Jain informed me.

[You cannot access the public forum on mission floors.]

“Oh...”

Looks like another setting had changed from the original story. However, I didn't bother to check my smartwatch. Too many changes had occurred, most of which were minor. I could just ask the system about them later.

“You didn't know about it?”

“No.”

“I thought you knew everything.”

“*Haha*, it's not like I'm the master of this tower.”

KUAA. A roar suddenly echoed in the cave as though a drunk man had woken. Cheok Jungyeong stretched and walked over to us.

“...”

He quietly grabbed a handful of deer meat and stuffed it in his mouth.

“Got any more?”

“Hold on.”

I took out another chunk of meat from my inventory. I should at least feed him well since Boss took the bear head I planned to give him.

Tsss—

“*Hehe*, it's looking great.”

Cheok Jungyeong grinned at the meat being grilled. I began to pack up the items around the cave as Cheok Jungyeong ate. We should get going after having stayed here for a while.

“Auu, I’m stuffed.”

What took 7 minutes to cook only took Cheok Jungyeon 1 minute to eat. He swiftly finished his meal and got up.

“Let’s get going.”

“Alright.”

“Okay.”

Jain stretched as Boss put on the bear head. We left the cave and walked through the jungle. Man-eating plants, gorillas, giant mosquitos, etc. We looked for an elevator while defeating all sorts of monsters.

“Oh?”

Our surroundings suddenly changed as if we passed through a barrier that separated two regions. The greenery on the ground turned into white snow. Taking a step back wouldn’t change anything. It felt like we had been transported to a different area.

“Where are we?”

“It looks like Antarctica.”

“How mysterious. We were just in a jungle.”

A fierce blizzard blew in the snowfield. The freezing temperature made the humid jungle seem like a dream.

* * *

A blizzard blew endlessly in the bitter cold. Rachel used the full power of her elementals to barely make an igloo. She carried her 2 unconscious guild members inside and lay a couple of blankets over them.

[Your strength has increased by 0.005 points.] [Your stamina has increased by 0.005 points.] [Your special stat, elemental affinity, has increased by 0.005 points.]

The stat alerts didn't make her happy at all. Rachel looked down at her guild members with mixed feelings. They had fainted the moment they touched the snowmobile. Thankfully, they didn't die. She opened the messenger.

[Communication is being hindered by the mission floor's natural phenomenon, snowstorm.]

"Haa..."

Rachel sighed and turned back to her guild members who lay like corpses on the ground. The tower's system said each player had 7 lives, but dying also resulted in penalties. As the vice leader, Rachel couldn't let her guild members die without knowing anything about the penalties.

"..."

Her stomach growled. Rachel opened the player shop as she rubbed her belly. She had already eaten all the emergency food provided by her ticket. However, she didn't worry about food since she still had 500 TP. With that in mind, she clicked on the 5 TP tutorial bento box.

[The tutorial bento box may no longer be purchased after the tutorial.]

"Eh?"

Her eyes widened in shock. *Why now?* She clicked on the 10 TP bento box, hoping for a different result. However, it remained the same. The player shop only featured one bento box left after she tried to buy food multiple times.

[Emergency Bento Box – 200 TP]

"Argh..."

She covered her face and stomped. *It cost 200 TP for a single bento box?* She felt like this was punishment for spending 3000 TP on armor. As the saying went, bad things came all at once. The mere 20 year old vice leader couldn't handle the situation.

“*Huu*. I can do this. Cheer up.”

Rachel lightly slapped her face. She didn't know when the blizzard would stop or when her 2 guild members would wake up, but she needed to find food.

Rachel left the igloo and the fierce snowstorm seemed to swallow all her senses. However, she forced herself through the snow and endured the bitter cold with her fire elemental Fiery's help.

“...!”

She suddenly stopped and the snow around her feet slid off a cliff. A huge crevice lay in front of her.

“I almost fell...” Rachel sighed in relief and looked down the crevice.

“*Ah*, over there!”

She discovered a golden elevator under the 15 feet crevice. Its color contrasted with the snow and made it easy to spot. However, her joy only lasted briefly. Soon, she bit her lips.

— !@#!@%#&

— !@*&!^\$@!#@#?

Another group had already taken over the elevator. Rachel examined their faces. Thankfully, she recognized them as they often appeared on Korean news. They belonged to China's number 1 guild, Empire of Glory. Unfortunately, they seemed to have met up with the rest of their guild members and prepared to depart.

“*Ah*, wait!”

Rachel shouted and 8 individuals looked up at her. Upon further inspection, she saw the pride and joy on their faces from overtaking their competitors. Her intuition told her they wouldn't wait for anyone else.

“Don't stay quiet after calling out! You should hurry up if you want to come with us!”

The man who seemed to be their leader spoke out. Rachel could sense the lust in his eyes.

“Thank you for the offer, but I have comrades who fainted.”

“Ah, I see. I don't think we can wait if you're not alone. Who knows how many people will come if we do?”

However, his lust disappeared in front of his competitive spirit. Rachel shouted again as he coldly turned around. She used her only negotiation tool.

“I understand, so I'm willing to pay 500 TP. No, I'll pay 1500 TP for my 2 comrades.”

“Hey, vice leader, do we look like beggars? We're the best in China despite how we look.”

“I also have a Lv.3 armor. I don't have it on me right now...”

“Oh? You were the fool who bought the gargoyle's leather armor?
Hahaha.”

“F-Fool?”

“Good luck with your passed-out friends. We'll go on ahead.”

They only ridiculed her after she offered them everything she had. The group of 8 walked into the elevator and the door closed shut.

“Ah...”

Woong— The elevator shook and shot into the sky. Rachel could only stare as it left.

[Alert! Once activated, the elevator will reappear in a random location.]

Rachel despaired once more at the system alert. *Tak, tak.* The sound of footsteps rang out.

“A human?”

She guessed half-correctly. Turning around, she saw a strange half-human, half-beast monster commonly found in cold regions on Earth, a yeti.

“...!”

Rachel quickly raised her rapier, a level 1 sword she bought in Tutorial Town.

[Lv.3 Baby Yeti]

A Lv.3 monster would be the highest she had faced since entering the tower. The yeti bared its fangs at her. Rachel didn't have much time to think. It charged towards her as if it had been ordered to kill all humans.

Rachel jumped to the side and dodged the yeti's charge. *KUOOO—!* Its roar echoed in the blizzard.

Rachel decided to fight as it charged once again. However, it moved much smarter this time and leaped up with its powerful legs.

KOONG—!

The yeti slammed its fists as it landed. Rachel dodged with her elementals' help and attacked the gaps in the yeti's defense. She wasn't sure if her attacks would work, but the fight seemed evenly matched.

Clang— Clang—

Her steel rapier clashed with the yeti's fists. The yeti couldn't gain an advantage against Rachel's acrobatic swordsmanship.

However, Rachel knew she couldn't drag out the fight. This was the yeti's natural environment while she needed to use magic power just to stay warm.

— *GUOOOO!*

The yeti exploded with rage at Rachel's constant dodging. It roared and swung its arm in a wide arc. Rachel decided to use this opportunity to strike.

“...!”

It seemed to have a sharp battle sense as if it led her on and lifted its foot to kick away Rachel's rapier. *Clang!* Rachel clenched her fists as her rapier flew away. *Use the gum if toothless!* She infused elemental power into her small fist and punched.

— *KOONG!*

A huge sonic boom rang out from the distance along with her punch. She might've thought the sound came from her fist if she hadn't paid attention.

Regardless, the sudden attack drilled a huge hole in the yeti's chest, and its flesh and blood splattered on her.

“...?”

Rachel stood in a daze. The yeti completely stopped moving and fell forward. Then she spotted her savior beyond the fallen corpse. A man who wore a black hood and all sorts of equipment. He looked extremely warm.

“Who...”

The man pulled his hood down before she could finish. Her jaws dropped when she saw his face. She felt a sense of ease instead of surprise or happiness.

“Nice to see you again,” he spoke.

“Ah...”

As Rachel thought, he couldn't have died in the tutorial. She felt dumb for ever worrying after seeing his robe, armor, mask, and other equipment. He was doing far better than her no matter how she looked at it.

Rachel became lost in thought at the smiling Kim Hajin.

Chapter 167

Change (1)

We didn't just coincidentally meet. I ran here as soon as I saw an elevator flying up and heard a girl scream. Rachel seemed to be in danger, so I used 3 of my precious bullets. I didn't regret it too much since a yeti's horn could serve as good material. Rachel led me to her igloo after our reunion.

"Come in. It's surprisingly warm."

"Thanks."

"*Um...* No, never mind."

She seemed to have many questions, but didn't dig any further. I entered the igloo without saying much. Two other people lay inside in poor condition.

"What happened to them?"

"They suddenly fainted."

"Suddenly?"

Rachel nodded. "Yes, they touched a snowmobile and suddenly—"

"Snowmobile!"

I interrupted Rachel. A snowmobile could only refer to one thing.

"Y-Yes, a snowmobile..."

"Where?"

“Um, you shouldn’t touch it. You’ll become like them if you do. I think it’s a trap.”

Rachel’s expression darkened. Of course, I knew about the fainting. They would pass out for about 2 days after touching a dwarven artifact bare-handed.

“Don’t worry. I know how to handle it.”

I planned to use the Book of Truth if I couldn’t find one on my own, but it seemed I could reserve the Book of Truth for finding the steles.

“Eh? How? Where?”

“Um, in the book the 2nd floor administrator was reading... Well, I’ll explain later. For now...”

I took out the jungle gorilla’s leather from my inventory before heading out to the dwarven artifact.

“Here. This should keep them warm.”

“Ah, thank you!”

Rachel placed the leather over her guild members as soon as she received it. They looked like corpses in a morgue, but it should keep them warm.

“They should wake up soon judging from the color of their faces.”

“I hope so.”

I smiled reassuringly. Touching the snowmobile without any preparations would cause one to faint for at least a day, but it wasn’t life-threatening.

“Then let’s go find the snowmobile. Do you remember where it was?”

Rachel looked worried, but nodded.

“Yes, I can ask my elementals for directions.”

* * *

“Mmm...”

I arrived in front of the snowmobile with Rachel. Only a vague outline remained after the blizzard buried it. I wanted to claim it for myself, but I couldn't do much for now.

Honestly, this hidden artifact could easily be found. The 2nd floor was only as big as the city of Daegu. Three of them existed on the 2nd floor and stood out.

However, a barrier also surrounded this hidden artifact. Touching it thoughtlessly would cause one to immediately faint. Kim Suho could cut the barrier with his gift, but I didn't have anything like that.

“Ah, I want to see Suho.”

“Suho? You mean Kim Suho?” Rachel tilted her head at my murmuring.

“Ah, yes. It's been 3 years since I last saw him.”

Honestly, I did see him from a distance a few times. I asked Yoo Yeonha to gift him some medicine and even went as far as tricking him into thinking they were vitamins since he didn't like getting stronger with medicine. The sender of the gifts remained anonymous, but he probably figured out that I had sent them.

“Ah, maybe...”

I came up with an idea after mulling it over and turned on my smartwatch.

[Device Link]

This dwarven artifact could be considered equipment, so I used my

laptop's newest function.

[Search For Nearby Devices]

I swallowed hard and clicked search.

[Searching for devices within 300 meters...] [Search complete.] [1. Dwarven Supercar] [This device has no owner. Would you like to set its owner to Kim Hajin and link to it?]

I only felt half-sure that this would work, but thankfully it did. I clicked yes.

[Setting an owner and linking to it requires 200 SP.] [Would you like to continue?]

That wasn't cheap by any means, but I could ride this artifact until the 7th floor. I clicked yes once again.

Woong—

A golden light shot out from the snowmobile and melted the snow nearby. The supercar revealed its black body engraved with golden symbols, which could seat 3-4 people. It operated without wheels and resonated with mana, truly making it a mystical dwarven artifact.

[The dwarven security barrier has been deactivated with the transfer of ownership.]

I hopped on the snowmobile, which seemed to have a heating function since the seat felt warm.

“Ah, be care... eh? Are you okay?”

“Yes, this is part of my gift,” I briefly explained to the shocked Rachel.

“Get on, Rachel. I'll drive you to the igloo.”

“Um... Can I ride it too?”

“Of course. You won’t get hurt, so don’t worry.”

Rachel blinked a few times before getting on behind me.

“Let’s go.”

Wiing— Driving the dwarven supercar didn’t feel too different from a normal snowmobile. We drove back to the igloo and reduced the 30 minute walk to 3 minutes.

“Oh, *um*, I’m sorry about this.”

I scratched my neck apologetically after dropping her off. Rachel had found the artifact, but I took it for myself. She only smiled.

“You don’t need to feel sorry. I wouldn’t have been able to use it anyways.”

“Still... *Ah*.”

I walked into the igloo and took out a [*Lv.1 Wooden Storage Box*].

“I’ll give you this.”

“...?”

Rachel looked back and forth between me and the storage box.

“It’s a storage box with an ice attribute. I made it in the jungle and it can function as an icebox.”

I opened the storage box.

“There’s food inside. It’s marinated deer meat. You can just pan-fry it.”

“Food?”

Rachel’s eyes shone as she looked inside. *Sniff, sniff*. She smelled the

sauce used to marinate the meat.

“Ah... thank you so much, Hajin.”

She expressed sincere, heartfelt gratitude. I returned a small smile. Then Rachel sat on the floor.

“I’m fine, so you can go. Your comrades must be waiting for you.”

Growl— Rachel’s belly growled. Her face flushed red and she quickly took out a frying pan. *Tak, tak*. She turned the burner on and put the frying pan on top.

“Um, would you like to join me?”

“No, I’m fine. I already ate.”

Rachel looked at me and nodded before placing 3 small pieces of deer meat on the frying pan.

“You should cook more. You must be starving.”

“I have more guild members than just these two, so I need to save some for them.”

“Mm, I see, then I’ll take my leave. You can send me a friend request later. My ID is...”

I paused. My ID was Extra7.

“...Extra7, but if anyone asks, don’t tell them.”

“Got it.”

Rachel didn’t ask why and simply agreed.

“Wait, Extra7!” Her eyes shot open as she suddenly recalled.

“The one who made 20000 TP?”

“Yep, that’s me.”

“Ah... right... then that equipment... with 20000 TP...”

She murmured to herself and came to her own conclusions. I grinned and left. The blizzard blew as fierce as ever. I put on my hood and jumped onto the dwarven supercar.

“For now...”

Let’s head to Boss. I took out a GPS receiver that I bought from the player shop before separating from the others. It cost 700 TP, but I could use it indefinitely.

[No.1 GPS – Northeast, 680 m]

Boss wasn’t too far away. I stepped on the accelerator and the dwarven supercar charged through the snow. I traveled 680 meters in exactly 20 seconds.

— In any case...

I heard Boss’ voice as I stopped and turned northeast from where I stood. My thousand-mile eyes pierced through the curtain of snow.

— You have 7 lives in this tower.

I could see Boss standing in the snow. However, 4-5 people surrounded her.

— So I’m sure dying once won’t be a big deal.

— *Kahaha!*

They only sneered at Boss’ warning.

— What, you’re going to kill us? You think we’ll just stand here and

do nothing?

— Why don't you take off that bear head? Or do you want us to do it for you?

I raised my Desert Eagle at the thugs. However, I had no chance to intervene.

Chwaak—

The shadow underneath Boss shot up. Black magic power formed a blade and pierced a talking man's neck.

— *Kuk!*

— W-What!?

— F-Fuck!

— H-Hey, kill her!

The thugs jumped back to unleash their magic power, but Boss easily neutralized their magic power blasts and even reversed the magician's spell. Her shadow blade tore their limbs apart.

— *Kuaaak!*

— *Kuak.*

Only despair and pain rang out along with the sound of bones breaking and flesh being torn apart. A shadow danced above the white field of snow as blood and human organs flew in every direction. The situation ended in just a minute.

“Haa.”

Silence returned and Boss sighed in the middle of severed limbs. A single drop of blood on her white skin made her look especially cold.

“Boss.”

I called out and her shoulders slightly flinched. Boss turned around in the blizzard and her eyes slightly flickered at me. However, she soon returned to her usual self.

“You’re back.”

“Yes, it was quite a spectacle.”

I said jokingly, but Boss didn’t react and simply walked past me. *Tak, tak*. She left behind a trail of blood in the white snow and seemed a bit lonesome. I silently followed her. *Whish*. The wind blew and I tried my best to ignore the bear head she wore.

* * *

“The Chameleon Troupe?”

Yoo Yeonha video called Yoo Jinhyuk in the outside world.

— Yeah.

Yoo Jinhyuk finally revealed a new piece of information to her. She decided not to ask whether he had been hiding it or just found out.

— By the way, are you not entering the tower?

“It’s hard to find the time. Apparently, it takes a month to finish the tutorial. I’m sure you don’t need me to explain any further.”

Yoo Yeonha looked past the video call at the news regarding the Tower of Wish. Some people had returned from the tower after clearing the tutorial by using some sort of a ticket and others had died without clearing the tutorial. The news caused quite a stir.

— *Mm*, yeah. That makes sense.

“Please continue what you were saying.”

Yoo Yeonha urged him on.

— Right, so I think this Chameleon Troupe is the group behind the Kwang-Oh Incident orchestrated by Chae Joochul.

Yoo Yeonha strained her ears. Yoo Jinhyuk was currently informing her about the assassin hired by Chae Joochul and commanded by Yoo Jinwoong.

— The problem is whether this Chameleon Troupe is the same as the current one.

Yoo Yeonha silently stared at him. Her eyes demanded an explanation. Yoo Jinhyuk looked around his surroundings before continuing any further. Only a single fly sat on his window.

— Jesus, how can a fly be that big? Hey, hey, chase that thing out.

“You don’t have to worry about a fly.”

— It’s just too big. What the heck? Did it come back?

“Geez, just ignore it. You’re in North Hamgyeong Province. No one knows about that place anyways.”

— Oh, it’s gone. Okay, I won’t say it again, so listen carefully.

Yoo Jinhyuk coughed after chasing the fly away and began to talk about the Chameleon Troupe. A mysterious group that appeared 30-50 years ago with an unknown goal and unknown members. From the traces they left behind, he could only guess they were a crime syndicate with at least 10 powerful members.

— You see, the Chameleon Troupe’s leader died back in the day when I was hot stuff.

“*Eh?* Died?”

— Yeah. I think Chae Joochul killed him, but I’m not sure. Now, look

at the terror incidents that have been happening in Pandemonium.

Yoo Jinhyuk displayed the recent data. Terror incidents weren't rare in Pandemonium, but the ones on the screen were unique because of the black lotus symbol.

— The Chameleon Troupe must've picked a new leader and resumed their activities.

“Hmm... So who's their new leader?”

— I don't know. But! This is where the Kim Hajin you love comes in.

“L-Love? We're just allies—”

— Anyways, a young girl dropped off Kim Hajin at the orphanage.

Yoo Jinhyuk had seen this with his gift.

— I'm almost 100% positive this girl is a member of the Chameleon Troupe. In other words, Kim Hajin will be looking for the Chameleon Troupe in the future.

Yoo Yeonha nodded.

“If things are as you say... it'll be complicated.”

She drew a map in her head.

[Chae Joochul = A] [The Chameleon Troupe's previous boss who carried out the Kwang-Oh Incident = B (now deceased)] [Working with B, the young girl brought Kim Hajin to an orphanage = C] [C is a current member of the Chameleon Troupe]

A total of 4 main characters: A, B, C, and Kim Hajin.

“It's too complicated...”

— It is. Kim Hajin is only a small fish compared to these giants. That's

why it looks and feels so dramatic.

“Dramatic? How?”

— Think about it.

Yoo Jinhyuk made a weird face and shouted.

— Chae Joochul! The child you tried to kill has come back alive!

“What.”

However, Yoo Yeonha only frowned.

— Chae Joochul will end up being killed by a main character he wasn’t even aware of. An extra if you will.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha crossed her arms without replying to his nonsense. Then she thought about Chae Joochul.

Chae Joochul the Immortal. The owner of Daehyun and undoubtedly a giant in Korea. She had a feeling it wouldn’t be long until she faced off against him. Chae Joochul began to increase his pressure as Essence of the Strait continued to grow.

— But Chae Joochul’s granddaughter is your friend and subordinate.

“She’s only my friend.”

— Be careful. Chae Joochul isn’t someone who would care about his granddaughter.

Yoo Yeonha nodded. Even though Chae Nayun was her friend and a hero of Essence of the Strait, Yoo Yeonha would never hesitate if the day came when she had to fight against Chae Joochul.

At the Chameleon Troupe hideout in *[Droon's Playroom]*, which Kim Hajin made with special care...

“What an interesting story.”

Droon stretched as the conversation between Yoo Yeonha and Yoo Jinhyuk replayed in his eyes.

“Is my mission over now?”

In the past, Boss and Jain tried to employ several information guilds to look into Kim Hajin. However, they failed every time. Droon, who investigated Kim Hajin's past independently, made an unexpected harvest. Calling it a harvest might be a bit misleading. It was the only result he obtained from Mimyo's 133 day stakeout.

“Should I tell them?”

Droon pondered. Mimyo had disguised as a fly and brought back an interesting conversation. Regardless of whether it was true or false, things would surely become touchy if either side found out.

“*Nah.*”

Droon shook his head after mulling it over for a long time.

“Everything they talked about was simply speculation. Telling Boss or hyung would only cause problems.”

Droon didn't want Boss and Kim Hajin to fight yet.

“Hajin hyung made this playroom for me and Boss took me in. Yep, that's right.”

Droon grinned and came to his own decision.

“But if everything is true...”

He couldn't help but think of the possibility. If everything Yoo

Jinhyuk said was true... the young girl who dropped off the baby at the orphanage. *If Hajin hyung was the baby and Boss was the young girl... then Boss killed Hajin hyung's parents?*

“Yikes, how scary.”

Droon trembled at the thought of this brutal truth and quickly hid under his blanket.

Chapter 168

Change (2)

I walked with Boss after commanding the dwarven supercar to follow us. We proceeded through the snowstorm without a clear destination. *Ssk, ssk*. Our feet crunched the snow beneath us. Then Boss asked me a question.

“What do you think?”

She sounded gloomy. I wasn’t insensitive enough to not know what she meant.

“Still the same.”

Boss once asked me what I thought about murder. That I would have to kill many people if I stayed with her. My answer remained the same.

“I’m a murderer too.”

The result remained the same whether someone was beaten to death, shot to death, or sliced into bits and pieces.

“...”

Boss stopped and I also paused behind her small shoulders. Perhaps she feared disappointing me. After all, she had never killed anyone so brutally in the 3 years we worked together.

“I see.”

Boss only spoke those 2 words and continued on.

“They’ll revive anyways, but they’ll have to start over from the

tutorial.”

Honestly, being dismembered was quite a severe death. Those thugs would probably lose 2-3 lives and wouldn’t be able to avoid the mental trauma either.

However, they had started it and Boss even gave them a chance to leave.

“They were probably djinns. I heard Pandemonium had around 500 tickets.”

“Yeah.”

Boss muttered and didn’t sound so dejected anymore. This was probably the right time to show her my new artifact. I called the dwarven supercar over. *Shoong*— Boss became startled and unleashed her magic power.

“What is it?”

“It’s mine. It’s our transportation.”

I jumped in like getting into a sports car.

“Get in, Boss.”

“What is this?”

“Like I said, the 2nd floor has lots of useful items.”

I smacked the back seat with a grin.

“*Hoh...*”

Boss curiously examined the vehicle before getting on.

“Is it made out of pure gold?”

As expected, that caught her attention first. Boss rubbed the golden symbols engraved on it before jumping in.

“Alright, it’s rather fast, so hold on tight. Oh, also...”

I took out the Yggdrasil leaf and blessed the dwarven supercar before setting off.

[Yggdrasil’s Blessing has enveloped the dwarven supercar.] [All effects of the dwarven supercar have increased by 1 level.]

“Hold on tight.”

“Okay.”

I stepped on the accelerator. *Vroom*— I sneaked a peek at Boss as we drove off. She leisurely watched the scenery and looked beautiful except for one thing.

“Boss, you should take off that bear head now.”

“Ah?”

Boss’ eyes widened and she quickly took off the helmet.

“I, I forgot I was wearing it since I was thinking about other things.”

Her face turned slightly red. This was the most meaningful change in expression I had ever seen from her.

* * *

On day 2, we built an igloo like Rachel to spend the night. The fierce blizzard had disappeared by the time we woke up and blinding sunlight reflected off the snow.

I took out the dwarven supercar from my inventory as I left the igloo. I had to quickly find the dwarven steles and head to the 3rd floor since Cheok Jungyeong and Jain grew bored.

“Let’s see...”

I murmured and took out the Book of Truth for the first time in the Tower of Wish. The system had warned me about using stigma, but I hoped Luke wouldn’t notice if I used less than a single streak. After all, Luke wasn’t a highly ranked NPC even as the 2nd floor administrator.

“*Hmm.*”

Speaking of NPC ranks, the 3rd floor’s administrator should be the famous magician, Medea. Unfortunately, she didn’t have too good of a personality. To think the administrator of a trash residential area would be a mythical rank NPC... what a shitty setting. I asked the Book of Truth about what I currently needed to know.

[Is there a dwarven stele within a 3 km radius?]

The Book of Truth immediately sucked 0.5 streaks of stigma as I felt an intense pain.

“*Argh.*”

Using stigma in the tower came with a greater backlash. However, the pain felt worth it as the Book of Truth revealed the stele’s location.

“It’s not far.”

Northwest, 1.3 km. I got on the dwarven supercar and stepped on the accelerator. It took less than 3 minutes to reach the coordinates. I found the stele buried under the snow inside a huge crevice at the edge of the glacier near the ocean.

I slowly drove the dwarven supercar down the cliff. This snowmobile could travel across vertical paths, so a cliff posed no issues.

“Found it.”

The dwarven stele lay buried under the snow. I dusted my hands as a system alert popped up.

[You have discovered a dwarven stele.] [The contents of the dwarven stele have been stored in your database.] [Ecorld Qowemr FcmoE Roalz...]

I couldn't understand it, but immediately asked the Book of Truth to translate. Surprisingly, it didn't take too much stigma.

[Young Dwarf's Diary of Enlightenment] [Today, Old Man Hairy Nostrils taught me the most important mindset as a descendant of Hephaestus...]

"The heck is this?"

I frowned in the middle of reading. *A diary? What happened to the potion recipes?* I walked up to the stele to check for anything else. A burst of light erupted when I touched it. I had experienced this brilliant light before. It happened when my accumulation of luck activated.

Chwaaa— The golden light emanating from the dwarven stele poured into my eyes. I stood still and fully received it.

[Young Dwarf's Enlightenment has resonated with your trait, Dexterity.] [Dexterity has been replaced with Young Dwarf's Dexterity. Its rank has been increased.]

"Haa..."

I trembled in excitement from the system alerts. The mystical race of dwarves, descendants of Hephaestus, possessed an innate dexterity. I clutched my beating heart and took a deep breath. I could only mutter one word.

"Jackpot."

* * *

We stayed on the 2nd floor for another 36 hours after my accumulation of luck. Meanwhile, the landscape changed from Antarctica to a volcanic zone and I found 2 more dwarven steles. One contained a recipe for brewing a special dwarven potion and the other had a recipe for crafting special dwarven shoes. Both of these recipes

resonated with Young Dwarf's Dexterity and entered my head. Now, I could make them as long as I had the ingredients.

"Everyone, let's head to the 3rd floor now."

"I almost died from boredom. We're finally going up?"

Cheok Jungyeong grumbled as I smiled.

"Didn't you have fun fighting the flame octopus? You said it lasted 12 hours."

"I'm tired of it now. I want to fight humans."

Boss and Jain probably felt the same judging from their expressions. I didn't blame them since this place had nothing fun to do. Cheok Jungyeong shot up.

"Alright, we're going up now, right?"

"Yeah."

"You better not be lying. Otherwise, I'll squash your head."

Cheok Jungyeong sounded impatient, but none of us worried since I had already found an elevator.

We left our temporary base and soon arrived at the elevator. It didn't look like an elevator since we poured magma over it and covered it in granite.

"I'm breaking it."

"Yes."

Cheok Jungyeong punched the mound of granite. *KWANG!* It shattered and revealed the elevator within.

"Alright, let's get on."

“By the way, Hajin, will everyone be able to come up? There were about 2000 people and only 4 of us are taking a single elevator right now.” Jain asked.

“I’m not too sure, but I’m guessing about 80% will make it up.”

The speed of the elevators would double after a week from something called the acceleration phenomenon.

“Really? *Hm*, I can’t see more than 50% going up.”

“Well, we’ll see. Hop on. We don’t have time.”

“Oh, right. Okay.”

We all got on the elevator, which only had 3 buttons: floor 3, open, and close. I sat down after pressing the 3rd floor button and the close button. *Wooong*— The elevator began to float after it roared to life.

“*Ah*, I’m hungry. Hajin, let’s eat some deer meat.”

“Oh, I gave it all away to my friend.”

“What? All of it?”

Jain felt shocked since it could’ve fed us for a week even if Cheok Jungyeong ate 3 people’s worth at every meal.

“Yes, you could say I traded it for the dwarven supercar, but we still have a lot of boar meat left.”

“*Ah*, I see. I guess it’s fine if that’s the case. What kind of idiot would trade that artifact for food.”

Jain accepted it after learning about the dwarven supercar’s versatility.

“By the way, is this thing going up?”

“Probably? Yaawn.”

It took 8 hours for the elevator to travel back and forth. We would be here for the next 4 hours.

“This is the perfect time to sleep.”

We decided to rest until the elevator arrived. I took out 4 pieces of monster leather from my inventory for each of us.

“Good night, Boss.”

“Yes.”

“You too, newbie.”

“You too, Jain.”

I checked my messenger before going to sleep and had received a few new messages.

Nayunjajangman: Hyung, did you clear the 2nd floor? If not, you can join the elevator we found. We decided to wait for about 3 hours before leaving. I'll give you the coordinates if you want to come.

“...”

The message came about 30 minutes ago. At first, I turned the messenger off without replying, but if Nayunjajangman was that girl...

Me: I'm on the 3rd floor now.

I felt like Nayunjajangman would wait for more than 3 hours if I didn't reply, so I sent a brief reply.

Nayunjajangman: Oh lol as expected of hyung.

Me: Oh right, make sure you stock up on food.

Nayunjajangman: Food?

Me: Yep. Deer or wild boar. If you've never dismantled wild animals before, now's the time.

Nayunjajangman: Got it. Is there nothing to eat on the 3rd floor?

I didn't say anything else. Of course, I wasn't sure whether Nayunjajangman was Chae Nayun, but my heart felt heavy and I cast the thought aside.

Zzz— Zzzz— Zzzzzz—

"Pft."

My depression didn't last long after hearing the unique snoring of each member.

"I should sleep too."

I closed my eyes and began to breathe. One, two, three... *DING!*

A ringing woke my blurred consciousness. I opened my eyes and got up as the elevator slowly opened.

"Yaawn."

"Kuhu, I like this leather. It's from the bear I defeated, right?"

"Yeah."

I stored the bear blankets in my inventory and stood in front of the door.

[You are now on the 3rd floor.]

The elevator opened along with a system alert. I looked out at the 3rd floor. The first residential area that players would soon label as the worst. Its name was Prestige.

[Welcome to the 3rd floor's residential area, Prestige] [You may freely use the messenger, waiting room, and community inside residential areas.] [Please be careful of sudden attacks by hordes of undead monsters.] [Prestige Boost — Stat increase rate is increased by 5% (7% for magic power).]

“What is this place?”

Jain frowned as she looked at the poor city outskirts. I knew how bad it would be beforehand and still thought it looked poor. Run-down shacks filled the city and homeless drunks slept by the road. A mysterious knee-deep fog blanketed the city and the air smelled like coal.

“It’s a city.”

“This is a city?”

“Yes, the system called it a city, so it’s a city.”

Roads filled with life and death and lifeless NPCs. The 3rd floor didn’t have a sun, so everything looked black and dark blue.

“Now, let’s go.”

People still lived here, so it should have shops. This part of the city on the outskirts seemed a bit more hopeless.

“Wait, wait, let me rest in my waiting room first. This place smells too awful... *uwek*—”

“Be patient. We have to figure out what kind of a place this is first.”

Going to the waiting room right away wouldn’t be a good idea. You wouldn’t be aware of anything that happened outside and also wouldn’t receive Prestige’s stat buff.

“Right, don’t overreact and just endure it, Jain.”

“Okay.’

Jain had no choice but to nod as Boss chimed in. We walked through the city as some NPCs aimed for our pockets and others innocently begged for help.

“Oh right, where did the other players go?”

“They’re probably working to make TP.”

“Auuu, this smell!”

Jain hated the nasty smell more than anything else. The other two felt the same. Cheok Jungyeong frowned and Boss put on her Lv.3 bear head helmet.

“Wait just a little longer. I’ll make a gas mask for you.”

I consoled Jain as we went to receive the group quest from Prestige City Hall. It felt a little annoying to deal with that damned Medea, but we couldn’t live in Prestige if we got on her bad side.

* * *

On the 2nd floor, Rachel energetically walked towards the coordinates sent by the second team. The 2 guild members who fainted after touching the dwarven supercar also accompanied her.

“Vice leader!”

“Over here!”

She could see 2 other members waving in the distance. Rachel wanted to run up to them, but walked slower to match the 2 members who hadn’t fully recovered yet.

“Geez, look at those two. They’re nothing but burdens.”

“I heard you two fainted. Why didn’t you just die! You’re going to

revive anyways, right?”

“Sorry, team leader.”

“Sorry.”

The 2 guild members dropped their heads in shame. However, Rachel only kindly smiled.

“It’s fine. No one expected such a thing to happen.”

The 7 Royal Court guild members reunited in front of an elevator with one worry left.

“Should we wait since 50 people can ride the elevator?”

Davin, who led the second team, asked. Rachel thought for a moment and recalled the Empire of Glory guild she met not too long ago. She didn’t want to be like them, but knew she had to make cold-hearted decisions as the vice leader. In this place, kindness would only be a burden.

“Let’s go up.” Rachel came to a decision and got into the elevator with her guild members.

“You can do the honors, vice leader.”

“Yes.”

Rachel pressed the 3rd floor button. Then as the elevator began to close...

“Waaaaaaait—!”

A loud voice rang out. Startled, Rachel instinctively pressed the open button.

“Let me go with youuuu—!”

The elevator opened once again and Rachel could see a white-haired kid with her supposed guardian. They looked dirty and tired, but ran at an extraordinary speed.

“*Uwak!*”

The child stumbled on a stone and fell forward, but the man following her quickly snatched her up and entered the elevator.

“*Ah*, thank you so much!”

The man bowed and expressed his gratitude.

“No problem.”

Rachel responded indifferently. For some reason, she felt like she had seen the man’s face before.

“Thank god, thank god...”

The white-haired child also seemed familiar. Rachel felt like she would remember if the child’s hair was properly combed. *Tap, tap*. One of her guild members tapped her shoulder and whispered.

— Vice leader, I think that’s Aileen and Yi Yongha. They’re heroes from the Temple of Justice.

Immediately, Rachel’s hair stood on end. She easily matched their faces with her memory after hearing their names. Everyone knew white hair almost represented Aileen.

— But what do you think is wrong with them?

Rachel whispered back. Why was Aileen, who reigned as one of the strongest heroes in the world, in such a state?

— It must be because they both heavily rely on magic power. As you know, magicians are heavily disadvantaged in this place.

In this tower, one had to use their body to get through. Even the greatest magician would struggle with hunger.

“Ah, thank you, thank you! You’re the only ones who opened the door.”

Even so, Rachel still felt curious. Aileen’s gift, Spirit Speech, could easily control people. Was her magic power restricted that much?

“No, it’s only obvious. Nice to meet you, Aileen and Yi Yongha.”

Rachel reached out to Aileen, who stood about 20 cm shorter. Aileen looked at Rachel’s hand and grabbed it with a grin. It seemed she hadn’t washed her hands in a while as it felt dirty and sticky.

“You know us?”

“There aren’t many who don’t.”

“There were. No, they probably pretended not to know. They must’ve been scared of me.”

Meanwhile, the elevator closed on its own and headed towards the 3rd floor. Ssss—

“Anyways, thank you so much!”

Aileen smiled like a child and plopped on the floor.

“Ah, I’m starving. Yongha, do you have anything to eat?”

“No, we already ate everything we had.”

“What do you have? *Hmm...*”

Aileen naturally turned to Rachel. She felt too ashamed to directly ask for food, but seemed to be asking with her eyes.

“We don’t have anything either.”

Rachel shook her head. Of course, she still had a lot of the deer meat Kim Hajin gave her, but lied.

“Mm? Ah, no, I wasn’t asking for food or anything. I’m thankful for the ride alone.”

“Ah, yes.”

[Lv.2 Kim Hajin’s Special Sauce Deer Meat] Lv.2 Satisfaction, Lv.3 Taste

Letting them in was one thing, but Rachel couldn’t share this Lv.2 food with them. It tasted extremely delicious and she planned to share it with her guildmates.

Chapter 169

Prestige (1)

— *Kueeek*. A red crystal spear shot forward and pierced the neck of a Lv.1 ribbon pig. The pig collapsed with a painful roar. Then Chae Nayun pulled the spear out of its neck.

“Dismantle.”

With a soft murmur, the pig’s corpse turned into meat and leather. Chae Nayun stored the food in her inventory.

[Your inventory is full.]

“*Mm*, can’t you fit more?”

[No.]

Chae Nayun filled her inventory with food she had collected for the past 4 hours.

“Nayun, are you done?”

Yi Jiyeon’s voice rang out from behind her. She sounded tired.

“Yeah, I’m finished. What about you? Is your inventory full?”

“*Huh?* Oh, *uh...* yeah, mine is full too.”

She clearly lied, but Chae Nayun didn’t pursue it any further.

“Let’s head back now. More people are gathering at the elevator.”

Essence of the Strait’s team had already found an elevator 5 hours

ago, but Chae Nayun delayed setting off to hunt nearby monsters because of Extra7's advice.

“Nayun, we have to go!”

However, none of the other guild members showed interest in hunting even when Chae Nayun told them the advice came from her master on the 3rd floor. They only repeatedly told her to hurry up. Of course, she understood their reactions. Other players could steal their elevator as they hunted for food.

“How many people do we have?”

Chae Nayun managed to obtain enough food to last the entire team 1-2 weeks despite their uncooperative attitude.

“Around 27 or maybe 28. We have to hurry. A fight might break out if it fills up.”

Essence of the Strait had found the elevator first, but other players had also gathered after they delayed setting off. Only 1 member of a group needed to find an elevator for an entire group to come over. It wouldn't be surprising if another huge group arrived soon.

“Okay, let's go.”

Chae Nayun decided to head back.

“*Sigh*, good. Follow me.”

Chae Nayun followed Yi Jiyeon with the red crystal spear in hand. They returned to the elevator in just 15 minutes. Anyone would notice that the Essence of the Strait members seemed unhappy. They felt annoyed, but held back because Chae Nayun was Yoo Yeonha's friend. Still, Chae Nayun ignored their gazes and stood in front of them.

“Chae Nayun, you delayed us by 5 hours. Five. Whole. Hours.”

However, it seemed they had something to say this time. The chief officer of Essence of the Strait's tower subjugation team, high-

intermediate rank, grade 2 hero Kim Youngjin stood in front of her.

“...”

“Don’t you have anything to say?”

“I suggested hunting together, leaving behind one team to defend the elevator and taking shifts.”

“What?” Kim Youngjin frowned intimidatingly.

“Like I said, we need to stock up on food for the 3rd floor.”

“The 2nd floor’s administrator said that the 3rd floor is a residential area. You think a residential area would be low on food?”

“...”

Chae Nayun didn’t reply. Extra7 was already on the 3rd floor and told her to stock up on food. However, she didn’t want to explain the same thing again. She knew her words would only sound like an excuse because of their bias.

“We’re late because of you. Do you understand that?”

“...Yes, sorry. It won’t happen again.”

Chae Nayun simply dropped her head and apologized. Following the chief officer’s orders. That was one of the conditions Chae Nayun had to accept for a tower entrance ticket.

“Tsk.”

Kim Youngjin didn’t say anything more and opened the elevator. The other members entered after him and other bystanders also got on. Unsurprisingly, Chae Nayun got on last.

[Departing to the 3rd floor.]

Their elevator contained 29 people. They shared the small space and awkward atmosphere. Yi Jiyoong clapped her hands and tried to lighten the mood since they would be here for 4 hours.

“R-Right, so, *um*, did any of you meet anyone famous in the tower?”

“Famous?”

“Yeah. I’m sure the tower has many famous heroes, mercenaries, and hunters.”

Everyone ignored Yi Jiyoong, which made the atmosphere even more awkward.

“...”

Shouldn’t they say something since we let them join our elevator? Yi Jiyoong grumbled inwardly.

“I met someone.” A man wearing a black robe raised his hand.

“Wow, really?”

“Yes.”

“Who?”

The man smiled at her question. Until then, Chae Nayun hadn’t shown any interest in their conversation. She simply looked through the auction house for any useful items and wondered if she should sell her red crystal spear.

“I saw Fenrir.”

“...!”

Chae Nayun’s head suddenly shot up like lightning struck her and she looked at the black robed man. *Jeronimo’s mercenary, Fenrir*. Chae Nayun knew his real identity. Only one person in this world could

wield a gun so well.

“Ah... really?”

Honestly, everyone who went to Cube with Kim Hajin knew. However, Yi Jiyoong pretended to be oblivious out of courtesy.

“Um, was he strong?”

“Yes.”

The man bitterly smiled and took off his robe. Yi Jiyoong blushed when she saw his handsome face.

“My friend and I almost died picking a fight with him. He was quite scary.”

“Oh... I see...”

“Yes, I suspect he’s the strongest in the tower. Don’t try to fight him if you ever meet him. You’ll die.”

Yi Jiyoong blankly nodded after being enchanted by the man’s handsome appearance. Gzz— Chae Nayun clenched her teeth and the hand holding her spear turned white. Kim Hajin was here. Just hearing this caused blood to rush to her head and filled her with all sorts of complicated thoughts.

“Ah... Dammit.”

Her head seemed to be splitting in half. She felt like she would lose herself in this intense pain. Rage and fear rose in her heart, as well as hatred and sadness. Doubt seemed to devour her reason. *There’s no way he killed oppa. It must’ve been a misunderstanding.* Such thoughts flashed across her mind. She only believed what she wanted, yet she could never believe such things. It drove her crazy and stifled her breath.

“My, my head...”

An unbearable headache struck her. It felt like a hammer beating on her head. In the end, she smashed her head against the elevator and collapsed.

“*Eh?* N-Nayun!”

Yi Jiyeon quickly helped her up. However, no one else showed any interest. Even Essence of the Strait members backed off and glanced at the chief officer to take care of the situation.

“*Ha*, what a mess.”

Kim Youngjin sighed. Just how long did he have to take care of this silver spoon?

“*Argh*, my head hurts too.”

He massaged his sore temples.

* * *

[3rd floor, residential area – Prestige] [TIP! Find a guard to purchase citizenship.]

We walked through Prestige. Fewer NPCs sprawled on the ground and proper buildings appeared as we grew closer to the city center.

“What’s that?”

A tall wall and a large gate appeared after about 40 minutes.

“Looks like a gate. Let’s check it out.”

A guard stopped us as we approached.

“The inner city is off-limits to non-citizens. You must show proof of citizenship to enter.”

“...?”

Everyone except me blinked in confusion. Soon, Cheok Jungyeong began to crack his knuckles. I quickly stopped him.

“Stop, you won’t be able to beat him.”

“*Haha*, kid, are you looking down on—”

“Ask the system.”

“Ask what? I’m sure it’ll say...”

Cheok Jungyeong stopped talking. He should’ve received a system alert that read something like this: *All guards inside Prestige have received a 250% boost in stats.* We were only on the 3rd floor, but guards were at least Lv.5. With a 250% stat boost, we wouldn’t be able to defeat them until we become strong enough to clear the 6th floor.

“*Uhahaha*, that only makes me want to fight more.”

“Shut up and stay put.”

Jain restrained him as he smiled mischievously. The guard spoke again.

“You can pay 1000 TP to register as a temporary citizen or return to the outer city.”

“What do you all want to do? I plan on buying the citizenship.”

I turned around and asked them out of courtesy. You couldn’t do anything without citizenship in Prestige.

“I have 1000 TP.”

“I told you, I think I can beat him in a fight!”

“I don’t have a lot of TP.”

Jain, Cheok Jungyeong, and Boss spoke respectively.

“Then I’ll pay for Cheok Jungyeong and Boss.”

I took out three 1000 TP banknotes from my inventory.

“What about me?”

“I know you’re rich, Jain.”

“I should’ve said I was poor too.”

Jain pouted as she took out 1000 TP. I considered haggling, but guards were the most inflexible NPCs. Haggling probably wouldn’t work on them unless it reached Lv.10.

“Here, 4000 TP.”

“Confirmed.”

The guard turned around and gave the money to a clerk at the front entrance. The clerk wrote down the amount in her accounting book and instantly produced 4 identification cards.

“Here. You are not official residents, so you will have to renew your identification cards once a month for 700 TP. It will cost 1000 TP to replace if you lose it, so keep that in mind.”

We received our identification cards for temporary citizenship. Extra7. Boss. PhantomThief. Goryeo’sStrongest. Our IDs contained our nicknames.

“How did they know our nicknames? We never told them.”

“It’s probably that NPC’s trait.”

“Oh, NPCs have traits too?”

“We call them NPCs, but they’re humans just like us in the tower.”

A series of system alerts popped up.

[You have obtained Prestige's citizenship.] [Common player quests have been issued.] [1. Undead Monster Subjugation] — You will receive 50 TP per 50 Lv.1 undead killed. — You will receive 75 TP per 25 Lv.2 undead killed. — You will receive 100 TP per 10 Lv.3 undead killed. — You will receive 125 TP per 2 Lv.4 undead killed.

[2. Land Spider Subjugation] — You will receive 50 TP per 4 land spiders killed.

[3. Demon Subjugation] — Prestige contains 666 demons. Each demon has a special bounty on its head.

“There's quite a lot to do.”

“There sure is.”

Prestige wasn't the prettiest city, but you could easily earn TP thanks to common quests for its citizens, Medea's special quests, and other NPC quests. However, these benefits would cause its downfall. The TP earned by players didn't benefit NPCs and only filled the belly of the administrator Medea.

Of course, I didn't plan on letting that happen.

I wanted to see a different ending with Kim Suho. I planned to only destroy the tower shell instead of destroying the world within the tower. This was the best ending I came up with after 3 years of planning. I would make this tower support such an ending.

“Your inventories are full of food, right?”

“Yep, just like you wanted.”

We would have to kill at least 66 demons to obtain meat on the 3rd floor. Before then, monsters and wild animals all spawned as undead, so one could only eat grass. That would only be a shortcut to losing vitality and stats.

“Aren’t you going in?” The guard urged us as we stood still.

“We will, but before that...”

I pointed at the building next to the wall. “How much is it for a building like that?”

“You should be able to buy it for 5000 TP.”

The guard answered my question. He probably would’ve ignored me if I didn’t have citizenship.

“Why, do you want to buy a building?”

“Yes, I plan to.”

“Why?”

“I just thought it’d be nice to own a shop.”

I answered Jain’s question. System alerts continued to pop up.

[You can purchase the Lv.2 Wooden Building Outside the Inner Wall for 5000 TP.] [You currently have 24000 TP.] [Would you like to purchase this building?]

Buying buildings felt so easy in a world without real estate. I clicked yes.

[You have obtained ownership of Lv.2 Wooden Building Outside the Inner Wall.] [The wooden building currently contains nothing inside.]

A building suddenly became mine with a single click.

“Let’s go in.”

“Hm? Don’t you have to buy it?”

“I already did.”

“What?”

I left my 3 puzzled companions behind and asked the guard again.

“Is it possible for us to meet the 3rd floor’s administrator?”

“No, it’s too early to have an audience with her.”

“How long do we have to wait?”

“Another week.”

“*Hmm.*”

I had no reason to enter the inner city yet. I crossed my arms in thought. Then I turned on my smartwatch to read the abandoned settings in my settings book. I wrote these settings, but never included them in the original story.

[3rd Floor Residential Area NPC – 1. Kiri and Henry.] A brother and sister duo. Give them money or food to receive the black pouch. The black pouch will allow you to bring back one item from Earth. Kiri and Henry are both clever and have high growth potential worthy of named NPCs.

“Oh right, these two kids lived here.”

Kiri and Henry aside, the black pouch would be quite useful. I had about 4 free days since I couldn’t meet Medea yet. I should obtain the black pouch and return to Earth to bring back the goblin tablet. That way, I could also visit Evandel.

“Boss, Jain, can you two go inside and look for a hideout?”

“A hideout?”

“Yes, just a place for us to stay. You can rent a house.”

“Sure, but where are you going?”

“I’m going back to Earth for a bit.”

The 3 of them entered the inner city. Then I took out the Book of Truth.

[Where are the NPCs, Henry and Kiri?]

The Book of Truth drained about 0.5 streaks of stigma and displayed their location in real time. They wandered not too far away around the city outskirts. I walked over and about 15 minutes later...

“Buy some flowers. They’re edible.”

I spotted Henry and Kiri in the distance selling flowers. However, no one seemed interested or even had the money to buy flowers. To make matters worse, their baskets only carried withered flowers.

“Flowers, buy some flowers. They’re edible.”

“...”

I silently watched them. Two starving children trying to sell flowers that no one wanted. Did it have to be so realistic?

“Haa...”

I discarded my depressing thoughts and walked over.

“Ah, um, flowers... buy some flowers...”

Kiri and Henry became startled when they saw me since I wore all black. I took off my hood and mask and smiled brightly.

“How much are they?”

“Eh? You’ll buy them?”

“Yeah.”

The younger sister, Kiri, spoke to me. She hesitated and couldn't meet my eyes.

“...10, 10 TP.”

“Each?”

“Yes? *Ah... um*, no. Everything in this basket is 10 TP.”

Kiri gave the entire basket to me. Meanwhile, Henry stood next to her and trembled. Did they think I wouldn't buy anything if each flower cost 10 TP? I silently looked at them and discovered a black cloth peeking out of Henry's back pocket. That must be the black pouch.

“By the way, what's that black thing?”

I knelt to Henry's eye level and pointed at the pouch in his back pocket. Kiri turned to him nervously.

“This... this? *Um...*”

Henry fiddled with the pouch in his back pocket with a troubled expression.

“*Um*, this is... *um...*”

His small body trembled as he contemplated what to say. Soon, he came to a decision and took it out.

“W-Will you buy this too? This pouch is really good!”

“O-Oppa! Dad said never to—”

“*Shh.*”

The surprised younger sister stepped in, but Henry stopped her. Kiri bit her lips with a sad look.

“How much is it?”

“This is a bit more expensive. It’s *um*... 200 TP.”

I looked at his thin cheeks and fearful eyes. I suddenly thought about these 2 NPCs from the setting I had abandoned. A setting I had disregarded in a rush to advance the story or because I felt too lazy to write about it. What would have been their fate in the original story? They would’ve starved to death.

“*Um*, 150 TP!”

Henry must’ve misunderstood my silence and lowered the price.

“*Mmm*...”

“I-Is it too much?”

“No, I think it’s too little.”

Their faces lit up when I took out two 100 TP coins. I gave one to Henry and the other to Kiri. They took the shiny coins with their small hands and blankly stared at it as they swallowed their saliva.

“*Ah*, oppa, give him the item.”

“Oh right, h-here!”

Henry handed me the black pouch.

“And *um*, take this too!”

Kiri quickly gave me her flower basket.

“I didn’t buy this.”

“You can have it! *Um*, you can eat these flowers! If you want, I can also teach you where they grow. I’m the only one who knows!”

“...”

Kiri was too kind. Such a young girl acted braver than her older brother. I couldn't help but worry about them.

“It's fine.”

I shook my head. I put the black pouch away and tapped their shoulders.

“Hey, aren't you two hungry?”

“...Yes?”

They both put up their guard this time.

“You see, this hyung owns a building.”

[Lv.2 Persuasive Voice has activated.]

They were born and raised in a harsh environment, but were still children. My voice easily persuaded them.

“Building owner?”

“Yeah. Also...”

I took out my identification card.

“Wow, a citizenship ID.”

“Uwoah...”

Their eyes shone brightly. Collecting money and buying citizenship. This must be their dream. I spoke to them as warmly as possible.

“If you follow me, hyung will make you lots of delicious food.”

I had more than enough reason to bring them along since I wrote that they were worthy of being named NPCs. Not to mention, I needed employees to take care of my new building.

Chapter 170

Prestige (2)

I easily persuaded Henry and Kiri as they accompanied me to my building. It felt a bit weird since I just bought it 30 minutes ago. We walked inside as they marveled at it.

“Hiik!”

They gasped when they saw the building’s interior. The more quick-witted Kiri noticed something unusual.

“T-There’s nothing here...”

“Huh? Oh.”

I could understand their misunderstanding. Crimes usually took place in empty buildings like these.

“Hiyaak!”

KWANG! To make matters worse, a fierce wind shut the door.

“It’s empty because I only bought it a while ago.”

I tried to calm them, but Kiri’s legs shook uncontrollably. She hid behind Henry, who glared at me with a terrified expression.

“W-What do you want?”

“S-Save us! We’re sorry, please don’t kill us!”

“Um, kids. I’m not a bad guy...”

Their faces turned purple as I slowly approached.

“Kids?”

“W-We’ll give you the money back! Please don’t kill us!”

“Ah, aaak! Aaaak!”

“...Uh.”

Talking any more would only make the situation worse. I simply sat on the ground and took out the burner and frying pan. Then I began to cook my special marinated boar meat.

“Hic.”

“Hic.”

The brother and sister slightly sobbed, but became quieter. I placed the meat on the frying pan and glanced at them. They still had their guard up, but also sniffed the air and smacked their lips. I finally spoke again.

“Of course there’s nothing here. I just bought it. Come eat. You must be hungry.”

Most suffered from starvation in Prestige. I even wrote something about a group of cannibals. Because of this, the children naturally grew suspicious. Kiri still hid behind Henry as he stuttered.

“Re, really?”

“What would I gain from hurting you two?”

Tzzzz— The marinated boar meat gave off a tempting smell.

“Come eat. It’s fine.”

“That, that’s not human meat?”

“It’s boar meat.”

“W-Where did you get it? I... I heard livestock can only be found in the inner city.”

“I showed you my ID, didn’t I?”

“Ah.”

I finally convinced them as they hesitantly approached the frying pan while drooling. Then I took out 2 plates, placed some boar meat on top, and handed it to them.

“M-Me first!”

“Ssp. Wait.”

Henry took the plates and stopped her from eating. Then he took the first bite. *Nom, nom*. He seemed to be checking for poison. As he chewed, his eyes became livelier and sparkled.

“O-Oppa, can I eat it too?”

“Yeah, eat.”

They finally began to eat the meat with their bare hands. I worried they would get sick from germs, so I handed them each a fork.

“Thank you!”

“Huu, huu!”

They quickly ate as I watched with a smile. Then I carefully asked.

“How old are you two?”

“I’m 13 and Kiri is 12.”

Henry's reply surprised me since they looked like 10 years old at most. It seemed they didn't grow properly due to malnutrition.

"Are you two living by yourselves?"

"Yes! *Hehehe*."

Kiri nodded joyfully as she chewed on the boar meat. Kiri had said their father left behind the black pouch. Now, she said they lived alone. That could only mean one thing. I took out another large chunk of meat and placed it on the frying pan. After it finished cooking, I sliced it in half and put each piece on their plate.

"You can stay and eat while I fix up this place."

"Y-Yes!"

"Thank you!"

I patted their heads before standing up.

"*Hmm...*"

I pondered while looking around the empty building. How should I decorate this place into a well-known shop? Of course, I already had an idea in mind.

* * *

It took me 30 minutes to transform the building into the best-looking shop in the outer city with brand new shelves, display cases, stands, and a counter.

"Wow, you're so good at making things!"

"*Uwoaah...*"

Henry and Kiri exclaimed in shock. They sat with full bellies after eating all the boar meat.

“I’m just talented.”

“*Uwoah*, talented...”

“Wow...”

Anything I said impressed them. *How cute.*

“Alright, you don’t have to sell flowers anymore. Just work here instead.”

“Here?”

“Yeah and I’ll provide 3 meals a day with a monthly salary of 200 TP.”

“2-200?”

Their jaws dropped.

“W-What kind of work do we need to do?”

“Cleaning the shop and selling items.”

“W-We’ll do it! But um... what items?”

“Oh right, hold on.”

I could come up with plenty of items to sell. I took out 4 random dice from my inventory and rolled them while thinking, *Please change into anything that can be sold.* The dice transformed into 4 items, but I could only sell the Lv.3 sword and Lv.2 leather armor. It was better than nothing. I placed the sword and leather armor on a display stand and took out the other equipment I made so far: a bear leather jacket, a red crystal axe, a gorilla tendon wrist protector, etc.

“I’m opening the shop tomorrow. The sword is 1500 TP, the axe is 1000 TP, the armor is 600 TP, and the jacket and wrist protector are 300 TP each. You can sell them for higher, but don’t lower the prices.”

“Yes!”

“Understood!”

Henry and Kiri nodded excitedly. I smiled and added.

“From now on, think of this place as your home. You can live here too.”

This building should have an attic considering its size. I wasn’t sure how I knew, but it probably had something to do with the dwarven knowledge I obtained from the steles.

“Here?”

“Yep, that’s okay with you, right?”

“...”

Henry and Kiri stared at each other. They looked happy at first, but their expressions soon darkened.

“N-No.”

“Our dad might come back, so we have to stay at home.”

“You can just leave a note behind.”

“Oh!”

I easily persuaded them again. Kiri tightly grabbed Henry’s hand and spoke.

“Then we’ll be back soon.”

[TIP – Players can become friends with NPCs as well.] [You may contact NPC friends through the messenger.] [You can become friends with the NPCs, Henry and Kiri.]

“Sure, but before you go...”

I became friends with Henry and Kiri. I simply had to think about it while holding their hands. Once I finished, Henry and Kiri returned home to leave a note and I began to clean up the attic. I bought a refrigerator from the player shop to furnish their room after crafting a bed, a table, a mirror, and a dressing table. I placed some boar meat and sandwiches in the fridge for them to eat since I would return to Earth for a few days. As for the bathroom, they could use the one on the first floor.

“Oh right.”

I came up with a good idea after looking at the sandwiches in the fridge. I made a new sandwich and left the shop. Then I went straight to the guard standing outside the inner wall.

“Good work.”

I greeted the guard and gave him the sandwich.

“What’s this?”

“A sandwich.”

The guard looked at the sandwich, but didn’t take it.

“Ah, you see, I just felt grateful for all your hard work as a fellow citizen. It’s lunchtime, so I brought you a sandwich.”

I emphasized my citizenship to him. Guards were some of the strongest existences in this city, so befriending one would only benefit me. Obviously, Medea was likely the only one stronger than the guards.

“Cough, thank you, citizen.”

The guard took the sandwich. He swallowed his saliva after examining it. I laughed and bowed. *Ding*— A system message arrived.

[Player CaptainBritain has sent you a friend request. Would you like to accept?]

I accepted it immediately.

CaptainBritain: Hajin, are you on the 3rd floor? ^_^

Me: Yes, what about you?

CaptainBritain: I just arrived, but I'm in a meeting right now in my waiting room. We're deciding whether to buy citizenship to enter the inner city. Also, thank you for the deer meat. I just ate some with my guild members and they all said it was delicious!

Rachel sounded as energetic as ever in her messages.

Me: Haha, I see. Um, you should buy the citizenship. Otherwise, you won't be able to do much. Also, I'm returning to Earth for a bit.

CaptainBritain: Earth?

Me: Yes, I need to check up on someone.

I received a message from someone else.

Boss: Newbie, when are you coming back?

Me: I'll be gone for about 2-4 days. Do you want to come with me?

Boss: Should I?

Me: Lol Actually, Jain and Cheok Jungyeong can't do anything without Boss, so you should stay.

Boss: I guess you're right lol

I was half-kidding, but it wasn't entirely a lie. Boss always made the correct decisions when it came to battles. After ending the conversation, I left behind a message for Henry and Kiri before closing

the messenger.

[I'm going away for a while, so keep the place clean. Eat lots and make sure to exercise as well. Ask the guard in front of the inner city gate for help if anything happens. Also, bring him a sandwich every day for lunch. I put a lot in the attic fridge.]

With that, I bought a return ticket and a re-entrance ticket from the player shop.

[Would you like to leave the tower using the return ticket?] [You will return to the place where you used the entrance ticket.] [Warning! Your record will be deleted from the player database if you do not have a re-entrance ticket.]

I equipped the bracelet-shaped re-entrance ticket to my wrist.

“Yes, I’ll leave now.”

[You have used the return ticket.]

A black portal opened along with the system alert.

[Lv.??? Black Pouch] Special Item — Will allow you to copy one item from the outside world and bring it into the tower. — The copied item can only be used inside the tower.

I walked through the portal with the black pouch. Then I came to the same empty space when I first walked into the black ticket’s portal.

[Here is the storage box owned by player Extra7.]

A system alert popped up along with the storage box.

[You may bring these items back to Earth or leave them inside.]

“I’ll just go. Oh, this is okay, right?”

I held up the black pouch.

[Special item has been confirmed. The black pouch can be brought outside the tower.] [An exit portal will now be created.]

Another portal opened and led to Earth. I closed my eyes and walked through.

* * *

“Huu.”

I opened my eyes with a sigh and found myself in the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout. Goblins busily ran around doing work.

“Auu.”

The tower’s stat restriction no longer applied. However, I felt more sore than light. I needed some time to adjust to my change in stats. Then I stretched and looked around the lobby.

“Oh? Newbie, when did you come back?”

“Ah, hello.”

I found Setryn lying on the couch. I wasn’t too familiar with the man next to her, the seat of indigo, Yoo Kyunghwan. He swung the other way and preferred handsome men like Kim Suho or Shin Jonghak. We made eye contact and he nodded.

“Hello, Yoo Kyunghwan. This is the second time we meet.”

“Yeah, I heard from Setryn that this place got better, so I came to look.”

“I see.”

I ignored them and brought the black pouch to the goblin tablet. The pouch seemed to suck something in and became full. However, the goblin tablet remained unchanged. So this was how it copied the item.

“What did you do?”

“I copied the goblin tablet.”

“Copy?”

“Yes.”

I left behind Setryn and Yoo Kyunghwan, who observed me with interest. Then I looked for Khalifa. He came out of his room and opened a portal for me.

Like that, I arrived in front of my apartment building. I ran as quickly as possible and didn't waste any time. At first, I went to my room, but no one was there. Then I remembered that I left Evandel at Haeyeon's place. I practically flew over to the apartment complex down the block and rang the bell.

— Who is it?

Yun Seung-Ah asked.

“It's me, Kim Hajin.”

— Oh? You're back?

Kiik— The door opened and Yun Seung-Ah came out looking tired and disheveled. I went inside and looked for Evandel, who sat on the couch with Haeyeon. She sat modestly like a lady, unlike when she was at home.

“Evandel.”

I called her name and she flinched. Then she slowly turned towards me and her pretty eyes widened.

“It's been a while.”

“Ha, Hajin—!”

Evandel shouted and ran into my embrace. She buried herself in my chest and wept.

“Hajiiiiin...”

“Don’t cry. I came back safe and sound, didn’t I?”

“Hello.”

Haeyeon came over and bowed as I comforted Evandel.

“Hi, it’s been a while.”

Haeyeon had grown since the last time I saw her. She must be around 120-130 cm now. Why wasn’t Evandel growing any taller?

“How cute.”

Yun Seung-Ah murmured apathetically. I glanced at her while hugging Evandel. Yun Seung-Ah’s appearance shocked me. I didn’t notice at first, but her hair looked like a mess and she had thick dark circles under her eyes. Her lips also swelled up and I would’ve believed it if she told me she was homeless. Just what happened while I was gone? I took a few steps back.

“Where are you going?” Yun Seung-Ah coldly asked.

“H-Home. I’m going to eat with Evandel. Haeyeon, do you want to come too? Uncle will cook you steak again.”

“Yes!”

Yun Seung-Ah stared at me.

“You entered the Tower of Wish, right? Are you doing well? Or did you give up halfway?”

“Ah, I’m going back. I’m paving the road for Suho, so don’t worry.”

September would soon arrive. Kim Suho and Jin Sahyuk would finally enter the tower. I would be a lot busier when the time came. For some reason, Yun Seung-Ah tilted her head.

“For Suho? Didn’t you guys break off your friendship?”

“What? No way.”

I smiled.

“We’re just doing different things for now.”

* * *

The 3 Chameleon Troupe members walked through the inner city. The difference between the inner city and the outer city felt like heaven and earth. The former had cleaner air and much better structures overall.

“Look, they must be players.”

Jain pointed into the distance at a huge group that gathered around a pond lit by streetlights. However, most of them had dark expressions. Things didn’t seem to be going well judging from their serious tone. Jain guessed that they had run out of money after spending 1000 TP on citizenship.

“What’s wrong with them?”

Jain smirked at Cheok Jungyeong’s question.

“You would be there too if not for Hajin.”

“What did you say?”

“Think about it. Finding food, cooking, advising us, and even lending money. It’s all thanks to Hajin.”

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong became speechless and rubbed his chin. Indeed, his body's condition felt great thanks to Kim Hajin. He never had to worry about food or money.

"I guess you're right."

"*Shh*, quiet."

Boss strained her ears and eavesdropped on the players.

— Wouldn't it be better to return to the 2nd floor? We can come back after we stock up on food.

— What if we can't find an elevator? Plus, our citizenship becomes voided if we go back. We'll have wasted 1000 TP!

— Then what the fuck do you want us to do? Haven't you seen the shitty food situation we're in? It's better to come back with food and sell it.

— I have food. I brought some from the 2nd floor.

— What? Show us.

The group began to fight. Boss watched from the side and turned around.

"Let's go find a base."

"Okay."

The Chameleon Troupe members walked through the city without a sun and looked for a hideout like Kim Hajin suggested. After about 2 hours, they found a decent building to rent for 300 TP a month.

[Player PhantomThief has rented a hideout.] [The following bonuses will apply when you're in your hideout.] [+ 10% vitality recovery rate.] [+ 2% stat increase rate when training.]

“So a hideout also has bonuses? Like I thought, listening to newbie is never wrong.”

Jain smiled and sat on the floor. Cheok Jungyeong began to exercise the moment he saw the system alerts and Boss opened the community. Tzzzk— A mysterious screen popped up in front of them.

[Hello, players.]

“Whoa!”

“What’s that?”

They stopped what they were doing and stared at the screen. A breathtaking beauty with blonde hair and green eyes spoke.

[I am the administrator of the 3rd floor, Medea.]

“Hmm.”

Jain crossed her arms and murmured. Honestly, she envied Medea’s beauty.

[You must be surprised by Prestige’s horrible condition. I am also heartbroken regarding this. I would like to help everyone as I explain how to reach the 4th floor.]

Medea brightly smiled.

[First, you must kill at least half the demons on this floor to climb to the 4th floor. The demons and their undead army are blocking the pathway to the 4th floor, located in the four cardinal directions around Prestige.]

Medea looked somber as another screen popped up. A map showed the bases of these so-called demons.

[You may access this map from the system whenever you wish. Also...]

Medea snapped her fingers.

[I'd like to give everyone a gift, but I don't have the resources. So I will gift the players with the highest points in each stat. Six of you will receive a gift for having the highest points in strength, vitality, speed, perception, stamina, and magic power. I hope you don't think I'm being too cheap.]

Boop— A light suddenly shot into Cheok Jungyeong and Boss' pockets.

“Boss? Cheok Jungyeong? What did you two get?”

“Uh... I got a gauntlet.”

Cheok Jungyeong took out a gauntlet from his inventory while Boss took out a magnifying glass.

[Heart Piercing Magnifying Glass (3 uses)] Special Item — You may see what a target player or NPC thinks about you. (Remaining time: 119 hours 29 minutes 23 seconds)

“Boss, what's that?”

“...”

Without replying, Boss held the magnifying glass up at Jain. She didn't mean anything by it and simply wanted to try it out. Plus, she valued the inner thoughts of comrades.

[Sister] [Comrade] [Bond] [Familiarity] [Responsibility to Look After You] [Slight Pity]

The first three seemed good. The fourth made sense, but the last two... slight pity? *She pities me?*

“What does it do, Boss?”

“Shut up.”

“Hm?”

Boss looked away offended. Then she used it on Cheok Jungyeong

next.

“*Huh?* What’s up?”

The magnifying glass zoomed in on his face.

“*Hehe*, you want to see my handsome face?”

A series of words popped up above the grinning Cheok Jungyeong.

[Loyalty] [Master] [Desire to Return the Favor] [Gratitude for Awakening His Past Life] [Desire to Win Against You] [Thinks He Can Win Against You]

Like last time, the last two bothered her, but they still seemed better than Jain’s. She decided to use the last one on Kim Hajin and put the magnifying glass away.

“Now.”

She clapped her hands.

“Let’s eat and hunt since we’ve found ourselves a hideout.”

Chapter 171

Vacation (1)

Prestige had no sun. Therefore, day and night didn't exist. Rachel woke up around 8 A.M. and was the only one awake inside the English Royal Court guild's hideout. The other 6 members still slept from the rough day yesterday. They had spent the day hunting undead monsters after buying their citizenships.

Together, they hunted 157 Lv.1 undead and 78 Lv.2 undead. Rachel had achieved almost 30% of this by herself. Her light elemental, Lux, played a big role.

"Huu..."

They made 375 TP and still had enough of Kim Hajin's deer meat to last another week, so they didn't need to spend money on food. As such, Rachel felt refreshed despite her slight soreness. She stretched and opened the community.

— Does anyone want to go down to the 2nd floor to get food? — The food situation here is hell. Fuck, how can they call this place a residential area? — Argh -. I can't go down because I already bought my citizenship. Fuck, don't buy the citizenship, everyone. It screws you over if you want to go back down. — I made a group for an undead hunting party. Click on the link to join or ask questions.

Many players expressed their dissatisfaction. However, players on the 2nd floor wouldn't know anything about it since the community couldn't be used on mission floors.

Rachel scrolled through the angry posts for useful information. After a few minutes, an interesting one caught her eye.

[There's a Lv.3 longsword being sold outside the inner wall.]

It had a screenshot attached as well.

— *Brother and sister NPCs are running the shop. This shop looks important. It's selling items Lv.2 and above.*

The post even contained a list of items sold at the shop. Lv.3 Decent Steel Longsword, Lv.2 Red Crystal Axe, Lv.2 Bear Leather Jacket... Rachel rummaged through her pockets after looking through the list.

“Oh, this place grew famous quick.”

A guild member's voice rang out from behind her. Rachel felt startled, but turned around and pretended to be unfazed.

“Do you know about it?”

“Yeah.”

Devel, a male member 4 years older than her, was quite the celebrity in England thanks to his handsome looks.

“I think this post went up 2 days ago, but even the cheapest item costs 700 TP. We can only watch for now.”

“Ah...”

Rachel coughed and glanced at her inventory. *Lv.3 Gargoyle's Leather Armor. Was it a waste to buy this? N-No.* Undead monsters couldn't hurt her thanks to this armor. Rachel quickly got rid of the doubt in her heart.

“First, let's eat. Wake everyone up. Today will be just as busy as yesterday.”

“Yes!”

Devel quickly woke up the other members while Rachel began to cook Kim Hajin's deer meat on a frying pan. The members sat around and ate breakfast.

“Thank god for this. We would have been screwed without it.”

“We’d either be starving or buying the player shop’s emergency bento box.”

“Vice leader, I have the utmost respect for you.”

“It’s nothing.”

The deer meat had a Lv.2 satisfaction effect, so eating just a little made them full. No one complained since it also tasted delicious. They only felt extremely grateful towards Rachel.

“Oh right, will those two be okay? They’re both magicians and it didn’t look like they brought any food.”

A member suddenly asked about Aileen and Yi Yongha, who left them yesterday.

“They should have food,” Rachel firmly spoke.

“They asked me if I learned the dismantling technique.”

— Kid, did you learn the dismantling technique?

Rachel recalled Aileen’s child-like voice.

“Dismantling technique?”

“Yes.”

One needed to properly dismantle a monster with their own hands to obtain the technique. Aileen and Yi Yongha would probably struggle to obtain the technique since they never experienced such a thing on Earth.

“I think they have monster corpses in their inventory. It wastes a lot of space, but the inventory can fit 1-2 corpses.”

“Oh, as expected, vice leader has great insight.”

Speak of the devil, a system alert popped up.

[Player WorldsStrongestMagicHero has sent you a friend request.]

Rachel could guess who it was from the nickname. For now, she delayed accepting it.

“Why don’t we visit this famous shop after we finish eating?”

“Pft.”

Other members began to laugh.

Rachel narrowed her eyes and glared at them.

“Why are you laughing?”

“Nothing!”

“Forming a close relationship with a shop is very important, you know.”

“Yes, of course. Let’s go! Get ready, you guys!”

* * *

I spent my time with Evandel for 2 days. We went to the Disneyland in America with Haeyeon and Hayang, toured 3-star Michelin restaurants, and personally watched Evandel’s display of spirit magic.

Evandel had grown exponentially. I might be slightly exaggerating, but her ghost army could probably fight Shin Jonghak evenly.

“You’re leaving her with me again?”

I returned home after having fun without regrets. Yun Seung-Ah

visited because she wanted to tell me something.

“Yes, I don’t have any other choice.”

Evandel slept soundly on my lap. I stroked her head and bitterly smiled.

“Evandel didn’t cause you any problems, did she?”

“Not at all. She even helped me do laundry when I said she didn’t need to. Oppa adores her too.”

“That’s great to hear.” I breathed a sigh of relief.

“But *um...* I think we’re going to sell the place soon.”

Yun Seung-Ah brought up something concerning.

“This one too?”

“Yeah, I don’t think oppa’s work is going well either. I came to tell you that.”

“*Ah...*”

“Don’t worry about Evandel. I’ll take good care of—”

“Then I’ll buy it.”

“Her...” Yun Seung-Ah’s eyes widened in shock.

“I’ll buy your house and you can keep living here. It’ll be my way of paying you back for all the trouble I caused. You don’t need to pay rent or anything either.”

“*Erm...* You’re that rich? It’s expensive to live around here, you know.”

I simply smiled. I hadn't checked my account recently with all the mercenary work and the tower, but I jumped in surprise when I checked today. I owned 5% of Essential Armory's stocks, 15% of SH Agency's, 15% of Essential Pharmacy's, and other stocks belonging to Essence of the Strait's businesses. Just the dividends from them came out to 30 billion won. That amount jumped to 50 billion with what I made as Fenrir.

"As you know, I'm Fenrir."

"Still, aren't bullets expensive? The apartment costs quite a lot too. We refused to sell it at 13 billion, but finally decided after being offered 20 billion."

That much for a 165-200 square meter apartment might sound expensive, but Seoul was the safest place on Earth. The cost of living in Seoul would only increase with time.

"I can buy it, so don't worry. Is this why you haven't been looking well?"

"Me?" Yun Seung-Ah smirked.

"I'm fine. I can just sleep in my office if I don't have a house. The problem is, well... the entrance ticket."

"The Tower of Wish entrance ticket?" I tilted my head.

"Yeah, those things are no joke. Do you know how much they're going for right now?"

I didn't. Even if I did, they would've surely changed by now.

"Green tickets cost 200 million each, yellow tickets cost 400 million, orange costs 700 million, reds cost 1.5 billion, and black is practically a blank check."

"Then..."

My face darkened and I suddenly had a bad feeling. If Yun Seung-Ah

couldn't get a ticket for Suho...

"We wanted to enter the tower too! Those damned loan sharks!"

Yun Seung-Ah slammed her fist on the table.

"I don't know how, but they found out about every ticket we obtained and seized them!"

My heart sank, but my brain spun quicker in urgent situations. I had gained this skill from working as a mercenary. Thankfully, I came up with a solution. With the Book of Truth, I should be able to find one with a day of hard work.

"You don't have any left?"

"*Haha*, who do you think I am?"

It seemed that wouldn't be necessary. Yun Seung-Ah grinned and held up her index finger.

"I have one. Plus, it's the best ticket you could get, a black ticket."

"Oh, I'm glad. That's for Suho, right?"

"Yeah, that's the least I can do for him."

I breathed a sigh of relief. Kim Suho should find one hidden piece after another in the tower and successfully resurrect Creator's Sacred Grace.

"Oh, before I go..."

I checked my gift.

▷*Young Dwarf's Dexterity [Intermediate rank] [Illusion attribute]*
[Evolving – grade 7] [Growth EXP: 3%]

As I thought, it didn't revert. I could return to Earth with my new gifts

and improved ranks as long as I didn't die in the tower. To think it would be intermediate rank at just grade 7... It might even reach master rank at grade 1.

"Before you go back, what?"

"Oh, *um*, I have a gift for Suho. With a black ticket, you can bring up to 3 pieces of equipment into the tower, but I doubt his equipment is top-class."

"..."

Yun Seung-Ah flinched and felt guilty. Currently, Kim Suho should only have Misteltein. Normally, guilds sponsored their members' equipment, but Creator's Sacred Grace couldn't provide top-class equipment right now.

"W-We can still provide low-intermediate rank artifacts... like a wrist protector."

I lightly laughed and looked at my hand. With this new gift, everything I made would become a lasting artifact for the ages. I ordered a few items as soon as I returned: a high-intermediate rank, grade 1 mountain tyrant's leather and a suppressed magic stone. With these, I should be able to craft an item rivaling an intermediate rank artifact.

"Uh, okay. If you say so. *Ah!* I just got called in! I'll see you later!"

Yun Seung-Ah ran out of the apartment at 11 P.M. *Koong, kwang*. Her footsteps rang out before everything became quiet again.

"*Nnng...*"

Evandel tossed around because of the noise. I carefully picked her up and placed her on the bed. Then I sat at the edge.

"*Huu...*"

The clock continued to tick in the silent room. I looked down at

Evandel sleeping soundly and suddenly thought of Boss.

“I hope she’s doing okay.”

I didn’t know why Boss overlapped with Evandel, but I knew what kind of a life she had lived. Perhaps I knew more about it than anyone else. Obviously, I had created her background story. A child who walked a path of sadness and pain more than anyone else, hated by everything in the world, a monster who grew up with betrayal. She suppressed the monster within her by abandoning her name. There were still too many things in this world I didn’t know. I opened the Book of Truth and used all 4 streaks of stigma.

“Tell me Boss’ past that I don’t know about.”

However, the Book of Truth couldn’t even reveal Chundong’s past.

[You do not have enough stigma.]

Was it because a person’s past contained too much information? Or was it simply because 4 streaks of stigma couldn’t handle it?

“Tell me what Boss was doing and where between January 1, 2020 and January 3, 2020.”

[You do not have enough stigma.]

It remained the same.

“What do you know?”

This time, it consumed 0.1 streaks of stigma. That wasn’t even a real question...

[Everything. It is your ability that is lacking.]

“...I guess you’re right.”

I scratched my neck and closed the Book of Truth.

I prepared to head back to the tower in the early morning. I knelt in front of Evandel, who came to see me off. However, she refused to look me in the eyes.

“I’ll be back soon.”

She didn’t say anything as she stared at the floor. She simply hugged a rag doll that I made to look just like me.

“Evandel?”

“When are you coming back?” she asked with a trembling voice.

“I’ll come back in a month.”

“...”

Evandel pouted and shook her head. Then she expressed her sadness in a tiny voice.

“Earlier.”

Something rose from the bottom of my heart. Did my parents feel the same when they raised me? I tightly embraced her.

“Okay. You can order anything you want to eat and have fun with Hayang and Haeyeon. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“...”

“I put some sandwiches and hamburger patties in the fridge, so you can eat those too. Ask Haeyeon’s parents to cook the patties. They’ll taste delicious.”

“Un.”

Our long, yet short hug ended as I stood up. Hayang walked up to

Evandel as if to console her. She scratched Evandel's leg and seemed to be telling her to do something. Evandel teared up, but didn't cry and waved at me.

"Come home safe."

"Yeah, I'll be right back."

I left the apartment, but I had to meet one more person before returning to the tower. I didn't need to visit her myself. A limousine waited for me when I came out to the front. Its window rolled down and Yoo Yeonha peeked out.

"You're back."

I smiled and sat next to her. Yoo Yeonha stared at my face before suddenly asking.

"Did you cry?"

"No. Anyways, you must be busy. You're working even when you're in a car?"

I glanced at the documents on a table inside the limousine.

"I've been frequently driving around because of our businesses and the Tower of Wish."

"*Mm*. Oh right, here."

I handed her a plastic bag.

"What is it?"

"A handmade burger. I just made it and brought one in case you felt hungry."

"..."

Yoo Yeonha blinked and thought about what to say. After a brief moment, she nodded and took the bag.

“...I haven’t had time to properly eat. Thank you.”

The hamburger’s smell rose from the bag. Yoo Yeonha peeked inside and swallowed her saliva. She obviously looked forward to eating it and licked her lips.

“How are things going inside the tower?”

“I’m doing fine, but your informants probably won’t come out. TP is extremely important in the earlier stages. They won’t have any to spare.”

“I heard. The return ticket is 1000 TP and the re-entrance ticket is also 1000 TP, correct?”

I nodded and stretched.

“Yeah. *Aaah*.”

“*Um*, the tower is one thing, but...”

She peeked at me and carefully brought up another topic.

“It’s... about that furniture. The chair you gifted me.”

“Oh, the chair? It’s amazing, right?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha silently nodded.

“I just thought, *um*, I’d like to ask the maker for a bed...”

“You liked it?”

“...Yes.”

Yoo Yeonha muttered. Did she think she was a loser if she liked something?

“So *um*, can you ask him?”

“I can, but it’ll be expensive.”

“Oh? How much is it?”

She crossed her arms as if there wasn’t anything she couldn’t buy, a look worthy of Seoul’s queen.

“A billion, I guess?”

“That’s nothing at all. If the bed is the same quality as the chair—”

“But it’ll be a used bed.”

“*Eh?*”

“It won’t be a new one.”

I didn’t have time to make one for her. A bed was the most difficult piece of furniture. I needed at least half a day to make one even at my current skill level. However, I could send her my bed. I didn’t mind too much since I planned to make a new one with Dwarf’s Dexterity.

“A used one?”

“Yeah, I can give you mine.”

“*Eeeh?*” Yoo Yeonha screamed.

“W-What, what do you mean!”

“It’s not dirty or anything, so don’t worry. It might smell like me, but

it'll do the job. Oh, I guess it might smell like cigarettes.”

“S-Smell...”

“I promise you won’t even think about other beds once you sleep in it.”

Yoo Yeonha’s face slowly grew red as she glared at me. It looked like she had something to say, but nothing came out. As her face changed from an unripe strawberry to a tomato on the brink of exploding...

“Are, are, are you crazy—!”

She screamed loud enough to shake the entire limousine. However, I simply shrugged.

“I mean, I can’t just whip out furniture of that level in a flash.”

“B-But you can just tell me the maker’s contact address.”

“The maker doesn’t have time. Don’t worry, the bed is clean.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha looked anguished. I could practically see her internal conflict.

“Huu... okay. So, where is this bed?”

She finally came to a decision. I grinned. If a clean freak like Yoo Yeonha wanted it that badly... well, I guess all the work exhausted her. Objectively speaking, my bed worked wonders on the mind and body.

“Just tell me the address you want it sent to. I’ll handle it.”

Evandel would be surprised if I gave her the one in my apartment, so I decided to give her the one I used in the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout.

“I’ll pay for it immediately.”

“Okay. Oh, but that wasn’t why I wanted to meet you.”

I put on a serious expression since we ended up off-topic because of the bed.

“I want to ask for a favor.”

“A favor?”

“Yeah.”

I wanted to make a rather simple request. The Book of Truth couldn’t tell me anything about Chundong’s past. I tried to investigate on my own, but couldn’t do it alone. Chundong’s existence felt like dust, befitting of a true extra.

“You know that I’m an orphan, right?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha’s face turned cold. She remained silent before quietly replying.

“I do.”

“It’s related to that. I’m wondering, *cough*, what happened to my biological parents. To be more exact, I want to know how they died.”

Chundong’s biological parents had passed away. That was the one thing I found out from the Book of Truth and that took 3 streaks of stigma.

“I need you to investigate for me. I don’t think I can do it alone anymore. I don’t have the time either.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha didn't say anything. She simply looked down and took deep breaths. I couldn't see her face either because her hair had grown longer.

"Well, it's not a number one priority. I'm only asking because I'm curious—"

"Okay." She suddenly interrupted me and looked into my eyes.

"I'll give it my best."

She seemed determined, yet hesitant. Her eyes appeared firm, but her fingers nervously wriggled on her knees. I nodded at the conflicting Yoo Yeonha.

Chapter 172

Skill (1)

After Kim Hajin left, Yoo Yeonha looked outside the limousine and leaned her head on the window. Han River, the Tower of Hero, and guild buildings shone with their respective insignias. Seoul's sky seemed unusually grey like it would rain.

“Haa.”

Yoo Yeonha let out a small sigh. Kim Hajin had asked her to investigate the truth behind his parents' deaths. In that case, how much did he know? Did he know about the Kwang-Oh Incident and that Chae Joochul had plotted it?

Yoo Yeonha felt a headache and pressed her temples. This was why she disliked one-sided knowledge. She didn't know how much he knew, so she couldn't decide how much to reveal.

“And this.”

A plastic bag caught her attention. Kim Hajin had made her a homemade hamburger. It smelled good, but Yoo Yeonha didn't have the energy to eat anymore.

“Um... driver?”

She almost asked if the driver wanted it, but the burger's smell spread even more as she held it up. It didn't smell like an ordinary hamburger.

“Yes, Miss? Do you need something?”

The driver asked. Countless thoughts flashed across her mind in this brief moment.

“N-No, it’s nothing.”

In the end, she brought the plastic bag closer and took out its content. The hamburger wasn’t too big or too small. It looked appetizing and even beautiful. *Gulp*. Yoo Yeonha swallowed her saliva and took a bite. *Nom, nom*. Her mouth stopped moving and starlight surrounded her. The taste temporarily isolated her from the world, a pure rapture that she had never tasted before.

“*Nyam*.”

She took another bite. More flavor exploded in her mouth. Mentally, she felt depressed and troubled, but her body remained honest. Her mouth wanted to eat this burger no matter what. Yoo Yeonha slowly ate and savored every bite.

* * *

I returned to the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout and didn’t waste any time. I sent my bed to Yoo Yeonha and touched my bracelet-shaped re-entrance ticket to return to the tower.

“Wait, coal!”

Setryn suddenly shouted. For the record, coal referred to the color black. Setryn liked to call me by different black objects. For example, she would call me coal, petroleum, oil, blackie, and black cloud.

“Yeah?”

“Our magician wants to live here too.”

“Magician... you mean brown?”

“Yep.”

The seat of brown, Hirano Arashi, a master of destruction magic and stronghold creation. *That perverted woman wanted live here too?* I felt reassured and worried.

“Then... tell her she can use my room for now. I don’t have time to make another one.”

“Sure, blackie.”

That seemed to be her only business as she hopped back on the couch. Next to her, Yoo Kyunghwan smacked his lips as he glanced at me.

“*Cough*, then I’m going back.”

I activated the re-entrance ticket, but a portal didn’t appear this time. My vision blurred and I suddenly found myself inside the tower. I knelt and retched. Direct teleportation took a heavier toll on the body.

“Argh, my head...”

[Welcome back, Player Extra7.] [Please get changed.]

“Yes.”

I put on the clothes I wore before I left the tower.

[Confirmed.] [A portal to the 3rd floor residential area will be created.]

A portal shot up from the floor and I stepped into it without hesitation.

[Welcome back to the 3rd floor – Prestige.]

The outer city of Prestige came into view. Hunger and poverty surrounded me. I could easily spot players walking around the streets now. More people must’ve climbed to the 3rd floor.

Boss: You’re back, newbie?

Boss messaged me as soon as I returned.

Me: Yes. Have you been doing well, Boss?

Boss: Yeah, I already earned 1600 TP.

Me: Ooh, that's a lot.

Boss: Hehe, fighting helps my stats grow quicker. Anyways, where are you?

Me: I'm walking towards the inner wall right now.

Then I grew curious about Henry and Kiri.

Me: Keep hunting. I have something to do, so I'll join you in about 3 hours.

I changed course to my shop.

— The items they sell here are too poor. Are you sure it's a named shop?

It didn't take long to reach it. From a distance, I noticed the 10 or so people around it.

— It sells Lv.3 items and items with attributes. It's the best place outside the inner city.

— Oh, by the way, I heard you can receive common quests without having to buy citizenship.

I pulled my hood down and walked past the chattering players. The shop had 6 players inside and they debated whether or not to buy the Lv.3 longsword. Henry and Kiri stared at them from the counter.

“Henry? Kiri?”

I used this opportunity to call them. Their faces turned bright when they saw me.

“Ah, it's time for us to restock everyone. Can you talk outside?”

“Oh? More items are coming in?”

“Yes, the shop is closing for the day.”

“Alright, I’ll come back tomorrow then.”

Kiri skillfully drove the customers away. The players glanced at me on their way out, but treated me like an NPC and didn’t show much interest.

“You’re back!”

“Welcome back!”

Kiri and Henry bowed at a 90 degree angle.

“Yeah, I’m back.”

I took off my hood and smiled. Thankfully, their complexions had grown much better. They looked healthy and well-fed and must’ve also taken baths.

“Are we getting many customers?”

“Yes, I don’t know why, but more people have been visiting lately.”

“What about the items?”

“We sold two!”

“Two?”

“Yes!”

Kiri replied energetically. I looked around the shop. They managed to sell the cheapest items, the bear leather jacket and the gorilla wrist protector. I wasn’t too surprised. Most people couldn’t fill their bellies, so they probably couldn’t buy a Lv.3 steel sword.

“The jacket sold for 600 TP and the wrist protector sold for 500 TP!”

“Oh? That’s more than I expected!”

As I thought, their talents suited the job. I would’ve been happy with 300 TP for each item.

“Um, are there any other items for us to sell?”

Kiri asked enthusiastically. I told them I’d give them 5% of whatever they sold, so they remained quite eager.

“Ah, um, it’s just that many customers feel disappointed. They always say we don’t have enough variety.”

“Hold on. I’ll make some more now.”

I walked downstairs to the empty basement. Then I took out the goblin tablet from the black pouch and infused stigma’s magic power into it. *Shooong*— Three lumps of light shot out and formed 2 normal goblins and 1 goblin shaman.

“Hello.”

— *Kerek, kerek.*

— *Kurorok.*

“Oh, we haven’t met before. I have work for you guys.”

I commanded the goblins to make potions. They had potion recipes and brewing techniques engraved in their DNA and should be able to make them as long as they had the ingredients. I bought all the herbs that could be used from the player shop. It cost about 10000 TP, but I should be able to make 5 times that amount once I sold everything.

“I hope they sell well.”

I set up a shop to prevent the 3rd floor from falling into ruins. Wealth had to be redistributed from players to NPCs, so NPCs could topple the wall preventing their growth by themselves. I wanted NPCs to

desire better lives rather than to disappear. Of course, I didn't plan on doing by myself and hired NPCs like Henry and Kiri.

"Um... Boss?" Kiri peeked into the basement.

"Oh, come down."

"Eh, eeh?"

The goblins startled her, but Kiri approached with interest when I patted their heads.

"Um, what are these strange creatures?"

"Think of them as friends. They're going to make potions down here. You just need to take what they make and sell them upstairs. You can also order them to clean the shop or fight if necessary."

"Ah, okay..."

"Good, you can go back."

Kiri went upstairs as I sat on the floor. I opened the tower's system and ignored the goblins rummaging through the herb basket.

[Special Dwarven Potion Recipe] 1. Sylaoon Grass (5g) 2. Krumin (3g) 3. Ketelin (1g)...

This recipe came from the dwarven stele and was most likely leagues above anything the goblins knew how to make. However, it required a rather special ingredient called ketelin, which required me to use the random dice.

[Random Dice x5]

I reached the maximum amount and actually wasted 3 dice over the 4 days I wasn't here. I quickly rolled the dice.

In 3 hours, the goblins made 10 potions while I made 3. They took a long time because the tablet hadn't leveled up yet and I ran out of ingredients. I used the remaining time to make three Lv.2 equipment and one Lv.3 equipment, increasing the shop's overall variety.

"Come back soon!"

"We'll do our best!"

"Make sure you eat properly."

"Okay!"

I left all the equipment with the siblings and went outside.

PhantomThief: Hajin, where are you? We're walking to your shop right now.

Me: I'll wait then.

I stood near the shop and Jain soon arrived wearing the robe I gifted Boss.

"Where are the others?"

"They're coming soon. Anyways, is making TP the only thing we need to do here?"

"For now."

The 3rd floor took a long time to finish because the demons we had to defeat formed a society of their own.

"By the way, did you get any skills?" I asked Jain.

"Skills?"

Skills were one of the most important aspects of this tower. A single skill could counter and waste all of someone's efforts no matter how

much they increased their stats.

“You didn’t get any skill books as drops?”

“Ah, I don’t hunt that much. You should ask Boss.”

“Oh, okay.

I only wanted a single skill from this floor. One of the best that only took up a slot, [*Permanent Materialization*].

“Oh, here they come.”

Jain pointed down the street.

“Where?”

I caught sight of two very noticeable people walking towards us.

“Wow.”

I muttered in shock. Boss looked beautiful. She appeared like a goddess with slender legs and an elegant figure. Her delicate face perfectly combined all the good traits between Westerners and Easterners. She looked cool in the leather jacket. So Boss was the one who bought the bear leather jacket. I guess that’s why Jain wore her robe. It seemed she finally started to take an interest in fashion.

“Welcome back, newbie.”

Boss walked up to me in boots that boosted her to my level. I pretended to be blinded by her beauty as she smiled in satisfaction.

“Alright, that’s enough. What is it you want to ask me?”

I wanted to ask for a favor.

“Ah, you see, I want to rob a mansion in the inner city.”

The professor's mansion contained the skill book I wanted.

“Stealing? Sounds fun.”

Cheok Jungyeong chuckled and Boss also nodded. Then she suddenly held up her index finger as though she recalled something.

“Before that...”

A magnifying glass appeared in her hand. *What item was this again?* I asked Boss instead of looking through my settings book.

“What is it?”

“Just a fun item.”

Boss vague replied and pointed the magnifying glass at me. The convex lens made my face distort unattractively. After about a minute, the magnifying glass turned into dust and scattered.

“Um, Boss?”

I couldn't help but grow curious about what just happened.

“What's wrong?”

“Uh...”

“Boss?”

I had never seen this agitation and surprise on her face before.

* * *

The Tower of Wish's unprecedented scale caused an uproar throughout the entire world. Television channels dedicated solely to the tower appeared, new websites popped up, and the tower's progression became hot entertainment for even ordinary people.

The same passion existed in Pandemonium. Entrance tickets became the hottest items to sell and trade without any federal authority restricting its residents and guests. Multiple auctions occurred every day. Both big and small fights broke out over attempts to forcefully take them.

“Hm.”

In Pandemonium’s popular Thousand Demon Arena, Jin Sahyuk sat in her waiting room as a fiend rank fighter. Naturally, her waiting room grew several times larger with her new rank.

“This is the real thing?”

With her legs crossed arrogantly, she asked with the ticket in her hand.

“Y-Yes, certainly.”

The man bowing in front of her replied. Jin Sahyuk looked at him with a bored expression. He curled up like a larva and trembled.

“What if it isn’t?”

“P-Pardon?”

Jin Sahyuk lit a cigarette and placed it in her mouth. *Huuu...* Thick smoke blew across the room. It tasted quite good as expected of a magic power circulation catalyst that cost millions of won.

“Are you deaf? I asked, what if it isn’t?”

“I, I’m certain. I swear it isn’t fake.”

Jin Sahyuk grinned. She went wherever she pleased and caused a mess with Bell no longer restraining her. She forced her way to entrance tickets and always checked their colors. However, she didn’t bother taking any that weren’t black. She only wanted the best and nothing else.

“Yeah, I guess I have to trust you. What other choice do I have, right?”

Murmuring to herself, she stared at the black ticket. The entire world focused on the Tower of Wish. What happened inside, how it functioned, and everything about it became a newsworthy topic. This drove Jin Sahyuk mad. A world where each person had 7 lives. The fact that she wasn't a part of it annoyed her. Likewise, she couldn't wait to kill the person who stole her ticket.

“But I heard the black ticket is a double-edged sword. You can only choose the hardest difficulty and the benefits you get are less than the others...”

“Shut it.”

Jin Sahyuk flicked the ashes from her cigarette. Then she infused magic power into the ticket. Until now, she had burned all the fake entrance tickets. The fools who brought her those tickets also became ashes. However, this entrance ticket felt different. It withstood her magic power and even circulated it within itself. This entrance ticket was... real.

Jin Sahyuk stared at the man who brought her the ticket. He kneeled respectfully while shaking, but still peeked at her. Jin Sahyuk decided to forgive his filthy look since she dressed rather revealing as well.

“You're right, this looks like the real thing.”

With a grin, she got up and opened her safe. Countless jewels shone beautifully inside. Jin Sahyuk took out the jewel she promised, a blood diamond. Then she tossed it like a piece of trash.

“H-Huk!”

“Take it and scram.”

“Y-Yes, thank you!”

The man ran away as soon as he received the diamond. Then he tripped and fell several times.

“Why run if you’re going to fall, fucking idiot.”

Jin Sahyuk watched him leave and examined the ticket once again with the cigarette in her mouth. At first, she smiled, but then her face viciously distorted. She clenched her teeth and severed the cigarette in half.

“Just you wait, motherfucker. I’ll tear you into pieces.”

She spat out her pent-up rage and had already fully prepared to enter the tower. She hadn’t played around and hunted people who left the tower after the tutorial. Sometimes she tortured them and sometimes she asked kindly. Then she practiced the necessary skills and techniques from the information she gathered.

For some reason, her rage suddenly subsided. Jin Sahyuk tilted her head with a strange expression. Just now, she felt a strange sense of foreboding. Apprehension? Unease? Regardless, her sharp intuition couldn’t be ignored. Jin Sahyuk seriously looked at the entrance ticket.

[Black Entrance Ticket]

“Pft.”

However, she simply sneered and shook off her sense of unease. *I just have to excel no matter what. No matter who, I just have to kill them.*

“Just you wait...”

Jin Sahyuk trembled with rage and excitement.

Chapter 173

Skill (2)

We walked through Citizen Boulevard, one of the main streets of Prestige's inner city. However, the atmosphere didn't feel as relaxed as before. A heavy and awkward silence blanketed us. *Poke, poke.* Jain nudged me.

"What did you do?"

She asked as she peeked at Boss, who wore a grave expression. I helplessly shrugged since I had no clue.

"I'm not sure."

"Did you do something wrong?"

"It's only been 30 minutes since we met."

"Right."

Jain rubbed her chin in thought. Then she suddenly widened her eyes.

"Ah, is it that time?"

"That time?"

Was it some sort of anniversary? Perhaps I could learn about Boss' past.

"You know, that time of the month."

"Oh, *cough.*"

I shook away the silly thought and focused on the task at hand. We quickly reached the professor's mansion. Boss tagged along despite remaining silent.

[Lv.6 Professor's Mansion]

"We're here."

An imposing mansion stood amidst Prestige's darkness. It looked like a medieval castle and shone with a silvery blue light.

"..."

"*Mmm*, so this is the place? How do you want to go about it?"

I stared at Jain without answering. I had no clue how to rob a house, much less a mansion of this scale. Even if I did, I couldn't compare to the professionals in front of me.

"Why are you staring?"

Jain tilted her head as she met my gaze.

* * *

It only took 15 minutes to occupy the professor's mansion. First, Cheok Jungyeong caused a scene outside to distract the guards. Meanwhile, Jain and I walked through the front door with the help of her disguises.

However, it would be difficult to suppress the *[Lv.4 Professor's Soldiers]* with just the two of us. My gun would reveal our presence and Jain didn't have a weapon. That's where Boss came in. She joined us in her shadow form and quickly subdued 6 soldiers. It wasn't that easy since she had to use 6 magic power potions. Each soldier had at least 1 basic skill and posed quite a threat.

"Uup, uuup—!"

Like that, we arrived at the professor's private study. Boss' shadow promptly tied up the *[Lv.6 Professor]* who was reading a book inside. For the record, a high level didn't necessarily correspond to greater strength. The professor only had a high level thanks to his intelligence.

"Uuup! Uuuuup!"

"Stay quiet."

"Kek."

The professor struggled until Jain pressed a few pressure points and he briefly shook before fainting. Now, the study finally became quiet. I looked around the room, which seemed larger than most auditoriums. Even at a glance, the study contained at least 10,000 books.

"People are dying in the streets and this guy built a castle of books. Humans will be the same no matter their world, *eh?*"

Jain muttered as she nudged the unconscious professor with her foot.

"So, Hajin, what are we looking for?"

"Look for skill books."

"Skill books?"

"Yes."

Officially, they were called skill acquisition books. Like in MMORPGs, you could instantly learn a new skill with them. Of course, improving an acquired skill still required individual effort.

"What's a skill book?" Jain asked, staring into the air.

"Ah, okay. I got it. Thanks."

The system must've explained it to her as she nodded.

“...”

However, unlike Jain who looked excited, Boss continued to silently stare at me.

“You should try it too, Boss.”

“Try what?”

Her response sounded like a grumbled complaint.

“Ask the system about skill books.”

“...”

Boss curtly mumbled, “What’s a skill book?”

Then she stared into the air like Jain.

“*Aha.*”

“Next...”

I clapped my hands to gather their attention now that they knew about skill books.

“We shouldn’t stay for too long. Let’s search for the next 20 minutes.”

In the original story, the professor used skill books as bargaining chips for players to do his bidding. I planned to take as many as I could and sell them in the auction house. Of course, at proper prices.

“You should recognize them since they stand out from regular books.”

“Okay.”

We rummaged through the study. *Drrk— drrk—* The sound of moving books filled the room.

“Hajin, I think I found one.”

Soon, Jain held up a book.

“Oh? Let me see.”

“Here.”

I caught the book and checked its information.

*[Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.0 Law of Thinking] [Average – Low]
Lv.0 Efficiency – Will increase the speed of your arithmetic operations.
Lv.0 Intelligence – Will increase the speed of your calculations.*

“Just keep it in your inventory.”

“Right? I didn’t think it was good either. You can have it.”

“No, I don’t really... *ah*, okay, I’ll take it.”

I could give it to Henry and Kiri. Unlike players, NPCs couldn’t instantly learn skills. However, they could still acquire them, so I placed the skill book in my inventory. Then I continued looking for more.

“Hajin, I found another one.”

“Where?”

As expected of someone nicknamed PhantomThief, she could easily find hidden treasures.

“Here.”

I checked the skill book’s information.

[Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.0 Charge] [Average – Intermediate] Lv.0 Limit Break – Will charge forward with your strength doubled. Lv.0 Flexibility – Will move quickly for an instant. Maximum range: 100 m.

A simple, yet useful skill. It suited someone like Cheok Jungyeong with high physical stats.

“Looks like we can give this to Cheok Jungyeong.”

“I agree. I’ll sell it to him for 1000 TP.”

“Does he have any money?”

“Yeah, he has a lot. He’s only been hunting the past few days.”

I felt a sudden gaze while we carried on our friendly conversation. I glanced to the side and saw Boss glaring at us with a somewhat dissatisfied expression. However, she quickly went back to looking for skill books after we made eye contact.

We found a total of 21 skill books after 20 minutes of searching, including *[Glass Barrier]*, *[Sand Manipulation]*, *[Monster Taming]*, *[Elemental Reinforcement]*, and *[Snatch]*. However, we couldn’t find what I wanted. I stomped and wondered if we had to go back.

“Newbie.”

Boss approached me. Her mood still seemed down as she handed me a skill book.

[Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.0 Permanent Materialization] [Rare – High] Lv.0 Limit Break – Will permanently materialize a formless existence.

“Oh!”

My eyes shot open. I finally found what I came for. It only had one effect, but that made it easier to level up.

“This is the one I wanted. Thanks, Boss. I’ll use it well.”

“I never said I’d give it to you.”

Boss put out her hand, clearly asking for it back.

“Come on, I’ll make you good equipment later.”

“Good equipment?”

“Yes, of course.”

Before Boss could say anything else, I placed it inside my inventory. Boss looked at me suspiciously before turning back.

“Now let’s hurry. The city’s vigilantes should be charging in any second.”

“Okay. By the way, how much is everything we looted?”

I briefly calculated it in my head out of curiosity. We stole 25 skill books in total and would have to wait 2 weeks for the [stolen good] property to disappear before selling them in the auction house, but in total...

“We should be able to earn at least 50000 TP once players start making money.”

“Wow.”

Jain happily smiled. Suddenly...

— In here!

— Get them!

A thunderous roar rang from outside. I could see 10 guards running over with my thousand-mile eyes peering through the wall. However, we had already prepared an escape route. Boss escaped using shadow

pool, instantly transforming herself into liquid. Jain and I disguised as the professor's soldiers, who we subdued on our way here. Jain thoughtfully made some injuries to our bodies. Then I immediately broke the window.

"Intruders! Release the professor!"

I pointed to the shattered window as soon as they barged in. "T-They escaped through the window!"

"W-What?"

"Are you two okay? Your injuries..."

The guards had terrifying levels with the lowest at Lv.8 and their leader at Lv.11.

"We're fine, so please catch them! They kidnapped the professor!"

"What?"

The guards immediately jumped out the window after listening to Jain. Then we leisurely walked out and met with Boss at a predetermined spot. Cheok Jungyeong also waited for us, looking sleepy.

"You're back."

"Cheok Jungyeong, do you want to buy this?" Jain asked as she handed him the skill book.

"What's this?"

"A skill book. It's perfect for you."

"Skill book?"

Cheok Jungyeong stared at it curiously. A smile emerged on his face as he read the system message.

“Oh, how much is it?”

“2000 TP.”

“Do you think I’m an idiot?”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jain began to negotiate as I sneaked away.

“Newbie.”

However, Boss roughly grabbed my wrist and looked into my eyes with a serious expression. It seemed like she would eat me.

“Y-Yes?”

“Where are you going?”

“Ah, I’m going to buy something. I’ll be back soon.”

I needed to do something before learning [*Permanent Materialization*]. Thankfully, it shouldn’t take long since it only required TP.

“What are you buying?”

“I’ll tell you later.”

“...”

Boss clenched her teeth, making her jawline more pronounced.

“You have lots of secrets.”

“Yes? What do you...”

“...”

Without replying, Boss walked past me towards Cheok Jungyeong and Jain.

“Boss?”

“Don’t talk to me.”

Her mood seemed quite terrible today, so I should make her something delicious later. Still, I had something to do and headed towards Medea’s temple.

[Lv.7 Temple of Medea]

The temple wasn’t far. As its name suggested, visitors had to be polite and respectful here. Naturally, I took off my mask and hood. *Kiik—*

[Lv.4 Medea’s Priest]

A priest warmly smiled at me as I opened the door.

“Welcome.”

“Ah, yes. I came to buy an item.”

“Our temple sells the following.”

The priest snapped his fingers and a hologram popped up in front of me. I picked out 3 items from the list.

[Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.0 Synthesis] [Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.0 Extraction] [Lv.0 Basic Skill Consolidation Scroll]

[Lv.0 Extraction] and *[Lv.0 Synthesis]* were rather useless by themselves. However, these skills suited me the best after looking through my settings book hundreds of times.

“I’ll take these 3.”

“That’ll be a total of 15000 TP.”

The Temple of Medea was famous for being expensive. Honestly, buying skill books here was a waste. However, the Book of Truth had

told me the following:

[Lv.0 Synthesis and Lv.0 Extraction may only be bought at the Temple of Medea.]

I didn't have a choice since I couldn't create them myself.

"Here, 15000 TP."

I handed the priest fifteen 1000 TP banknotes. He took the money with a bright smile and gave me the 2 skill books and a scroll.

"Thank you for your purchase. *Ah*, would you like to become a member of our temple? If you do..."

"No, it's fine."

As I said before, the Temple of Medea was quite expensive. I wanted to burn it into the ground rather than join. I declined and quickly left. Then I moved to my waiting room to begin my work.

"*Ah*, this place has sunlight."

It felt like a welcomed change after having no sun in Prestige. I sat at the edge of my bed and took out the skill books.

[Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.0 Synthesis] [Would you like to learn the Basic Skill – Lv.0 Synthesis?] [Warning! Learning a skill will use up a skill slot. Once used, a skill slot cannot be recovered.] [Warning! Synthesis is a half-skill that can only be leveled up with scrolls!]

"Thank you for worrying about me, but I already know."

I went ahead and learned it.

[You have acquired the Basic Skill – Lv.0 Synthesis. You may learn 2 more skills.]

[Basic Skill – Lv.0 Synthesis] Lv.0 Limitation – You may synthesize Lv.-1

or lower items.

Lv.-1 or lower made it seem like a trash skill that couldn't be used. However, I took out the consolidation scroll to level it up.

[Lv.0 Basic Skill Consolidation Scroll has upgraded your synthesis skill.]
[Lv.1 Synthesis] Lv.1 Limitation – You may synthesize Lv.0 or lower items.

“There.”

Using synthesis, I combined the 2 remaining skill books, *[Lv.0 Extraction]* and *[Lv.0 Permanent Materialization]*.

[You have used Lv.1 Synthesis!] [Warning! The chances of successfully synthesizing a skill are extremely low. Would you like to proceed anyway?]

“Yes.”

Playing with probability meant little to me.

[Synthesizing!] [What will be the result? Dudududududu...]

“I didn't know you could be so lively.”

[...Extrapolating results.] [Synthesis successful!] [With great luck, the 2 items have successfully fused!] [You have obtained a new skill, Normal Skill Acquisition Scroll – Lv.0 Extraction and Permanent Materialization.]

Unsurprisingly, the synthesis succeeded.

“Huu.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I went through all this trouble for a reason.

[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]

Extraction pulled out the essence of an existence and materialization provided it a form while permanence made it last forever.

I secretly planned to use this skill for one simple and obvious reason:
to materialize my strongest weapon, stigma's magic power.

Chapter 174

Skill (3)

Stigma's magic power didn't last long separated from my body. The same applied to any other form of magic power. People could instantly materialize magic power, but it usually disappeared within 10 minutes unless they provided a constant supply to maintain its form.

[You have obtained a new skill, Normal Skill Acquisition Scroll – Lv.0 Extraction and Permanent Materialization].

However, this skill made condensing magic power and materializing it possible. Mana crystals, which usually took a long time to create, could instantly be made. The skill was still low level, but it should be possible.

[You have activated Extraction and Permanent Materialization].

I used the skill on stigma. First, I extracted it, which felt like my arm would tear off, but I clenched my teeth and endured. Stigma's magic power faintly glimmered from my arm and the skill forced it into a certain shape. Meanwhile, the pain grew more intense and spread to my shoulder and head. It felt like being trampled by dozens of horses.

“Kuuak...”

Suddenly, the pain stopped and a crystal rested on my palm when I opened my eyes. The unrefined crystal looked rocky like an uncut gem. Additionally, it gave off a white glow rather than a blue one. I checked its description.

[Lv.2 Pure Origin Mana Crystal] Lv.2 ???, Lv.2 ???

Its effects remained mysterious despite its grand name. However, I felt like I knew how to use it.

[The chief administrator is observing you with interest.]

I received a rather interesting alert. The Chief Administrator was the existence that oversaw every floor. I smiled and turned on my smartwatch. Then I typed in my desired effects to replace the question marks.

[Lv.2 Pure Origin Mana Crystal] Lv.2 Permanent Strength Increase Upon Consumption, Lv.2 Permanent Speed Increase Upon Consumption

As expected, it required zero SP and functioned like a blank check. I put one in my mouth without hesitation.

[Consuming an origin mana crystal has increased your strength by 0.05 points.] [Consuming an origin mana crystal has increased your speed by 0.05 points.]

It went up by quite a lot since my stats were still in the 2 point range. I should gain about 0.01 points in the outside world with 0.05 points in the tower.

“Great.”

It could be worthily called a cheat skill. However, my body ached and I felt drowsy. It didn’t specifically limit me in any way, but once a day was unquestionably my limit. I thought about jumping into bed until I recalled the egg.

“When are you going to hatch?”

Muninn’s egg showed no signs of hatching. *Rub, rub*— I rubbed its shiny surface to scare it.

“If you won’t hatch, I’ll extract your power and absorb it all. I’ll fry you!”

However, the egg showed no signs of change. I placed it down and stored my bed in my inventory since the egg only needed a blanket to hatch.

“Hyung’s leaving now.”

I left the waiting room after saying goodbye. I invested quite a lot into making my waiting room hospitable, but sleeping in Prestige’s hideout provided more advantages. Plus, I preferred to have some company.

“Auu, I’m so tired.”

I trudged back to the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout.

“Oh, Hajin! You’re back.”

The 3 Chameleon Troupe members grilled some meat at 11 P.M.

“Come eat.”

Cheok Jungyeong gestured with his index finger while Boss silently stared at me.

“Ah, it’s okay. I’m too tired.”

I took out my bed from my inventory as Jain and Boss’ eyes widened.

“Oh, where’d you get that bed?”

“I brought it from my waiting room.”

*[Lv.3 Comfy Bed] Lv.3 Recovery: Will fully restore your vitality in 6 hours.
Lv.3 Comfort: Will clear your mind.*

I couldn’t hold back my drowsiness and lay on my Lv.3 bed. Boss and Jain looked on with envy, but I didn’t intend on giving up my bed today. I closed my eyes, hoping the fatigue from extraction and permanent materialization would disappear.

* * *

A perilous land with fragments falling from the sky. The world was dark with no hope or light, only death. There, I resented my birth and

rejected my existence.

My parents regretted giving birth to me. They called me a curse, the origin of evil, and decided to kill me, so I killed them to survive. I cut down the very person who gave birth to me and slashed the neck of the person who used to hold me. I died that day along with my parents and became reborn.

That was my childhood and the world I lived in. I felt happy to have parents, even though they hated me, and I felt happy to have a home. However, everything disappeared after I killed them.

I wandered in the void and occasionally met people who made me smile. However, they all turned out to be schemers who wanted to use me. I killed more and more after being tricked by their smiles. Soon, the snakes began to fear me and I killed the snakes that tried to bite back. Then I met a certain man while living in this perpetual cycle. We had no reason to be together. However, he treated me honestly and told me to do what I wanted, that he would become my new fence if I wanted. I agreed, and that was when the real killing began. I never resented anyone. I simply existed to kill.

“...!”

My eyes shot open as something beat in my chest. Scenes of the past crumbled away and reality reappeared before me. I was drenched in sweat as my body trembled.

“Haa...”

Was it because I wasn't sleeping in my special bed? I ended up having a nightmare I haven't had for a long time. This was why I hated sleeping. My past always crept up, but the me in my dream was always too young to fight back.

“Huu...”

Using magic power, I controlled my blood circulation and calmed my body. However, I still couldn't understand something and opened my system log. It had recorded Kim Hajin's inner thoughts towards me and I couldn't comprehend them.

*[Longing] [Responsibility] [Affection] [Sadness Towards Your Past]
[Trust] [Desire to Look After You]*

Such embarrassing emotions didn't concern me except for the sadness towards my past.

I gritted my teeth and clenched my fists. Rage rose from the bottom of my heart as my fingernails dug into my skin.

"How laughable."

What do you know about me? Just what do you know to have such thoughts? Did you secretly investigate my past? My stomach churned. Something deep inside my subconscious squirmed and an uncontrollable hostility grew. I got up from my bed and moved according to my emotions. Then I stopped in front of his bed and looked down at him.

"..."

I wanted to ask: *What have you found out about me during the past 3 years? What is your purpose for being with me? In the end, are you also one of them?* Black magic power ignited from my hands and my shadow spread out towards him. I had to kill him before he betrayed me. I had to kill anyone suspicious.

"..."

However, my hands refused to move. The past 3 years flashed before my eyes. His inner emotions also included affection and longing. How was I supposed to interpret that? As I contemplated...

"Yaawn."

He tossed and turned. Immediately, my magic power flickered away and I took a few steps back.

"Hmm?"

Soon, he raised his upper body after blankly staring at the ceiling.

“Boss?” He called my name as his drowsy eyes met mine.

“...”

My body froze from his gaze. *Gulp*— I wanted to ask him so many questions. Where his emotions came from? Whether I could trust him and why he stayed with me. However, what came out of my mouth was...

“I’m... hungry.”

Stupid words. For a moment, he looked at me in a daze before bursting into laughter.

“*Pft*, at this hour? *Ah*... well, I guess you did a lot today.”

He jumped out of bed and headed to the kitchen.

“I’ll make you something special.”

He turned on the lights. *Tak, tak, tak, tak*. The sound of cutting vegetables and meat resounded. *Tzzzzz*. Then he turned on the burner and poured the ingredients onto the frying pan. I stood behind him and simply watched him cook.

* * *

The next day, Chae Nayun raised her sore body in the *[Lv.0 Essence of the Strait’s Hideout]*. All the guild members had woken up early and made their beds already.

“*Mmm*.”

Chae Nayun sat on the ground after her morning stretch. Then she took out her frying pan, burner, salt, and boar meat.

“Nayun, Nayun, my favorite Nayun.”

Yi Jiyeon snuggled up to her and happily giggled while the other

guild members walked on eggshells around her.

“What’s everyone doing?”

She called them over like she always did as she grilled the meat.

“*Huh?*”

“Aren’t you going to eat?”

“Y-Yeah, we, we will...”

Only then did they approach one by one.

“*Cough*, we’re really lucky to have you, Nayun.”

“I agree. What a godsend.”

Almost 2 weeks had passed since they came to the 3rd floor. Essence of the Strait’s guild members could only rely on Chae Nayun’s food.

“*Cough*, everyone, before eating...”

Kim Youngjin, the chief officer of the tower subjugation team, gathered their attention.

“Essence of Strait could only advance thanks to Chae Nayun, so let us each give her a word of grati—”

“Don’t need it.”

Chae Nayun didn’t have any opinion on the matter. She no longer expected anything from anyone and thus had no disappointments. Kim Youngjin had already acknowledged his mistake and apologized to her. She knew how difficult that was for a high-intermediate rank hero.

“O-Oh, okay. *Ah*, you can give me the tongs. I’ll grill for you.”

“Okay.”

She didn’t reject his offer. Chae Nayun left the cooking to Kim Youngjin and opened her messenger.

[Thanks again, hyung. Your advice saved us.] [Oh right, do you want to meet up sometime?]

“Is he busy?”

Two days had passed since she messaged Extra7, but he hadn’t replied. She only received messages from Shin Jonghak.

YoungFly: Where are you? Let’s hunt together if you have time.

Me: Do it with your guildmates.

YoungFly: I’m too strong for them.

Chae Nayun simply ignored him.

“Right, Nayun, are you going to buy that longsword?”

“Longsword?”

“Yeah, the Lv.3 longsword that’s being sold in the shop outside the inner wall.”

“Oh...”

Players called it the *[Brother and Sister Shop]*. A longsword perfectly suited Chae Nayun.

“I don’t know. I already have the red crystal spear.”

Without saying much, Chae Nayun secretly touched her left shoulder. Immediately, she felt a burning pain from the injury she received while fighting a Lv.3 banshee four days ago. She initially thought the injury would heal over time, but the pain only grew worse until she

couldn't even properly wield a two-handed weapon.

“...”

Chae Nayun examined her injury on the system window.

[Lv.2 Curse of the Vengeful Spirit]

The curse had only been Lv.1 yesterday. As expected, it grew stronger over time. Still, Chae Nayun pretended to be fine and asked Yi Jiyoona.

“Jiyoona, you still can't use healing factor?”

“Eh? Oh, yeah. I still don't have enough magic power. Why? Are you hurt somewhere?”

“No, that's not it.”

Pshhhu! A strange alarm suddenly rang and a holographic window popped up in the air. Medea appeared on the screen.

“Oh, it's Medea.”

The male members put down their chopsticks in front of the 3rd floor administrator.

[Hello, players. I'm Medea, it's been a while. I'm here to give you all a new goal.]

Tada— Medea snapped her fingers and a thick spire appeared on the screen.

[This is a demon spire. One is located in each of the four cardinal directions. You may think of them as control towers.] [I will reward the player or group that destroys one of these with 5000 TP.] [Each player's damage contribution will also be estimated and players with the highest contribution points will receive special rewards.] [It's no fun telling you what they are in advance, but...]

Tada— Medea snapped her fingers again. This time, 3 windows with different items popped up.

[Special Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.1 Lightning of Thor] [Artifact – High-intermediate] [Special Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.2 Wind of Odyssey] [Artifact – Low-intermediate] [Trait Recovery Coupon]

“Oh!”

Everyone’s eyes lit up. They had only heard about the so-called skill books in the community. Not to mention, these were special skill books rather than the basic ones.

“H-Hey, aren’t those like... really good?”

Chae Nayun felt especially agitated. Her injury made her more impatient.

“Calm down, everyone. We should carefully formulate our plans first.”

Kim Youngjin gathered the members for a meeting.

* * *

I left the city and entered the field as soon as I saw Medea’s announcement. I brought along a handmade bow and 20 arrows. Three skeletons appeared after I walked through the dark monster field for a bit. Then I nocked 3 arrows onto my bow. *Chweeek*— The arrows quickly pierced their heads.

— Wow, who’s that?

— That was a good shot.

— Where did he get that bow? It looks like it’s high level.

— Should we ask him?

My performance caught the attention of a few other players in the

area. I ignored their murmuring and approached the skeletons. Then I placed my hand above them and used my skill.

[You have activated Extraction and Permanent Materialization.]

The lifeless skeletons transformed into dust. However, the dust didn't scatter away and coalesced into a crystal.

[Lv.0 Skeleton Soul] Lv.0 Vengeful Spirit

At first glance, the crystal seemed useless with only a vengeful spirit. However, I could use them as grenades to blow up the demon spires after collecting them and using synthesis. I made my way back after killing the skeletons. *Tap, tap.* Someone suddenly tapped on my shoulder.

“Um... you're a player, right?”

I turned towards the voice and inwardly jumped. The white-haired Aileen stood in front of me. She looked a lot skinnier since the last time I saw her, but her unique confidence remained. As expected of a Temple of Justice hero, Aileen had survived just fine. Why was she here though? Did she recognize me? No, that was unlikely. I still wore a hood, but my equipment had completely changed since the tutorial.

“I saw you doing something just now. Is that the dismantling technique?”

Thankfully, it seemed she misunderstood my extraction skill for dismantling.

“Dismantling technique?” I changed my voice and spoke.

“Yep.”

“Why do you ask?”

“Ah, well, I have food, but I don't know how to dismantle it.”

“Oh?”

She was asking a stranger to do it for her? Should I consider her too nice or naïve? No, she would kill anyone who tried to scam her.

“You can have some if you help me!”

I suddenly received a message.

PhantomThief: Hajin, I see you. You're with Aileen, right? Keep her there and catch her attention. I'm going to try the snatch skill I just learned.

The basic snatch skill could steal items or TP from inventories.

“How about it? It doesn't hurt to use it, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I peeked over her shoulders as I spoke. I could see a woman waving excitedly from the distance.

“Sure, I'll do it.”

“Really? What level is your dismantling technique?”

“...3.”

“Reaaaally? Nice! So that's why those skeletons instantly disappeared.”

Aileen brightly smiled and tapped on the air a few times before pulling out a giant boar from her inventory. It wasn't rotten, but it wasn't fresh either. It would surely rot if I didn't dismantle it soon.

“Big, isn't it? I'll give you a fifth... no, a fourth.”

“...”

I nodded silently. Meanwhile, Jain sneaked up on Aileen. I suspected

the following was happening to Aileen's pockets: -10 TP, -20 TP, -10 TP, -20 TP...

"*Hmm...*" I examined the boar.

"W-Why? Is it too big?" Aileen stared at me with worry.

"No, it should be doable. Dismantle."

I used dismantle after Jain finished and backed away. The giant boar instantly split into meat and leather. It appeared cleanly cut with my high level dismantling.

"*Uwoah!*"

Aileen's eyes widened in surprise. I quickly messaged Jain while Aileen gawked at the boar meat.

Me: How much did you steal?

PhantomThief: Lol 989 TP. I took it all. Hahaha the kid sure had a lot, but they're all mine now.

I scratched my neck and looked at Aileen.

"*Uwoah*, look at all these!"

She placed the meat in her inventory with her tiny hands, unaware she just lost all her money. She seemed happy like she just won the lottery. I felt a bit sorry, but the food should last her 2 weeks. She could sell them to other hungry players, so I didn't feel too bad. I left Aileen behind and walked towards the undead cave I came to visit.

"*Ah*, you should take your portion!"

Aileen shouted. However, I responded without looking back.

"You can have it."

Aileen would be a formidable competitor in Medea's quest. I ended up giving her food in exchange for taking her money, but I wasn't sure if that would slow her down. Well, I just had to get first place.

Chapter 175

Skill (4)

[Boar Thigh] [Boar Neck] [Boar Belly] [Boar...]

“Great, great!”

Aileen smiled in satisfaction as she stared at her inventory. The boar that filled up her inventory had now turned into food that could be cooked. It would last her 2 weeks even if she ate 3 meals a day until she was full.

[Yongha, I got the boar dismantled.]

First, she messaged Yi Yongha since he always complained about being hungry. Aileen could now act like a reliable older sister.

FlameWizard: What? Why? -.-

“...?”

However, his reaction caught her off guard. Aileen tilted her head, wondering if he went crazy from hunger.

Me: Why not? Didn't you say you were hungry?

FlameWizard: If Aileen dismantles it, a lot of edible parts will become wasted. Dismantling a wild animal isn't easy, you know -.-

“Ah.”

So that's what worried him. Heh, what a fool. Aileen snickered as she proudly typed.

Me: I didn't do it. I asked a passerby for help.

FlameWizard: Oh? You finally got Spirit Speech to work on a person?

Me: No, my magic power hasn't recovered enough to command someone, but I can induce a positive response.

The man probably didn't notice that Aileen had used Spirit Speech when she asked him to dismantle her boar, but it most likely induced him to agree.

FlameWizard: Great! What level was his dismantling technique?

Me: Lv.3. My inventory is filled with meat now, hehe.

FlameWizard: He had a Lv.3 technique? Wow, that's amazing. Anyways, let's meet up now.

Me: See if you can buy some lettuce on your way so we can eat some wraps.

Their conversation ended as Aileen proudly walked back to the city. Not long afterward, 5 zombies rose from the ground. They carried a strange curse aura and blocked her path.

"Hmph."

Aileen snorted and unleashed her magic power. At first, she planned to simply destroy them, but decided to test how much her power had recovered since she felt great today. She condensed her magic power into a blunt weapon.

"Listen up."

Lv.1 zombies had no intelligence and only acted based on instincts. However, speaking was only a means to her power. A true Spirit Speech master wasn't restricted to just speech.

"This hammer."

She pointed to her blunt weapon formed from magic power. Suddenly, the strange power of words surrounded the weapon. This was Spirit Speech, a tangible power that transcended simple hypnosis.

“Is going to crush your heads.”

Immediately, the blunt weapon moved, or perhaps it didn't. One could only guess from the faint afterimage in the air and the 5 zombies' crushed heads.

“Huhu.”

Aileen smiled proudly. Wielding magic power felt just as natural as blood flowing through her veins despite the stat restrictions.

[Your magic power has increased by 0.02 points.]

A system alert popped up, boosting her morale even higher.

“Oh right.”

She rummaged through the zombie corpses for anything useful. However, all five Lv.1 zombies died without dropping any items.

“Absolutely trash.”

Aileen returned to Prestige with no zombies bothering her again perhaps because of her earlier display. She passed by several starving players and returned to her hideout in the city.

[Lv.0 Temple of Justice Hideout]

Aileen and Yi Yongha quickly purchased this hideout for a monthly rent of 150 TP after reading in the community that hideouts could boost rest and stat increases. Thankfully, land prices weren't as astronomical as food. She took out her frying pan and burner as soon as she entered. *Tak, tak.* As she put meat on the frying pan...

“Aileen!”

Yi Yongha ran into the hideout with a touched expression.

“Oh, you made it back just in time. Come grill this for me.”

“Before that, let me see your inventory.”

“Fine, go ahead.”

It seemed Yi Yongha couldn't believe her until he saw it with his own eyes. Aileen proudly flipped her hair back and shared her inventory.

“Wow, all that might last a month if we're frugal. Thank god we brought a boar from the 2nd floor.

“Yeah.”

Only complete idiots would forget to bring food after suffering in the highest difficulty Tutorial Town. For this reason, Aileen felt sorry for the players who came from a lower difficulty. In her eyes, they suffered because they initially chose the easy way.

“This is all thanks to me, right? I'm the one who caught that Lv.3 boar on the 2nd floor.”

“Yeah, yeah, *ssp*. Sure, *ssp*...”

Aileen half-heartedly replied while staring at the meat. She had many questions to ask, but her mind turned blank after seeing the meat. Five minutes later...

“I think they're done, Aileen.”

“Yeah, let's eat.”

The meat that took 5 minutes to cook disappeared in 1 minute.

“How about some neck meat this time?”

“Sounds good.”

Aileen took out more meat as Yi Yongha glanced at the community while grilling.

“Ah!”

“Hiik! Ah, geez, what!”

“Aileen, look at this.”

Yi Yongha showed her a public forum post.

[The Brother and Sister Shop has new items.] Posted by: Prementium

The Brother and Sister Shop has a Lv.3 Magic Amplification Staff and three Lv.2 equipment. Oh, they have potions too, the standard mana potions and health potions. They also have other potions, which all average around 150 TP. These potions are leagues above the trash potions sold in the Tutorial Town...

“Magic amplification staff?”

Aileen’s eyes shone.

“Let’s go after we finish. If anything, we can buy some mana potions.”

“Good idea. How much money do you have?”

“I have about 1500 TP.”

“That much?”

“As you know, my gift specializes in hunting monsters.”

Yi Yongha flipped the meat as he laughed. Meanwhile, Aileen fell into thought. *We have about 2500 TP in total since I have around 1000 TP. We should be able to buy something nice. Exactly how much do I have again?* Aileen opened her inventory to check her balance. Then...

“Eh?”

She blanked out. Then closed her inventory and opened it again thinking something went wrong with the system. However, nothing changed. Aileen rubbed her eyes and looked again, confused and flustered. She blinked and rummaged through her pockets.

“What’s wrong?”

Sssk, sssk. Yi Yongha asked as Aileen searched her pockets like a crazy woman.

“Ah, *um*, you see...”

Her TP had disappeared without a single one left. The TP she worked her ass off to gather. *Where, just where did it...*

Aileen spoke with a trembling voice.

“M-My money, it... it disappeared...”

Tears flowed from her eyes as she softly muttered those words.

* * *

[Lv.5 Grahamson’s Cave]

I stood in front of a cave where the demon Grahamson lived. I wanted to find an item here. It wasn’t quite good enough to be called a hidden secret, but could still be considered too good as an ordinary item.

“*Hmm...*”

Click. I checked the Desert Eagle before entering just to see if the trigger had jammed or dulled.

[Warning! You may lose up to 3 lives if killed by a demon!]

A system alert popped up as I checked my equipment. Having 7 lives could also be disadvantageous since it made players careless in battle. Honestly, unless a death resulted from very clean PvP (Player versus

Player), each death shaved off at least 2 lives. Furthermore, being killed by one of the tower's 4 hostile races (demons, celestials, giants, and hell wraiths) also shaved off at least 3-4 lives. As a result, each player could only revive 2-3 times.

"Thank you for the advice. I'll be careful."

As always, I politely replied to the system. Then I checked the Book of Truth once again.

[Lv.6 Grahamson] Lives in the Lv.5 Grahamson's Cave. He is a monster trainer who commands an army of undead monsters against Prestige. Strength: Necromancy. Weakness: Physical resilience.

The Lv. 6 Grahamson's highest stat should be 5-6 points. I should be able to beat him due to his low physical resilience. One bullet from a shotgun should do it. Still, I fully prepared beforehand. First, I took out the dwarven supercar from my inventory.

"Oh."

It looked just as beautiful and elegant the first time I saw it. I hopped on and blessed it with *[Lv.3 Yggdrasil's leaf]*.

[The dwarven supercar has been granted a blessing!] [Lv.3 Yggdrasil's leaf whispers its ability to you.] [TIP! Lv.3 Yggdrasil's leaf can grant permanent blessings to 5 pieces of equipment.] [Would you like to permanently bless the dwarven supercar?]

Was the system helping me? I nodded.

[The dwarven supercar has been granted a permanent blessing!] [All effects have permanently increased by 1 level.] [A dormant magic effect has awakened.] Lv.2 Like the Wind: You can increase or decrease the amount of friction. For a short period, you may glide through the air at a low altitude.

"Oh?"

It could also fly on top of being amphibious?

“Amazing.”

I drove the dwarven supercar inside after checking my items. Ssss— The car quietly entered the cave. The pitch-black surroundings lit up as I turned on the car lights. After about 15 minutes of driving...

“Hm?”

The cave began to rumble. *Dudududu*— To be more precise, something seemed to be digging up from the ground. I stopped the car and carefully observed my surroundings.

“Oh, undead monsters.”

From the ground, undead monsters sprouted like rice in a field. At least 100, 200, or 300... However, the army didn’t particularly make me nervous since they were all Lv.1 or Lv.2 with a few Lv.3.

“Pft.”

I inadvertently snickered. Unfortunately for them, the dwarven supercar also had offensive capabilities. I just had to drive fast enough to run them over. As always, weaklings didn’t pose a problem.

Guooooo—

Kegelgelgel—

Hundreds of zombies, skeletons, ghouls, and will-o-wisps advanced from all sides. I simply stepped on the accelerator. Sss... The magic engine roared and the Young Dwarf’s Dexterity also applied to my offensive driving. *Bzzzzzz—!* A thunderous explosion rang out. The dwarven supercar shot forward with a golden light and crushed everything it touched, unaffected by terrain, height, or walls. Zombies, skeletons, and ghouls all scattered in the air.

[Your driving technique has improved to Lv.4] Your perception of roads has reached the creative level of a genius.

It only took 10 minutes for the above alert to pop up. The army of

monsters had been decimated by the time I finished my crazy joyride inside the huge cave.

“Auu, I feel dizzy now.”

The smell of blood and the dizziness from driving almost made me retch, so I got off the car to collect my breath. Magic power suddenly ignited in front of me as I blocked my nose and frowned.

“...!”

A beam of magic power filled with killing intent hurled towards me. It came from a *[Lv.3 Skeleton Mage]* with blue light flickering in its hollow eyes. I couldn't dodge in time, but I didn't need to.

[You have activated the skill, Extraction and Permanent Materialization.]

I stood still and activated my skill. The beam of light stopped in front of my face and condensed into a solid substance. *Tk*— The cube-shaped lump of magic power dropped to the ground.

“Whew, thought I would die there. That surprised me.”

Shouldn't it shout out a skill or something before attacking? I sighed in relief and picked up the cube.

[Lv.3 Skeleton Mage's Curse Crystal]

I stored it in my inventory since it could surely be used for something. Then I raised my Desert Eagle and immediately fired. The bullet pierced the mage's head and the light in its eyes died.

“Wait, come to think of it...”

Taking all the items on the ground would be complicated. I looked around the huge cave littered with corpses and bones and loot scattered among them.

“I'll deal with Grahamson first and pick them up later.”

I hopped back on the dwarven supercar and drove deeper into the cave. Soon, I arrived at a dead end with a throne in a large space. Grahamson sat on the throne imposingly as I got off the car.

“A human?”

Grahamson muttered. I didn't say anything and simply walked forward with my gun. *Tap, tap*. My eerie footsteps rang out in the empty cave.

“This is the problem with humans.”

Grahamson continued as I transformed the Desert Eagle into a shotgun. I needed to enter into shooting range and he should've tried to stop each of my footsteps.

“They are incapable of understanding who is in front of them and how to properly act.”

However, Grahamson remained arrogant and only muttered the lines of a third rate villain. I continued forward and ignored his useless ramblings. Soon, I reached the appropriate distance and checked my shotgun's chamber. It contained 2 shells.

“Foolish human...”

“You're the fool, idiot.”

“You dare!”

I aimed at the demon from 20 meters away. However, Grahamson didn't even seem to recognize my weapon.

“What's that?”

“You don't have to know. You won't need to anyway.”

KWANG! I pulled the trigger as I replied. A shotgun shell shot forward, scattering a trail of magic power behind it.

“Kuhuk!”

The bullet struck the demon’s chest.

“Y-You trash...!”

To my surprise, Grahamson withstood the first bullet. It seemed he wore quite a high level armor despite it being made of leather.

“Rise, my crea—”

However, a third rate villain deserved a cliché death. *KWANG!* I fired once again at his chest. The demon race’s weakness wasn’t its head, but the heart.

“...”

Grahamson died without being able to finish his sentence or summon his creations. He slumped and landed head first onto his throne. *Ssss—* Then his corpse turned into dust and scattered. Only a single book remained in his wake. I approached the throne and grabbed what I came for.

*[Lv.6 Special Magic Record Book – Demon’s Cunning Speech] [Unique]
Recorded Page: The owner of this book may cast the spells recorded inside using their magic power.*

This book contained several skills and would serve me well. Using this as a medium, I could use the following effect skills:

Deceitful Quest — You may arbitrarily grant quests to players. The difficulty, rank, and reward of the quest can be set by the user. The reward does not have to be paid.

This skill would be perfect for pretending to be an NPC and ordering players around. After all, players were crazy when it came to quests.

Suggestive Voice — You may cast a hypnotic suggestion on yourself or others. However, you cannot make unrealistic or detailed commands. The effect of the hypnotic suggestion will increase with the amount of magic

power used (more effective when cast on yourself or targets with low intelligence). When used, you may change your voice for 30 minutes (the hypnotic suggestion's effect may increase or decrease depending on how trustworthy your voice sounds).

Casting hypnotic suggestions on others wasn't particularly useful since it wouldn't work on anyone stronger than me. However, self-hypnosis would be incredibly useful for training.

Cowardly Lie: You may infuse magic power into your lies towards players or NPCs. Overly unrealistic or nonsensical lies will not work, but believable lies will become more trustworthy.

This... *Tiring*— My messenger rang as I looked through the book.

CaptainBritain: Hajin, have you visited the shop?.

It came from Rachel.

Me: Shop?

CaptainBritain: The Brother and Sister Shop. That's the only well-known shop in Prestige. Ah, have you not checked the community lately?

Me: No, I didn't have time.

CaptainBritain: You can't do that!! (# ` Ⅲ `)

A smile emerged on my face. Rachel never said much in person, but her texts always seemed incredibly expressive. Was it because of emoticons? She sounded especially cute.

CaptainBritain: Anyways, this Brother and Sister Shop is currently the most important named shop in the outer city. They're selling potions now and its cheaper and higher quality than the ones in the inner city. I'm standing in line, so you should hurry over as well...

As I wondered how to reply to her long message...

— What is this place?

Someone's voice echoed out from the other side of the cave.

Chapter 176

Killing Jin Sahyuk (1)

I looked towards the far side of the cave. The voice belonged to someone I knew well. With a bobbed haircut and the red crystal spear, Chae Nayun nervously bit her lips as she wandered around the cave entrance.

“...”

I looked at her from a spot where she couldn't see me. A bitter feeling rose from the deepest corner of my heart. Was it sorrow or guilt? An emotion that couldn't be described.

— Hey, hey, come out.

Chae Nayun waved her spear around, suspicious of any traps. The way she moved her hand seemed somewhat strange.

— Is it empty?

She stepped into the cave, but I couldn't let that happen. I took out the *[Lv.6 Demon's Cunning Speech]* book I just acquired and infused it with stigma's magic power. I wanted to activate the skill, deceitful quest.

[Assign a quest to the Player 478 m away.] [Quest Info] Rank — Intermediate, Summary — Warning! This cave is full of traps and Lv. 4 monsters. It is recommended you enter with at least 8 individuals. Detailed quest information will only be revealed with at least a group of 8. Reward ???

— Whoa!

Chae Nayun widened her eyes and blankly stared into the air.

— Yes! It's a quest! I found a quest!

Then she quickly cupped her hands over her mouth and looked around.

— *Hmm...*

She slowly backed off after checking that nobody overheard her excited holler. Then her next actions seemed a bit strange. She began to gather large leaves and branches to cover up the cave entrance.

“...”

I bitterly smiled. At least she had grown a little smarter. I collected the item drops scattered throughout the cave while Chae Nayun ran around. I received a lot thanks to my high luck, but only a few could be used.

[Lv.1 Skill Consolidation Scroll] [Inventory Expansion Coupon] [Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.0 Summon Skeleton] [Lv.3 Skeleton Warrior's Bone Armor]

The skill consolidation scroll could be used to upgrade [Lv.1 Synthesis] and the rest could be sold.

— *Mmm, perfect.*

A voice echoed from the distance. Chae Nayun nodded in satisfaction at the completely hidden entrance before returning.

“*Whew...*”

I went back to what I needed to do after Chae Nayun left. I looked at the countless corpses on the ground. They had all increased my skill proficiency, but one problem remained.

“How am I going to get through all these?”

[Inventory] Lv.0 Skeleton Crystal x 123, Lv1. Zombie's Vengeful Spirit x 121, Lv.1 Ghoul's Evil Heart x 108

For 2 hours, I used extraction and permanent materialization on all the undead in the cave. Of the 400 corpses, I successfully converted 352. With my luck, extraction and permanent materialization had a success rate of almost 90%.

[Basic Skills (3/3)] [Lv.3 Extraction and Permanent Materialization (2 slots)] [Lv.2 Synthesis (1 slot)]

Extraction and permanent materialization grew to Lv.3, but I received an even better harvest.

[By repeatedly using skills, you have acquired the special stat, spirit power.] [Your status window will now display spirit power along with vitality and magic power. Spirit power will be consumed when using skills.] [You may now train spirit power.]

Skills required spirit power since they were considered the power of souls in this world. Skills required players to use their vitality before acquiring spirit power. That's why I had to consume 13 health potions in the last 2 hours.

[TIP! Players can fuse magic power and spirit power.] [The fused spirit power will be stored in your heart.] [This is recommended for easier activation of skills.]

"No, that's okay."

Most players would opt to do what the system suggested since fusing it with magic power made it easier to wield.

Spirit power could only be obtained from the tower. I needed to make spirit power into my new weapon since I only had Master Sharpshooter and aether. However, I wouldn't be able to use skills outside the tower if I fused spirit power with magic power.

[You have chosen not to fuse spirit power with magic power. Spirit power scatters in your bloodstream. Using it will require training to elaborately manipulate.] [An attribute has been assigned to your spirit power based on

your current skills.] [Your spirit power has acquired the matter interference attribute.] [Skills of this attribute will rank up while skills of other attributes will have their efficiency lowered.]

Obvious attributes like water, wind, earth, and fire existed along with more unique ones like eternal resistance, which Kim Suho would gain, and reality manipulation, which Jin Sahyuk would gain.

“Matter interference...”

Mine sounded like an inferior version of reality manipulation. I wasn’t sure whether it was good or bad, but it seemed to suit me. I exited the cave and left behind a Lv.3 longsword from a random dice for Chae Nayun.

“Ah, I’m so tired.”

I walked through Prestige’s eternal darkness and returned to the city.

“Everyone! Look at this!”

However, the city seemed a bit louder than usual. A group of people held onto pickets and shouted.

“We have to join hands!”

I looked at their pickets.

*[Looking for players of ordinary backgrounds to join our alliance!]
[Ordinary players must join hands against the tyranny and information control of guilds!] [The Ordinary Player Alliance is waiting for you!]*

“I guess it’s about time.”

An annoying group had begun to form. The Ordinary Player Alliance was no different from a cult that practiced pyramid schemes. On paper, they aimed to bring together players who weren’t heroes or djinns since guilds and Pandemonium formed cartels of their own. That sounded admirable, but they were incredibly corrupt and violent. I ignored them for now and walked to my shop.

[Riry Shop]

Soon, I spotted the shiny sign I made. A long line of players waited out front. Members of the Ordinary Player Alliance also stood among them.

“Everyone, ordinary players must unite! Guilds refuse to provide us with any information. They look down on us and ignore us!”

One particularly passionate man caught my attention. He screamed his lungs out to convince others around him.

“I, Zurahan, will help you! I will help carry your burden!”

He gave off a positive first impression, but was actually this floor’s main villain. *Should I just kill him now or should I watch his foolishness play out more?*

“Hmm.”

I decided to leave him alone for now. Killing him wouldn’t be too meaningful since he would just revive and a sudden attack would only increase his follower’s faith. I passed by the long line and entered through the back door. Many players roamed inside and I spotted Rachel among them. She looked at something with a serious face.

“This...”

She seemed to want the Lv.3 wrist protector. For a swordsman, a wrist protector was one of the most important pieces of equipment. However, she shook her head and turned to the potions.

“Berserker potion, external injury healing potion, mana recovery potion...”

She murmured about what to buy.

“Vice leader, you’ve been doing the same thing for the past 30 minutes.”

A guild member called out to her as the door opened and two familiar faces entered.

“Ay, don’t be too depressed Aileen. It happens. At least we don’t have to worry about food. We can even sell some of it.”

“...”

Aileen looked like she would cry as Yi Yongha consoled her.

“Now, let’s take a look. You wanted to see the magic amplification staff, right?”

“I don’t have any money, so I can’t buy it.”

Aileen muttered with a sorrowful voice. Yi Yongha scratched his head.

“Who knows, maybe it’s cheap.”

“It says it costs 2200 TP right there.”

[Lv.3 Magic Amplification Staff – 2200 TP] Aileen pointed to the staff inside a display case. Then she took a deep breath and turned around to hold back her tears. Rachel’s voice rang out.

“Owner, I’ll take 5 of these.”

She finally decided to buy some potions.

“I’m buying in bulk, so can you knock off 100 TP?”

Rachel tried to haggle, but...

“No.”

Kiri firmly rejected her.

I stood in front of Kiri and Henry after the shop closed. They seemed cheery and eager to tell me how much profit they made.

“How much did we make?”

“Look!”

“A lot!”

They opened the safe and showed me... 7000 TP. Players generally hesitated to use their money in the tower’s early stages, but they didn’t hesitate to buy potions that could save their lives. The player shop didn’t sell any potions, which greatly benefited me.

“Good, good.”

Now, I should use this money to buy more land. I already thought of a long-term solution for redistributing TP from players to NPCs. To do this properly...

“Here, take this.”

Henry and Kiri needed to grow, so I gave them a total of 4 books. Two would teach them how to read and write, one taught business management, and the other was a skill book called *Law of Thinking*.

“What are these?”

“They’re books you need to study. For one... no, two... no, whenever you’re free, study them.”

“We’re studying?”

“Wow!”

“*Hmm?*”

They quickly snatched the books and turned around. Their reactions surprised me since I thought they’d hate studying. *Stomp, stomp—*

They ran up to the 2nd floor as though I would take the books back. I watched the two children with a proud smile.

“Study hard, okay?”

I murmured to myself and left. Now, I should buy the land I had been eyeing. I walked to an empty plot devoid of even a single grass.

“Um, I’d like to buy the land from here to way over there.”

[Would you like to purchase the following plot of land for 6000 TP?]

“Yes.”

This plot of land looked desolate for now, but that would change after 33 demons died. It would become the only fertile land outside the inner city and would produce a crazy amount of food with the magic power in the land. I planned to make a farm, selling cultivated crops to players and distributing them to NPCs. With this, Prestige would become habitable.

Kim Suho would surely change his mind that this place wasn’t a pit of despair where the administrators and players treated NPCs like second-class citizens. No matter how much effort I put in, Kim Suho was the real hero who would climb to the tower’s peak.

* * *

Outside the tower, Yun Seung-Ah called Kim Suho to her office. She needed to give him something with only a week left until the Tower of Wish’s second opening.

“You’re here?”

“Yes, guild leader.”

“Come sit.”

Yun Seung-Ah smiled as he sat in front of her. First, she placed a ticket

on the table as his eyes widened.

“You know what this is, right? It’s a black ticket.”

“...”

Kim Suho stared at it in a daze before looking back at Yun Seung-Ah.

“H-How did you get this?”

“*Huhu*, I have my connections.”

Yun Seung-Ah proudly crossed her arms. Honestly, she practically begged her former master Yoo Sihyuk, saying it was her final wish. In front of her tears, Yoo Sihyuk had no choice but to ask his best friend, the famous Vast Expanse. Vast Expanse offered it for the cheap, discounted price of 3 billion won. Kim Hajin had more or less bought this ticket for her after he paid 20 billion won for her apartment. She finally had money to buy this ticket.

“Anyways, I got you the best ticket. I have high expectations for you.”

“Ah, but.” Kim Suho scratched his neck.

“What? Do you need something else?”

“No, it’s not that. You see, I found one too.”

“What?”

Kim Suho smiled bashfully and took out a green ticket. Yun Seung-Ah stared at it before smiling.

“A green ticket, it’s not bad. You can bring someone with you then.”

Kim Suho stared at Yun Seung-Ah.

“Except the guild leader and vice guild leader. We’re too busy.”

“Oh, I see. I understand.”

“As I said before, you don’t have to be so formal with me. Oh, also.”

Yun Seung-Ah took out a huge box from underneath her desk. It contained the leather armor Kim Hajin had made for Kim Suho.

“I was surprised too when I received this.”

Yun Seung-Ah wanted to know how Kim Hajin made this armor and had a professional analyzed it 7 times.

“It’s an armor rivaling an intermediate rank artifact.”

“*Whoa*, intermediate rank artifact?”

Kim Suho's expression brightened. He was unexpectedly a big fan of equipment.

“Yep, it’s made from the leather of a high-intermediate rank, grade 1 mountain tyrant.”

She opened the box as she explained. Kim Suho became lovestruck when he laid eyes on it.

“Amazing design, isn’t it?”

“Y-Yes, it’s fantastic.”

He nodded with his mouth open. The analyst who appraised it wanted to rate it as high-intermediate rank simply because of its design despite it being on the lower end of intermediate rank.

“Take this. It’s a manual written by the maker.”

“The maker? Who is it?”

“Kim Hajin.”

Kim Suho slightly flinched.

“Ha, Hajin?”

“Yep, apparently he received something from the tower that helps him craft items. Who knew he could make something so amazing?”

Kim Suho read the armor’s effects and looked at it once again.

“You don’t look too happy.”

“No, I am. It’s just that...”

Kim Suho pouted. “I’d rather he came to see me.”

“*Pft.*”

Yun Seung-Ah found his complaint adorable. “He’s busy too. Be understanding.”

“But guild leader, didn’t you meet him?”

“...That’s because we’re neighbors.”

Kim Hajin’s status had elevated to being a great benefactor, but she felt too embarrassed to explain. For the record, her apartment now belonged to Evandel.

“Tell him I said thanks if you see him again.”

“Okay. Oh, he left another gift too.”

“Another one?”

This time, Yun Seung-Ah took out a small notebook.

“This is?”

“Memorize it before you go. Hajin left it for you.”

The cover of the notebook contained the following title: *[Tutorial Guide Book]*.

“He said he’ll be waiting for you.”

“Ah, I see.”

Kim Suho silently laughed after hearing this. Then he slowly opened the notebook. The first page was densely packed.

Hey, has it been 3 years already? Well, writing a greeting feels too awkward, so I’ll just skip it. I’m sure we don’t need it anyway. This notebook is a guide for the tutorial. I’m sure you can plow through any obstacles on your own, but I prepared it just in case. Don’t show this to anyone else. Don’t even tell anyone about it. I won’t be able to clear this tower, but it should be possible for you. I trust you. I made you an armor too, so don’t disappoint me.

“What a long introduction.”

Kim Suho grinned and began to read the rest. At times, he seemed expressionless and sometimes he snickered. Yun Seung-Ah couldn’t help but grow curious.

“W-What’s so funny?”

She stealthily reached out, but Kim Suho turned and rejected her. He didn’t change his mind even though she pouted and narrowed her eyes at him.

* * *

Another 2 weeks passed in Prestige. The new tutorial began 10 days ago and several factions appeared in Prestige.

Medea’s quest hadn’t progressed at all. I hindered everyone who tried to challenge any demon spire and borrowed Cheok Jungyeong or Boss’ power when I couldn’t do it alone.

An ill rumor began floating around the community because of it, but I couldn't care less. First place would be mine and I had no intention of giving it up to anyone.

"By the way, are you sure those things will work?"

"Of course."

Today, I finally left Prestige to destroy the control towers.

"They're more than enough."

I reaffirmed Cheok Jungyeong's doubt and took out a grenade from my inventory.

[Lv.5 Cluster of Hundreds of Vengeful Spirits] Lv.5 Explosion

I made this cluster of vengeful spirits by synthesizing hundreds of undead crystals together. Simply hitting a demon spire should send it crumbling after I imbued this with an ignition attribute using stigma's magic power.

"Just that tiny thing is enough?" Cheok Jungyeong doubtfully asked again.

"Yep. We're going to destroy 1 tower every day for the next 3 days."

"Mm, Boss?"

Jain turned to Boss and asked. Boss fiddled with a mosquito bite on her finger and quickly shoved her hand in her pocket.

"What?"

"We have to inscribe that."

"That?"

"You know, Hajin's signature."

She meant the black lotus symbol.

“...”

Boss nodded and unleashed her magic power, which became a black lotus that inscribed itself on the ground.

“Is it okay to do this? Won’t people know it was us?”

“It doesn’t matter.”

Boss firmly spoke. Well, now was around the time the Chameleon Troupe’s name and strength began to spread.

“Oh right, I’m returning to Earth for a bit after we knock down the 3 towers.”

“Earth? Again?”

“Yeah.”

I didn’t have anything else to worry about and she would soon arrive as well.

“And I’m going back down to the 2nd floor when I come back.”

“2nd floor? Why?”

Boss curtly asked, but I only smiled.

“I need to do something, but it won’t take long. I’ll bring back some food too.”

“Always a secret.”

Boss stuck out her lips and grumbled, but didn’t dig any further.

“I’m throwing it now.” I raised my hand holding the grenade.

“Is that really enough? That tower looks real sturdy.”

“Wouldn’t it be faster to just barge in and destroy everything?”

Jain, Cheok Jungyeong, and even Boss doubtfully looked at me. I didn’t say anything. I made this vengeful spirit grenade by repeatedly using *[Lv.2 Synthesis]* and perfectly threw it like a baseball pitcher. *Whiiiiish*— The grenade soared through the air towards the demon spire. My aim and form looked perfect thanks to Master Sharpshooter. *Tk*. The grenade landed, but nothing happened at first.

“Hey, kid. Nothing’s hap—”

As Cheok Jungyeong furrowed his brows... *Booom*— The grenade exploded and a shockwave pulsed out. *KWAGWAGWAGWANG*—! Then a heaven-shaking explosion followed.

“Oh?”

Cheok Jungyeong’s eyebrows jumped in surprise. It only took 3 seconds for a single grenade to destroy the tower. Fragments rained from the sky and a cloud of dust rose. Just like that, the grenade toppled the demon spire and I still had two left.

Chapter 177

Killing Jin Sahyuk (2)

I destroyed the east, west, and north control towers with Cheok Jungyeong, Jain, and Boss. The other players should discover the gate to the 4th floor within a week after they destroy the south tower.

[Player Extra7 has greatly contributed to Medea's quest.] [The performance ranking for Medea's quest has been updated.] [You have gained Medea's interest.] [The remarkable power of your explosives has unlocked an achievement.] [Terrorist] Destroy 3 or more buildings with a single explosion. [You have acquired a trait!]

“Oh?”

I received several alerts, but the trait surprised me the most. The Tower of Wish featured unlockable achievements that gave bonus rewards for being the first to complete it. Players rarely met the requirements, but receiving a trait was even rarer.

[Bomber] [Low-intermediate rank] [Special attribute] [Static] Explosive Reinforcement — Will increase the power of explosives by 30%. The explosion attribute may be added to certain objects. The power of the explosion depends on the object's value or rank. The object will disappear after exploding.

I received quite a good trait. I would've been happy with even a low rank one and basically just received a free gift.

“Oi, can I fight those guys?”

Cheok Jungyeong cracked his knuckles. I looked out and spotted the demons that survived the tower's collapse.

[Lv.4 Demon Foot Soldier] [Lv.5 Demon Soldier] [Lv.6 Demon Centurion]

The Lv.6 demon would be a bit tricky, but Boss and Cheok Jungyeong should have no trouble.

“Do as you wish.”

Cheok Jungyeong immediately activated his skill, *[Charging]*. His massive body grew even bigger. *Guooo*— And magic power covered his body like fire. Then he shouted at the demons.

“Come!”

Despite his words, he was the one who impatiently charged towards them. *KOONG!* The Lv.6 demon centurion flew back with a single blow.

* * *

[Lv.5 Chameleon Troupe's Hideout] Your vitality will recover 30% faster. After waking up, your stats and skill will increase faster by 7%.

We returned to our hideout after working up a sweat. I didn't mean to brag, but our hideout suddenly jumped to Lv.5 thanks to me. Unlike other players who rented, I fully purchased ours and expanded it with several handmade pieces of furniture. It contained 4 masterpiece beds (made by Kim Hajin) and 2 masterpiece couches (made by Kim Hajin). Furthermore, I also built a shower room and turned the entire basement into a training room. Jain even stole an air purifier from a noble's castle. Our hideout was undoubtedly the best in all of Prestige.

“Ah, my home. I love the air here.”

Jain hopped on the couch, full of smiles. Boss sat next to her and opened the community page. Recently, Boss liked to browse the community. I couldn't blame her since this place didn't feature any forms of entertainment.

Other players had fun adventuring, finding quests, and learning skills, but Boss didn't seem interested in any of those. She hadn't even learned any skills yet and seemed pickier than me.

“Boss, aren’t you hungry?”

“I already ate.”

Recently, Boss had been acting quite curt around me. I still didn’t know why. Was it because of the community?

I slowly peeked at her screen. Players could see what each other did once they became friends.

[Returnee from a Ruined World – Chapter 19] I remembered my home when I lost him. A world that no longer existed. Families and friends who lived there. Suddenly, I was struck with sorrow. It felt like the heavens pressed down on me... I will not die here. I will survive no matter what and drag him down from his throne. I will kill him with my own hands. That’s why I lived... Just you wait. My soul rose from the bottom of my heart.

[To be continued.] 5 TP per chapter! I am aiming for at least 10,000 characters per chapter! With my skill, story imprint, you will have a more realistic reading experience! Readers who donate TP may decide a character’s name!

“...”

Boss was reading a webnovel on some unknown player’s profile. It slightly surprised me. Of course, I recalled writing something like this in the original story.

[Ordinary players decided to do what they were best at after contemplating how to earn TP: creating novels, manhwas, alcohol, and cooking.]

However, I didn’t expect Boss to read a novel. She pressed on the screen after finishing chapter 19.

Would you like to donate 75 TP to the player Wallet? [Yes] Player Wallet has gifted you with a character name coupon!

She even donated to the guy. I became curious about what name she would give the character. Cheok Jungyeong suddenly asked while I looked at her screen.

“Oi, newbie.”

“...Yes?”

“What’s the most dangerous thing here?”

“Most dangerous thing?”

“Yeah, I’m looking for something or someone worthy enough to fight with my life on the line.”

Cheok Jungyeong stretched his muscles. He still wanted to fight after the Lv.6 demon centurion? I pondered about the most dangerous thing in Prestige.

“Other than the demon king, it would probably be the banshee.”

“Banshee?”

“Yeah, it’s hard to deal with its curse.”

The banshee’s curse led to death unless treated immediately. Not just a singular death, but a true death. This curse prevented players from leaving the tower and caused them to slowly suffer for up to 3 months before dying. Being able to revive didn’t mean anything. The curse wouldn’t lift upon death and would continue to follow the player.

“I see.”

“You should tell me immediately if a banshee curses you.”

I should be able to get rid of it with extraction if the curse remained at Lv.1.

“*Heh*, you think I’d get done in by something like a curse?”

“Well, the same goes for Boss and Jain. Just tell me immediately if a banshee curses you.”

With that, I turned to Boss' screen once again. However, she seemed to have already submitted the character name and browsed through the public forum.

“*Cough*, then I'll be going now.”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jain called out as I got up.

“Can you make some food before you go? I'm hungry, Hajin. You always only ask Boss.”

“You're not going to train before you go?”

I could understand Jain, but even Cheok Jungyeong expressed regret. It must be because I've been training with him recently. It was hellish enough to kill me, but I barely held on with self-hypnosis. *I can still do it. I don't feel pain.* I barely kept up with him with these 2 hypnotic suggestions.

“Do you want to return to Earth with me?”

“No, I like it here. It's fun fighting with my strength restricted.”

Cheok Jungyeong smiled as though he truly enjoyed it.

“If you say so.”

I quickly went over to the kitchen to cook a boar steak for Jain.

[Lv.3 Kim Hajin's Boar Steak]

“Wow. How is it Lv.3? It's surprising no matter how many times I see it.”

I smiled from Jain's compliment and teleported to my waiting room. Then I stretched and took a deep breath. One good thing about the waiting room was its sunlight. Muninn's egg bathed under the warm light.

“Wait.”

I examined the egg closer.

“I knew it!”

It had grown bigger. Was it about to hatch? I smiled and sat next to it. I planned to leave immediately, but decided to wait for 30 minutes. The egg surely needed its master’s love.

“Mmm.”

I held it in my embrace.

* * *

[Lv.??? Highest Difficulty Tutorial Town]

The highest difficulty Tutorial Town troubled many players including Chae Nayun and Aileen. It also gained quite a bit of notoriety outside the tower. However, Kim Suho currently led a leisurely lifestyle. He couldn’t avoid receiving less from mercenary missions, but managed to gather the 1000 TP by being extremely frugal about living space and food.

Kim Hajin’s tutorial guide book contained the best haggling prices for various shops and inns. Other than this, it only gave general advice and told Kim Suho to look for things on his own. This led Kim Suho to find several hidden secrets.

“...?”

It first advised him to: *[Walk slow and steady to find hidden secrets. There’s no need to hurry. Direction is more important than speed.]* Following this, Kim Suho carefully explored the outskirts of the town and encountered someone unexpected.

“...”

“...”

Kim Suho stood in a daze at the girl sitting on a bench like a thug. The unexpected encounter caught them both off guard.

“I’m in a bad mood, so screw off.”

The girl broke the silence first as Kim Suho dryly coughed.

“I had a feeling I’d meet you here.”

“I said screw off.”

Kim Suho observed Jin Sahyuk’s condition. Her hair looked disheveled, her clothes had turned into a mess, and her lips swelled from stress. She clearly wasn’t having a good time.

“You don’t look... too good.”

Kim Suho honestly spoke as she shot back.

“You looking to die right now?”

“...”

He didn’t react to the provocation and simply sighed. They walked completely different paths. Still, she was the only remaining person from his home world. Kim Suho decided to talk things out like the saying, *A battle can be won without fighting*. He took out some jerky from his inventory, which he got from a boar that terrorized a farm.

“Do you want some?”

“You can shove it up your ass.”

Jin Sahyuk rejected his offer before getting up and glaring at him. She looked ferocious like usual.

“I want to kill you right now, but you’re far behind in line.”

“Line?”

“That’s right. You got pushed back to 237. You should thank everyone else.”

“There are 236 people in front of me?”

Kim Suho smiled bitterly. However, it didn’t take long to come to terms with it since Jin Sahyuk had always been a troublemaker in his hometown.

“You’ll still only be number 2 after I kill them all, so don’t count your chickens before they hatch.”

“What?”

Kim Suho frowned and couldn’t quite understand. Jin Sahyuk wanted to kill someone else more than him? Who could it... *Ah!*

“Are you talking about Kim Hajin?”

“Is that his name?”

Jin Sahyuk grinned. Kim Suho’s expression stiffened since he understood that smile.

“I wanted to kill him before I even knew his name.”

Jin Sahyuk added apathetically as Kim Suho placed his hand on his scabbard. Seeing this, Jin Sahyuk instantly unleashed her magic power.

“You’ll die the moment you take that out.”

“...”

Kim Suho silently faced off against her. His sword shone inside its sheathe as Jin Sahyuk’s magic power surged. Kim Suho’s hostility and Jin Sahyuk’s killing intent formed a cold and heavy atmosphere.

However, he soon gave up on attacking after realizing that he worried about the wrong person.

“Heh.”

A small smile emerged on his face as he recalled a past incident.

“Didn’t you already lose to him?”

“What?”

Jin Sahyuk’s face instantly distorted.

“I didn’t see it clearly, but didn’t you get done in by a single coin?”

“...”

“I bet the same thing will happen even if you challenge him now.”

Kim Suho provoked her, but she didn’t say anything. She felt slightly odd for some reason. Not rage, but an uneasy feeling that bothered her. However, Jin Sahyuk still didn’t know why she felt this way.

“Hajin is the same.”

The tutorial guide book, a leather armor rivaling an intermediate rank artifact, and his career as Fenrir. Kim Suho felt certain Kim Hajin was just as strong as him, if not stronger.

“Screw off.”

Jin Sahyuk shot back. Suddenly...

“Suho! This is where you were?”

Kim Suho’s companions finally found him. He first met the Fermun brother and sister half a year ago and decided to travel together after meeting them in the tutorial. Kim Suho relaxed his hand and Jin Sahyuk also calmed down.

“What are you doing here? Yeonghan is looking for you.”

“*Pft*, I see you still have annoying flies around you.”

“Who’s this? I’m not like that!”

The older sister, Venessa Fermun, cut in. “If anything, it’s natural for a flower to attract butterflies.”

Vanessa bashfully grabbed the hem of Kim Suho’s shirt. Jin Sahyuk’s eyes narrowed in disappointment. However, Vanessa tactlessly pointed at Jin Sahyuk and laughed.

“From what I can see, you’re a butterfly too.”

“Shut your trap if you don’t want to die, crazy bitch,” Jin Sahyuk retorted.

* * *

I arrived home. Four weeks had passed since the last time. Thankfully, Evandel did just fine and became the leader of a small group that included Hayang, Haeyeon, and a 4 year old kid from the next block.

“*Mm*, so you don’t want to go anywhere?”

“I like it here!” Evandel replied and went back into her tent.

“...”

I felt slightly flustered alone. A tent sat in the middle of the living room like a secret base. I did something similar as a kid. Close friends would eat together, play games, and tell scary stories.

“Then I’m going out, okay?”

— Okay.

— See you later.

— *Meow.*

I could hear their voices from the tent. I felt a bit sad, but could only smile at their cuteness.

I left my apartment. September would soon end and beautiful autumn leaves decorated the garden outside. I walked towards the local playground and spotted a familiar figure. She sat on the swing and glided back and forth. I went and sat next to her.

“You didn’t take a limousine today?”

Kiik, kiik. Her swing creaked until it came to a stop. *Ssss*— The leaves rustled from the blowing wind as Yoo Yeonha looked up at the sky and sighed.

“Did something bad happen?”

“...”

She finally turned and faced me with an exhausted and troubled expression. Was something bothering her?

“What did you want to talk about?” I softly asked.

Yoo Yeonha had called me here. To be more precise, she left a message to contact her whenever I came back. I replied as soon as I saw and she promptly arrived.

“It’s about your request from before.”

“Oh, that’s done already?”

Yoo Yeonha nodded. The Falling Blossom information network surprised me. It grew quicker than I originally anticipated.

“But...” Yoo Yeonha looked at the ground and kicked the sand.

“There are things I can and can’t tell you...”

“Huh? What’s that?”

Yoo Yeonha sighed and raised her head. “You can choose. Do you want me to tell you everything or do you want me to tell you what I can.”

She sounded nervous and her voice trembled. I became serious as well from her expression. Suddenly, I felt a bit scared. Just how bad was Chundong’s past?

“Then... tell me what you can first.”

I didn’t want to force her to say anything she didn’t want to.

“Is that okay with you? You don’t know which details I’ll leave out.”

“You can tell me the rest when you’re ready.”

I smiled. “I don’t know what you’re hiding, but I can wait.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha bit her lips. Then she swung on her swing once again. *Kiik, kiik*. It swayed as the wind blew and leaves fell. Time passed until she felt ready again.

“Um.”

“Yeah?”

“Have you heard of the Chameleon Troupe?” Yoo Yeonha looked at me and asked.

Chapter 178

Killing Jin Sahyuk (3)

I returned to my apartment after talking to Yoo Yeonha. I could hear the kids whispering inside the tent in the living room.

— Did someone just come in?

— *Nn*, I don't know. *Ah*, maybe it's a ghost!

— *Meow*.

I walked past them to my room. *Haa...* I lay in my bed with a deep sigh. Today, Yoo Yeonha told me something I hadn't known. Some of it was speculation, but I wasn't quite sure how to feel regardless if it was true or false.

— The Chameleon Troupe? What's that?

That's how I replied when she asked. I inwardly shook, but I acted calm on the surface.

— You probably haven't heard of them. They're hidden deep within the shadows. A group of some of the strongest on Earth. I think their strength rivals that of the Vast Expanse.

Yoo Yeonha seriously replied. I stood still as she continued.

— I... I think they're the ones who killed your...

Her sentence cut off in the middle. However, I understood what she meant. Chundong's past that I didn't know about. I blanked out as though a hammer struck me.

— Are, are you sure?

— I'm almost certain. These two are most likely your parents.

Yoo Yeonha handed me a few documents. *Kim Yoohon. Shin Yiyeon.* It contained two unknown names and faces.

— They passed away on the day of the Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter Incident. This is a portrait...

She handed me a portrait.

— Of the person who left you at the orphanage. Only half her face is shown and it's from 20 years ago, so I doubt it helps much.

I took out the portrait and looked at it again on my bed. It showed a cute young girl with a somewhat dangerous aura. It would be difficult to determine her identity after 20 years. However, I felt almost certain it was a young Boss.

“What a shitty remake...”

I muttered. Frankly speaking, none of this had anything to do with me. This was Chundong's and I was Kim Hajin.

However, I thought about how Chundong might feel if he knew about this? Of course, I had no way of knowing since Chundong was gone without a trace left in this world.

“Chundong...”

A life that disappeared because of me. Or rather, a life that became me.

“It looks like you weren't an extra after all.”

* * *

Yoo Yeonha also returned home alone. Her large mansion felt especially empty today.

“Mom? Dad?”

She knew they had left for a guild conference, but still called out anyways. She wanted to see her scary mother and overly attached father. She knew they'd be happy if she suddenly hugged them.

However, she was currently alone when she needed her family.

Yoo Yeonha trudged to her room and sat in her work chair like usual. She picked up her pen and looked over contracts like usual, did some calculations like usual, thought about things like usual, and certain things troubled her like usual.

Suddenly, an unbearable self-hatred rose within her.

“Uk.”

She clenched her teeth. *I have to endure it. I have to grow stronger and colder. I have to harden my heart with self-contradiction and selfishness to conceal the truth and lies. I have to become shameless for my family, my guild, and my dream.*

This deep-seated self-hatred bothered her despite what she constantly told herself. She had left out her father and Chae Joochul from the story. She smiled and felt relieved when Kim Hajin didn't ask any further questions. She felt happy when his anger wasn't directed at her. In the end, she couldn't help but feel disgusted by her own unsightliness.

“Uuk...”

Her stomach churned and she threw the documents aside to run to the bathroom. Then she threw up into the toilet and emptied her stomach. She threw up once more after seeing the filth coming out of her mouth. This cycle continued until only yellow stomach fluid came out of her mouth.

“Uuu... aah...”

After an unknown amount of time, when her vomit changed into

coughing up blood... *Tiriring— Tiriring—* The smartwatch on her wrist rang.

“...Hnng.”

Yoo Yeonha closed her eyes and took a small breath after glancing at the caller. She spat out the blood and saliva, washed her hands and face, then brushed her teeth. The caller had already hung up by the time she wiped herself off.

Tiriring— Tiring—

Soon, her secretary called again and she quickly picked up.

“Yes, what is it, Sechan?”

Her voice sounded different.

— Miss, the government returned the offer we made.

“Did they?”

Yoo Yeonha’s eyebrows twitched. However, she maintained her composure.

“What did they want?”

Chwaaa— She turned on the faucet and washed her hands again. Her mysophobia and obsessive-compulsive disorder had grown worse recently.

— Environmental concern... is what they said, but that’s obviously false. They’re not willing to negotiate with us. It seems Chae Joochul bribed or threatened them.

Chae Joochul. Chae Joochul came up again. She thought about what Kim Hajin once said to her, *If your hands are already dirty then use them however you want.*

— What should we do?

Her secretary cut off her self-deprecating thought.

“There’s nothing we can do against someone who doesn’t want anything.”

Yoo Yeonha replied with a smile. She felt bitter, but decided to give up on the matter.

— Understood. Also, we captured a spy trying to make a copy of our monster database. Unfortunately, some information has already been leaked. That said, they weren’t anything too expensive.

This time, Yoo Yeonha’s composure shook. Everything bad seemed to come at once today.

“Another spy? What do you think, Sechan? What should we do?”

— I...

“Should we cut off one of his arms?”

Yoo Yeonha left the bathroom and sat in her office chair again.

— Y-Yes?

“Regrowing a severed arm isn’t too difficult nowadays. There’s that potion we developed too.”

She turned her laptop on. Her secretary had already sent the detailed report to her email. [*Yi Jonghwa*]. The traitor’s name and face appeared on the screen.

— Leave it to me.

“What will you do? Are you going to cut off his limbs and throw him in a dungeon?”

— Pardon?

Yoo Yeonha already lost count of how many times something like this had happened. It couldn't be solved with lawful means like a lawsuit. Her opponents always covered up their crimes with unlawful methods. Chae Joochul almost always played a part and even when he didn't, other large corporations bribed officials against her.

“You should know this too, Sechan.”

Yoo Yeonha had experienced and learned many things over the past 4 years.

“I, Yoo Yeonha...”

She experienced her first betrayal 4 years ago. At the time, she thought it would be her last. However, many more followed. Even an attempt to overthrow her almost succeeded.

As far as she was concerned, these things happened because she acted too soft. Others wouldn't have dared if she had cut off the heads of her traitors.

“Can no longer forgive such a thing.”

With that, Yoo Yeonha hung up. Only one principle remained. *Kill or be killed.* She immediately commanded the Falling Blossom guild.

[Understood.]

A reply quickly came back. Yoo Yeonha stared at the message... *Thud.* Then she slammed her head on the desk.

“Haa...”

She sighed and pondered. *Now is a rough time for both my personal life and professional life. I'm in the middle of a storm, but a storm can't last forever. It will eventually disappear and the sky will clear. Remember, be patient and endure it. Eventually, an opportunity for victory will appear.*

“I’m so tired.”

Yoo Yeonha got up and staggered to her bedroom. She could see her beloved bed and felt like melting the moment she lay on the soft mattress. This magical bed resolved all her stress and exhaustion. Never in her life would she have thought a piece of furniture could console her. She remained still for a moment. *Sniff, sniff*. Then she smelled the mattress.

“Why doesn’t the smoke go away?”

She had washed the mattress several times. However, her sharp nose could still smell the faint scent. Calling it Kim Hajin’s smell... felt a bit weird, so she called it the cigarette smell. Yoo Yeonha rolled over to the part that smelled the least and curled her body like a shrimp. The faint scent remained, but she slowly fell asleep inside it.

* * *

Prestige’s final tower collapsed with the combined effort of Essence of the Strait, Desolate Moon, and Frost Sanctuary. A total of 27 Players from the above guilds and 3 other rankers participated in the conquest.

The southern tower was the largest of the four, but they didn’t suffer a single casualty.

Essence of the Strait’s tower subjugation team returned to their base after a brief item transaction with the other two guilds. They found their injured comrade outside as they returned.

“Chae Nayun?”

The chief officer, Kim Youngjin, called her name.

“Ah, Team Leader.”

Chae Nayun hurried over with her left arm in a cast.

“Why are you outside? You should take care of your body.”

“Well, I was just wondering... Was Fenrir among the rankers?”

Chae Nayun asked with a serious face. Kim Youngjin looked at her. She had been fixated on Fenrir almost as if he was why she had entered the tower. Her obsession only grew worse after her injury.

“No. I checked if any of them used a gun since you asked, but no one like that appeared.”

“Team leader is right. Maybe that man in the elevator misspoke.”

Yi Jiyeon muttered as she approached Chae Nayun. Then she whispered into her ears.

“But Nayun, why do you want to find Kim Hajin so much?”

Chae Nayun turned and glared at her. However, Yi Jiyeon didn't seem intimidated at all.

“Why? I wonder why?”

“You don't have to know.”

“*Hnnng*? But I think I already do.”

“Screw off.”

Chae Nayun shot back and turned around. *Thud*. However, she immediately bumped into something hard.

“*Huh?*”

Chae Nayun instinctively looked up and saw a big, burly man.

“*Eh?*”

The man frowned. He looked more like a giant and she felt like she had seen him somewhere before.

“Oh?” The man seemed to remember her too as a huge smile appeared on his face. “We meet again, little girl.”

“Tsk.”

Chae Nayun finally recalled him. The man who acted like a bodyguard for an NPC in Tutorial Town. She clicked her tongue and stepped back. Cheok Jungyeong smiled threateningly and approached.

“Stop.”

However, Essence of the Strait’s guild members quickly stepped forward. Kim Youngjin pointed his sword at Cheok Jungyeong and asked Chae Nayun.

“Who is he?”

“He’s... someone I quarreled with in Tutorial Town.”

That’s all Chae Nayun said. Cheok Jungyeong only smirked in response. His gaze fixated on her chest.

“What, you’re Chae Nayun?”

He looked at the nametag on her chest. [*Essence of the Strait – Chae Nayun*] Cheok Jungyeong found it funny that guilds wore nametags.

“You know me?” she asked while maintaining her composure. Cheok Jungyeong furrowed his brows.

“Why are you talking so casually?”

“You did it first, so what?”

“Mmm.”

Her logic momentarily made him speechless. Then he snapped out of his daze.

“*Cough*, so why are you looking for Fenrir?”

“You know him?” Chae Nayun’s eyes widened. Cheok Jungyeong flinched, but soon shook his head.

“N-No.”

“It looks like you’re lying.”

“I, I fought him once before.”

“You fought him?”

“Yep and I won. He was quite a tough opponent.”

Kim Hajin said not to talk about anything related to him. Cheok Jungyeong always listened to his comrades’ requests. Of course, whether he could hide it or not was another matter.

“*Whee, whee—*”

Cheok Jungyeong began to whistle and looked away. Chae Nayun glared at him suspiciously before asking another question.

“How do you know me?”

“Ah, well, you’re quite famous.”

“Am I?”

Cheok Jungyeong had a habit of making a list of the strong, people who would become strong, and people who were said to be strong. That said, he could hardly recall their faces.

“Also, a djinn bragged to me a long time ago.”

“A djinn? What does that have to do with me?”

A dangerous smile emerged on Cheok Jungyeong's face.

"That crazy bastard left quite an impression. He said he killed your mother."

"What?"

The killer of Chae Nayun's mother had always been taboo for her. Her face immediately heated up and an unbearable rage surged within her.

"Y-You fucker!" She punched him instinctively. *Thwack!* However, he easily caught her small fist in his palm.

"Listen, kid. I'm not the one who killed your mom."

Cheok Jungyeong almost twisted her wrist. He felt he could crush her bones with a little bit of pressure. However...

"*Hm?*" Her bones felt surprisingly tough.

"Oh? You have a surprisingly strong—"

Koong! A fierce kick struck his face while he murmured in surprise. A shockwave shot out from the lightning kick.

"*Haha*, what a daring girl."

Cheok Jungyeong didn't expect her to attack with one of her arms in a cast and the other in his hand. After receiving her kick, he stood still and revealed a toothy grin. He could see Chae Nayun consumed in rage and loved to see that type of face.

"Tell me."

"Tell you?"

"You just said it. The djinn who killed my..."

"Now? In this situation? You can't be serious."

Chae Nayun stared at him and bowed after calming down.

“Sorry, I got angry and lost my cool.”

“I got angry too when I was hit, so no.”

Cheok Jungyeong coldly turned around, but she immediately grabbed him. Then she opened her inventory and took something out.

“I’ll give you this.”

“Hm?”

She took out a crimson spear with a strangely intimidating tip. Cheok Jungyeong checked its description, but didn’t care for Lv.2 items. However, this was the first time he saw something with the fire attribute.

“Chae Nayun, you can’t just give it away even if it’s a personal item.”

Kim Youngjin stepped in with a worried expression. Anyone would desire a weapon with an attribute. However, Cheok Jungyeong rejected her offer.

“You see, kid. I don’t use weapons.”

In Goryeo, Cheok Jungyeong had conquered the land with a sword, not his body. He cut down countless barbarians and protected his country. Naturally, his sword’s name resounded throughout the land along with his name. However, he chose a different path this time. The world became light as a feather when he held a sword. Cheok Jungyeong didn’t like that. To kill or be killed. He wanted to vie for supremacy with nothing but his bare hands.

“Then...”

Chae Nayun didn’t give up. She could tell he wasn’t lying since he would’ve taken the red crystal spear.

“Here.”

She took out 2 banknotes worth 1000 TP each. This time, Cheok Jungyeong showed a little more interest.

“This is all I have.”

“I don’t need it. Use it to treat your arm. I don’t want my future opponent to be crippled.”

Cheok Jungyeong reigned in his desire for wealth. Chae Nayun sharply shouted when he turned around again.

“Hey! F-Fuck, you lied, right! Why did you even say that if you weren’t going to tell me?”

Cheok Jungyeong paused and slightly looked back.

“...Sir.”

She respectfully changed her tone as they made eye contact. Cheok Jungyeong calmly replied.

“I like people who are strong.”

“What?”

“This one’s nickname is Goryeo’sStrongest.”

He took on an imposing tone and stared at Chae Nayun. His face still stung from the kick of a girl who barely came up to his chest.

“You can send me a friend request. I might tell you if I like you. Challenge me whenever you want. I’ll accept it.”

“Goryeo’sStrongest is your nickname? Ah, hey!”

Cheok Jungyeong waved and quietly walked away. Chae Nayun didn’t chase after him.

“Haha, this place is full of interesting people.”

He already found over 10 people to put on his list of strong people. Kim Ohsung, one of Satan’s servants. Kim Hakpyo, the executive of Evil Society. The high rank heroes, Oh Junhyuk and Seo Youngji. And Kim Junwoo, a hunter of the Vast Expanse.

“This is the perfect place for something big to happen. *Heh*, I’m happy with so many people to fight.”

Cheok Jungyeong grinned. At that moment...

“Na, Nayun!”

A ruckus sounded from behind him. Cheok Jungyeong looked back without much thought. The girl who yelled at him had collapsed on the ground.

“What an interesting girl.”

Cheok Jungyeong shook his head.

* * *

I returned to the tower after taking care of some matters on Earth. I announced that the Truth Agency would be taking a break for a little longer. Then I contacted SH Agency’s CEO, Park Soohyuk, to buy a special artifact from the auction house when the time came.

“*Hmm.*”

Currently, I stood in front of the elevator to the 2nd floor. I didn’t tell Boss or any other members what I planned to do. I wasn’t quite sure how to face them yet with what I found out from Yoo Yeonha. However, I wasn’t worried since I had already fully prepared with all sorts of high level equipment that players on the 2nd floor couldn’t even dream of. My skills had all reached Lv.3 as well. I felt fully confident in killing Jin Sahyuk.

“*Huu...* let’s go.”

Still, I had designed her as the final boss, so I couldn't help but feel a bit scared. However, I shook it off with self-hypnosis and entered the elevator. Then I pressed the button to the 2nd floor.

[Going down.] [Warning – you will need to obtain a new citizenship card when you return.]

“That’s okay.”

The elevator began to move and it would take 4 hours to reach the 2nd floor. I wondered what to do and took out Muninn’s egg, which I brought from my waiting room. It had grown from a chicken egg to an ostrich egg. I brought it along since it looked like it would hatch soon. A system alert suddenly popped up.

[A player has entered the 5th floor!]

“Already?”

That happened faster than I anticipated. Well, the 4th floor wasn’t that difficult, so it didn’t surprise me too much. Players would start getting stuck on the 6th floor. Furthermore, I only had to prevent them from reaching the 9th floor. That floor should be opened as late as possible due to the calamity there. I took out a blanket and lay on the elevator. The 9th floor was still far in the future. For now, I only focused on Jin Sahyuk.

Chapter 179

Killing Jin Sahyuk (4)

I spoke to Muninn's egg while I waited inside the elevator. I just told it fun folktales like the story about the tortoise and the hare and the three little piglets. I knew it would hatch soon since it periodically shook.

Ding— [You have arrived on the 2nd floor.]

The elevator stopped exactly 4 hours later. I wore my mask and hood and checked the Desert Eagle. It took 0.5 seconds to load and 1.5 seconds to transform with aether.

Shooong—

The elevator opened with a futuristic sound and a vast forest appeared. Warm sunlight shone and the air felt hot. I stepped onto the grass and surveyed around with my thousand-mile eyes. Thankfully, Luke wasn't too far away. The second wave of players still seemed to be in their waiting rooms judging from the empty plaza.

First, I climbed a tree. Then I jumped from one to the next for a place to view the entire plaza.

"Hmm."

I finally found a spot with a full view by a cliff with little chance of getting ambushed. Then I sat on a branch and waited for Jin Sahyuk.

Time passed from 10 minutes to 30, 90, then 3 hours.

"I can wait. I like staying hidden. It's fun. It feels great."

I self-hypnotized myself with the *[Lv.6 Demon's Cunning Speech]* and

no longer felt bored or tired. It worked extremely well and I could even wait 6 more hours, or 12, or 24. The extreme heat turned into extreme cold as day turned to night.

Finally, the players appeared in the plaza. Close to 2000 instantaneously arrived with a burst of light that almost blinded me.

— W-Where are we?

— This must be the 2nd floor.

— *Shh*, don't reveal any information.

Some looked confused, while others already knew about the 2nd floor. The former should be ordinary people, independent djinns, or those from small guilds. The latter came from large guilds and djinn groups. I scanned the crowd for my target.

— Wow, look. It's Kim Suho.

— *Tsk*, why did he have to come? He could've stayed outside and become the world's youngest high-intermediate rank hero.

Kim Suho stood out even among a crowd of 2000. His handsome face shone like gold. I felt happy to see him, but my gaze flew past him. Soon, I found my target.

Jin Sahyuk stood with her arms crossed like an iron-blooded general. I tightened my grip on the Desert Eagle. Players had to start over from the tutorial once they died. Furthermore, they would lose all the skills they had acquired. It wasn't a coincidence that players had 7 lives and could have a maximum of 7 skills (except for the black ticket).

I planned to kill Jin Sahyuk at least twice. I wanted to ambush her right away, but I had to wait with Luke nearby. Even the 2nd floor's administrator was far stronger than me in the real world. As such, I had to fight Jin Sahyuk away from him.

“As you can see, the 2nd floor is quite chaotic. It is filled with all sorts of frightening aspects of nature.”

“Yaawn.”

Players carefully listened to the administrator’s speech as Jin Sahyuk yawned. A few players even glared at her.

“Your goal is simple. Travel through this chaotic nature filled with traps and monsters to find the elevators that lead to the 3rd floor.”

Luke gave the second wave of players the same speech. Jin Sahyuk felt bored. Even without an explanation, she could steamroll through anything.

“Each elevator can carry 50 individuals, which is quite a lot. Unfortunately, they move very slowly and take 8 hours to travel back and forth. An elevator will not return for the next 8 hours once it departs.”

Jin Sahyuk only needed to hear up to that part. She listened to the rest half-heartedly and began to walk away.

“Be careful. Hunters other than monsters may prey on you.”

The administrator gave one last warning. Jin Sahyuk stopped to look back at the administrator. This particular sentence bothered her for some reason and he seemed to be staring at her.

“Some players who remained on the 2nd floor or returned from an upper floor may attack and steal from newer players. You will need to watch out for these newbie hunters. They know you have at least 1000 TP and are at your weakest.”

The crowd stirred as guild members heard about this for the first time. They had forgotten about other players with ill intentions since they only focused on quickly climbing the tower.

“Now, go out and find an elevator.”

With that, the administrator sat under a tree and began to read a book. The majority of players, including Jin Sahyuk, headed off. Some lightly bowed to the administrator before going their way. Only one group stayed and approached the administrator. Unsurprisingly, it was Kim Suho and his companions.

“Being nosy again. *Tsk, tsk.*”

Jin Sahyuk sneered at them and headed north. She moved alone, unlike the others. In her eyes, newbie hunters would only provide more money and food. She didn’t fear them the slightest.

“Come and get me.”

She walked with confidence as a thin current of magic power shot up with every step. After 30 minutes of walking like that, a boar attracted to her magic power appeared.

[Lv.2 Blackblood Boar]

— *Kueeek!* The large boar charged as Jin Sahyuk shot a bolt of magic power. *Kueek*— Then its internal organs blew up and it instantly died.

Jin Sahyuk approached the corpse and carefully emitted her magic power to dismantle it. She took only the most delicious meat and the thickest leather according to the information she received from outside the tower.

“How easy.”

Jin Sahyuk continued forward. Contrary to her expectations, no newbie hunters challenged her and only unintelligent monsters appeared. Even the weakest humans recognized a predator as Jin Sahyuk sighed in disappointment.

Whiish—

Suddenly, an unnatural wind blew and a strange spiral stormed past her. Immediately, an alarm rang in her head and she instinctively twisted while cladding herself in qi reinforcement. A beam of light

pierced her shoulder as blood spurted and an intense pain struck her. The strength instantly left her body and her legs gave out as she fell back. However, she quickly picked herself up and stitched her wound with magic power.

She made up for the blood loss by circulating her blood faster with magic power. At the same time, she calculated where the attack came from and threw a bolt of magic power. Her attack shot forward like an arrow and destroyed every tree in its path.

“Come out.”

Jin Sahyuk spoke in a low tone, but her voice resounded far and wide with magic power. The attacker reacted with another bullet. This time, she didn’t let it reach her. The bullet touched the magic barrier she quickly created. It shattered, but managed to slightly change the bullet’s course. That was enough for Jin Sahyuk to twist her body and dodge.

She had already learned from the initial attack. Now, the sniping would no longer work. She didn’t know who dared to attack, but he had lost the moment he couldn’t kill her with the first hit. However, the attacker shot another bullet. It seemed he hadn’t learned yet. Jin Sahyuk grinned and unleashed a barrier.

“...?”

The bullet suddenly curved and flew towards her blind spot. She couldn’t dodge and hastily calculated the point of impact to concentrate her magic power there.

“...!”

This time, it struck her thigh. She managed to prevent her leg from being blown off, but an unbearable pain coursed through her.

Psssh—

A man jumped down from a tree as the leaves rustled. He wore a mask and a hood. However, he took them off to reveal his face and walked towards her. Jin Sahyuk carefully observed him.

“You.”

She knew exactly who he was.

* * *

“Huu.”

I deactivated the sniper rifle mode after firing 3 bullets. Then I jumped down from the tree. I thought about infusing stigma’s magic power into a bullet to kill her in one blow, but decided not to. If she dodged it, I would’ve wasted my ultimate attack. Even if it hit, she would only lose 1 life from it. To take at least 3 lives, I had to blow her head off with a shotgun. That was the only way, so I approached her.

“It’s been a while, *eh?*”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk glared at me. I thought she had fallen, but already got back up. Dozens of magic power weapons undulated behind her. Her magic power capacity surpassed even Chae Nayun and her magic power control and adaptability couldn’t be matched. Her gift, Magic Arms, was a simple yet devastating ability that could create thousands of magic weapons. The current Jin Sahyuk shouldn’t be capable of handling that. I furrowed my brows.

“You obtained a hidden secret, didn’t you?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t reply, but I felt confident in my guess. I didn’t know exactly how she found it, but she must have chosen to remove 10% of her stat restriction as a reward.

“Oi.”

Jin Sahyuk, who glared at me, finally spoke.

“What.”

“Did you come down to get killed?”

I smirked. It seemed she wondered why I didn’t just kill her from the tree. Of course, I could have killed her without her ever knowing my identity, but I had a reason for coming down.

“I wanted to kill you thoroughly.”

“You!”

That lit her fuse as dozens of weapons, arrows, and harpoons shot towards me. However, they all seemed like toothpicks. I transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle as her weapons moved like turtles in bullet time.

First, I needed to test how many bullets it took to strike down one weapon. I fired 2 bullets. The first caused her magic weapon to waver and the second made it disappear. Then I began shooting her weapons down, starting from the ones closest to me. The lighter arrows only took one bullet while the rest took two. However, Jin Sahyuk’s barrage never ceased. Her magic power capacity seemed endless, so I spaced out my usage of bullet time. *Kwang*—! I deactivated bullet time after a round of bullets and the world instantly hastened.

“You!”

Jin Sahyuk’s mouth moved as I scanned my targets. Then I reactivated bullet time. Like this, I conserved as much time as possible. Eventually, Jin Sahyuk should run out of magic power. On the other hand...

[Assault rifle bullets x 119]

I wouldn’t run out any time soon. *Kwang, Kwang, Kwang!* Magic power continually clashed with bullets. Dust and wind swirled in the air. I grew confident that I would win as this exchange dragged on.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk must've felt the same as her magic power dwindled. I couldn't help but wonder what she must've thought.

“Mmm.”

I decided to stop wasting bullets once her attacks became weaker. I set my gun down and activated my skill.

[Lv.3 Extraction and Permanent Materialization]

It could be used for both offense and defense. Jin Sahyuk's magic power condensed into crystals and fell before me.

[Lv.2 Jin Sahyuk's Mana Crystal] [Lv.1 Jin Sahyuk's Mana Crystal]

Tk, tk, tk, tk... They fell like tiny droplets of rain. Jin Sahyuk stopped attacking by the time 26 crystals fell. She glared at me with tearful eyes.

“...”

I didn't know whether it was from anger or resentment, but I knew it wasn't from fear or sadness.

“You crying?”

I sneered as I approached. She shouldn't be able to move a finger after squeezing out every drop of magic power. I walked up to her and transformed the assault rifle into a shotgun. Jin Sahyuk clenched her teeth.

“I'll admit it. Right now... you are stronger,” Jin Sahyuk muttered.

“But ask yourself this.”

She glared with hatred and continued, “Will you be able to kill me 7 times?”

However, it wasn't even a question worth answering. *Seven times?* I

only needed to kill her three times. I kicked her knee.

“*Uk!*”

Then I pointed the shotgun at her head after forcing her to kneel. I grinned while looking down at her. Before she went back to the tutorial...

“See you later.”

I hoped these words would instill fear in her and pulled the trigger. A slug with stigma’s magic power shot out.

KWANG!

Soon, a deep silence descended. No blood spurted from her instant death. Her body dispersed into blue particles of light. *Whiissh*— The wind carried it away.

“*Huu...*”

I sighed in relief at my first kill of Jin Sahyuk. It turned out so easy I felt stupid for worrying. Honestly, I simply couldn’t lose in here. My Lv.4 armor would’ve protected me even if her magic weapons directly struck. Should I have let her hit me a few times?

I stretched in satisfaction. *Wiiing*— My smartwatch rang.

[You have won a duel with a target!] [Target Kim Hajin has acquired the following victory reward!]

“*Hah?*”

An incomprehensible alert popped up.

* * *

Boss, Jain, and Cheok Jungyeong stood in front of a crystal stele in the 4th floor’s final area.

“I think I’ll have to go outside.”

Reaching the crystal stele meant they had cleared the 4th floor. They had to defeat the 8 undead kings in all 8 compass directions. To advance to the 5th floor, you only needed to defeat one of the eight kings and find the crystal stele in its palace.

“Outside? To Earth? Why?”

“It’s starting to get fun, Boss. Why don’t you wait until we clear the 5th floor?”

Jain and Cheok Jungyeong tried to persuade her.

“No, I don’t think I can wait any longer.”

However, Boss could no longer ignore the doubt and suspicion in her heart. She wasn’t sure whether the magnifying glass malfunctioned or if Kim Hajin was mistaken, but she couldn’t sleep without knowing why he felt that way.

Jain calmly watched her and stepped up.

“Move aside, Jungyeong.”

“What? Why is it always me...”

“Move it. You’ve been exiled before in your past life, right?”

“What does that have to do with any—”

Jain walked up to Boss after sending Cheok Jungyeong away.

“Something’s been bothering you, right? Tell me,” she whispered into Boss’ ear.

“I can’t tell you yet.”

However, Boss remained silent. She couldn’t be certain of anything

and didn't want to cause any discord among members.

“*Mn?*”

“Just wait.”

I'll find out the truth no matter what it takes. Jain didn't dig any further after seeing Boss' determination.

“If you say so...”

“Alright, I'll see you two later then.”

“Don't hurt yourself, okay?”

Boss nodded and looked through the player shop for the necessary tickets while Jain and Cheok Jungyeong walked up to the crystal stele. After about 5 minutes...

“Are we going up right away? Do you have enough potions?”

“I'm always ready.”

“Okay, then let's go.”

Boss slowly approached them as they excitedly spoke.

“...Jain.”

“Boss? You still haven't left?” Jain widened her eyes and tilted her head. Boss stared at her for a moment before mumbling.

“...Lend me some money.”

“*Hm?*”

“I, I need to buy a return ticket and re-entrance ticket, but I'm short 300 TP.”

Jain stared at her and blinked in surprise. Boss quickly made an excuse.

“I ended up spending too much.”

Jain immediately furrowed her brows.

“Boss, you donated to those authors again? I told you not to do it!”

She didn’t donate to just novel authors. She even donated to manhwa authors and artists. Even if she liked art, it wasn’t like she came from the House of Medici.

“...”

Boss swallowed her saliva.

“Sorry, that’s been my only source of entertainment recently. I’ll try to curb my habits when I return. My sense of money has been muddled ___”

“Ah, this is all Hajin’s fault! It’s because he spoils you that you can’t think rationally.”

Jain began to nag her. Boss almost warned her to be more respectful, but swallowed her words. She knew Jain became terrifying with anything related to money.

Chapter 180

The Story Inside the Box (1)

“...!”

Jin Sahyuk’s eyes shot open and she began to hyperventilate like someone who almost drowned. She breathed, but felt like she couldn’t from an overwhelming pressure.

“Huu... huu...”

Only after taking a few more breaths did she snap out of her daze and touch her forehead, which dripped with sweat. She finally realized that she had died.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk pulled her hair back and looked around. The floor and walls consisted of wooden boards and the ceiling was white. She had returned to her waiting room and a system alert popped up.

[You have died. You must stay inside your waiting room until the next tutorial.] [The next tutorial will begin next month on November 1st.]

She became speechless at the damned system and boiled with rage. Unbearable hatred and killing intent filled her until her arms, legs, and the rest of her body trembled. *See you later.* His final words echoed in her ears.

However, her rage soon died down. After experiencing death, a powerful listlessness and exhaustion struck her. Her rage subsided like a receding tide as her body felt increasingly enervated and her mind cleared. Emotions she normally wouldn’t feel rose within her.

“Haa...”

She closed her eyes and deeply sighed. She had lost without any room for excuses. No, she could make plenty of excuses thinking back on it. Her stats had been restricted and the opponent had a 2 month head start. However, she ceased such thoughts since she had already died and simply sat in a daze.

I lost again. Does that make it twice now? Did I really lose to the same guy twice?

She felt her strength leave her body like her bones had liquified and laughed at herself.

Is this it? Will you be able to fulfill your life-long wish like this?

She opened her eyes, which swirled with doubt. The white ceiling seemed to shine brighter than usual.

“Is there anything I can do before starting over?”

She asked the empty air.

“Something to kill time.”

[Time is a concept. Therefore it cannot be killed. I recommend studying to grow smarter.]

The system seemed happy that she died.

“Are you fucking with me?”

[I recommend reading.]

“Hm, reading...”

She had never read a book since coming to Earth. The last time she read a book was in her hometown due to compulsory education.

“Then give me something to read.”

[History of Losers]

A comic book instantly appeared in the air. Jin Sahyuk frowned at the cover.

“You piece of shit! Give me something else!”

[How to Overcome Illiteracy]

A proper book appeared this time, but the title didn’t sound appealing at all.

“Fucker, give me a proper book.”

*[How to Overcome Anger-Management Issues] [How to Talk Positively]
[Friendly Way of Talking]*

Several books fell from the sky.

*[Anne of Green Gables] [100 Facts Every Idiot Should Know] [How to
Maintain One’s Composure]*

“Are you messing me, you piece of— *aak!*”

A book fell and struck her head. The particularly heavy book hit her with its edge. Jin Sahyuk clutched her head and groaned.

“Uuu, you son of a bitch...”

However, the attack (?) wasn’t over. *Tudududu*— Countless books continued to fall from above like hail.

*[The Bird That Drinks Tears] [The Little Prince] [The Prince] [Veritable
Records of the Joseon Dynasty] [On the Origin of Species] [Anatomy]...*

Soon, Jin Sahyuk found herself buried under. She clenched her teeth inside this tomb of books and mumbled.

“If only it had a body.”

Jin Sahyuk felt a strong urge to beat up the system, but knew it had no form. She shook off her frustration with a sigh and looked through the books. One in particular caught her attention.

[The Prince] by Niccolò Machiavelli.

“Hm.”

Jin Sahyuk smiled. Something about the title and author attracted her. She saw herself as someone who would one day become a ruler, so she picked up the book without hesitation.

* * *

[You have won a duel against a target!] [Target Kim Hajin has acquired the following victory reward!] [All stats have increased by 1 since the target is a sworn enemy. (Only 35% will be applied in the tower)] [You have obtained 2 Special Consolidation Tickets.] [You have stolen 1479 TP from player StrongestWill.]

“...”

I sat on the ground and stared at the system alert. I looked through the entire system log, but couldn't recall anything about it. Then I looked at my laptop's system log with my smartwatch and went back 3 years: 2029, 2028, 2027... Finally, I found my answer.

[A magic power of rage and obsession has formed a spell in a distant place. You have been selected as a target.] [However, a miraculous luck strikes!] [A mysterious power has reversed the spell!] [An unknown person's gift, Targeting, has been changed to benefit Kim Hajin!] [Narrow Escape from Death (4/9) – A special stat, accumulation of luck, has partly unlocked.]

“Hmm.”

Using this log, I tried to figure out exactly what happened. First, Jin Sahyuk selected me as a target. My luck ended up reversing her spell and she became the target instead. Then I gained the above rewards from killing the target today.

This Targeting seemed like Jin Sahyuk's second gift. *How complicated.* I checked the reward.

[Special Consolidation Ticket] A consolidation ticket formed from a special gift. You may strengthen a gift, equipment, physique, or art with this ticket.

"Oh?"

This amazing item didn't exist in the original story. Of course, I would have to use it to know how much it strengthened something. *Should I use one on Master Sharpshooter?* A series of alerts popped up as I considered my options.

[A merit conference will be held in Prestige's [Lv.11 Medea's Castle] in 2 days at 8 P.M.] [You must participate in this event as an influential candidate.] [If you don't, you will earn the ill-will of Medea and will not receive any rewards.]

There should be a few special skill books and a trait recovery coupon as rewards. I should be able to recover another trait with first place.

"Hmm."

I got up since I could think about what trait to choose later.

"Ah, I should pick up Jin Sahyuk's mana crystals."

[Lv.1 Jin Sahyuk's Mana Crystal x 22] [Lv.2 Jin Sahyuk's Mana Crystal x 4]

I wasn't sure what to do with them, but it should come in handy since Jin Sahyuk's magic power was high rank.

I checked the current time after placing the crystals in my inventory: 3 P.M. I should hunt some more and take care of djinns who would become problematic in the future. Who would've thought I would become a newbie hunter?

I climbed up another tree and expanded my vision across the horizon. I found someone on my hit list among those traversing the 2nd floor's

harsh conditions.

— It's so hot. Fan me properly.

Cecilia, a djinn with a succubus' ability. She had enslaved some men and currently ordered them around. I transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle since using a sniper rifle bullet would be a waste. The assault rifle would be enough for anyone other than Jin Sahyuk.

Of course, I had to shorten the distance to increase its power. I jumped from tree to tree until I came within 400 meters. I could see Cecilia with my naked eyes and aimed. Then I pulled the trigger.

Shooong—

The bullet shot through the air and pierced her forehead. She immediately scattered into particles of light.

[You have stolen 3568 TP from the player CharmCharmCharm.]

— W-What?

— *Huh?*

The men looked around in a daze as the succubus' enchantment wore off.

* * *

In 24 hours, I killed 7 djinns and procured enough food to feed 100 people for 3 days. I also found another dwarven stele. I thought about going back when I suddenly grew curious about Kim Suho. I returned to an elevator after finding and observing him for a while. As expected, Suho did just fine on his own.

“...?”

Something in my pocket suddenly vibrated when I prepared to board the elevator I found using the Book of Truth. It came from Muninn's

egg, which sat in my robe's large pocket.

I quickly took the egg out as cracks formed on its surface. The cracks grew bigger as the egg continued to shake.

“Oooh.”

This slightly surprised me. The descendant of Odin's beloved pet was being born now. What was I supposed to do? For now, I unleashed stigma's magic power and comfortably wrapped the egg. It stopped shaking inside the soft membrane of magic power. Soon, the eggshell broke and a small bird peeked its head out. Its feathers looked wet and it couldn't open its eyes yet. It looked incredibly ordinary for a descendant of the bird loved by a god. However, the information displayed was far from ordinary.

[Lv.5 Descendant of Muninn] [Strength 0.2] [Bite 0.2] [Stamina 0.2] [Speed 0.2] [Perception 6] [Vitality 0.2] [Magic Power 6]

A Lv.5 newborn with perception and magic power stats at 6 points. My jaws dropped and I held the newborn in my arms. It must've felt my warmth and slowly opened its adorable eyes to look up at me.

“Hi.”

I didn't know whether it could understand human language, but I smiled and greeted it anyway. Then it tilted its head to the side as birds often did to get a better look at me.

— *Chirp.*

A system alert popped up as it cried.

[Lv.5 Descendant of Muninn has recognized you as its master.] [Please name the Lv.5 Descendant of Muninn!]

“A name...”

I never thought about what to name this sacred bird. After a moment, I came up with one.

“Ah! How about Pomi?”

Pomi frowned.

— *Chirp, chirp chirp!*

It didn’t sound happy at all. Did that sound bad?

“Then how about Phoenix?”

Phoenix pouted. Wasn’t it a cool name?

“*Hmm...* Then how about Lionel Ronaldo.”

— *Chirp!*

“Son Heungmin?”

— *Chirp!*

“Vermillion Bird?”

I suggested every name I could think of, but Muninn’s descendant wasn’t easily pleased. After about 30 minutes...

“Is this really okay?”

— *Chirp chirp.*

The little bird finally smiled and its eyes formed cute crescents. I didn’t understand why, but the name just now sounded good to it.

“Alright then. From now on, you’re Mr. Spartan Keyser Söze Macbeth Junior.”

— *Chirp, chirp!*

[Muninn’s descendant loves the name you gave it.] [The naming ceremony

has been completed.] [Mr. Spartan Keyser Söze Macbeth Junior has activated its first trait, Ring of Perception.] [From now on, you may share your vision and thoughts with Mr. Spartan Keyser Söze Macbeth Junior!]

“Hmm?”

[Second Trait – Information and Shop] [Mr. Spartan Keyser Söze Macbeth Junior will allow you to use the tower re-entrance ticket and earth return ticket for free.] [Furthermore, it will gift you 2-3 items per day.] [Mr. Spartan Keyser Söze Macbeth Junior will awaken more traits as it grows.]

A newly born chick had this much potential? Investing 20000 TP was undoubtedly the correct choice. As expected of a divine bird's descendant, Spartan was already amazing.

“Alright, Spartan. Let's go up.”

— *Chirp.*

I placed Spartan (short for Mr. Spartan Keyser Söze Macbeth Junior) on the ground. He waddled into the elevator as I followed. I decided it was a he since I gave Spartan a male name.

[Going up.]

I pressed the 3rd floor button. The door closed and the elevator began to fly up. Meanwhile, Spartan continued to chirp as he explored the elevator. I opened the messenger to kill some time.

Nayunjajangman: Hyung, you don't happen to have a curse antidote, do you?

Nayunjajangman: Ah, not that I was inflicted with a curse, haha. It's actually my friend.

Nayunjajangman: It looks like the curse is growing stronger as time goes by. I think it's still bearable, but I can pay up to 2000 TP if you have one.

A message that I received 2 days ago caught my attention.

“A curse?”

The only curse that one could receive on the 3rd floor was the banshee’s curse. The ingredients were quite expensive, but I knew the recipe for making the counteragent. I still had several random dice in case I needed them too. However, I felt afraid to meet Nayunjajangman. I feared whether he or she was Chae Nayun.

“Mmm...”

However, I also couldn’t let Nayunjajangman’s friend die. I leaned against the elevator in thought.

— *Chirp, chirp!*

I glanced over after hearing Spartan’s loud chirp.

— *Chirp! Chirp!*

Spartan flapped its wings. Was he already trying to fly? He was only just born 30 minutes ago!

— *Chirp...*

Spartan’s eyes remained closed as he focused his strength into his wings.

— *Chirp! Chirp!*

Unfortunately, he couldn’t fly just yet. He seemed dissatisfied as he opened his eyes and glared at his wings.

— *Chirp, chirp!*

He retracted them after a disgruntled cry. I couldn’t help but smile at his cuteness.

Boss returned to the Chameleon Troupe's hideout on Earth. She felt a bit sore as the tower's stat restriction lifted. However, she didn't waste any time stretching and headed straight to the hideout's lobby.

"Boss, you're back."

Setryn discovered her first and ran over to hug her, but Boss pushed her away with light magic power.

"Meanie. Why can't you love me as much as newbie?"

"Where's Droon."

"Droon?" Setryn tilted her head and pointed at Droon's playroom.

"He's been inside his room recently. What do you need him for?"

"..."

Boss didn't say anything and walked over to Droon's room. *Knock, knock*— The door opened and Boss' gaze fell downward.

"Droon."

"Boss?"

A small child who only came up to her chest looked up at her and blinked in surprise.

"Why'd you call me?"

"Tell me where Yoo Jinhyuk is hiding."

"*Eh?* S-So suddenly?"

"Didn't I tell you to investigate his whereabouts? That was a long time ago too."

Droon flinched at Boss' unusual attitude. He hadn't seen this side of her for a long time thanks to Hajin hyung. *Did something happen inside the tower?*

"I, I found out where he lives. B-But why are you looking for him?"

"I want to ask him something. I don't think he'll respond to my messages on Violet Banquet, so I'll find him myself."

Boss felt certain Yoo Jinhyuk would know something. Droon swallowed his saliva at her determination.

Chapter 181

The Story Inside the Box (2)

After returning to Prestige, I checked up on the Riry Shop and my plot of land worth 6000 TP. Riry Shop made great profits thanks to the goblins' hard work while Henry and Kiri learned the business management skill book. They said they only needed 4 days to learn how to read and write when I asked them about their incredible learning speed. (For the record, players had an automatic language support inside the tower.)

The empty plot of land already showed signs of fertility with weeds growing.

[Random Dice x 5]

I rolled the dice while looking at the empty plot. Two gave me equipment I could sell in Riry Shop and the other two turned into crops that could be cultivated.

[Lv.2 Clear and Clean Rice] [Lv.3 Incredible Meat-Flavored Corn]

Then I asked Henry and Kiri about NPCs with farming experience. I found 5 NPCs in an hour and ordered them to plow the land after feeding them. I also purchased a few dilapidated houses nearby and fixed them up into decent cabins since they didn't have any homes.

All this took only half a day thanks to Young Dwarf's Dexterity.

"We'll do our best, Lord!"

The 5 NPCs bowed respectfully with teary eyes. Well, there were now 8 of them including their family members. It felt a bit embarrassing, but I considered it noblesse oblige as Prestige's richest man.

“Work hard, but don’t overwork yourselves.”

Encouraging words from a person of power often improved work efficiency. Finally, I returned to the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout.

“I’m back?”

However, they had all left. I looked around the cold and dark hideout before turning the light on.

“*Hmm...*”

Was it because I couldn’t smoke in the tower? Being alone felt a bit sad.

— *Chirp, chirp.*

Spartan suddenly chirped from my shoulder.

“Right, you’re here too.”

I realized that Spartan shared my thoughts and reached over to stroke his head.

— *Peep, peep.*

Spartan flapped his wings in joy as I thought about what to do next. I still had one day left until Medea’s conference. Should I grind my stats and skills with monsters on the 4th floor? Suddenly, a lightbulb went off in my head.

“Training.”

I should learn how to use spirit power more naturally since it would follow me to the real world. Something like meditating while circulating it through my bloodstream with stigma’s magic should work.

“...”

I went to the underground training room with Spartan. After placing him down, I sat cross-legged like a martial artist in wuxia novels.

My spirit power was currently level 2, which only allowed me to use basic skills 30-40 times. I could only use them 20-30 times if I didn't rely on potions.

Cheok Jungyeong told me to breathe with my entire body. Wouldn't spirit power be similar? I closed my eyes and relaxed.

"Huuu..."

I inhaled and tried to feel the spirit power scattered in my bloodstream. I could certainly feel its existence even though it wasn't tangible.

I exhaled and fused the spirit power with stigma's magic power. Then I gathered the scattered spirit power into a cluster by injecting stigma's magic power into my body. It began to circulate on its own once the spirit power fused with stigma's magic power. I breathed with my entire body from my head to my heart and my hands to my feet.

First breath. Second breath. Third breath. Fourth breath... *Dukun.*

My heart throbbed as the spirit power and magic power surged from my body. A golden aura different from magic power manifested.

"Uuk."

I groaned in pain and felt something sticky in my throat.

"Uu, ueeeek—!"

I vomited uncontrollably as a disgusting black lump came out. Then I vomited 2 more black lumps.

"Ueek."

My retching finally stopped as I wiped my mouth and stared at the mysterious black lumps.

[Lv.-2 Impurities from Kim Hajin's Body]

“Ah, it's tar.”

I wasn't too surprised considering how much I smoked before entering the tower. Geez, I thought I had experienced the bone and marrow cleansing I only heard about in wuxia novels. I placed the black lumps in my inventory to keep the training room clean.

“Huuu...”

Then I tried moving my neck and waist. I felt refreshed, but didn't notice any real changes. The system would've told me if I had experienced any. I blinked and looked at the sky.

[It seems a single training session is not enough.] [Continually using that method may produce results.]

“Ah, I see. Thank you.”

The system kindly explained. It also didn't know everything about the tower and sounded a bit surprised. Obviously, that was a good thing.

“Hmm...”

I decided to take a 5 minute break before trying again. I wiped away my sweat and checked the community.

[CaptainBritain] [(Item List) Selling items dropped by an undead monster. Message me if would like to buy anything.]

[Comment(s)]

— *Is the skeleton legacy still available? Are you also trading items?*

— *It's sold ^^*

— *It's not. I don't know who this is, but please don't make false statements :(And yes, trading is okay. Come to English Royal Court's hideout in Prestige's district 3.*

I saw a post from Rachel. She did say she's been busy recently with no time to use the messenger. Another post caught my attention.

[JiSUPERYoon] [Does anyone know how to get rid of the vengeful spirit's curse? π.π My friend is dying π.π If you do, please come to Essence of the Strait's hideout. We'll reward you not only in the tower, but outside as well.]

[Comment(s)]

— *Who cares? We have 7 lives anyways.*

— *Just tell him or her to die once.*

— *No, that's not it... haven't you heard of the banshee's curse? It permanently killed several people recently.*

— *Oh that. Yeah, I heard there was no cure. Good luck.*

The banshee's curse already became widespread after 10 or so people permanently died from it.

"Essence of the Strait..."

Nayunjajangman also mentioned the banshee's curse 4 days ago and Chae Nayun was also in Essence of the Strait. It was unlikely to be a coincidence. Of course, Nayunjajangman said a friend had been afflicted with the banshee's curse, but Chae Nayun never liked to show any weakness.

— *Chak!*

I slapped my cheeks. *Stop thinking about strange things and just focus on training!* I sat cross-legged again and closed my eyes. *Huu, huu...* I continued my spirit power awakening method.

[Lv.2 Essence of the Strait's Hideout]

I found myself standing in front of Essence of the Strait's hideout 30 minutes later. I didn't wear a mask in case they might think I looked suspicious, but I did wear a fake beard so they wouldn't recognize me.

"Um."

An Essence of the Strait guild member standing guard called out as I loitered around their entrance.

"Who are you?"

He seemed wary of me. I couldn't blame him since my hooded robe would look suspicious to anyone. I used the demon's cunning speech to change my voice.

"I saw the post in the public forum."

"Public forum?"

The guild member tilted his head. Someone else walked down the stairs and came out to the entrance. Her eyes looked swollen from crying. I immediately recognized her and called out.

"I came to get rid of the curse."

"Pardon?"

"...!"

Yi Jiyeon, who looked depressed, quickly ran over.

"C-Curse? W-Who is he?"

"Uh, he says he's a mercenary. Apparently, he saw a post in the public forum, but we didn't post anything."

“Ah, I posted it not too long ago!”

Yi Jiyeon examined my face. I purposely looked away, hoping she wouldn't recognize me.

“Hey, can you take off your hoodie?”

The guild member spoke, but Yi Jiyeon quickly exclaimed in surprise.

“Ah! Um... this person is fine. Let him in.”

Her voice turned soft and surprised me just as much as the other guild member.

“We need to know his identity.”

“Don't worry. I'm good at recognizing faces.”

Yi Jiyeon said as she poked my side. It seemed she found out judging from my mischievous smile. I followed her without a choice.

“Where's the patient?”

“You'll see. By the way, you never cut your beard?”

She recognized me because of my beard? I realized I had made a dumb decision.

“No, this beard is fake. I don't grow beards anymore.”

“That's nice. Anyways, let's hurry.”

Yi Jiyeon pulled my wrist. As expected of an advanced guild, Essence of the Strait occupied a 3 story hideout. We went up to a room on the third floor.

“It's here.”

Yi Jiyeon opened the door to a white hospital-like room. Two patients lay unconscious. One was a man I didn't know. He wasn't inflicted by the curse, but the other one...

“...”

I walked in. Rather, my feet moved on their own towards the girl lying half-dead on the white bed.

“She's been unconscious since 2 days ago.”

The girl only faintly breathed and the black curse encroached upon her neck. I couldn't deny the truth any longer. Nayunjangman was... Chae Nayun.

“Her curse is already at level 5. Is it possible to treat her? It is, right?”

I looked down at Chae Nayun. Her face had turned pale and her body trembled every time she breathed. My chest felt heavy just looking at her. The tar I spat out today seemed to be going back into my throat.

“How did she get it?”

“Ah, um, a month ago... Nayun tried to save me... hic... I thought it was okay back then... uaaaang.”

Yi Jiyeon began to sob. Then she burst into tears before she could finish her sentence.

“I can treat her, so don't cry. You're too loud.”

According to the system, a human couldn't withstand a lv.5 curse. The ingredients for an antidote could only be found on the 6th floor, but I should be able to lower the curse's level with the counteragent I made. Then I could extract the rest using [*Extraction and Permanent Materialization*].

“*Hic*, what, *hic*, should I do? *Hic*.”

“I’m telling you that you’re too loud. Here, take this.”

I took out the counteragent from my inventory and handed it to Yi Jiyoong. This precious medicine took 1500 TP to make.

“What’s this?”

“A curse counteragent. You have to apply it on her skin directly.”

“A-Amazing! Amazing—! Amazing—!”

“Hurry up, will you?”

“Y-Yeah!”

Yi Jiyoong pulled down the shoulder area of Chae Nayun’s shirt. A black spot on her left shoulder gave off an eerie smoke.

“I just have to put it on her?”

“Yeah.”

Yi Jiyoong opened the counteragent’s lid and practically poured it on the curse root, which resembled a human face. A strange smoke and horrifying shriek rang out the moment the counteragent touched the curse root.

“W-What’s happening?”

Yi Jiyoong jumped in surprise, but didn’t back off. She continued to courageously apply the counteragent to the curse’s screeching face.

“Die, die, die you bastard!”

“It’s fine now. Get back.”

I pulled Yi Jiyeon aside and rolled up my sleeves. Now, I should be able to extract the curse. By focusing all my spirit power and using it in one go...

“What?”

However, an unexpected phenomenon occurred. It died on its own before I could extract it. It seemed like Chae Nayun’s magic power was devouring what remained.

“What’s happening?”

“I’m not sure.”

Chae Nayun’s magic power shot out and enveloped the curse. Was her magic power revolting after being suppressed by the curse for so long? The tables had turned as Chae Nayun’s magic power attacked the curse.

“It looks like it’ll be okay.”

I looked at Chae Nayun clenching her teeth and shaking as though she was having a nightmare. Was she fighting the curse alone in her sleep? I wanted to help if possible.

I took out a handkerchief and wiped the sweat from her forehead. It looked like she became more relaxed.

“*Hmm...*”

I was no longer needed and turned around with a bitter smile.

“I’m leaving.”

“*Eh?* W-Wait, we have a reward for you. Take it when Nayun fully recovers.”

“I don’t need it. In exchange, don’t tell her it was me who treated her.”

I spoke and even used a hypnotic suggestion. However, Yi Jiyeon tilted her head and asked.

“What if she asks? She’s going to try to figure out who helped her. She’s not going to leave me alone until I do.”

Yi Jiyeon was right. I knew Chae Nayun’s personality too. After mulling over it, I left behind a solution that would cause the least amount of trouble.

“Tell her an extra treated her.”

“Extra? What’s that?”

“Like a background actor? You don’t even know that?”

“But...”

“It’s fine. She’ll understand what it means. Just tell her that.”

* * *

Outside the tower, Yoo Jinhyuk’s office currently faced a calamity in the usually peaceful North Hamgyeong Province. His office looked as though a tornado had gone by and hot magic power still filled it.

“Not even a match... *cough*. Dammit.”

Yoo Jinhyuk lay in the middle of this pit of hell coughing up blood.

“*Argh*, my body. Can’t you go easy on me?”

A monster had visited him 3 minutes ago with no room for negotiation. The monster asked about Kim Hajin the moment it arrived and when Yoo Jinhyuk remained silent, it began to rampage. Three seconds. Three seconds was all it took for him and his office to turn out like this. He was no longer an active hero, but the difference in power was unbelievable.

“...”

Yoo Jinhyuk met eyes with the girl looking down at him. She looked like a lion with sharp eyes and hair that fluttered in the air from magic power.

However, the lion didn't seem hungry for blood. It looked like a lion that revealed its fangs out of fear, a lion that only tried to look threatening.

“I don't know why an overpowered monster like you is interested in Kim Hajin, but just so you know...”

Yoo Jinhyuk pulled himself up. Then he sat on his half-broken chair and turned on his computer. The hard drive contained information regarding Kim Hajin. However, Yoo Jinhyuk planned to delete it. An informant made a living by being heavy-mouthed.

[Delete]

When he almost pressed the button...

— *Ah!* Something happened in Lord Jinhyuk's house!

— Bring your weapons!

— Who dares to trouble our lord!

Foolish voices rang from outside the window. The girl glanced out. Then looked back at Yoo Jinhyuk with an evil smile.

“*Haa.*”

Yoo Jinhyuk sighed. He had no choice now after she discovered his weakness. It was over the moment she took the villagers hostage. He clicked his tongue and moved his hand away from the keyboard.

“You want to know that much?”

The girl nodded.

“Why? You’re going to kill him?”

The girl shook her head.

“I see.”

The girl didn’t say anything and her beauty almost dazed him even in this situation. Then he recalled a certain scene. A girl leaving Kim Hajin at the orphanage. She looked too similar for it to be a coincidence.

“I’ll tell you, so let me ask you one thing. You’re the new leader of the Chameleon Troupe, correct?”

As expected, the girl didn’t say anything. However, Yoo Jinhyuk took that silence as a yes. He would’ve been too embarrassed if someone this strong wasn’t the leader, but an ordinary member.

“Alright.”

Pieces of the puzzle fell together in his head as he transferred the data onto a USB.

“This should have everything you want to know.”

The girl stepped towards him, but Yoo Jinhyuk quickly held his hand out.

“But wait, your old boss and I were acquaintances. We even fought once, though the result was... something I’d rather not talk about.”

The girl’s eyebrows twitched.

“Anyways, listen up. It’s advice from an adult.”

Yoo Jinhyuk continued, “There is a high chance you’ll regret seeing this. No, I’m certain that you will. You won’t like what you see

whether you want to kill Kim Hajin or keep him alive.”

He held the USB out.

“Are you still curious?”

The girl reached out without saying anything. Her lack of hesitation made Yoo Jinhyuk pull the USB back. The girl frowned. Yoo Jinhyuk felt like a trainer trying to tame a lion.

“You don’t know the contents of a box before you open it. That makes you want to open it even more, but after you do...”

“Shut up and hand it over.”

The girl unleashed her magic power once more. Yoo Jinhyuk shrugged and put the USB down.

“Let me ask you one final question. Do you remember everyone you’ve killed?”

“...”

The girl didn’t reply and reached for the USB. Yoo Jinhyuk picked it up again as she sighed.

“If you don’t remember or don’t want to remember... *uwuk!*”

A sharp pain struck his stomach and he blacked out. Yoo Jinhyuk’s memory of that day ended there.

Chapter 182

The Story Inside the Box (3)

Boss sat in her chair and stared at the flash drive. First, she thought, *Where do I put this?* She had learned it from Jain before.

“Oh.”

Fortunately, she remembered. Boss opened the flash drive to reveal a small piece and plugged it into her smartwatch. Then the information inside popped up as a hologram.

[Kim Hajin] — 174.3 cm, 73 kg, body fat 8% — 2025, admitted into Korea's Hero Academy [Cube] at rank 934. — 2025, achieved rank 334 after the first Cube final exam. — 2026, achieved rank 121. — Went up 813 ranks in one year. The biggest increase in Cube's history. However, he suddenly dropped out after Destruction's Cube incident that took place the same year. The media fervently covered the interesting turn of events. Some say he felt turned off by the restrictions that would be placed on him as a hero. He subsequently joined Jeronimo Mercenary.

Everyone already knew all of this about Kim Hajin's career. Boss coldly stared at it. *Should I go back and kill him for good?* Fortunately for Yoo Jinhyuk, more interesting information followed.

[Private records of Yoo Jinhyuk] July 2025, began investigating Kim Hajin at my niece's request.

At first, it contained useless information again, so she quickly scrolled down. Then...

“...!”

Her fingers touching the hologram suddenly stiffened and trembled at the followed information.

— October 2025, found vital keyword. [Kwang-Oh Incident]

“...”

BEEP— A loud noise filled her ears as those words reflected in her eyes. They kept repeating in her head. *Kwang-Oh Incident, Kwang-Oh Incident...* It happened more than 20 years ago. She had buried it deep within her subconsciousness, but still couldn't forget that day. The first test she faced from the former Boss who took her in.

— *Kim Hajin may be the sole survivor of the Kwang-Oh Incident. Not baseless, but evidence is still weak.*

That story took place long ago...

It rained heavily that day and the people inside trembled when we arrived at the shelter. They were afraid and so was I. Bell, the former black, said to me. *Kill or be killed.* Otherwise, Boss would abandon me. Bell made me do everything under the pretense of training and I carried out the massacre as a child.

— *Evidence #1: A pregnant woman gave birth there on that day.*

I killed many people that day, but spared one life. A baby crying and covered in blood. He hid in his mother's arms. No, the mother desperately tried to hide the baby.

— *Evidence #2: The date he showed up at the orphanage matches the date the incident took place.*

I couldn't kill a baby who couldn't threaten me.

— *2026, discovered new information.*

A strong headache tore at her brain.

— *According to the informant, the assassin who attacked the Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter left a single baby alive. Very strong connection to Kim Hajin's birth. Was Kim Hajin the baby and did the assassin leave him at the orphanage? Not sure yet.*

[Warning: This information is stored in Violet Banquet's personal database and will automatically be destroyed if it comes into contact with magic power other than Yoo Jinhyuk's.]

Memories of that day appeared before me. Bell smirked when I couldn't kill the baby. He said, "We were ordered to kill 96 people. No orders were given about an unexpected 97th. You can let him go if you want. It's up to you Byul."

Maybe that was part of the test, but I didn't kill the baby.

"Well, I'm sure Boss will understand if that's your decision."

I should've never been born, but the child who deserved happiness and his parents' love was now covered in blood because of me.

You would have lived an ordinary life if I had not been born.

I felt sorry and extremely guilty. That's why I couldn't kill him.

"..."

I opened my eyes after recalling the past. Suddenly, Kim Hajin's feelings towards me gained new meaning. I had learned the truth, but tears didn't flow. I didn't feel angry either. I simply grew calmer as though my emotions had been blocked.

Did Kim Hajin know all of this? And still showed no intentions of killing me. Does that mean he forgave me or is this some kind of test?

I had no idea. I was never that smart. Right now, all I want is... to stop thinking for a moment. I closed my eyes and soon fell asleep.

* * *

Chae Nayun woke up the next morning and the normally blurry view looked much clearer today for some reason. Still, her mind felt a bit hazy as she repeatedly blinked and tried to control her breath. Then...

[Although you received the help of a counteragent, you are the first to overcome the vengeful spirit curse.] [Achievement Unlocked – Hard to Kill] [The achievement bonus has been limited to 50% since you received help from others. The other half will be unlocked once you reach the 6th floor.] [Trait acquired – Magic Power that Swallows Curses]

“...?”

She couldn't understand the alert even after reading it. *Did I become stupid? My body and my head won't work like I want them to.*

“Oh, Nayun! You're up?”

Yi Jiyoona popped up from the corner of her eyes.

“You're up! Oh, thank God!”

Yi Jiyoona brightly smiled, but suddenly frowned and tightly hugged her. Chae Nayun couldn't breathe. The feeling of tears wetting her neck felt disgusting, but she regained her consciousness thanks to that.

“Get off.”

“Mm? What?”

“Get off of me.”

However, Yi Jiyoona only held her tighter and pushed her face closer.

“Thank goodness.”

“Haa.” Chae Nayun sighed and lifted her upper body. Then she pushed Yi Jiyoona away.

“So what happened?”

She asked Yi Jiyoona, who cried tears of joy.

“Oh, um, I posted on the forum if anybody had the antidote for the

curse.”

Yi Jiyeon answered as she fiddled with her fingers. Kim Hajin told her not to tell anyone, so she felt awkward.

“And?”

“And a man with the antidote came by chance to help us.”

“...”

Of course, Chae Nayun didn’t believe that so easily and suspiciously stared at her.

“What, what?”

“I mean thanks, but... he just helped?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Without asking for anything in return?”

Chae Nayun doubted kindness without a reason. She had a chronic distrust of human beings now.

“Yeah, but how’s your arm?”

Turning Chae Nayun’s attention away from something was easier than fooling most kids.

“Arm?”

Chae Nayun coughed and lifted her left arm up and down. It felt stiff from not being used, but had certainly been cured.

“It’s good. Fine. No, but who in the world—”

“Oh right. Then you can use the longsword now.”

“Longsword?”

Chae Nayun had already forgotten about what she wanted to ask.

“Yeah. What you got from the quest.”

“Of course, I remember. Back then, I...”

About 3 weeks ago, she found her first group quest in the tower.

“...Was really happy.”

She still considered that day one of her greatest accomplishments.

[Hidden Quest!] [Intermediate rank group quest has been found. This quest requires at least 8 people.]

She immediately summoned 8 other guild members after finding the quest. At first, the cave only contained a few undead monsters, but soon they found a glowing blue sword hidden inside. Everyone screamed with joy and she almost fainted after checking its information. They had almost run out of food when they found this rare item.

[Lv.3 High Quality Longsword Polished with Ice Crystal] [Rare] Lv.3 Attribute – Ice, Lv.3 Frost Damage, Lv.3 Attack Power, Lv.3 Durability

A weapon that almost equaled... no, a weapon that overpowered Lv.4 weapons.

“Did the team leader leave it behind?”

However, team leader Kim Youngjin had been using it for the past 3 weeks. Chae Nayun hadn’t been in the proper condition to use it.

“Uh-huh. He left it behind today, saying he couldn’t possibly use it when you were out sick. Instead, he took the red crystal spear.”

“As expected of the Weapon Master.”

Kim Youngjin's gift allowed him to wield any weapon as if he had been using it for years. His magic power was plain, but he would become a high rank hero by next year thanks to his gift. Yi Jiyeon grinned and buried her face in Chae Nayun's shoulder.

"This shit again."

"It's to celebrate your recovery."

"I'm not fully recovered yet. Stop pushing, it hurts. Oh right."

Chae Nayun widened her eyes as if she recalled something.

"Hey, who gave you the antidote again?"

"..."

"Stop evading the question and answer."

Yi Jiyeon smiled. Chae Nayun would surely have forgotten if it had been anything else. This must be getting on her nerves. Maybe she felt something intuitively. A woman's intuition, so to speak. *I'm in a good mood, so maybe I'll just tell her.*

"He, well. So... um."

Oh, but not now. Later, I'll tell her when we get into something dramatic and give her a surprise. Yi Jiyeon suddenly turned serious.

"He said you would know if I told you that a background actor stopped by."

"A background actor?"

"Yeah."

"The heck is..."

Chae Nayun's eyes widened.

“Do you know who he is?” Yi Jiyoong asked as Chae Nayun softly smiled and held her face.

“Hehe... yeah, I know. I got it. Now go.”

“Who is he?” Yi Jiyoong tried hard not to smile.

“Just an old teacher.”

“T-teacher?”

Yi Jiyoong almost burst out laughing when Chae Nayun urgently asked.

“Hey, hey. Did you tell him my nickname?”

“No, no. I didn’t”

“Good then.”

Chae Nayun nodded and turned on the messenger.

[I heard from my friend that you gave her the antidote. Thanks lol you didn't reply so I thought you deleted me cause I kept bothering you.] [Btw the person you cured is my friend lol not me.]

She sent the above messages to Extra7. Then she turned back to Yi Jiyoong.

“How did he look? Did he look old?”

“Uh... He did look a bit old with a beard.”

That was the biggest hint Yi Jiyoong could give her.

“Beard?”

“Yeah.”

“Beard...” Chae Nayun smiled.

“That does sound like him. I always pictured him as an old guy who’s good at playing games.”

Chae Nayun mumbled, suddenly feeling her heart warm up.

There’s still a person I can believe in even in a world like this. No, no. There are surprisingly many now that I think about it: dad, grandpa, Yoo Yeonha, Kim Suho, and even that idiotic Shin Jonghak.

“...”

She realized one thing after almost dying despite saying she wanted to die every day. It was human nature to want to live. *Don’t be so pitiful. Move forward. Stronger. Tougher.* Chae Nayun shook her head and jumped to her feet.

“Where are you going?”

“To work out. I didn’t get to practice my sword for 3 weeks. I think I might have... forgotten a lot. I gotta get back on track.”

* * *

The afternoon remained dark as night in Prestige. Players who busily conquered the higher floors returned for the special event that would take place in Medea’s palace.

“Yo, newbie.”

“Hey, Hajin.”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jain walked over to me in front of the palace. They told me about how they played around on the 5th floor and got higher quality equipment. Jain wore a high quality cape and a jeweled necklace while Cheok Jungyeong wore a gauntlet made out of bones.

“How was the 5th floor?”

“Fun and exciting. You should come next time.”

The 5th floor looked like the demon realm. Its theme should be adventure, to break through 6 fortresses, 10 gateways, 8 outposts, and 5 castles to reach the end of the world.

“How far did you go?”

“I’m not sure. We stayed in the Swamp of Beginnings for about 2 days. Some idiots waited there to find party members.”

The 5th floor was half the size of Korea. As such, 2 days were nowhere near enough to get anywhere.

“I’ll go with you tomorrow.”

I peeked over Cheok Jungyeong’s shoulder, but didn’t see the person who normally stood there.

“Where’s Boss?”

“Boss? *Ah*, she must have something to do.”

Jain put on a scary frown.

“She left with a face like this, so something serious must’ve happened. Anyways, let’s go in.”

Jain hopped over and linked arms with me. I wouldn’t have minded except Jain was currently disguised as a man.

“Oh right, disguise me too.”

“Okay.”

I had no choice but to enter the palace as Chameleon Troupe’s seat of black since we left behind the lotus symbol after destroying the towers. As such, I changed my face with Jain’s help.

We walked over to the main gate after disguising ourselves. Then we presented our citizenship cards to the guard outside the gate. He gave us different badges after checking our contribution points. My badge was made of diamond while Cheok Jungyeong and Jain's were made of gold.

"You may enter."

We went inside a beautiful, wide lobby with a red carpet and a high ceiling like the Pantheon. A beautiful chandelier hung in the center and maids and butlers in formal attire stood nearby.

"We'll check your badge ranks now."

An old man who seemed to be the chief butler walked in. I went first.

"Diamond rank has been confirmed. Please tell us your honorable name."

"..."

Honorable name didn't mean real name, right? The butler quickly added as though he read my mind.

"A false name or a nickname is fine."

"Ah, then I'll go with Buyong." [1]

The old butler quickly made a nametag.

[Diamond – Buyong]

Cheok Jungyeong and Jain went next. Cheok Jungyeong seemed to think the names had to be two characters and went with Jungyeong while Jain used an anagram of her name, Anji.

"Follow me."

We followed the butler past the lobby after putting on our nametags.

Soon, we found ourselves in front of a huge silver door. However, we quickly walked past it. Then the butler stopped in front of a golden door.

“Anji and Jungyeong may enter through the golden door.”

“*Eh?* We’re not using the same door?”

“The door you use is determined by your rank. However, you will all end up in the same reception hall.”

The butler calmly explained. Medea’s palace was an extradimensional space formed from magic power. The different colored doors all led to a single reception hall where players gathered to receive their rewards. Medea only split up the doors to make their entrances more flamboyant.

“We get different rewards, right?”

“That is correct.”

“*Ah*, I would’ve destroyed the towers myself if I knew beforehand. Hajin’s going to end up taking everything.”

Jain glanced at me as I laughed.

“Don’t worry. I’ll share the rewards with you.”

“Really?”

“Of course.”

“Yay.”

Jain hopped over to the golden door as Cheok Jungyeong followed. His back muscles tingled as he entered. I wondered what caused such a reaction and peeked at the reception hall beyond the golden door.

“*Oh.*”

As expected, powerful people filled the room and made Cheok Jungyeong's blood boil. *Kiiik*— The golden door closed shut.

"I will guide you to the diamond rank door."

I followed the butler past a ruby door, a sapphire door, and an emerald one. My body felt completely tense by the time we arrived at the diamond door. I was just a fish inside a room with whales.

"Are you ready?" the butler asked.

"Um... It's okay for me to wear this robe, right?"

I was under Jain's disguise, but still didn't want to reveal my face if possible.

"Yes, it's fine. Medea also enjoys wearing robes as well. In fact..."

The butler glanced at my robe.

"That robe is beautiful enough to make her envious."

"*Haha.*"

I made it with aether, so it couldn't be helped.

"Then I'm going in."

"Yes, I hope you enjoy your stay."

The highest ranked door opened with a roar as I stepped into the reception hall.

"..."

Two long tables joined together to form a single 100 meter table. Everyone's gazes fell on me.

Essence of the Strait, Kim Youngjin. The high rank heroes I met at Cube, Oh Junhyuk and Seo Youngji. Satan's Servant, Kim Ohsung. Hunter of the Vast Expanse, Kim Junwoo. Desolate Moon, Shin Jonghak. It felt nice to see him again. Heroes from the Temple of Justice, Aileen and Yi Yongha. And a mysterious man wearing a robe. Only powerful men and women with great achievements in the tower gathered here. Shin Jonghak was obviously the weakest among them.

"The diamond ranked Buyong has arrived."

The butler respectfully introduced me. I leisurely walked in and sat on the seat adorned with diamonds near the head of the table. The mysterious robed man sat in front of me while Aileen sat next to me.

"..."

Aileen stared at me with sparkling eyes. No, it wasn't just her. Everyone observed me. Not many looked too kind if I had to describe their gazes. *Mmm...* It felt like they tried to estimate the power of the strongest person in the room. I pushed my hood down. I was only a hyena if they were tigers. It felt too uncomfortable.

1. Buyong means lotus. 🙋

Chapter 183

Imprinting

Essence of the Strait's team leader, Kim Youngjin, took a guess at the contribution rankings for Medea's quest.

First was the destruction of the demon control towers. Guilds severely lacked here because they found it impossible to cooperate. One side would suddenly ambush the other or would suddenly say different things than initially discussed. Jain had caused all these conflicts in disguise. Then an irregular took care of the towers while the guilds turned to shambles.

Kim Youngjin became dumbstruck whenever he thought about it. He woke up like any other day, but someone had destroyed 3 towers without a trace.

Leaders of each guild quickly ran to the towers' locations that day. However, they only found ruins and a black lotus symbol engraved with magic power.

Kim Youngjin knew what that black lotus symbolized as Essence of the Strait's executive. Every high ranking hero often talked about Pandemonium's serial terror incidents.

Black Lotus took all the contribution points related to control towers. Shocked by this, the guilds came together to conquer the last one. Thankfully, Kim Youngjin managed to achieve ruby rank.

Next, they hunted the demons and undead monsters near the city. The contribution points couldn't compare to destroying the towers, but guild analysts concluded that one could achieve gold to ruby rank by faithfully doing this.

Finally, Prestige's various quests also gave contribution points. Others like the *[Lv.3 Longsword Forged with Ice Crystal]* quest that Chae Nayun

received also gave rewards that any player would envy.

Kim Youngjin nervously looked around the reception hall. It contained exactly 100 players. The top 100 in terms of contribution points.

They all sat around a long table looking at each other. At first glance, they seemed to be equal, but a clear hierarchy existed.

First were the ones closest to Medea. One diamond, three emeralds, and six rubies including Kim Youngjin himself. The diamond seat had yet to arrive, but the most eye-catching hero was the emerald seat Aileen.

“Ah, I’m starving. When will the administrator arrive?”

The Hero Association’s ultimate weapon, also known as the Human Dragon or the Last Spirit Speech Master. Kim Youngjin felt honored to be in the presence of this white-haired expert. She greatly contributed to the southern tower’s destruction and slaughtered countless undead monsters to undoubtedly earn the emerald seat.

“The most important person hasn’t arrived yet either.”

Seo Youngji, the high rank hero who sat next to Kim Youngjin, whispered. Kim Youngjin also thought the same.

“Right, Black Lotus hasn’t arrived yet.”

The only diamond seat undoubtedly belonged to Black Lotus.

“He must be planning to reveal himself more now since he carved his signature inside the tower.”

Seo Youngji muttered as she looked strangely at Kim Youngjin.

“By the way, Youngjin, I heard you found a rare item on one of your quests.”

“Us?”

“Ay, don’t pretend like you don’t know. I saw you swinging that blue sword with an ice attribute, right? It looked amazing. Where did you get it?”

Kim Youngjin shook his head. The blue longsword wasn’t just a weapon since outside items couldn’t be brought inside the Tower of Wish. Good weapons found inside served as valuable assets for any guild. Seo Youngji was a senior from his days in Cube, but Kim Youngjin couldn’t give away any information.

“*Cough*, rather than that, don’t you think Prestige has been rapidly changing?”

Kim Youngjin changed the subject. Seo Youngji seemed to accept his indirect refusal.

“The outer city became more energetic. Crops are growing too.”

As their conversation came to an end...

DUN—!

A large gate that had remained shut suddenly roared. Every player turned towards the gate decorated with beautiful diamonds.

Kiiik—

The door slowly opened as a man walked through with steady steps. The butler near the door introduced him.

“The diamond ranked Buyong has arrived.”

The man didn’t look simple. He wore a black robe embroidered with white patterns that looked beautiful enough to capture every eye. Magic power flowed along the robe’s surface. *What level could it be?* Kim Youngjin couldn’t help but wonder.

“ ... ”

The man sharply scanned the players in the room. His hawk-like eyes seemed to pierce through their secrets. After 5 seconds, he concluded his brief observation and sat at his seat. The room suddenly grew louder.

“So he’s...”

“*Shh.*”

Seo Youngji placed an index finger to her mouth.

“Nothing good will come from being involved with him.”

“...”

Kim Youngjin silently nodded. That man was no doubt the strongest player. Kim Youngjin felt thankful he met Black Lotus in the tower since they might stand a chance with everyone’s stats restricted.

“By the way, is it true?” Kim Youngjin asked Seo Youngji.

“What is?”

“That the Divine Archer Jin Seyeon is also looking for a ticket.”

“I don’t know.”

“You’re her direct junior and an association member. Shouldn’t you know?”

Seo Youngji laughed and shook her head.

“Association members don’t know everything regarding what heroes do in their spare time. Why do you ask?”

“Black Lotus also uses a bow. We need someone who can suppress him.”

“Why can’t that be someone from a guild? You guys sure like to bring

up the association when it's convenient."

Black Lotus probably destroyed 3 towers with a single arrow each. Only an archer on the same level could suppress him. A warrior would never be able to defeat an archer on high ground. They could only hope that they wouldn't be sitting ducks.

The association bestowed Jin Seyeon with the master rank title for this reason. Reaching the peak of the bow was much harder than the sword.

"Honestly, I hope she doesn't come. I don't think the Divine Archer can beat him either."

Seo Youngji spoke as she shook her head.

"No way, there's a reason she's called the Divine Archer."

"No, I'm positive. Look at the ominous and dangerous aura around him. He hasn't even shown his face."

Seo Youngji didn't know that this aura came from Jain's disguise, which became unstable because of the restricted stats. Seo Youngji mistakenly thought Kim Hajin emanated this ghastly aura from his level of attainment.

"I guess you're right."

"I hope nothing bad happens here."

"It should be fine. Aileen is here as well."

"I don't like her that much."

Seo Youngji grumbled. *Tk, tk, tk, tk.* The lights went off. Soon, a white sphere of magic power rose and lit up the room.

"The third floor's administrator and this palace's master, Medea, has arrived."

The door behind the head of the table opened with the butler's introduction. Medea elegantly strode in wearing a blue dress under a red robe.

However, her entrance felt a bit lacking after Black Lotus.

"Welcome, players."

Medea paused before sitting at the head of the table. She stared at Black Lotus, who sat next to her.

"As expected, the administrator recognizes his strength," Seo Youngji murmured.

"Looks like it."

The players began talking among themselves after seeing this.

* * *

"Welcome, players."

Medea suddenly stopped and looked at me after her grand appearance. To be exact, she looked at my robe. It seemed the butler wasn't lying when he said she would envy its beauty.

"*Cough*, I am the administrator of Prestige, Medea."

Medea turned back to finish her introduction. The 100 players all greeted her and she returned a kind smile.

"I am glad we can gather on this joyous day. All of you must have walked through your respective door of contribution."

Snap. Medea snapped her fingers.

[You have received the diamond door's blessing.] [The amount of TP gained by completing Prestige's common quests has permanently increased by 11%.]

A system alert popped up.

— *Hm?*

— What's this?

Players widened their eyes as Medea smiled.

“*Huhu*, that was the first reward. Don't be surprised. This is only the beginning.”

This time, she clapped and classical music began to play. Several servants walked in carrying food.

“First, let us enjoy our meal.”

[Lv.3 Steak] [Lv.3 Beef Soup]

They served high quality food that couldn't be found in Prestige. Players smacked their lips as they glanced at Medea.

“Dig in. You must be starving.”

The players began to eat as I looked around while cutting my steak. I also knew the other top 8 players. The robed emerald ranked player in front of me was most likely Bell. Like me, he didn't exist in the original story.

“Feel free to talk amongst yourselves. Players should work together, right?”

Medea laid the groundwork for conversation. Immediately, a gaze fell on me. I turned my head and found Shin Jonghak passionately staring at me. It seemed he wanted to talk to me. Of course, I ignored him.

“You.”

Poke. The woman next to me suddenly poked my shoulder.

“...?”

“Hi.”

Aileen waved as our eyes met. She could be considered the strongest individual force aside from the Nine Stars.

“You know me, right?” Aileen asked.

“... ”

However, I focused on my steak without answering.

“We met before in Tutorial Town. You threw the vodka at me.”

Annoyed by her incessant talking, I activated [*Demon’s Cunning Speech*].

“I don’t recall. Can you eat quietly?”

However, even I felt surprised by how fierce my voice sounded. The players eating quickly turned towards me. I should’ve learned how to use it properly.

“Oh? You’re using magic power in your voice. Are you provoking me?”

Aileen smiled, but her gaze grew sharper with hostility.

“It’s you, isn’t it? The new black.”

Everyone in the reception hall focused on us, including Bell and Medea. I wasn’t surprised since Medea liked conflict.

“... ”

I turned towards Aileen glaring at me. I wasn’t scared of someone who looked like a kid. However...

“First, take off that rob— *uup!*”

Aileen spoke with magic power, but I stuffed a big chunk of steak in her mouth before she could finish.

“Eat.”

I had an item that let me cast hypnotic suggestions, which functioned similarly to Spirit Speech. Of course, it wouldn’t work on someone with high magic power like Aileen unless I made it hard to notice.

“It’s delicious, isn’t it?”

For example, this subtle hypnotic suggestion amplified the flavor.

“...”

Aileen stopped glaring and quickly began to chew. *Nom, nom, nom, nom.* It took ages for her to finish with her small mouth. I inwardly breathed a sigh of relief and leaned back. Then I looked at the players staring at me. They quickly averted their gazes, but the giants I mentioned continued to look on with interest.

“...”

I shook my head and Medea suddenly clapped her hands.

“Great, it seems the rank 1 player has the heart to give his food to others. That was a fun spectacle,” Medea spoke up. “Now then, let’s begin the conferment ceremony.”

Her announcement felt too sudden. The startled players hurriedly finished their food or stood with their plates.

“No, no, you don’t have to stand.”

Medea smiled and stopped them.

“Feel free to continue eating. I’ll take care of the reward ceremony. I

dislike unnecessary and uncomfortable formalities.”

That was a lie. Medea wouldn't hesitate to throw disrespectful people in jail or use them as sacrifices in magic experiments.

“*Cough.*” She cleared her throat before starting the conferment ceremony.

“First up, rank 51-100. Silver rank players will receive 500 TP in addition to the silver door blessing.”

Fifty butlers walked in and handed 5 gold coins to each silver ranked players.

“Next up, rank 11-50. Gold ranked players will receive 1000 TP in addition to the golden door blessing.”

They received 1000 TP in the same fashion.

“Finally, rank 1-0. The rewards are as follows.”

A window popped up in front of the top 10 rankers.

[Trait Recovery Coupon] [Special Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.1 Lightning of Thor] [Artifact – High-intermediate] [Special Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.2 Wind of Odyssey] [Artifact – Low-intermediate] [Orb of Regeneration] [Mystic Key]...

“Rank 1-10 players may choose their rewards from this list. First, the diamond ranked Buyong may pick 4 items from this list.”

Medea looked at me with interest. Four items were indeed worthy of first place. However, the players behind me would undoubtedly feel discontent if I took all the skill books. Medea probably hoped for that as well. Of course, I felt confident in dealing with them, but I didn't want the skill books anyway.

“Have you made up your mind?”

“Yes.”

“*Haha*, I guess it’s not too hard of a decision. Announce your choice.”

I selected my items in front of the other 9 rankers.

First, I chose the *[Trait Recovery Coupon]* and the *[Special Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.2 Wind of Odyssey]*.

The others likely expected this. However, the final two rewards I chose were the *[Orb of Regeneration]* and the *[Mystic Key]*.

Immediately, the room stirred and Medea also looked surprised.

“D-Did you click the wrong button?”

“No.”

I needed much better skills than Medea’s skill books, so I chose the evolving items that would only grow stronger and could only be acquired from her.

* * *

“Why didn’t you choose the other skill book?” Jain grumbled about my choice after we left.

“Lightning of Thor isn’t all that good.”

Medea offered 2 special skill books, but neither were particularly good. Yes, the Lightning of Thor was a high-intermediate rank artifact. However, skill books fell into the following grades: average, rare, artifact, historical, legend, and mythical. Three grades existed above the artifact grade.

“Jain, you can have this.”

I handed her the *[Lv.2 Wind of Odyssey]*. I didn’t want to learn it to save my skill slots, but Wind of Odyssey wasn’t a bad skill.

“Eh? You’re giving this to me?” Jain’s attitude did a complete 180.

“Yes, it suits you. As for Cheok Jungyeong, here’s 5000 TP.”

I simply handed him the currency. However, he stood in a daze and must’ve gone delirious after not being able to fight anyone in a room full of powerful rankers. Or maybe he fell for Medea.

“You don’t want it?”

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong didn’t say anything, so I placed the 5000 TP back into my inventory.

“By the way, Jain, doesn’t this face look too similar to mine?”

I recalled my disguise, which didn’t look all that different from my original face. Kim Hajin’s general looks remained, but I had a beard and more clearly defined facial features. Admittedly, I looked more like Jake Gyllenhaal now.

“Ah, I didn’t have a choice because my ability is restricted. Any more and someone would notice, but don’t worry. They’ll never think it was you. Your real face is a lot uglier, *hehe*.”

“Not a lot.”

“Hm? I’ll change your face back. You be the judge.”

The beard on my chin disappeared and my face returned to normal.

“How is it?”

“Hm.”

Well, maybe I looked just a little bit uglier. I caught sight of Boss walking towards us while feeling hurt about my appearance.

“Oh, it’s Boss!”

“Boss!”

Jain and I left Cheok Jungyeong and ran over to Boss. A week had passed since I last saw her. Of course, a part of me felt a bit uncomfortable because of Chundong’s past, but I already decided to bury that as Kim Hajin.

“Welcome back, Boss. What have you been up to?”

Boss silently looked at me for a long time. *Did something happen on Earth?*

“No, it’s nothing.” She sighed and shook her head.

“Your face looks a lot skinnier for it to be nothing.”

“My face.”

“Yes, let’s go back to the hideout. I’ll make you a good meal.”

I began to walk towards our hideout. However, Boss didn’t move. She only stared at me with somber eyes.

“Boss, aren’t you coming?”

“Hajin.”

The word that came out of her mouth startled me. Boss always called me newbie unless it was something serious.

“Yes?”

However, she simply shook her head. “It’s nothing.”

Her awkwardness made me feel awkward too, but I brightly spoke up.

“Oh right, Boss. We have a new family member at our nest.”

“Family member?”

“Yes.”

* * *

[Lv.5 Chameleon Troupe's Hideout]

— *Chirp?*

Spartan tilted his head and scanned the 4 people in front of him.

“So this is your pet?” Cheok Jungyeong asked.

“Yes. He's quite loyal, so he should only like me.”

“Oh?”

“He's clever and only follows one master. His name is Spartan.”

Chirp. Chirp— Spartan flapped his wings at the three new people.

“Isn't he cute? He's flapping his wings to protect his owner. He's worried that you'd hurt me.”

“Is he?”

“Yep, so don't hate him too much.”

“How cute. He's loyal to his master?”

Cheok Jungyeong seemed skeptical while Jain stared at Spartan in awe. *Chirp, chirp*— Spartan chirped a few more times before hopping over.

“Come here, Spartan.’

I opened my arms.

“What?”

However, Spartan didn't jump into my arms. Instead, he hopped over to Boss on the couch reading a novel. Then he dug into her embrace. Spartan's sudden snuggling startled Boss as well.

“...?”

Boss looked back and forth between me and Spartan. I fell into a daze. However, Spartan didn't even spare me a glance.

— *Chirp, chirp.*

He rubbed his head on Boss' chest, coaxing her into petting him. *Cheep, cheep.* He even began to sing. *The hell?*

“I see, he's very loyal. *Heh, hehehe.*” Cheok Jungyeong snickered.

“How funny, Spartan is definitely a male,” Jain remarked about his gender.

Chapter 184

Materialized Demon Realm (1)

Spartan ended up staying with Boss. I, Kim Hajin, allowed it as his owner. I told him to liven her up as a good pet should.

“Huu.”

Spartan already followed her into her room. Then I looked over the items I'd been too busy to check. First, I examined the special consolidation ticket from killing Jin Sahyuk.

[Special Consolidation Ticket] A consolidation ticket formed from a special gift. You may strengthen a gift, piece of equipment, physique, or art by using this ticket.

This ticket existed on my smartwatch rather than in my inventory. Next, I took out the 3 items I obtained today.

[Trait Recovery Coupon] [Orb of Regeneration] [Mystic Key]

Finally, I checked my SP.

[Current SP: 4,483]

I had about 4,200 SP this morning and earned almost 300 SP in a single day after I made a name for myself on such a big stage. I only needed a little more to create a good gift.

“For now...”

I decided to use the special consolidation ticket. Obviously, I would strengthen Master Sharpshooter. I opened my status window to check its current level.

▷[Master Sharpshooter] [Intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving
— Grade 4] [Proficiency EXP 95%]

◇[Master Sharpshooter] [Intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving
— Grade 6] [Proficiency EXP 86%]

The first line was the real version and the second line referred to inside the tower. The restricted version was quickly catching up to the real one since stats and proficiency EXP increased faster in the tower. Players would regain their real abilities around the 9th floor, but that was a story for another time. I tapped the special consolidation ticket on my smartwatch.

[You have used the special consolidation ticket.] [Master Sharpshooter has increased in power.] [Master Sharpshooter has increased in potential.]

“Hmm.”

The ticket didn’t add anything special and only strengthened the gift’s fundamental effects. I decided to hold onto the other special consolidation ticket. I still wasn’t sure whether I should use it on the Desert Eagle or another gift.

[Trait Recovery Coupon]

My biggest gain from today would allow me to recover 1 of my 3 remaining traits.

▷[Random Consolidation System] [Low-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [3 stage consolidation] ▷[Magic Dysfunction Physique]
▷[Medicinal Memory Physique]

Which one should I choose? I needed to carefully think. Recovering a trait didn’t just mean a simple boost in battle prowess. Another fortuitous event could happen just like how Dexterity evolved to Dwarf’s Dexterity. *Should I choose the medicinal memory physique like I originally planned?*

“No.”

I would've chosen the Orb of Regeneration for nothing.

[Orb of Regeneration] [Magic Artifact] An orb with the power of regeneration. Evolving Item – EXP [0/100] Lv.1 ???

An orb the size of a ping-pong ball that glowed green. It didn't have a level and its only effect remained hidden: *Lv.1 ???*. However, I could easily check its description with my smartwatch.

Lv.1 Recovery and Regeneration

Its effect seemed to have a wide range. Simplicity was sometimes best. Not even I knew how wide its applications could be. I might become half-invulnerable if I brought this item out to the real world and leveled it up.

“And this key...”

[Mystic key] [Magic Artifact] A mystical key. Evolving Item – EXP [0/100] Lv.2 Unlocking

It was the same size as an ordinary key, but looked like it came out of a fairytale. Its surface glowed blue and made it hard to tell whether it was a solid or liquid. This mystical key's use would also increase as it grew. It would gain offensive and defensive capabilities in addition to its unlocking ability.

“Alright.”

I decided to go with the trait that would allow me to use items more efficiently.

[Random Consolidation System]

“Come.”

I murmured as I tore the ticket in half.

[Choose the trait you wish to recover.] [Random Consolidation System]

[Magic Dysfunction Physique] [Medicinal Memory Physique]

System messages popped up in front of me. Three traits I had lived without for a long time now. I chose the Random Consolidation System.

[You have recovered a trait!] [Random Consolidation System] [Low rank] [Spirit attribute]

The tower restricted its power, but I could still scan up to 5 items. The consolidation percentage dropped from *[0-54%]* to *[-10-30%]*. However, I felt more than satisfied since 30% could make a significant difference.

[You have acquired a new trait.]

I smiled as I held the Orb of Regeneration. Then I happily murmured.

“Scan.”

The number engraved on the orb was... 24%. My luck seemed to be working well. *Piring*— Someone sent me a message as I rejoiced.

CaptainBritain: Hajin, have you seen the community? Something huge happened at the palace today.

It came from Rachel.

“Oh right.”

I vaguely recalled seeing her among the 100 people in the palace. I didn't get a good look since she sat among the gold ranks. It wouldn't make sense if she weren't there considering the English Royal Court guild made huge achievements as well.

I smile as I replied.

Me: Something huge?

CaptainBritain: Yes, take a look at the public forum. Ah, by the way, why weren't you at the palace?

Me: Oh, um... I didn't make enough contributions. I went back to Earth and only came back recently, haha.

CaptainBritain: Ah, I see. That's okay, don't worry about it too much. I can help you. I was rank 33 this time. :)

I took a look at the public forum.

[Public Forum]

[Holy Jesus, Aileen and Rank 1 got into a fight at Medea's palace.]

— I was there. I saw it myself, hehe.

— For real??

— Yep, apparently they were super strong. In the end, it looks like your talent determines where you'll end up in the Tower of Wish.

— Nah, it's all skills. Better go grind the ones you have (if any, hehe).

[Does anyone have footage from the palace?]

— You can record videos here?

— Yeah, you just have to buy an item from the player shop. I think it was called the one-use recorder.

— Someone's selling the video. I already bought it and watched it.

— How much did you pay?

— 50 TP. It was pretty intense. Rank 1 and Aileen were exchanging magic power. I would have fainted if I was caught between them.

— *Damn, I want to see it too. Can you share it?*

[Second wave of Essence of the Strait members, please leave your name here.]

— *Essence of the Strait's Yohei. I have arrived.*

“...”

Over 300 posts appeared on the public forum every day and over half talked about me. Not to mention, they exaggerated quite a bit. I couldn't complain as I stared at my smartwatch.

[You have gained 1 SP.] [You have gained 2 SP.] [You have gained 1 SP.]
...

I finally found out why my SP kept increasing. I would probably gain an astronomical amount of SP if they discovered my identity, but that would turn my life upside down.

“I don't even want to think about it.”

Tiring— I received another message.

CaptainBritain: Also, the English Royal Court guild became quite close with Prestige's Riry Shop. Feel free to tell me if you want any potion or equipment...

That was actually my doing. I told Henry and Kiri to make things cheaper for Rachel.

[How? I heard the owner there is quite strict.]

I replied while pretending to be oblivious.

CaptainBritain: Ah... well (≧▽≦) It's a bit embarrassing to say this myself, but it looks like the English Royal Court is fairly influential. We focused on working in Prestige while other guilds busily conquered the 4-5th floors. ^.^

Rachel seemed especially lively these days. She genuinely enjoyed the Tower of Wish where she was free from England's burdens and Lancaster's constant threats.

CaptainBritain: Oh right, we bought a plot of land too and crops started to grow on it. (◡ > ◡ < ◡) You should come to see it later.

I couldn't help but laugh since her messages sounded completely different from how she spoke.

CaptainBritain: Ah, sorry. I got too excited and talked for too long. :(

Me: No, it's fine with me.

I could understand why she wanted to brag. She always had to keep a solemn image as the vice leader.

Me: You can use our messenger as a diary if you want.

CaptainBritain: Diary? lol It's fine. Ah, we have a hunting session planned for tonight, so I have to go now. Let me know if you have trouble with anything. I'll help to the best of my ability! (> ʌ <)

I hopped on my bed with a grin. Then...

[Sudden Quest!]

A quest popped up.

[Special Quest – What Medea Wants.] [Summary – Medea wishes to have your robe.] [Rank – low] [Reward – Favorable impression from Medea among others.]

“What?”

Was she thinking about my robe this entire time? She must've wanted it badly if a quest popped up. I checked the robe's description once again.

[Lv.3 Masterpiece Robe Crafted by a Master Craftsman] Elegant yet not flamboyant, imposing yet not outlandish. A masterfully designed robe. Lv.3 Magic Seal: Has increased durability, Lv.4 Outward Appearance, Lv.3 Scent

I made the magic seal enchantment with stigma's magic power.

"She must've really liked it."

I could make another one whenever I wanted, so I decided to give it to her when the opportunity arose. I turned off the system and lay on my back. I felt tired, but needed to do one last thing before sleeping.

[Lv.3 Extraction and Permanent Materialization]

Extracting stigma's magic power with this skill. *It wouldn't hurt today, right?* After all, I had the Orb of Regeneration. I held the orb in my hand as I used the skill on stigma.

"Uuk!"

Alright, it still hurt. The pain seemed stronger than ever now that the skill grew to level 3. Intense pain swept through my body like a waterfall. I quietly closed my eyes like someone on his deathbed while foaming at the mouth.

* * *

I slowly opened my eyes to a dark room. However, I didn't worry since Prestige always looked like this. Darkness completely shrouded the city without a single streetlight or torch.

However, a figure sat on the edge of my bed and coldly looked at me in the darkness. The only light in the room came from this figure's eyes. Was it an assassin or a mysterious being in Prestige?

"..."

I swallowed hard. I felt surprised, but didn't panic. I could simply take out the Desert Eagle from my inventory and...

“Eh?”

Bright moonlight shone through the window. The white light washed away the darkness and revealed the figure’s appearance. She wasn’t an assassin. I was all too familiar with the person at the edge of my bed.

“You’re awake.”

Boss spoke as expressionlessly as always. *How long had she been here?* I made eye contact with her.

“Boss? What’s up?”

“Pasta wanted to come here.”

Boss shrugged. *Pasta...* *Was she talking about Spartan?* I glanced at my blanket. Spartan curled up next to me asleep.

So he still wanted to sleep with his owner. I grinned and stroked his back. Zzz— zzzzz— Spartan lightly shook as I petted him.

“Then I’ll be leaving now.”

“Ah, wait, how was Spartan?”

“...He’s cute,” Boss muttered and got up from the bed. I held her back from leaving.

“Boss, you didn’t forget that we’re going to the 5th floor today, right?”

Her legs stopped. She slowly looked back and nodded with a bitter smile.

“Of course.”

“Okay.”

Boss left as I stretched. *Koong, koong, koong.* I could hear Cheok Jungyeong’s footsteps. It was time to train.

— *Chirp, chirp.*

Spartan also woke up and stretched on the blanket. I waited for him before heading downstairs together.

“You’re here.”

“Yeah.”

I greeted Cheok Jungyeong and sat cross-legged on the floor. Then I started with the breathing exercise for awakening spirit power. This breathing exercise normally tired me out after 30 minutes, but I should be able to do it longer now with the Orb of Regeneration.

Huu... huu...

I deeply breathed 15 times before opening my eyes as my back and waist began to spasm. I had yet to gain any insight or enlightenment like in martial art novels.

“Ah, so tiring...”

I looked around the hideout while resting. Spartan had run off and couldn’t be found.

“Where’d he go?”

“I cooked him. He’s in my stomach now.”

“...”

I closed my eyes and ignored Cheok Jungyeong’s dumb joke. Spartan and I could share our thoughts and vision. I wanted to give it a try. Soon, a blurry scene appeared before me. Spartan’s vision came into view. The area filled with steam. Was he near boiling water?

Where is this? Is he really being cooked?

I watched in astonishment. Then Spartan suddenly jumped and I

finally got a better view. Boss was enjoying a warm bath with Spartan in the bathroom.

— What?

Boss seemed deep in thought and splashed some water at Spartan. Because of her sudden action...

“...”

I quickly cut off my visual connection with Spartan and opened my eyes. *Chak!* I slapped my cheeks hard.

“What are you doing, newbie?”

Cheok Jungyeong smirked. I couldn’t say anything about what I just saw. *Let’s wipe it from my memory.* I didn’t mean to peek, but if Boss found out... Honestly, I didn’t see much, none of the important parts. *Just seeing her skin shouldn’t be a crime, right? Cough, this was all that bastard’s fault.* I stood up.

“Ah, hey, where are you going in the middle of training?”

Cheok Jungyeong asked as I looked back at him.

“To cook a certain bird.”

* * *

[5th floor, Materialized Demon Realm]

I went to the 5th floor with the Chameleon Troupe members after properly scolding Spartan and checking up on Riry Shop. The materialized demon realm’s starting area was a harsh volcanic region that constantly spewed lava and black smoke.

“Newbie, what’s your plan for the day? Jain and I already registered with the third crystal stele.”

Cheok Jungyeong asked. The 5th floor contained a total of 15 crystal steles. They served as checkpoints since it wouldn't make sense to start over every time you came back.

"I..."

I wanted to look for NPCs like Henry and Kiri that had been abandoned in the original story. Hidden quests might show up with hidden items like the dwarven steles. It shouldn't take too long, but might be dangerous alone with the many strong enemies on this floor. Not to mention, it would be impossible to kill some boss monsters alone.

"Let's split into two teams to explore."

Jain and Cheok Jungyeong nodded.

"Alright, I'll go with Cheok Jungyeong. We were doing a quest before."

"Sounds good."

Jain and Cheok Jungyeong went together and seemed surprisingly close.

"Then..." I looked back at Boss observing the volcanic region. Her eyes filled with curiosity at the demon realm.

"Boss? Do you want to come with me?"

I felt awkward around her for some reason. Boss briefly looked at me before nodding.

"Yeah."

"O-Okay."

I took out the dwarven supercar.

“H-Hop in.”

“Okay.”

Boss got on the dwarven supercar. “Why do you keep stuttering?”

“I, I wonder why. Maybe I’m having withdrawal symptoms from not smoking for a while.”

I could only make up a poor excuse.

Chapter 185

The Materialized Demon Realm

(2)

I tightened my grip around the dwarven supercar's accelerator. We sped through the flames shooting up from the ground. The hot breeze mixed with ashes irritated our faces, but we endured it with our masks on.

“Wow.”

The demon realm that I'd only seen in movies or read in books passed by. Dark flame pillars shot up from the ground and monsters chased us while screaming.

However, my traveling companion remained silent. She simply watched the scene through her bear helmet and didn't even ask about our destination. I focused on driving and ignored all the obstacles. We drove for about 30 minutes towards the GPS coordinate displayed on the Book of Truth.

[Lv.6 The Strange Valley of Darkness]

I finally found one of my discarded settings. I stopped the dwarven supercar at the entrance.

“We're here, Boss.”

Many of the Tower of Wish's settings had been abandoned. I had changed the original story a lot from my initial plans. It became more shallow and completely lost its originality. I passionately came up with the settings, but lost focus due to the pressure and lack of time when I wrote the story.

This won't be fun. I only have half an hour until the deadline. I don't have

time, so let's just skip this. Ah, this one is too difficult to describe, etc... I discarded dozens of NPCs along with more than 10 episodes.

The Tower of Wish arc became incomplete and full of holes. The lazy past me had left it that way, but I wanted to properly finish that story now. That's probably what the co-author, who should be watching even now, wanted to see as well.

"Where are we?" I became slightly emotional when Boss suddenly asked.

"Huh? Umm..."

How should I explain? I stroked my chin for a moment.

"Well... ah."

Something crossed my mind. I just had to come up with a similar excuse as I always did.

"I read some books in Prestige."

"Books?"

Boss widened her eyes. Then she smiled for some reason.

"I've been reading a lot of books recently as well."

She probably thought we shared similar hobbies.

"Not webnovels."

"...Webnovels count as books too."

Boss pouted. It had been a while since I last saw her like this. Spartan must've healed her somehow.

"Look. This author here is earning a ton of TP with his webnovel."

She even tried to show me the novel she sponsored, but I stopped her.

“Anyways, I found this description in the book.”

I cleared my throat and recited what I had written in my settings book.

“The demon prison camp is hidden somewhere on the 5th floor. In this prison camp, human NPCs are treated as slaves to demons...”

A husband and wife pair should be inside: Kedrick and Lirko.

[5th Floor Slave NPCs – Lirko and Kedrick] 1. Two human NPCs locked up in the Valley of Darkness. 2. Kedrick is a master blacksmith and Lirko is a talented lancer. 3. Kedrick possesses an item called the [Mysterious Pocket] and Lirko is hiding an item called [Kedrick's Ghost Sword]. 4. The [Mysterious Pocket] is a unique item that enables the user to bring something from inside the tower to the outside world. 5. [Kedrick's Ghost Sword] is an excellent Lv.6 sword. 6. Kedrick and Lirko have high potential. They can grow to Lv.55, equivalent to most administrators.

The Valley of Darkness also contained Krakoon, the commander-in-chief of the demons.

“This valley must be that prison camp.”

“I see.”

Boss looked at the valley before her. The narrow canyon between two mountains looked dangerous. Boss turned to me after observing for a while.

“What do we get from saving the NPCs?”

“Huh? Oh, that's...”

I couldn't tell her that NPCs would later help us in a crucial moment. No, we had to make them help. Not just for the Tower of Wish, but also the many obstacles and devils in the future.

“NPCs can become useful.”

“Really?”

“Yes. Just look at my Riry Shop. Henry and Kiri are both on my side now, right? I earn more than 3000 TP per day. It’s almost like I’m cheating.”

Henry and Kiri grew quite rapidly. They became very tall after I took care of the famine. Well, maybe not that tall, but they certainly grew and already mastered a passive skill called the *[Law of Thinking]*. I also gave them a skill book called *[Sharp Eyes]* since they wanted to learn more.

[Sharp Eyes] was a rare basic skill that could measure an NPC’s abilities and hidden potential. I left it to Kiri since I couldn’t learn any more skills. Winning over an NPC allowed me to indirectly use skills that I couldn’t learn.

“We’ll probably receive an additional reward if we get rid of all the demons in there.”

Henry and Kiri didn’t possess any professions, but the couple did. I even wrote a description for Lirko along the lines of: *Lirko can even overpower Kim Suho with brute force when freed from her shackles*. I didn’t know why I wrote such a sentence.

“Let’s go together.”

I looked at Boss. Her dark eyes always sparkled like jewels.

“If you say so.”

Boss nodded as we headed towards the valley. We only took a few steps in when everything turned dark and we could only hear our footsteps on the sand. The Valley of Darkness sure lived up to its name, but my hearing grew sharper.

“Boss, where are you going?”

Boss suddenly changed directions. No, more like she leaned towards the right.

“I have no idea. It’s too dark to see.”

I grabbed her wrist before she went too far ahead.

“...?”

“Just follow me. I can see just fine.”

Boss nodded as we continued onward. The valley felt strangely quiet. Slaves should be digging for the dark ores buried here.

“Eh?”

Soon, we came across a dim source of light. A withered flower buried under the valley’s dark soil. I immediately checked its description.

[A Nearly-Withered Shamrock Plant]

The bud of this valuable herb gleamed with a white light. You could chew it whole or use it to make an elixir with the power to resurrect even the dead. I had planned to obtain it at some point. Unfortunately, this one neared its end.

“Boss, wait just a second.”

I stepped over to the shamrock plant. Then I took out the Orb of Regeneration in front of the dry, thin plant. The orb touched its leaves and gave off a faint glow.

The dried leaves and withered stems gradually stood up again.

However, it progressed too slowly. I inserted my magic power into the orb to speed things up. *Woong*. The orb grew brighter as the shamrock plant absorbed the flash of light.

[Lv.4 Healthy Shamrock Plant]

The plant regained its vigor and the white light flowing from its bud looked even more beautiful. I placed the plant in my inventory.

“...?”

Boss looked at me with wide eyes.

“What was that?”

“Oh, that? I just used the item that Medea gave me as a reward.”

“Reward?”

Koong! A loud noise rang out.

“What?”

“It seems there’s someone else here besides us. I’ve felt a strange presence for a while now.”

At Boss’ words, my thousand-mile eyes stretched towards the noise before stopping at a mysterious player draped in a robe.

— *Mmm?*

He held the NPC Kedrick by the neck and would undoubtedly kill him. He glanced towards me as if he felt my gaze.

“There’s an enemy. Follow me.”

I took out the Desert Eagle and held Boss’ hand as I ran. Boss didn’t ask any questions and simply followed. Soon, we reached the unknown player.

[This place is a prison camp.] [The Valley of Darkness’ veil will be temporarily lifted.]

The darkness disappeared and the man’s figure came into view. I could guess his identity.

The second, or maybe the first existence, that wasn't in my original story. He called himself Bell.

“Damn.”

He stared at us and seemed startled, but soon smiled.

“You got the quest too?”

“Quest?” I frowned.

“I guess not. That’s fine. Long time no see, *huh?*” He scratched his head.

“Yeah.”

I replied while tightening my grip around the Desert Eagle. I didn’t know how he got here, but now seemed like a good chance. His existence always bothered me. I wanted to kill him at least once today. However, the man suddenly blurted something strange.

“No, not you.” Bell grinned and looked at Boss. Complex feelings filled his gaze.

“Hey, let me give you a piece of advice.”

“...?”

“You’d better get out of her way.”

Huge magic power suddenly erupted. The ground vibrated and the whole place shook. Only then did I look at Boss.

“Boss?”

Her facial expression remained calm despite her magic power. She gave off an ominous aura. The color of her eyes also changed. They turned blood-red, the eyes of Yaksha that I came up with in my settings.

“Long time no see, Byul.” [1]

Bell spoke to Boss.

* * *

[Lv.3 English Royal Court Guild's Hideout]

The English Royal Court had one of the highest level hideouts in Prestige along with Essence of the Strait, Frost Sanctuary, and Desolate Moon.

— You know me, right? We met in Tutorial Town.

The events that took place yesterday played as a video in the hideout's lounge. The title was: *Aileen and Rank 1 in a Battle of Nerves*. Rachel had recorded it for members who couldn't attend the event. They watched the video in stifling silence.

— I don't remember. Why don't you just eat quietly?

Those words stopped Aileen's prodding. The voice contained magic power that caused an echo in the soul.

The guild members slightly stiffened when the voice filled the room. They felt overpowered and awed even though it came from a video.

“To think someone other than the Spirit Speech Master could use magic power like that.”

The vice team leader, Davin, nervously spoke.

“It's a big world with many great people,” Rachel replied. Containing magic power in words without an artifact was difficult and also inefficient. Without real talent, it would only increase the volume of your voice.

However, this didn't apply to Aileen and the mysterious rank 1.

They fought using only magic power contained in words. This short battle felt fiercer than soldiers exchanging blades 1000 times.

“You’re right. I feel quite inferior.”

“Inferior? It’s not like we stood there and did nothing.”

Rachel smiled bitterly. The gap in strength felt too overwhelming. Those two had gone far ahead even though they all started at the same place inside the tower. Rachel became convinced of focusing on the 3rd floor instead of climbing higher. If a crow-tit wanted to win against a stork, it had to compete in a different field rather than stretching its legs.

“For now, let’s stop watching the video.”

Rachel turned it off.

“Land prices have gone up lately, haven’t they?”

“Yes. The profit is already 2500 TP.”

Kimbol, the person in charge of their finances, answered. The Royal Court guild invested 4500 TP to buy 2 buildings and 500 acres of farmland. They had earned the TP by hunting undead monsters, attacking hidden dungeons in Prestige, and chatting with NPCs to complete even the most mundane quests.

“By the way, vice leader.”

However, Davin still felt worried.

“If there is another residential area on the upper floors...”

“Of course, I thought about that.”

Rachel lightly cut him off.

“Most of the land should belong to NPCs if the new residential area is

better than Prestige. We won't be able to buy anything with our money. If it's worse, our investment would be a success since that means there isn't a residential area better than Prestige."

Davin thought for a moment before nodding.

"Right. You would be perfect if you did a little less shopping."

Rachel slightly narrowed her eyes. *Cut back on shopping?* She saved as much as she could and spent the extra money very cautiously.

"Let's take care of today's work."

"Yes!"

Today, they would hunt monsters on the 4th floor. They could obtain item drops while training and leveling up their skills since the undead king and his minions continuously respawned. Rachel stepped outside with the Royal Court guild members. They walked through Prestige's familiar darkness towards the crystal stele. Then...

"*Eh?* Rachel?"

A familiar voice called her name. Rachel looked back and tilted her head. An old classmate stood there. The man who always placed first at Cube, Kim Suho, the Sword Saint from Creator's Sacred Grace.

"Suho?"

"Wow. It's so nice to see you again."

Kim Suho approached with a smile as a crowd accompanied him. As always, he stood at the center of attention.

"It's been a while."

One of Kim Suho's companions stood out. Rachel's eyes fixated on her.

"I met them on the 2nd floor. *Ah*, you all know her, right? This is

Rachel, the English Royal Court guild's vice leader."

Kim Suho introduced his group, oblivious to her confusion.

"H-Hi. D-Do you remember me? I, *uh*, I went to school with you, too..." Yi Yeonghan stuttered.

"Yes, I remember."

Rachel nodded at Yi Yeonghan's words while still looking straight at someone else.

"I'm Vanessa Fermun and this is Paolo Fermun. We're from the Colaion family."

An Italian woman, Vanessa Fermun, introduced herself along with her brother. Rachel also greeted them. Only one person remained. The one Rachel had been staring at this whole time. She couldn't keep her cool and all the Royal Court guild members felt the same.

"*Ah... Cough.*"

The woman in front of them was one of the 70 master rank heroes in the world. A hero among heroes, a powerhouse who could kill a calamity grade monster with a single arrow. Everyone respected her skill and character and her title sounded just as brilliant as her accomplishments, Jin Seyeon, the Divine Archer.

"Nice to meet you, vice leader of the Royal Court guild."

Jin Seyeon smiled at Rachel.

"I'm Jin Seyeon."

"*Ah*, y-yes. Nice to meet you. I'm Rachel."

"I know. I've seen you a lot on TV. *Haha.*"

Surprisingly, Jin Seyeon had a very straightforward personality. She

seemed slightly different from how the media portrayed her as a gentle saint.

“Why don’t we shake hands?”

Rachel couldn’t tell if she was dreaming or awake. She remained dumbstruck even when Jin Seyeon reached out. Of course, she had heard that Jin Seyeon was looking for a ticket, but didn’t know the master rank hero had already found one.

“Ah, s-sure.”

Let’s think about it later. Rachel forced herself to remain calm and shook Jin Seyeon’s hand.

1. Byul, Boss' name, means star in Korean. 🤔

Chapter 186

Materialized Demon Realm (3)

The Yaksha transformation was one of the numerous abilities under Boss' gift, Shadow. Her eyes turned red, including her pupils and sclera. Her iris also took the form of a beast's and indefinitely increased her dynamic vision and physical abilities.

Simply staring at the opponent would've released enough magic power to tear down the entire place if the tower hadn't restricted her stats and abilities. However, the Yaksha transformation currently only increased her physical strength.

She recklessly rushed in like a beast and couldn't be seen by the naked eye.

However, Bell easily dealt with her attack. He didn't even retaliate. His body simply vaporized. Boss couldn't touch him as he rose into blue magic power.

Still, Boss didn't give up. She pursued and swung her shadow blade in every direction. The blade shattered the surroundings and cracked the earth. The entire valley transformed into a chaotic battlefield.

"You haven't changed."

Bell spoke as his magic power clashed with Boss. She flew into an even greater rage at his words. Her shadow blades multiplied and seemed to devour the darkness itself. However, Boss couldn't maintain this form for long since it took too much magic power. I sighed and raised the Desert Eagle.

I wondered why Boss lost her cool all of a sudden. However, now wasn't the time to ask. I infused the bullets with stigma's magic power and gave them the attribute of... anti-magic.

Boss and Bell tangled up with each other, but I would shame the name of Master Sharpshooter if I couldn't hit a foe while avoiding a friend.

I aimed at Bell and activated bullet time. They still moved incredibly fast as the world slowed. Which angle should I choose to strike Bell and not Boss? The calculation and decision felt instinctive. I pulled the trigger.

Chwaaa—

The bullet shot towards Bell at an extraordinary speed and angle.

“...!”

It struck his shoulder and he immediately turned back into his physical form. Boss didn't miss this chance and landed a solid punch. Her fist filled with magic power and flew straight into his stomach. It sent him flying and coughing up blood.

Kwang—!

His body dug into the cliffside, but the wound wasn't fatal. The battle had ended, but Boss couldn't finish him off.

“Uk!”

Boss couldn't maintain her Yaksha transformation with her current magic power. Her pupils had already returned to normal and her magic power probably wouldn't last another 3 minutes. She stared at Bell with killing intent, but couldn't move.

I stepped towards Bell.

“Hello.”

“Pft... Yeah, hi.” Bell grinned at my greeting.

I could tell he was only acting tough. Their battle lasted less than 3 minutes, but ended in an instant. He no longer had the strength to

stop me.

“I let you go last time, but there won’t be a second.”

I pointed the shotgun to his forehead. Such a cheesy cliché like letting go of an injured enemy wouldn’t happen here.

“I know. I shouldn’t have met you here. What a shame. It’s hard enough dealing with one of you, but 2 versus 1?”

However, Bell sounded unbothered. He acted too calm even though he had 7 lives.

“Say hello to your boss for me.”

He even grinned.

“See you later.”

And said the same words I told Jin Sahyuk not too long ago.

“...”

It felt quite shitty to hear that from him. I wrapped the anti-magic attribute around the bullet and fired.

KWANG—!

A loud bang filled the air. Soon, everything became silent as his body scattered into a current of magic power. Just like that, he died.

“...”

I couldn’t rejoice at the simple ending. I wanted to ask many questions. *What kind of relationship did he have with Boss? What happened between them for Boss to lose herself like that?* A strange noise came from behind as I pondered.

“Ah, Boss!”

I turned around and saw Boss spasming. I quickly ran over.

“Hey, hey. Relax. Relax!”

Boss tried to use her magic power. She had lost her reasoning and still fought Bell in her head. Her eyes turned red as she struggled to transform into the Yashka once again.

“It’s over! Calm down! Hey!”

At this rate, all her blood vessels would burst and she would die at least once. I had no choice but to restrain her. I took her into my arms as our bodies overlapped. I could feel her vividly shaking.

“Please calm down. Calm down.”

I even used my suggestive voice skill, but that wasn’t enough. I continued stroking her.

“It’s okay. Everything’s okay.”

Perhaps Dwarf’s Dexterity worked even in these types of situations. Boss began to calm and the magic power that would likely burst her blood vessels also subsided.

“...”

I held her in silence. Her body felt cold as ice and her breathing remained disconnected. The magic power outburst had stopped, but the side effects continued. Still, this was better than a rampage.

“Sleep tight for a while.”

I whispered and took out the Orb of Regeneration. Then I infused it with my magic power. Soon, the orb’s green light warmly wrapped around Boss. She stopped trembling and her body temperature returned to normal. Her consciousness sunk into a deep slumber. I turned my head with her in my arms. The NPC Kedrick looked at us.

“...!”

He turned away in surprise as our eyes met. I carefully laid Boss on the ground and stepped towards him. After all, I had come here for them. I wasn't expecting such a big event to occur.

“Hello.”

“*Huh?* Oh, yes. Hello.”

Kedrick seemed okay even though Bell held him by the neck just a few moments ago.

“*Haa...*”

A long conversation would've followed if this had been a game. Maybe cheesy self-introductions and some greetings, but I jumped straight to the point. I felt too tired for chatter.

“I came to save you.”

“What? All of a sudden?”

“They held you captive here, no?”

I pointed at the shackle around his neck.

“*Ah...*”

Kedrick nodded. His personality seemed meek and docile despite his muscular body.

“Why did that man try to kill you?”

“*Huh? Oh*, that's... I don't think he was trying to kill me.”

“*Hmm?*”

That sounded unexpected. Kedrick fumbled with the shackle as I looked at him.

“I think he just tried to break this shackle. I told him he wouldn’t be able to by force, but he kept trying. I almost died from suffocating.”

“Uh... Aha. So that’s it.”

Bell had good intentions, but he shouldn’t have done it so violently.

“I’ll get rid of it for you. By the way, that man was a villain.”

I pointed at where Bell was just a moment ago.

“Oh, I see. Thank you, but that won’t be possible. This shackle can’t be destroyed by normal means. You have to kill Krakoon to get his key.”

Kedrick sounded like a devoted NPC. I took a look at the quest he gave me.

[Kedrick’s Quest.] [Subquest – Rescue] [Rank – High-intermediate] [Goal – Infiltrate the office located at the end of the Valley of Darkness and kill Krakoon or steal his keys and escape.]

“I don’t need to.”

However, I shook my head. I didn’t intend to continue the quest with Boss like that.

“Show me your neck.”

“Eh? No. I mean, this is not a matter of necessity...”

“It’s fine.”

I took out the *[Mystic Key]* from my inventory. I had chosen it to save time in such situations. Quests felt more fun when you destroyed the process.

“What’s that?”

Kedrick widened his eyes and tilted his head. His innocent behavior didn’t suit a man with a beard and all that muscle.

“A key.”

I answered and shoved it towards his neck. Kedrick seemed surprised, but the mystic key dug into the shackle without requiring a keyhole. It felt gentle as if I inserted it into water. *Click*. The key entered before stopping at a certain point. Then I turned it 180 degrees. *Click*— The shackle disassembled and fell to the ground.

“*Huh?* But how...”

I didn’t have the time to enjoy his surprise. We made quite a scene and the demons would soon come rushing.

“We don’t have time. Is there anyone else with you?”

“Oh, right! M-my wife, she’s also locked up here!”

Kedrick started running somewhere as I carried Boss on my back.

* * *

[Lv.3 English Royal Court Guild]

“This is our guild’s hideout.”

Click— Rachel turned on the light. It didn’t look glamorous, but was well-managed like a private home.

“There’s something called the hideout system in Prestige. It gives you stat boosts and various buffs if you stay in your hideout for a fixed amount of time. The buffs depend on the hideout’s level.”

Kim Suho, Jin Seyeon, the Fermun brother and sister, and Yi Yeonghan followed Rachel as she explained.

“Our hideout is probably one of the top 5 in Prestige.”

Rachel bragged unassumingly and scanned for their reactions. Kim Suho and the others looked around with interest.

“Hu, Huhu.”

She shrugged with pride.

“*Mmm...* It’s a good hideout, but how do we get to the upper level?” Jin Seyeon asked. As expected, her goal seemed to be climbing the tower.

“First, you have to earn performance points.”

They discovered the crystal steles that led to the 4th floor after destroying the control towers, but players needed something called performance points. It wasn’t hard to meet the requirements since they only had to clear common quests.

“Performance points?”

“They’re given out every time you complete a common quest. You should’ve received a system alert with a list of them when you bought your citizenship.”

“*Ah*, those. So we just have to kill monsters. Sounds fun.”

Jin Seyeon nodded enthusiastically.

“...”

Rachel observed her childhood idol standing in front of her. She heard how Kim Suho and Jin Seyeon got together. It wasn’t anything dramatic. They just happened to take the same 2nd floor elevator that Kim Suho discovered.

“Oh, sometimes the administrator Medea will give out quests. You should definitely clear those for better rewards.”

“Ah...”

Kim Suho, who had been listening to Rachel, asked Jin Seyeon. “So what will you do now, senior?”

“Oh, me?” Jin Seyeon grinned.

“First, I’ll meet up with the people from the association. Youngji and Junhyuk are here as well.”

The high rank heroes from the association, Seo Youngji and Oh Junhyuk. Jin Seyeon had added them as friends once she got on the 2nd floor elevator. She heard something interesting from them.

“I want to hear more about this Black Lotus too,” Jin Seyeon muttered with a serious face.

“Then, I’ll leave now.”

“*U-Um.*” Rachel subconsciously grabbed Jin Seyeon. The master rank hero smiled and tilted her head, but Rachel had nothing in mind and frankly spoke.

“I saw you... on TV. I watched you... volunteer.”

“Oh, that? I’m a bit different on TV, *huh?*” Jin Seyeon bashfully scratched her neck.

“Half is just pretending and the other half... I’m a little shy in front of cameras. *Haha.*”

She laughed heartily and bowed. “Anyways, I’ll be leaving now.”

“Ah, yes. It was nice to meet you.”

Rachel had only met her for half an hour.

“Please come back anytime. I can offer you a place to stay.”

In that half hour, she realized why everyone admired and respected Jin Seyeon so much.

“Those words are enough, vice leader Rachel.”

No other master rank hero would politely speak to a junior. Rachel felt touched once again by her courteous farewell.

* * *

A lot happened, but we successfully rescued Kedrick and Lirko. In exchange, we received the [*Mysterious Pocket*], [*Kedrick's Ghost Sword*], and a [*Treasure Chest*] that Kedrick kept hidden from Krakoon.

We arrived together on the 3rd floor, Prestige. They originally lived here before the demons kidnapped them.

“We’re back.”

“Right.”

However, they didn’t seem too happy. Kedrick glanced at me and explained.

“Our relationship is a bit complicated. I worked as a blacksmith for the government and Lirko served as captain of the inner city’s vigilante group. We wouldn’t be allowed to even exchange a glance.”

“I see.”

I hadn’t written about their pasts. Love beyond status and money. It sounded like a classic romance story.

“You don’t have to worry about that anymore.”

“What?” Lirko and Kedrick tilted their heads.

“Prestige has changed a lot.”

Only 3 months had passed since I first arrived, but the city had drastically improved. First, I succeeded in cultivating [*Lv.3 Amazing Meat-flavored Corn*] and [*Lv.2 Clear and Clean Rice*]. I handed them out to NPCs for free or at very low prices. Second, a commercial district rose around Riry Shop. Riry Shop didn't feature cheap items anymore as part of our strategy to appear more high-class. Players had no choice but to sell their loot to resident NPCs. Then Riry Shop repurchased these items from the NPCs and made potions out of them. This cycle resulted in the following changes.

“Huh?”

Kedrick and Lirko blankly stared at the Prestige in front of them. Residents worked as street vendors, mothers returned home with corn in their hands, fathers headed towards farms or mines to work, and players walked here and there. For the record, I owned at least a fourth of the land with my constant investments.

“It changed a lot, right?”

I asked with a smile. Kedrick remained dumbstruck as Lirko replied.

“Yes, yes. You're right. I think we could live in happiness without entering the walls.”

Lirko looked at Kedrick as he busily scanned the city. She lightly pinched his side as his face crumpled.

“Kuaaak!”

Well, maybe she didn't pinch that lightly.

“Follow me. I'll let you stay at a place for free in exchange for what I've received.”

“For free?”

I had prepared a house beforehand. The first floor would serve as Kedrick's workshop and the second floor would be their private living space.

“By the way, aren’t you uncomfortable?” Lirko asked as she looked at Boss on my back.

“Ah, don’t worry. She’s very light.”

“Oh.”

Was she asleep or did she pass out? I continued walking with the unconscious Boss on my back.

“We’re here.”

We arrived after about 10 minutes of walking. Lirko and Kedrick looked around in surprise.

“It’s a blacksmith workshop.”

“Yes. I’m also good at making things. Only the first floor is a workshop. The second floor is a regular home.”

I made this place to train Dwarf’s Dexterity, but didn’t have the chance to use it.

“Stay here for now. We’ll talk more later. I’ll send over a kid named Kiri.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

“Thank you. Thank you so much for helping us.”

“Oh, don’t bother. I’ve already received enough compensation.”

Their gratitude made me feel a bit awkward. I returned to our hideout with some difficulty as Boss was surprisingly voluptuous.

Chirp—! Chirp—!

Spartan rushed towards me as I opened the door and headed towards the bedroom. Then I laid Boss on the bed with Spartan by my side.

“*Argh*, my back.”

I felt a bit startled. Boss had woken up already.

“*Ah*, geez. Boss, when did you wake up?”

“About 5 minutes ago. Was I that heavy?” Boss asked.

“No. You were light.”

I smiled and covered her with a blanket. Boss snorted in disbelief.

“You just said I was heavy.”

“On another note, I have lots of questions I want to ask. You went on quite a rampage today. Our plan almost went sideways.”

Boss only moved her eyes and looked at me. She seemed rather embarrassed and sorry.

“I have a feeling you won’t tell me even if I ask, so I’ll let you rest for now.”

I decided to explore the demon realm another time and I stood up. *Click*. I turned off the light and prepared to leave.

“Hajin.”

Boss called and I turned towards her. She lay in bed and muttered, “I can’t move my body.”

“What?” I rushed to her as she blinked at the ceiling.

“Is it magic power exhaustion?”

“Yeah. I can’t move at all.”

Growl— Suddenly, a sound came from Boss’s stomach.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

We looked at each other for a moment. After staying still for about 5 minutes...

“Are you hungry?” I asked first.

“...Yes.”

She added in embarrassment, “Sorry.”

Chapter 187

Sign (1)

I made some porridge using the best ingredients: fresh carrots, beef, rice, and water. Then I checked the boiling pot's description.

[Lv.3 Porridge Filled with Kim Hajin's Care] Lv.1 Recovery, Lv.2 Satisfaction, Lv.3 Taste

This should be enough. I transferred the porridge into a bowl, placed it on a tray, and brought it to Boss.

She lay still in bed and busily moved her eyes, probably reading a webnovel or looking through the community.

"Your food is here."

Boss raised her body and repeatedly blinked at me.

"..."

I never even fed Evandel before. I scooped a spoonful of porridge and brought it to Boss' mouth. She seemed embarrassed.

"...Nom."

Boss swallowed after chewing for a bit. Then I brought another spoonful as she slurped the porridge off the spoon. After repeating this a few times, Boss suddenly muttered.

"This doesn't normally happen."

"What do you mean?"

“Losing my temper.”

She still felt embarrassed about what happened today.

I spoke nonchalantly, “Is that so?”

“I didn’t expect to encounter him. I wasn’t prepared... *uup*.”

I pushed another spoonful into her mouth, cutting off her sentence.

“Don’t feed me when I’m talking.”

“I don’t have much time. You should eat quickly.”

I had a mountain of things take care of: the treasure chest, how to use Kedrick’s ghost sword, the mysterious pocket, and introducing Henry and Kiri to the couple.

“...”

Boss frowned and went back to eating.

“I will be calmer the next time I see him. I only snapped because... *uup*.”

I stuffed her mouth as she tried to make another excuse. She must not have expected it as some got on her mouth. Boss glared at me.

“...”

“So, who is he?”

I asked about Bell, pretending not to know. Boss slightly flinched before looking away.

“Weren’t you sulking last time because I kept secrets from you?”

“When did I sulk?”

Boss pouted. Her mouth wriggled as she pondered. Then she sighed. I strained my ears as she whispered.

“He is... the previous black seat.”

“*Eh?*”

That genuinely surprised me. I stared at Boss in a daze. My consciousness froze for about 5 seconds before recovering. Technically speaking, it had been a plot hole. The black seat I currently possessed originally belonged to Shin Jonghak, but I never wrote about the previous owner.

“He’s also a traitor who betrayed and murdered the previous boss.”

I didn’t know about such a setting and the Chameleon Troupe’s previous boss. I hadn’t written anything about it either. It made sense since the Chameleon Troupe had a long history. I scooped another spoonful as I listened to Boss.

“It’s already been 10 years, but I haven’t forgotten his face for a single day... *nyam.*”

She bit down on the spoon and announced with determination.

“I’m going to kill him. I will eliminate that traitor.”

“I understand what you’re saying, but you can’t do what you did today.”

Boss nodded. “So what will happen to him next?”

“He died, so he should revive on the 3rd floor in 48 hours.”

I didn’t know exactly how many, but he should’ve lost at least 2 lives.

“I see.”

Boss stared at me with a smile.

“Thank you for killing him.”

I smiled back. Without Boss, I wouldn't have been able to kill him either. Bell would've easily closed the distance if Boss hadn't acted as the frontline tank and damage dealer. I didn't know how much abilities he had recovered and couldn't risk dying.

“You too, Boss.”

The door suddenly opened.

— I'm back!

Jain's voice rang out. *Perfect timing*. I placed the bowl on the tray and left Boss' room. Jain took off her shoes while beaming with a smile.

“Ah, that was so fun. Oh, Hajin, when did you come back?”

“It's been a while. Rather than that, can you feed Boss?”

“*Eh?*” Jain tilted her head at the unexpected request.

“Feed her? Me?”

“Yes, she's in her bedroom.”

“Why?”

“You'll see once you go in. Boss went wild and fell into magic power exhaustion.”

— *Cough!*

A displeased sound came from Boss' room. When I glanced back, Boss glared at me as if to say, *Don't leave it to Jain*. Of course, I ignored her.

“*Hmm*, I see.”

Jain's confused expression quickly turned into mischief.

“Okay, I'll do it. *Ehehe*.”

She hopped into Boss' room after making a lewd face. Boss flinched when she saw Jain.

“Boss, I heard you couldn't move. *Ah*, let's close the door first.”

Kiik— I could see Boss' pitiful eyes begging me to rescue her as the door slowly closed. Unfortunately, I had other things to do.

— Jain, I'm already full.

— Are you sure? *Ah*, can you not move your tongue because of magic power exhaustion? Should I feed you mouth-to-mouth?

— N-No! I can move well! See!

I ignored the fierce shouting from Boss' room and returned to mine. Then I took out the treasure chest from Kedrick.

[Lv.6 Treasure Chest] Krakoon's treasure chest. It contains various items, but requires a key to open.

The treasure chest Kedrick hid from Krakoon out of defiance. Surely a Lv.6 treasure chest would contain good items. Unfortunately, I couldn't open it with the mystic key.

“Is the key's level too low?”

I could easily solve that with SP and could probably use setting intervention to rewrite any piece of paper into an item experience coupon. Then I could level up any item I wanted, but that would be a waste. I only needed 700 more SP to make another gift.

“Auction house.”

I went into the auction house for any alternatives and typed in the

keywords, [Item] and [Experience].

[Searching listings with the keywords, item and experience.] [... 13 items have been detected.] [Item Experience + 23 Coupon x 3] [Item Experience + 17 Coupon x 2] [Item Experience + 11 Coupon x 7]

“Eh?”

The highest bid cost 50 TP, which was quite cheap. The instant purchase at 300-400 TP confused me, but I soon understood. These coupons could only be used on evolving items.

I immediately clicked the instant purchase button.

[You have purchased Item Experience + 23 Coupon x 3] [You have purchased Item Experience + 17 Coupon x 2] [You have purchased Item Experience + 11 Coupon x 7]

The coupons appeared in my inventory and I immediately used them on the [Mystic Key] and the [Orb of Regeneration].

[Orb of Regeneration] [Magic Artifact] An orb with the power of regeneration. Evolving Item – EXP [11/200] Lv.2 ???

[Mystic key] [Magic Artifact] A mystical key. Evolving Item – EXP [9/200] Lv.3 Unlocking

Their effects leveled up.

“Is Lv.3 unlocking good enough?”

I held the mystic key and muttered.

“Scan.”

The number 27% appeared. *Jackpot.* I inserted the key into the treasure chest. It practically slid in this time when it didn’t fit before. *Click—* A noise rang out. *Did it work?* I turned the key to the right. *Kük—* And opened the lid with high expectations as a brilliant light burst

out.

“Oh.”

I muttered in astonishment. As expected of an administrator, he hoarded many precious shiny items.

[Lv.4 Blue Diamond] [Lv.5 Pure Dark Ore Ingot x 3] [Lv.3 Skill Consolidation Ticket] [Lv.3 Item Consolidation Ticket] [Lv.1 Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Tempering and Smelting] [Lv.4 Red Sapphire]

The *[Lv.5 Pure Dark Ingot]* undoubtedly caught my eye the most. I hadn't seen a Lv.5 ore until now.

“Should I use it to make arrows?”

Making arrows with such a valuable ore sounded insane. After all, arrows could only be used once.

However, that depended on the person. A rich person valued time more than money. I would gain a powerful weapon other than my gun if I made arrows out of these ores. I couldn't use my gun when I worked as a Chameleon Troupe member.

“*Hmm?*”

A lightbulb suddenly went off in my head. I thought of a method to make arrows reusable and looked at my smartwatch. Then I turned back to the dark ore ingots. I wouldn't even need that many arrows if this worked. I could even use synthesis to compress and strengthen them together. The arrow only needed to be durable and powerful.

“...”

I fiddled with my smartwatch as I gathered stigma's magic power.

* * *

I returned to the 5th floor's *[Valley of Darkness]* the next day. I went

alone, but didn't worry since I thoroughly prepared all sorts of items. Then I climbed to the highest point at the mountain peak protruding on both sides of the valley.

— So two of them escaped?

— Yeah, the boss went wild because of it.

— *Haa...*

I looked down at the dark valley and spotted some demons talking about yesterday's incident. Human NPCs continued working under their watch. Their security seemed tighter, but that didn't matter.

I nocked 5 arrows onto my bow. Both the arrow tips and the shafts shone black. That color had unintentionally become symbolic of me.

I aimed and fired down.

Chwaaak—

The arrows moved independently from one another. The first curved to the left, the second flew straight, the third curved to the right... All 5 pierced the necks of demons. The valley immediately fell silent. I muttered as their bodies scattered into dust.

“Return.”

The five [*Lv.7 Dark Ore Arrows*] suddenly flew up. *Sssss—* They followed their previous paths into my hand.

“Perfect.”

Reusable arrows seemed possible once I thought about it. I simply added *Lv.0 Remote Control* to the five [*Lv.7 Dark Ore Arrows*]. Making it *Lv.0* saved me SP, but I could only use it to retrieve the arrows for now. I should be able to control them according to my will once it leveled up.

“Now...”

Only 11 prison camps left. I moved swiftly like a ninja after confirming the arrows’ effectiveness.

The dark ore arrows didn’t leave any evidence. They flew silently like an owl hunting in the night and delivered eternal darkness upon their targets. I wasn’t exaggerating. They turned invisible in the dark whenever I fired.

I ended up killing all the demons guarding the 11 prison camps.

Now, only Krakoon remained. I made my way to his office.

“...?”

I felt a fierce gaze on me. Two piercing eyes with killing intent. I turned and spotted a man wearing glasses. His skin looked blue and a horn protruded from his head.

[Lv.8 Administrator of the Valley of Darkness, Krakoon]

“Krakoon.”

— Who are you?

Krakoon asked. I couldn’t hear him too well over the distance, but I answered anyways.

“That’s none of your business.”

— *Pft.*

Krakoon snickered, clearly looking down on humans.

— You must be the one who attacked us yesterday. Regardless, you won’t escape. You think I didn’t make any preparations?

A huge tremor of magic power erupted.

— Hundreds of soldiers will gather here soon.

Purple magic power appeared on the ground. This large-scale spell, mass teleport, required a magic circle.

— Your punishment shall be death by dismemberment. No, I will make it so you wish to be dead.

Krakoon's confident laughter rang out through the valley.

However, I remained silent and took out the mystic key. It still had the 27% enhancement. I infused stigma's magic power to temporarily boost its strength even further. Then I stabbed the key into the ground.

“Hey, Kraken.”

— It's Krakoon, not Kraken. Tell me where Kedrick and Lirko are if you want to surrender. I will generously allow you to die if you do so.

“No, *um...*”

I turned the key and calmly spoke.

“Have a nice day.”

Magic power flashed from the key and seeped into the dirt. Immediately, the mountain began to rumble. I just unlocked something holding this mountain together, which would result in a landslide and the valley resided right underneath the mountain. I focused it in Krakoon's direction, so the human NPCs should survive.

— W-What is...

Krakoon muttered a boring line like a third-rate villain. *Trrrrr*—! Dirt slid down and the mass teleport spell disappeared.

“*Sigh...*”

I turned to the side like a movie star and made eye contact with someone else. Well, we might've been too far away to meet eyes. She would've looked like a speck of dust without the thousand-mile eyes. *Was it just a coincidence?* I narrowed my eyes and pulled my hood down.

One of the strongest characters stood in the distance, Jin Seyeon the Divine Archer. She was with Chae Nayun for some reason. However, that wasn't important at the moment. Jin Seyeon stared at me with her Divine Archer eyes and her gaze remained steady. Without a doubt, she was staring at me.

* * *

"Haha."

Jin Seyeon stared from a long distance away. It would've been too far without the supernatural eyesight from her gift, Divine Archer. For 10 minutes, she observed that person's actions. Finally, she smiled at the man who made eye contact with her.

"Um, senior, did you feel that tremor?"

The innocent voice distracted her for a split second. Chae Nayun grew curious about the sound of the landslide.

"A landslide just occurred."

Jin Seyeon answered before looking back, but the man at the mountain peak had already disappeared.

"A landslide?"

Chae Nayun asked. Jin Seyeon nodded, but hid the truth that one person had purposely caused it. No one would believe her even if she told the truth. An artificial landslide could only be caused by 5 star magicians who specialized in that field unless a mountain became extremely unstable. *An archer had caused a landslide? In the Tower of Wish where everyone's abilities had been restricted?* Jin Seyeon wouldn't have believed it either if she hadn't witnessed that man's strange flow of magic power.

“Yes, a landslide far away from here buried an entire valley.”

“Um, senior, you don’t have to talk so politely. Feel free to speak casually.”

Chae Nayun sounded uncomfortable.

“How could I to the chairman’s granddaughter? I feel more comfortable speaking like this.”

Jin Seyeon refused, but Chae Nayun still felt a little happy inside.

“Do you know grandpa?”

“*Mmm...* You could say that.”

Although it’s not a good relationship. Jin Seyeon swallowed her next sentence and smiled.

“In any case, that’s why I met up with you.”

“*Ha, haha*, I see.”

“*Cough.* In that case, what do you think about my grandfather, hero Shin Myungchul?”

Shin Jonghak walked on eggshells around Jin Seyeon, but finally worked up the courage to ask. Even Shin Jonghak didn’t dare to act arrogantly in front of a master rank hero. As if to prove her status, Jin Seyeon caught up to their strength in just 4 days.

“He’s an amazing person. I’ve heard many great things about him.”

“*Ha, haha, hahahaha. Cough.*”

Shin Jonghak’s expression brightened. Then he dryly coughed and tightened his grip on his spear.

“Rather than that...” Jin Seyeon spoke.

She had already heard everything from her comrades, Seo Youngji and Oh Junhyuk. Many pitted her against Black Lotus for the title of the strongest archer. Jin Seyeon had recently been losing her motivation, so she welcomed this new opponent.

She hadn't slept since she entered the 3rd floor. In other words, she had remained awake for 72 hours to regain her abilities and acquire new skills. She felt like she had returned to her younger days.

“Let's move. I see a demon camp nearby.”

Jin Seyeon looked back at where the mysterious archer stood. That was most likely Black Lotus. The landslide had ended and no one remained on the silent mountain peak.

Where was he all this time?

Jin Seyeon finally looked away with a happy smile after staring at the empty mountain peak for a long time.

Chapter 188

Sign (2)

[Lv.11 Medea's Palace]

A lofty palace stood at the heart of Prestige. The gothic spires and stained glass gave off an antique charm and the mana crystals shone even in Prestige's eternal darkness.

Only magic power sustained this mystical palace that represented the sovereignty of the abandoned princess, Medea.

The palace halls resembled a maze that one could only enter with her permission. The walls featured magic cannons that could shoot down any enemy. She even added 8 legs to the palace so she could escape with it. This showed how much she loved the place.

"Hmm..."

Medea's faithful servants surrounded her. They followed her every wish and the table in front of her contained delicacies from the upper floors. However, she seemed to be in a bad mood despite all this.

Only one thing bothered her.

No one in Prestige would have the skills to craft such an item.

Medea thought back to the event she held 4 days ago. The robe belonged to the first ranked man named Buyong. The surface flowed like water and its beautiful engravings exuded a faint aura of artistic magic power that could only be seen by those who possessed an aesthetic eye. Medea could see the aura and it felt so natural as if it had been created like that.

Who could have made such a robe?

She grew curious since no one in Prestige had such skills. She would've brought them to the palace a long time ago. Someone like that couldn't be found outside the 3rd floor either. A civilization that could produce such luxuries would be on a much higher floor than Prestige.

“Could it be?”

She suddenly thought of Hephaestus, who should be hiding somewhere, but quickly shook her head. That ignorant man wouldn't be able to make something so delicate. Dwarfs possessed far greater dexterity than elves, but avoided cloth and only focused on metal because of that damned blacksmith.

“Tsk.”

It all seemed so pitiful to Medea. Everything in Prestige would be cheap anyway. It slightly piqued her interest, but that was all. She wasn't dying to get her hands on it. Only items like the Blue Wave or the Song of Sorrow could hold her attention.

“Reiley.”

Medea stopped thinking about the robe and called the old butler. A part of the room trembled and the old butler appeared out of thin air. This simple teleportation only worked inside the palace.

“Yes, Your Highness.”

“When is the next administrator conference?”

The tower's administrators frequently held meetings.

Some felt apathetic to the whole thing, some kindly helped players ascend, and others tried their best to disturb them.

Medea was the self-indulgent type, an apathetic administrator.

She couldn't care less about who died. She only focused on gathering performance points and TP to manifest herself in the phenomenon

realm. After all, being stuck inside this tower for the rest of her life would be very sad and boring.

“The meeting is scheduled 10 days from now.”

“Is that so?” Medea oddly smiled and licked her lips. “Then let’s get one more thing done before then.”

It would be a bit difficult, but she wouldn’t be the one to shoulder the burden.

“Isn’t it about time for Prestige to receive a sun?”

Medea’s enchanting voice filled the palace.

* * *

[Lv.6 Strange Valley of Darkness]

I entered the valley to escape Jin Seyeon’s sight.

“It should be around here.”

I finally managed to find *[Krakoon’s Vault]* through all the dirt with my thousand-mile eyes. Then I easily opened it with the mystic key.

“...?”

It only contained documents inside. I carefully looked over the land documents and slave contracts.

[Magic Land Document] A land document made from magic power. Ownership can be transferred to another person upon the original owner’s death.

[Magic Slave Contract] A slave contract made from magic power. Ownership can be transferred to another person upon the original owner’s death.

First, I infused my magic power into the land document.

[The owner of Valley of Darkness has been changed to the player Extra7.]
[Currently, around 480 kg of dark ore are buried within the Valley of Darkness.]

“Oh?”

Something like this existed. *How could I dig up all this dark ore?*

[TIP! Lv.1 Player Shop sells an automatic miner for 800 TP.]

“Ah, thank you.”

I didn't know a lot of things. Naturally, I purchased the automatic miner from the player shop. The machine looked like a drone.

[Lv. 1 Automatic Miner] A cute machine that will search for buried ores and automatically dig for them. Lv.1 Ore Mining: Will dig up to 1 kg of ores per hour. Lv.1 Ore Searching

I bought 3 automatic miners and released them. Then I began to search the Valley of Darkness for enslaved human NPCs.

“Aah!”

“W-Who are you?”

The sudden incident confused them. I gently approached and asked about their hometown. Then I released the shackles around their necks.

I found 16 in total, all former residents of Prestige.

I tore up their slave contracts, collected their ores, and sent them back. I also messaged Henry and Kiri to introduce the freed slaves to Kedrick. He would take care of them somehow since they all went through tough times together.

“Thank you! Thank you!”

“I won't forget your kindness!”

We stood in front of the crystal stele that allowed travel between the 3rd and 4th floor. A system window popped up as the 16 NPCs shed their tears.

[You have defeated Krakoon, the Valley of Darkness' administrator, and rescued the NPCs.] [Subquest completed. The Wishes of NPCs in Prison Camp – Murder of the Valley Executive] [All stats have been increased by 0.3 points.]

“Mmm.”

I nodded in satisfaction and wondered what to do next. I didn't want to act carelessly with Jin Seyeon nearby. *Should I check out the 5th floor?*

I could easily scout around with my thousand-mile eyes. I climbed one of the many mountains and focused stigma's magic power into my eyes. Then I looked around the entire landscape.

I studied the alliance team moving together. A group of about 50 busily discussed a castle attack. The two best guilds, Essence of the Strait and Frost Sanctuary, prepared to attack the *[Lv.7 Demon Castle No.1]* along with the English Royal Court guild.

— About 150 demons and 800 undead inside the No.1 castle.

Rachel spoke and seemed delighted to work with the upper guilds.

— Are you sure?

Kim Youngjin, Essence of the Strait's team leader, asked.

“Yes. My wind elemental personally scouted the area.”

Rachel nodded with a serious expression as Kim Youngjin smiled.

— An elemental sure has great tactical value.

— No, I'm still just a beginner.

Rachel seemed happy at the praise, but remained humble. She probably jumped with joy inside.

— We only have 50 people. Maybe the difference is too much.

— What do you think about asking Aileen for help?

Jung Hosun, Frost Sanctuary's team leader, responded to Kim Youngjin's concerns.

"Aileen."

I took my eyes off of them and began looking for Aileen. I easily spotted her white hair and short stature.

— Yongha, I have 1030 TP on me right now. Remember that.

— *Huh?* Why are you telling me that?

At least 100 undead and 5 demons surrounded the two of them.

"Well, I just thought we should check beforehand. I can't lose them again."

Aileen only worried about how much money she had with so many enemies before them. She probably thought she mistakenly lost the TP that Jain stole.

— Okay, 1030 TP. I'll remember that.

— Good.

Aileen nodded and smiled at the ghastly undead and the demons.

— Hey kids. Hail is falling from the sky right now.

The demons looked confused. The sky above appeared dark as ever without a sign of precipitation. However, her words would be their death sentence.

— You see, those hailstones will split your heads!

Anything the Spirit Speech Master said became true. Hailstones filled with magic power instantly poured from the sky. *Kugwagwagwagwang!*

The hail seemed more like a meteor shower and completely wiped out the demons. The masses of ice crushed their armors on contact and pulverized the undead before they even took a step.

“...”

I scratched my neck as I watched the massacre.

“*Sigh.*”

I should try harder from now on. I shouldn't lose now that I could mine for dark ores. Then I could use synthesis to compress them into stronger arrows.

I finished my surveillance and took out the dwarven supercar.

* * *

[Lv.5 Chameleon Troupe's Hideout]

“I'm back.”

— Is that you, Hajin?

I heard Boss' voice from the bedroom as I stepped inside. I smiled and headed towards her room. Boss lay in bed with the Orb of Regeneration in one hand while patting Spartan with the other.

“How do you feel?”

“Much better. I think I’ll recover by tomorrow. This orb is quite effective.”

“That’s good to hear.”

I sat next to Boss and formed a comb with stigma’s magic power. Then I brushed her messy hair and began thinking.

I didn’t write much about the Chameleon Troupe in my settings book. Most of the ideas remained in my head as I agonized over what kind of background to create. I purposely left it blank to fill it with a better setting later.

However, I stopped writing before the Chameleon Troupe and Kim Suho became equals. It should be around 2-3 years in the future.

I regretted it now with so many things I didn’t know. Jin Sahyuk’s relationship with Bell. Bell’s relationship with Boss. Boss’ relationship with the previous leader. I would’ve written more if I knew this would happen. Well, I’d been a failure after all. Kim Hajin couldn’t even finish his own novel.

“*Hmm...*”

Boss enjoyed my combing with her eyes closed. I calmly looked at her. I should just directly ask to learn what I didn’t know.

“Hey, Boss.”

— Oh? Looks like Hajin is here.

A noise came from the entrance. I tilted my head and stood up.

“Wait just a moment.”

I stopped brushing her hair and stepped outside. Jain stood at the entrance with another person.

“When did you get back, Hajin? We’ve got 2 more members in the tower now. You know him, right?”

Jain spoke first. Then the gentle-looking man next to her smiled.

“Hey, newbie.”

I smiled back at Jin Yohan, the seat of green.

“Yes, hello.”

I sounded composed, but my mouth twitched with tension. The Chameleon Troupe members had begun to gather. Silver should arrive next and they would soon meet Kim Suho.

* * *

“Auu, I’m exhausted.”

Kim Suho returned to the *[Lv.1 Creator’s Sacred Grace Hideout]* after grinding his stats and skill on the 4th floor.

He had more guests than usual today. Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak accompanied him along with his usual companions. The small 55 square meter hideout became quite crowded.

“You didn’t have to follow me back. Anyways, come in.”

Kim Suho scratched his neck as he guided them.

“Pft, what a tiny place.”

Shin Jonghak naturally sneered. He still acted a bit rude, but not out of line like in the past. *Did he become an adult?* Kim Suho grinned and nudged Shin Jonghak’s shoulder like close friends.

“Are you crazy? Did you just shove me?”

Shin Jonghak immediately turned serious. Startled, Kim Suho simply

coughed.

“Stop being so noisy. Here, it’s a housewarming gift.” Chae Nayun handed Kim Suho a bundle of potions.

“Oh, what’s this?”

“A potion set from Riry Shop. It’s worth 1000 TP, so be thankful.”

“1000 TP? Wow, thanks. Call me if you ever need help. I’ll be there right away.”

Kim Suho gratefully took the potions. Chae Nayun smiled at his child-like excitement.

“Take a seat everyone. I’ll make dinner.”

Venessa Fermun went into the kitchen as the rest sat near the table.

“Hey, doesn’t this remind you of the good old days?” Yi Yeonghan spoke after looking at the familiar faces around the table.

“We’re only missing those two. Yoo Yeonha and Kim Ha— *huuk!*”

Kim Suho pinched his side before Yi Yeonghan could finish. However, Chae Nayun’s expression had already turned sour.

“*Uuu*, my side...”

Yi Yeonghan didn’t notice anything wrong as he endured the pain. Kim Suho quickly changed the subject.

“So Nayun, how have you been doing? I heard you got inflicted with a curse.”

“Oh, that? How did you know? I guess rumors travel fast.”

Chae Nayun didn’t want to think about such things as she shook off what Yi Yeonghan said with a bitter smile.

“I heard from Yi Jiyoona.”

“Yi Jiyoona? That girl is too talkative.”

Chae Nayun sighed. Once again, she reaffirmed her belief in not telling Yi Jiyoona any secrets. Now everyone knew about that embarrassing curse.

“I’m fine. Someone I know treated me.”

“Oh? Who?” Yi Yeonghan asked.

“I’m not going to tell you, but he’s famous in the tower.”

Chae Nayun made a smug face. She naturally knew many people because of her background. However, she only trusted a few and Extra7 had become one of them. His status had risen at least 2 levels in her heart.

“What’s his nickname?”

“Extra7.”

The player who made a name for himself in the tutorial. His achievement became a legend that others still talked about in the community.

“Ah, that’s the person who made 20000 TP in the tutorial!”

Chae Nayun widened her eyes at Yi Yeonghan’s words.

“Eh? You knew? How?”

“He became famous outside the tower too. You don’t know what’s going on outside, right? The world is only talking about the Tower of Wish. I’m not even exaggerating. Every news station is reporting on the internal structure and analyzing the tutorial along with every new floor.”

“Oh? Interesting. *Ah*, then keep it a secret that I know him. You guys aren’t like Yi Jiyeon, right?”

Extra7 hyung might be bothered, so Chae Nayun asked them to keep it a secret.

“Sure, but how do you know Extra7?”

“I’ve known him for a long time. I first met him as a cadet,” Chae Nayun confidently replied to Kim Suho’s question with a smile.

She had never met him in person, but they interacted like normal friends. Back then, they used to play a match together at least once a day.

“Hey, can you ask him to lend me some money? I want to buy an item,” Yi Yeonghan asked.

“Shut it.”

Chae Nayun looked at him in disgust. Suddenly, the system windows popped up around them.

[Hello, everyone. This is Medea.]

“*Woah!*”

Yi Yeonghan jumped out of his seat and fell backward. They hadn’t encountered Medea until now.

“Be quiet. This seems important.”

Chae Nayun quickly became focused. Last time, she failed to participate in Medea’s quest because of the curse. She wanted to do well and rank in the top 100 this time.

[I hope you’re having a nice day players. I believe you know what I will say.]

Medea's breath-taking beauty caught Yi Yeonghan's attention after his initial shock.

[It is time for another quest.]

Medea smiled.

[The quest is called, Sunlight. It is very important.]

However, her smile gave off a creepy feeling because it looked too perfect.

Chapter 189

Sign (3)

The sky looked clear and blue outside grand duchess Ah Hae-In's residence in Paris, France.

"Thank you once again for your partnership with Essence of the Strait. We will do our best to not disappoint."

Yoo Yeonha successfully completed her contract with Ah Hae-In, the 8 star magician on the verge of becoming a 9 star. Ah Hae-In sat in front of Yoo Yeonha and faintly smiled.

"I could say the same to you. I heard my nephew joined Essence of the Strait."

Yoo Yeonha returned a smile.

"Yes. Baire Moren is actively taking part in the guild."

More than 4 years ago, Baire Moren competed against Kim Hajin in archery at the Cube Festival and lost even with Ah Hae-In's help. Essence of the Strait had recruited him to win her favor.

"Then will my nephew enter the Tower of Wish this time?"

Yoo Yeonha couldn't confidently reply. "We aren't certain yet. The individual's decision is most important... I don't see why not if Moren wants to."

"*Haha.* You don't have to try so hard. I know my nephew's strength. He'll only be prey for others if he enters the tower now. I want to see him around for a long time. It's not like I expect him to become a great hero."

Ah Hae-In gave a meaningful smile.

“Still, wouldn’t my nephew’s looks guarantee him success in the entertainment industry?”

Yoo Yeonha wanted that as well. She smiled assuringly. “Of course.”

“Good. I look forward to working with you.”

Her meeting with Ah Hae-In went smoothly from beginning to end. Yoo Yeonha clenched her fists with joy. The news of Ah Hae-In joining hands with Essence of the Strait would surprise their foes and encourage their friends. How would the public and their rivals react? Yoo Yeonha looked forward to it.

“Oh, by the way, what’s that guy Fenrir up to nowadays?”

Ah Hae-In suddenly asked a rather strange question. Yoo Yeonha widened her eyes at the unexpected name.

“Were you interested in mercenaries as well?”

“It’s not that. He just left a deep impression on me. It’s already been 4 years, but I still remember him.”

“Ah, you mean the archery competition?”

Yoo Yeonha recalled what happened 4 years ago. Kim Hajin showed off a mystical curve shot against Baire Moren during Cube’s class competitions. He gained many admirers and attracted several guilds with just one arrow.

“Yes. It seems like a waste for a master archer to be using guns.”

“Still, he’s broadened our horizons as the one and only gunner. He’s already considered a god-like figure in the field.”

Ah Hae-In smiled with her eyes. She had no wrinkles despite her age.

“Is that so? I heard Fenrir is on good terms with Essence of the Strait. Does that mean I’ll get to meet him sooner or later?”

“He’s currently inside the tower, so I can’t be certain. Surely he won’t hesitate to meet the grand duchess.”

“*Hahaha*. Really?”

Their friendly exchange continued as Yoo Yeonha carefully ended the conversation.

“I’ll take my leave now.”

“Oh, look at the time. Farewell. Spending time with a beauty made me feel young again.”

Ah Hae-In didn’t stand up and simply stretched her hand. Yoo Yeonha shook it with a bright smile. The grand duchess hated getting up since she might be shorter than the other party even with heels on. Yoo Yeonha even wore flat shoes today for that very reason.

“You may stay the night if you’d like. It’s already quite late. The guest rooms are better than most 5 star hotels.”

Ah Hae-In kindly offered since she enjoyed today’s meeting.

“I appreciate it, but just one night might not be enough if I stayed. I’d be filled with regrets after leaving such a beautiful place,” Yoo Yeonha gracefully declined.

“Is that so? Well, you must be busy.”

Ah Hae-In understood. Honestly, Yoo Yeonha had nothing left on her schedule after their meeting. Tomorrow would also be her rest day, a special day she set aside for herself once every 6 months.

“Rest well. I apologize for taking up so much of your time.”

“No, no. It’s nothing.”

Yoo Yeonha planned on returning home right away. It's not that she didn't like Ah Hae-In or the mansion. Ah Hae-In was a hospitable French lady who learned Korean from historical dramas and her mansion felt much cozier than Yoo Yeonha's place.

However, Yoo Yeonha couldn't sleep anywhere else when she had such a lovely bed at home. Before she realized it, the bed Kim Hajin gave her became her most precious treasure.

I'll go home and sleep for the rest of the day.

Yoo Yeonha left Ah Hae-In's mansion and happily skipped towards her limousine. The car smoothly drove away to the portal station.

"...?"

Yoo Yeonha looked out the window in delight when she saw a surprising scene.

"Hold on, driver. Slow down."

The limousine slowed and Yoo Yeonha spotted the two people walking down the street. A tall woman held hands with a child. Both stood out from afar. The tall woman wore sunglasses, but anyone could tell she was Yun Seung-Ah.

— Evandel, isn't traveling abroad fun?

— Yeah. It's fun!

— I don't know why Haeyeon doesn't like it.

Yun Seung-Ah must be in France for a vacation, but the child next to her stood out. She had blonde hair and an adorable eye smile. Yoo Yeonha stared at the child with a serious look.

"I... I've seen her before..."

She had seen the child somewhere in the past. It must've been 3-4

years ago. She couldn't quite recall, but she had definitely seen that child. She felt confident that girl had been with Kim Hajin. Back then, they seemed to be heading somewhere hand in hand just like with Yun Seung-Ah right now...

"But why...?"

Why was that girl with Yun Seung-Ah? Just who was she?

"Could it be?"

Her mind turned blank. *Ding*— A bell rang in her head. *Ding*— All her thoughts disappeared. *Ding*— Strange speculations filled the empty space. If that was the case... *Did that child dye her hair just to hide their relationship?*

"Uh..."

Yoo Yeonha leaned against her seat. *No, no.* Such a natural color couldn't be from a dye. It must be a coincidence.

"Wait a minute."

A thought suddenly crossed her mind. She resented herself for being so smart and quickly turned on her smartwatch to look up a conversation log.

[I'm a little short on money. Lend me some so I can buy a house. Selling my stocks seems like a waste.]

[Huh? What house?]

[Here. <Address>. It's worth 20 billion won. I have 18 billion on me, so just lend me 2 billion.]

[You'll need 2 more billion to cover taxes. Anyways, I'll wire you the money soon.]

Yoo Yeonha had lent Kim Hajin 4 billion won. She looked up the

registration certificate for Seocho Apartment. It belonged to Kim Hajin, but someone else rented it. The tenant was Yun Jiho, Yun Seung-Ah's brother and the CEO of an entertainment company.

"Things are getting stranger by the minute."

Yoo Yeonha unknowingly put her hands on her head.

"*Nah...* No way, no way..."

Her hair stood on ends despite her denial. The old habit returned whenever she had bizarre thoughts.

* * *

[Tower of Wish, 3F Prestige]

"..."

I observed the new Chameleon Troupe member, Kaita, the seat of silver. He just arrived and chewed on gum as he watched Medea's quest.

[We will need 100 kg of dark ores, 1111 pyrogen grassroots, 1 shamrock plant, and the sun's essence from the 5th floor's Castle No.5 to install an artificial sun in Prestige.]

The Sunlight quest sounded rather simple. We just had to gather materials for an artificial sun and deliver them to Medea. However, the last ingredient could only be found after conquering a castle.

"*Yaawn.* A quest? Hey, archer, can I get anything good out of this?"

Kaita asked. He looked like one of those Russian skinheads the more I looked at him.

"The rewards will be announced in the video soon."

"*Ah,* really?"

Medea began to recite the rewards.

[For the rewards, you will receive 1000 TP per 1 kg of dark ores, 100 TP per pyrogen grassroots, and 3000 TP plus a special gift for the shamrock plant. The team that brings me the sun's essence will receive 10000 TP and 5 special rewards.]

I already had the dark ore and one shamrock, but what Medea offered for the dark ore seemed too cheap. A fair price would be 2000 TP per 1 kg.

Kim Suho and the Chameleon Troupe would collide during this quest. Kaita would team up with Zurahan, the Ordinary People Alliance's representative. Then he would act rashly before getting killed by Kim Suho. Afterward, Kaita held a grudge against Kim Suho and chased after him in the real world, which eventually led to his real death.

I didn't intend on stopping him. This guy acted the craziest out of all the Chameleon Troupe members. He considered murder, mutilation, and other unspeakable crimes as mere hobbies. Left alone, he would definitely betray Boss one day. I would do it myself if Kim Suho didn't kill him.

"Hey, newbie. By the way..."

Jin Yohan looked through the community and spoke up.

"What's this castle attack that everyone is talking about? They're saying there's a castle attack today."

I took a look at the post.

[We will begin the attack on Castle No.1 at 6 P.M. today. Ordinary players should stay away from the 5th floor's area 3.]

"Oh, it's exactly what it sounds like. They're going to destroy a castle."

"Really?"

"These bugs sure do all kinds of weird things."

Kaita sarcastically commented as Boss limped out of her room. As expected, she already recovered most of her stamina.

“Boss, are you all better now?”

“Uh, uh. B-Boss. H-Hi.”

Jin Yohan greeted Boss with a smile, but Kaita seemed visibly shaken by her appearance. Sure enough, this guy feared her. Well, I would be scared too if she beat me to the verge of death.

“Kaita, you’re here too.”

Boss welcomed him differently from how she treated me. Her eyes coldly flickered with magic power.

“Y-Yeah. Oh, but I didn’t do anything o-on the way. Really.”

Despite Kaita’s meek standing, he had been one of the original Chameleon Troupe members and was 4 years older than Boss.

“You.”

“N-No! I’m telling the truth! Plus, don’t people revive even if you kill them? Still, I didn’t do anything!”

I watched Kaita protest for a while before getting up. “Boss, I’m heading out.”

“Mm? Where are you going this time?” Boss retracted her threatening aura.

“To my shop. I probably won’t return today since I have something to do.”

“Is that so?” She looked a bit sullen.

“I’m leaving.”

“...”

I nodded and went outside. Boss’ eyes fixed on me through the door crack. I knew that look. She wanted me to cook for her.

I decided to ignore her today with my busy schedule.

I quickly arrived at Kedrick’s workshop. It had a lot of people inside, including most of the NPCs I saved from the prison camps.

“Ah, it’s master!”

“Oh!”

The muscular men greeted me. I smiled bitterly and approached Kedrick.

“How are things going?”

“Good. Very good. Rice is good and so is the corn. *Hahaha*.”

“That’s a relief. Ah, and these.”

I took out a bunch of items in front of the plump Kedrick.

[Steel Ingot] [Frozentium Ore] [Building Stone] [Casted Steel]...

I bought most of these miscellaneous ores from player auctions.

“Use these as materials. I’d also like to borrow the workshop for a while.”

“Of course. You there! Move these!”

“Yeah!”

I stood in front of the furnace as the NPCs carried the ores. Ssss—I turned the furnace on with stigma’s magic power. Then I melted the

dark ore ingots and used Young Dwarf's Dexterity and stigma's magic power to make the *[Dark Ore Arrows]*. The whole process took 3 hours. I could've finished sooner, but it took time for the ore to melt and cool.

[Lv.5 Dark Ore Arrow x 15]

"Aya, you turned all those expensive ingots into arrows."

An NPC sounded worried, but I simply smiled. Using *[Lv.3 Synthesis]*, I fused the 15 *[Lv.5 Dark Ore Arrows]* with 5 *[Lv.7 Dark Ore Arrows]*.

[Warning! The items' high level will reduce the chance of success.]
[Synthesis has succeeded!] *[Warning! The items' high level will reduce the chance of success.]* *[Synthesis has succeeded!]* *[Warning! The items' high level will reduce the chance of success.]* *[Synthesis has succeeded!]*

I only succeeded 12 out of 15 times even with my absurd luck. My dark ore arrows remained at level 7, but their destructive power and piercing increased by a level.

[Lv.7 Dark Ore Arrow] Lv.6 Destructive Power, Lv.6 Piercing, Lv.6 Dark Trajectory, Lv.5 Magic Destruction, Lv.1 Remote Control

All five had the same description.

"Ah, master. Henry and Kiri said the shop needs more shelves."

Kedrick informed me after I finished synthesizing my arrows.

"Yeah, I already received their message. I have everything planned."

I would perform a major renovation on the shop. I wanted to hire more staff and divide the store into different sections with potions, weapons, and armor. The shop would continue to grow until it became a Prestige landmark.

Young Dwarf's Dexterity combined with aether's aesthetic eye should come up with a beautiful design.

“Where will you go now?” Kedrick asked as I prepared to leave.

“*Huh?* Oh...” I replied after a brief pause.

“I’m off to climb the tower.”

* * *

[Tower of Wish, 5F Materialized Demon Realm]

I went up to the 5th floor after upgrading my arrows and intended to reach the 6th floor. How would that be possible without completing the 5th floor? A hidden path existed like in many games.

“Let’s see...”

I took out the Book of Truth and asked the following question.

“Where is the Fairy Lake?”

Kim Suho would use this pathway in the future, but the order didn’t matter. The first person to reach the 6th floor received a reward, but it wasn’t anything great and wouldn’t affect Kim Suho.

[The Fairy Lake has been located.]

The location appeared on the Book of Truth’s GPS. I drove the dwarven supercar as I glanced through the public forum.

[How’s the castle attack going?]

— *Looks like they’re still going at it?*

— *Why is the Royal Court Guild with Essence of the Strait and Frost Sanctuary? Are they the decoy?*

— *Their vice leader is an elemental. Elementalists are extremely versatile and useful for attacking fortified strongholds.*

— *Oh, I see.*

— *Wouldn't a single elemental be better than hundreds of you?*

— *What was that for? Wanna PK?*

“Hmm...”

Everyone talked about the current castle attack.

Pzzt—! Pzzt—! Mana surged into the sky from not too far away.

I could see Castle No.1 and stopped to take a look. My thousand-mile eyes penetrated through every obstacle.

— Aim for the magicians above the wall!

It seemed like a tough fight. I noticed 3 familiar faces: Rachel from the Royal Court guild and Chae Nayun and Yi Jiyeon from Essence of the Strait.

— West gate, attack the west gate! Earth! Give me an earthquake! Fire!

— Rachel, I need to get up the wall! I need your elemental's help!

Rachel and Chae Nayun performed exceptionally well together. However, the situation didn't look good because they only had a few magicians while the demons had many. In fantasy novels, magicians played the most important role in castle attacks.

“Hmm...”

Maybe I could freeloader off of them. The system gave out the rewards, so I could probably obtain some too by secretly helping out. Plus, I couldn't ignore Rachel and Chae Nayun struggling.

“I'll help them deal with the magicians just once.”

I climbed a nearby tree and peered at the castle far away.

“...”

I sat on a sturdy branch, took out my bow, and nocked 5 arrows. Then I aimed for the ones casting spells. Two per arrow. I decided to kill just 10 magicians. Of course, the enemies would notice and set up defensive magic, but 5th floor magicians shouldn't be able to stop the *[Lv.7 Dark Ore Arrows]*. Dark ore specifically counteracted magicians in the first place.

I sat about a kilometer away, but fired without hesitation.

Chwaaaa—

The arrows traveled in the darkness. Their trajectories couldn't be seen, but the targets detected the overwhelming wind pressure. They put up their defensive magic along with other barriers. Of course, their attempts failed.

Krrrrrk—

The arrows destroyed all their magic and pierced through the magicians' necks. Five of the 13 magicians instantly died without a sound.

The arrows should've rammed into the ground, but began to move again and drew an impossible trajectory. *Chweeek—* Lights flashed from the corner of my eyes as the 5 arrows killed 5 more enemies.

“Hmm.”

Only 10 demons died, but the magicians accounted for a large part of the castle's strength. The tides of battle soon shifted. The players on the battlefield couldn't afford to be interested in who shot the arrows. They only focused in front of them.

“Return.”

I got back on the dwarven supercar after collecting my arrows. Then I

drove away without looking back.

I arrived at the Fairy Lake about 30 minutes later in a remote area that most would glance over. Only mud and dirt filled the lake despite its name. The lake seemed like it contained monsters, but nothing lived inside. A pathway on the bottom led to the 6th floor.

“Phew.”

A nasty smell filled the air. I mentally prepared myself and held my nose as I took off all my armor. I warmed up with exercises just in case and took a few deep breaths.

Plop!

I jumped into the lake. *Ueeeeek—!* And threw up as soon as I entered. Vomit clung to my face inside the water. *Ueeeeek—!* I threw up again in disgust. Kim Suho’s sincerity purified the lake, but I couldn’t do that. I endured the filth for 5 minutes while shivering. The system message finally popped up.

[You are the first to reach the 6th floor!] [News of your advancement will be announced to all players in 3 hours.]

Chapter 190

Ranker (1)

[You are the first to reach the 6th floor!] [News of your advancement will be announced to all players in 3 hours.] [All stats have increased by 0.3 points.] [You have acquired two Lv.3 Skill Level Up Coupons.] [You have acquired one Lv.2 Consolidation Coupon.]

I arrived on the 6th floor covered in mud, vomit, and garbage.

“Uuuk!”

I fell to the ground and threw up again. My stomach churned as yellow gastric fluid gushed out of my mouth.

“Ugh...”

I only came to my senses after emptying my stomach. I brushed aside my disgust and got back on my feet. Then the 6th floor came into view. After the most disgusting passage was...

“Wow.”

The most beautiful sight in the world.

[Welcome to the 6th floor, Splendor.] [The 6th floor is a neutral floor.]

I became speechless. My mind blanked and my heart stopped from the breathtaking view. The sun and the moon magnificently shone in unison. The navy blue sky glowed with stars like the milky way. Water shot out from the ground and into the air at an emerald waterfall. Trees with leaves that sparkled like jewels filled the pink forest.

I couldn't take my eyes off this spectacular sight. Surely heaven would

look like this. Even the Garden of Eden wouldn't be as wonderful.

“Ah, ah.”

I shook my head and recalled why I came here in the first place.

My top priority was to reach the 8th floor. Then I had to block the bridge that connected the 8th floor to the 9th floor. *Why?* The 9th floor contained a calamity that needed to be delayed as long as possible. I didn't know what would happen if players rushed in like in the original novel. I would probably receive an alert saying: *[It has been determined that the calamity described in the original novel was too weak...]* and the calamity would be significantly increased. I expected that much from my experiences so far.

Of course, players would try to ascend to the 9th floor. I planned to stop them with my arrows. To do that, I needed to hone my skills first.

“Hmm.”

I stretched and looked around. The 6th floor's crystal stele stood nearby. Someone appeared before me as I touched it to save my current location.

“U-Uwoah! That surprised me...”

A woman appeared out of nowhere and stood like a statue. I recognized her as Eirene, the 6th floor's administrator.

“Uh... Nice to meet you. Are you the administrator?”

I politely introduced myself, but Eirene only smiled.

“Put your clothes back on first.”

She lightly waved and refreshing magic power flowed from her fingertips. It removed all the mud from my body.

“Ah, yes. Thank you.”

Eirene watched as I quickly dressed. Then she asked, “Did you come here alone?”

Her voice sounded soft like a mother speaking to her son.

“Yes, but I plan on... bringing more people in the future.”

“Is that so?”

Her smile calmed me.

“Yes...”

“Oh, that’s right. I haven’t introduced myself. I’m Eirene, the 6th floor’s administrator.”

I already knew, but sincerely nodded.

“As you can see, the 6th floor is very peaceful and I wish to retain this peace.”

“Yes.”

“For that reason, one cannot stay here for long nor can many stay at the same time.”

A system window popped up.

[1/111] [199:57:58]

I felt surprised and elated at the same time. I received 200 hours, which was about the same as Kim Suho. For the record, the time limit depended on how well you treated the system.

“It seems the child watching from above has taken a liking to you, so I gave you extra time.”

Eirene smiled.

“Now, I shall not interfere any longer. Do what you must. Oh, the ticket to the 7th floor is hidden somewhere on this floor.”

A ray of sunshine fell on me as she finished her sentence. I closed my eyes and she vanished when I opened them again.

“*Phew...*”

I took a deep breath. Eirene had skipped a lot of details. The 6th floor was one of the most important floors. Here, one could dramatically improve their skills over a short period.

The 6th floor’s objective seemed straightforward. Players had to find tickets to the 7th floor while evading illusory beasts from time to time. Their climb would end if they ran out of time before finding a ticket.

I didn’t worry because tickets could be found everywhere. However, it would be foolish to immediately ascend to the 7th floor.

“...”

I checked the time: 3 PM. I’ll spend just 12 hours today.

“*Mm... Ah, hmm...*”

What was it called again? Kim Suho had used a hot spring, but I couldn’t remember the name. I glanced at my smartwatch and looked at the settings again.

[Spring of Peace]

“Ah, that’s right.”

Half water and half spirit energy filled the spring. It restored all your energy, whether it be magic power or spirit energy. I found its location through the Book of Truth and drove there on the dwarven supercar. A system alert popped up.

[Your pet Spartan has grown!] [Spartan has awakened a new trait.] [3rd

Trait — Summon] [Spartan can now be summoned by its master whenever and wherever.]

“Oh?”

Perfect timing. Spartan could become stronger if he came here. We should train together.

“Summon.”

I muttered, but nothing happened no matter how long I waited. The 6th floor remained as quiet as a library.

“Summon?”

I assumed a portal would show up. *What’s this?* I bobbed my head in confusion.

Kieeeeek—!

Suddenly, a loud cry filled the air. I looked up and saw Spartan flying between the clouds.

“What?”

Spartan appeared out of nowhere with no trace of magic power.

Kiiiiii—!

He circled the sky and flew between the sun and the moon before landing on my shoulder. His dashing figure looked more like an eagle now.

“Let’s do some training.”

— *Peep!*

His chirping sounded more mature as well. I headed towards the hot spring with Spartan.

We arrived after driving for about 10 minutes. Sapphire rocks surrounded the spring and the water shone brightly.

I took my clothes off and went in as Spartan hesitantly followed.

[The hot spring's heat has enveloped your body.] [Stats will increase 30% faster.] [Stamina, magic power, and spirit power will recover 100% faster.]

I gave a series of incredible buffs. I closed my eyes to enjoy the hot spring before training.

“Ah, so good...”

My body felt warm and my head turned foggy. *This must be what heaven feels like.* I suddenly laughed after about 3 minutes. Spartan floated on the surface with his stomach up. Someone could mistake him for a bird that drowned.

“Hey, hey, sit up straight?”

I spotted something black in between the leaves and through the steam. I thought I had imagined it, but the thousand-mile eyes had never been wrong.

“H-Hey, Spartan!”

I pulled my naked self up.

“Spartan, go that way!”

I pointed at where I saw the dark figure. Black fur, a glossy mane, and a sleek yet well-built body. That might be the legendary horse, Bucephalus.

* * *

The first castle attack with 53 participants from 3 different guilds finally ended in success. The allied team broke through the gate, killed

all the demons, and now occupied the castle.

“Auuu.”

The players enjoyed their victory to the fullest as they sprawled all over the ground from fatigue.

“Haa, haa.”

Chae Nayun caught her breath in silence. Her arms ached as if they would snap. Every muscle in her body hurt. How many times did she swing her sword? How many magic slashes did she fire? How much magic power did she use? She worried about her longsword’s durability. She had heard a new blacksmith shop opened in Prestige and wanted to visit.

“...”

Chae Nayun looked about 10 steps away at Rachel.

Rachel looked like a refined royal even as she rested. She knelt with her eyes closed and slowly breathed in and out. The nearby wind and earth shook with every breath. *So that’s an elemental’s way of breathing.* Chae Nayun watched in awe before speaking.

“Hey.”

Rachel heard Chae Nayun’s whisper and opened her eyes.

“...” She simply stared at Chae Nayun.

“Uh... Umm.” Chae Nayun had called Rachel, but didn’t know what to say. Finally, she managed to utter a few words.

“Good work.”

“You too,” Rachel casually replied and went back to meditating. Chae Nayun carefully observed her.

“Hey.”

She called again.

“...”

Rachel didn't answer and simply stared at Chae Nayun.

“I mean, it's nothing. It's just, we fought together... and I wanted to ask you something.”

Something had been bugging Chae Nayun for a while now. A thought sprang up in her mind every time she saw Rachel. Sometimes, the thought would make her blood boil with rage. Everybody knew the relationship between the English Royal Court and Fenrir.

“Uh, um... you see...”

It wouldn't be a problem if things ended there, but rumors circulated about a scandalous relationship between Rachel and Fenrir.

That bothered her. She knew it had nothing to do with her, but the thought still made her angry. Still, she couldn't ignore it. A person's feelings couldn't be controlled.

“You and Kim Ha...”

She found it difficult to speak that name. Chae Nayun stopped and clenched her teeth while looking at Rachel, who curiously tilted her head.

“Anyways, you and him...”

The reason Chae Nayun entered the Tower of Wish. Her top priority was to find Kim Hajin. She knew he would enter it.

“Have you met him? Inside the tower?” Chae Nayun finally managed ask. However, Rachel shook her head.

“No.”

“You’re lying.”

“It’s true.”

“...”

Chae Nayun licked her lips at the straightforward response. A princess wouldn’t lie without blinking an eye, right?

“Then, is there... something between... you and him?”

“What do you mean?”

“No, I mean... Well, *um... Sigh.*”

Chae Nayun frowned after hesitating.

“No, never mind. Just let me know if you run across him later. Keep it a secret from him.”

“Why?” Rachel’s crystal-like eyes stared at her.

“You don’t need to know why. I mean, it’s better to stay on good terms with each other. I’m pretty influential in Essence of the Strait, so I’ll tell them good things about you and the Royal Court guild.”

“Pft.”

Others must’ve eavesdropped as not just one or two people snorted. Of course, they all lowered their heads when Chae Nayun glared at them.

Chae Nayun blushed in embarrassment and glanced at Rachel. To her surprise, Rachel smiled and nodded without a hint of mockery.

“Okay.”

“...”

That made Chae Nayun even more embarrassed.

“B-By the way, I got this sword from a quest. Do you want to see?”

She fiddled with the rare longsword for no reason.

“It’s nice. Can I hold it?”

“Oh, y-yeah. Here you go.”

Rachel’s eyes widened as she examined it. *Yup, it’s awesome.* Chae Nayun smiled in satisfaction.

“Oh, it’s upgradable too. The blacksmith told me I could get it up to level 5 or 6.”

“Wow, really?”

“Good work, everyone! The alert for the rewards should be coming out any time!”

Kim Youngjin clapped and shouted. Players who participated in the castle attack screamed with joy. Soon, a system window popped up.

[You have successfully conquered the first castle!] [Contributions are being calculated based on merit...]

Players watched the system in silence.

[Calculations complete.]

“Oh!”

The team leaders each reacted differently. Essence of the Strait’s Kim Youngjin appeared confident, Rachel pulled her hands together as if praying, and Frost Sanctuary’s Jung Hosun licked his lips.

The 53 participants looked at the system window with different expectations.

[Participants — 3 parties and 1 individual player.]

[Party 1: Essence of the Strait] [Contribution – 32%]

[Party 2: Frost Sanctuary] [Contribution – 27%]

[Part 3: English Royal Court] [Contribution – 24%]

[Individual Player] [Contribution – 17%]

“...”

“...”

“...”

No one cheered or patted each other on the shoulder. The crowd became silent because of one reason.

[Individual Player] [Contribution – 17%]

This individual player shouldn't have existed. Amidst the confusion, the system kept spitting out new messages.

[Rewards will be given based on contribution.] [A total of 15000 TP will be divided according to the contribution ratio.] [The lottery for a special item will now proceed.] [The higher the contribution, the higher the chances of winning the lottery.]

“L-Lottery? What's this?”

The whole place grew noisy again.

[Lottery in process...]

Gulp. Nervous swallowing filled the castle. They didn't expect a lottery, but it would surely give an amazing item. *A special item like a skill book for our guild please.* Such thoughts filled the minds of every player.

[Individual Player has won the lottery!] [The special reward will be sent to the individual player.]

An icy silence filled the air.

“...Younghyun.”

Kim Youngjin broke the silence and called his subordinate.

“Y-Yes!”

“I asked you to record a video of the castle attack, right?”

“Yes. I recorded it with the player shop's recorder...”

“Show it to me.”

However, before the allied team had a chance to grasp the situation—

[Notification: An unknown player has reached the 6th floor!]

Another storm struck them.

* * *

[3F Prestige – Riry Restaurant]

This restaurant owned by Henry and Kiri was the first of its kind outside the inner walls.

“So you're saying it's all Black Lotus' doing?”

Jin Seyeon asked as she stuffed the restaurant's best dish, meat-

flavored corn fried rice, into her mouth. Seo Youngji sat next to her.

“Yes. An arrow came flying from somewhere and killed 10 magicians simultaneously. Kim Youngjin wanted to know if it was you. You said no, so it must be Black Lotus.”

Jin Seyeon grinned.

“So Black Lotus helped finish the first castle attack. Then he ran to the 6th floor?”

“Probably? They’re not sure if it was him who climbed to the 6th floor.”

“Amazing.”

Jin Seyeon laughed at the interesting turn of events. Then a particular individual caught her eye.

“Oh? Youngji, over there.”

“Let’s see... *Hm?* It’s Aileen.”

Aileen plodded through Prestige’s entrance. She kept her hands in her pockets for some reason.

“What’s wrong with her?” Jin Seyeon asked. Aileen walked cutely while staying on guard.

“Oh, I heard she lost some TP before. She’s been on high alert in the city ever since.”

Jin Seyeon and Aileen suddenly made eye contact.

“*Aah?*”

Aileen grimaced as Jin Seyeon politely nodded. Aileen looked at her disapprovingly and approached with quick steps.

“Nice to meet you, Miss Aileen.” Jin Seyeon stood up and greeted her.

“So you came?” Aileen pouted as she looked up at Jin Seyeon, who stood more than 20 cm taller.

“*Haha*, yes. I did.”

“*Hmph*.”

Seo Youngji looked at their battle of nerves. Well, it seemed more like Aileen picking a fight.

She thought to herself. *Who would win between a Temple of Justice hero and a master rank hero?* The subject was quite controversial. Some said the former while others believed the latter would win.

“It’s an honor to meet the Spirit Speech Master. I apologize for the late greeting. I had a lot going on.”

Aileen was one of the strongest in the Temple of Justice. Jin Seyeon adopted a modest attitude towards the small giant considered second only to the Nine Stars.

“What brings you here? You should just keep volunteering.”

Aileen decided to politely speak as well. Their age gap wasn’t big, but she didn’t want to become too friendly.

“*Ah*, did you not hear the rumors?”

“Rumors...?”

Aileen seemed oblivious, but soon nodded. *She’s probably talking about Black Lotus.*

“You’re here to catch him too?”

“Does that mean Miss Aileen is here to do the same? That’s right, did you hear about what happened at the castle attack today?”

Aileen didn't answer. Jin Seyeon pointed down the street.

“Ah, here comes the participants themselves.”

Kim Youngjin, Jung Hosun, Rachel, Chae Nayun, Yi Jiyeon, etc. The so-called rankers of the great guilds approached the restaurant.

“Miss Aileen, why don't we hear what happened directly from the participants?”

“Well, that doesn't sound too bad.”

“Then please, have a seat.”

Jin Seyeon pointed next to her.

“...”

Aileen slowly sat with her hands still in her pockets in case she might lose all her money again.

Chapter 191

Ranker (2)

Perfectly cooked rice with corn sprinkled on top like snowflakes. A fried rice made with only rice and corn cooked over a frying pan with corn oil. It didn't look delicious at all.

“*Mmm.*”

That's what Rachel thought as she plunged her spoon into the rice and brought it to her mouth. *Nom, nom.* She chewed slowly when she expected something to taste bad and her chin cautiously moved.

“...?”

However, Rachel's eyes soon widened and she began to chew faster.

“Is it good?”

Jin Seyeon grinned and Rachel nodded without a word.

“...”

Nom, nom, nom— The princess turned into a hungry hamster. The dish tasted like pork rather than corn.

“This flavor...”

Kim Youngjin and the others reacted the same. This restaurant opened 4 days ago, but they hadn't visited out of suspicion. Now they understood all the excellent reviews on the community.

“Does it taste bad, Nayun?”

Except for one person. Jin Seyeon looked at Chae Nayun, who chewed mechanically as if she was eating rubber.

“*Huh?* No, it’s good.”

Chae Nayun stuffed more food into her mouth and chewed faster. *Nom, nom, nom, nom*— She feared her reaction would hinder others from enjoying their meal. Her cheeks filled with fried rice, but she didn’t enjoy it at all.

“So he took away all the special rewards?”

Aileen, who already finished eating, asked. Essence of the Strait’s Kim Youngjin shook his head with a grim expression.

“No. A team can only receive up to 3 of the 5 special rewards. The individual player took the maximum he could receive.”

“*Ah*, really? He must be lucky. I’m jealous.”

The lottery process worked quite simply. The virtual container carried a total of 100 tickets. The number of tickets varied depending on the party’s contribution. For example, Essence of the Strait received 33 tickets for their 33% contribution. Naturally, the unknown individual received 17.

“Right?”

“But why did he help you? Wait, can we even call that helping? Excuse me, waiter?”

Aileen stopped and grabbed the waiter passing by.

“Yes?”

“Give me one more plate of this.”

“Sure.”

She turned back towards Kim Youngjin after placing her order. Kim Youngjin sighed.

“Actually, we recorded footage of the castle attack.”

“*Eh?* You got a video?”

“Yes. I ordered a subordinate to record so we could better prepare for the next castle attack. The siege might’ve even failed without this mysterious player’s help.”

“Oh? Let me see. Show me the video.”

Their conversation attracted everyone around them. All the nearby players, not just Aileen, showed interest.

“Here. You can see something flying from the sky and killing 10 magicians.”

Kim Youngjin projected a hologram into the air. Only those who were friends with him could see it.

— Attack the magicians first!

— That’s too difficult! Too many guards are surrounding them!

The video started from the beginning. Rachel and Chae Nayun strained their eyes to see.

“What are you guys doing?” Kim Suho suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

“Oh geez, you surprised me. When did you get here?”

“Me? Just now. I’m here to eat.”

Chae Nayun felt surprised, but gestured to the seat next to her.

“You too, sit down and watch this.”

Chae Nayun pointed to the hologram.

“What’s this?”

“A ranker.”

“Ranker?”

Kim Suho was already friends with Kim Youngjin and quickly focused on the video.

Five black streaks flew across the sky. No one could tell whether they were arrows, spears, or some sort of magic spell. Fierce winds surrounded the attacks as they headed towards the 5 magicians’ throats. The magicians detected the murderous intent and cast defensive magic, but the black streaks easily broke through and pierced them. Only then could the observers tell that the attacks came from arrows.

“Oh?”

“*Eh?*”

What happened next surprised them even more. The arrows that pierced the magicians suddenly changed course. They shot up and killed another 5 magicians.

A total of 10 magicians died. Each magician gave 1.7% in contribution, so that added up to 17%. Everyone understood how the individual player earned it now.

“*Haha*. Isn’t that a mysterious and wonderful archery skill?”

Jin Seyeon smiled.

“Even his arrows are black. He obviously designed them like that on purpose. How childish.”

Aileen, on the other hand, hid her astonishment and feigned

indifference.

“What are you going to do about the other castles?” Aileen asked Kim Youngjin.

“Someone reached the 6th floor without destroying all the castles, but we decided to focus on conquering the 5th floor for now.”

“Hello, everyone. We are the Ordinary People Alliance!”

A loud voice filled the restaurant.

“Please contact us if you are an ordinary person and still not a member!”

The Ordinary People Alliance recently began crowding the streets. Their leader and followers stormed in and sat around a big table.

“Hey, Divine Archer. What do you think of them?” Aileen asked while glancing at the loud bunch.

“Well, they need a way out too. I think they’re alright for now.”

Jin Seyeon gave a neutral response.

“Hey. What are you doing?”

A hoarse voice suddenly called out and caught everyone’s attention.

“Ah, are you an ordinary person?”

“Huh? Uh, I guess I am.”

A bald man who looked like a criminal with scars under his eyes replied. It was Kaita.

[Highest Difficulty Tutorial Town]

Meanwhile, 2 weeks had passed since the 3rd tutorial began. Jin Sahyuk started from scratch after dying.

“...”

She recognized some familiar faces: an NPC she fought to the death with last time, an NPC she caught trying to pickpocket her, etc.

However, Jin Sahyuk walked past them with a smile. Everything seemed familiar her second time around.

“*Hmm.*”

She looked at the 1000 TP she received after coming first in the second tutorial. Now, she somehow had to increase her wealth and acquire better weapons and armor before climbing to the 2nd floor. That man probably waited there for her.

First, she headed towards the mercenary pub and opened the community while walking. The community and public forum became available starting from Tutorial Town. Of course, the poster could hide information by putting a checkmark next to, *Disable for players below _th floor.*

“*Mmm?*”

She came across an interesting post.

[List of Rankers for Beginners Provided by the Information Team Small Business Enterprise.]

Hello, we are the information team, Small Business Enterprise. We are part of the Hero Association's Department of Statistics. We entered the tower to examine and evaluate players inside the Tower of Wish.

Of course, the Tower of Wish has no official rankings. However, we directly gathered information about famous players inside the tower.

We have selected the top 100 rankers based on a certain set of criteria to encourage other players and to set guidelines for newcomers.

...(Omitted)

We apologize for the long introduction. Below is the ranker list. (Some players may have been omitted if their information has not been made public.)

1. Black Lotus: A mysterious player believed to have been the first to reach the 5th and 6th floors. His nickname, real name, and everything else remain unknown. The only fact we know is that he is male. He is officially an archer, but seems capable of utilizing other weapons as well...

(Omitted) This player's growth speed is on a different level and may be a hermit master. He is undoubtedly powerful. Even Vast Expanse, who has been assessing the situation from the outside, has called him very interesting.

2. Aileen... We'll leave out the details. She is the same Aileen we all know with daunting magic power and her overwhelming Spirit Speech. Humanity's great hero.

3. Yi Yongha: Another hero from the Temple of Justice. He may pale in comparison to his partner, Aileen, but the Hellfire Magician has a gift specialized in hunting. No monster can withstand his hellfire.

4. Kim Junwoo: A Vast Expanse hunter. He only plays solo. Not much is known about him since he takes care of everything alone...

5...

Jin Sihyuk walked while looking at the list of rankers, the so-called big shots in the tower. She would've stopped after a few lines, but reading had now become somewhat of a hobby.

[Lv.??? Mercenary Pub]

She arrived at the mercenary pub and turned off the community. Then she stood in front of the owner behind the counter.

“Oh, what’s this? You’re down here again?”

The owner recognized her and frowned. She would’ve given him the middle finger in the past, but Jin Sahyuk simply smiled today.

“You should know not to rip me off if you recognize me.”

* * *

[6F, *Splendor*]

Bucephalus, the legendary horse beloved by Alexander the Great who ruled Macedonia in the distant past. One of the most priceless treasures within the Tower of Wish, which contained all of humanity’s legends, histories, and myths.

I wanted to tame it no matter what.

I observed where it ran with my thousand-mile eyes. My sight stretched faster than my body could move. Soon, I spotted a galloping horse with a beautiful black mane. Right. It... no, she was undoubtedly the legendary Bucephalus. I quickly took out the dwarven supercar.

“Scan.”

I stepped on the accelerator and chased after Bucephalus as Spartan followed from the sky.

I finally caught a glimpse of Bucephalus after driving for about 3 minutes.

[Lv.13 *Bucephalus*]

My smartwatch confirmed the horse’s identity. Level 13 meant a legendary creature and she could level up even further as time passed.

I didn’t necessarily want to ride her. I could just tame her and set her loose. She would trample everything in her path. *Should I give her to*

Evandel as a gift?

I had to catch her first. I should be able to bring her back to the real world once I tamed her.

“...!”

Black smoke came out of the dwarven supercar that surpassed its limits. Bucephalus suddenly stopped and I did as well. We stared at each other. Bucephalus above the hill and my dwarven supercar on the slope.

Prrr—!

Bucephalus looked down and wailed in discontent. *Prrr— Prrr—!* She breathed heavily through her nose in an intimidating manner.

“Oh, *um*. I didn’t follow you. I just happen to be heading in the same direc-”

— *Prrr!*

Bucephalus was historically famous for her temper. Even the brave Alexander the Great had a difficult time taming her. As such, I couldn’t do anything rash. It would be impossible to tame her in one day, but I didn’t want to let her go.

“...”

Suddenly, the famous story of the monkey and the flower shoes came to mind. The barefoot monkey had been offered flower-patterned shoes that he eventually couldn’t live without. *Did I have anything she might want?*

[Random Dice x3]

I held on to 3 random dice in case I needed them. Even the famous Bucephalus couldn’t survive without food. Rather, a smarter animal would value the taste of its meal more.

Let's lure her with food.

Drrr— I rolled the 3 random dice.

[Lv.4 Salmon Powder for Enhancing Food] [Lv.4 Master Grade Grains]

I received some excellent items.

“Um, wait.”

I excused myself before pouring the grains and powder on a large plate and threw in an ample amount of raw meat, which I had planned on eating myself. Then I placed the plate on the ground as Bucephalus watched me.

“This is really tasty stuff.”

I used my suggestive voice. Surely an animal wouldn't be able to resist it... *Prrr*—! However, Bucephalus resisted the magic power. *What a mighty fellow.*

“Okay, okay. I'll leave. I'm going now.”

I slowly stepped back and left the plate. I decided to retreat for today, but ordered Spartan to keep an eye on her.

Vroom—

I drove back to the hot spring without waiting to see whether she would eat the food or not. I would find out later when I returned.

“Phew. Let's get some training done.”

I lowered myself into the water and took a deep breath. The spirit power circulated through my veins as I breathed repeatedly for it to reshape my body. The scattered spirit power gathered around my heart according to my will and increased my heart rate.

Koong—!

The thumping grew strong enough for my ribs to hurt, but this also trained my body's interior, including my organs and blood vessels. The interior was just as important as the exterior.

I continued training for about 30 minutes. Suddenly, a hoard of system messages appeared.

[You have successfully conquered Castle No.1!] [Your contribution rate is 17%] [You have received 2550 TP.] [You have received special rewards.] [Special Skill Book – Lv.1 Wind of the Spirit] [Item – Lv.4 Purifying Wand] [Item – Lv.4 Special Chemical Activity Beaker]

“Ah, they succeeded.”

I sat up and examined the rewards.

[Wind of the Spirit]

This special skill enabled the user to vaporize their body for a short amount of time. It could be used for escaping or sneaking up on an enemy, but didn't have much worth as a special skill. It would've been amazing as a normal skill.

[Lv.4 Purifying Wand]

This wand helped magicians control their magic power better. It refined the impurities in magic power like its name suggested.

“Hmm...”

[Lv.4 Special Chemical Activity Beaker]

I needed to investigate how to use this one.

“It looks like it might work with the hot spring water here.”

I took out the beaker.

I continued traveling back and forth from the 6th floor for a week and followed the same routine every day. First, I located Bucephalus with Spartan's help and offered her delicious food 3 times a day. While doing so, I came across other legendary beasts such as a unicorn and black tortoise. However, they couldn't be tamed.

Then I trained after feeding Bucephalus. I did breathing exercises at the Hot Spring of Peace for more than an hour every day. Master Sharpshooter's grade improved with Spartan's help and I honed my skills with *[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]*. For the record, I could extract stigma's magic power twice a day inside the hot spring.

As a result, my stats increased by... *Dududududu*... No less than 2.015 in a mere week.

My stats inside the tower would soon catch up to my stats outside. Then the real growth would begin. My growth should accelerate once my stats caught up. Probably by another 2-3 points.

"Cough."

I received one more piece of good news. Currently, I ignored Bucephalus as she circled the hot spring.

Prrr, prrr.

She didn't directly approach out of pride, but made her presence obvious. Yesterday, I stopped feeding her the food she had grown used to for the past week.

Bleep—

I received a message.

Boss: I'm at the place you said. The filthy lake.

"Mmm."

I informed the Chameleon Troupe members about the pathway to the 6th floor. Of course, that didn't include Kaita. Currently, he should be

on his way to his demise along with Zurahan.

Me: You have to jump into the lake. Are you with anyone?

Boss: I'm alone. Cheok Jungyeong, Jain, and Jin Yohan said they had something to take care of.

The three of them would certainly try to attack a fortress or gateway. They were experts when it came to attacking strongholds. Jain would disguise herself as the enemy commander, infiltrate the castle, and open the gates from within. Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Yohan would then destroy everything inside.

Boss: You want me to jump in this thing?

Me: Yeah. Hang in there even if it's dirty.

Boss:... Okay. I'll head in now.

Prrr— I heard heavy breathing and glanced back at the angry Bucephalus. I found it quite funny and cute. I held back my laughter and continued ignoring her. She would take a mile if I gave her an inch.

Prrr— Prrr— Prrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr—

I ignored her darting and stood up. Then I dressed and got on the dwarven supercar to where Boss would arrive.

Boss came into view in the distance. She had already finished speaking to Eirene and became clean again.

“Boss!”

“...?”

Boss noticed me. I found the way she oddly waved quite cute.

“Hajin, you came.”

“Yeah. Boss, how many hours did you get?”

“Me? I...”

I didn't have to wait for an answer. The number 59:58:32 floated above her head.

“60 hours seems pretty average.”

“*Mm*. Is that so? Where do I find tickets to the 7th floor?”

“You can worry about that later. Here, you should train first. Your stats grow even faster on this floor.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Hop on.”

I got on the dwarven supercar with Boss when she suddenly called me.

“Hajin.”

“Yes?”

“What is that?”

Boss pointed at Bucephalus, who groomed herself from afar. Bucephalus must've followed me all the way here.

“*Hmm*. Must be a wild animal.”

I slightly smiled and continued to ignore the horse.

“Let's go to the hot spring.”

“Sure. I don't know where, but... W-What? Hot spring? We're going to a hot spring?”

Boss's flustered voice echoed behind me.

Chapter 192

Ranker (3)

I drove the dwarven supercar through the 6th floor. A gentle wind blew past us and colorful flowers could be seen everywhere. The eyes of deers twinkled from the mountains. This scenery simply put my mind at ease.

I couldn't help but reminisce in this state of happiness. I didn't know why, but memories from a distance past surfaced.

I felt invincible with my friends during my teenage years. I studied hard for the college exam. Years passed and I served in the military before I could enjoy life as an adult. Then I began writing after my discharge. Things went well. I earned some money and finally left home. I thought I had achieved everything on my own back then, but I was wrong. The support from my parents and my relationships with others over 25 years made me who I was.

I spent 25 years there and 5 years here. How would they have changed in 5 years? Was the world I lived in still the same? A strange anxiety rose in me from this beautiful scenery.

“Hajin.”

Boss suddenly called my name.

“...Yes?”

I replied a bit late. The weather felt especially nice today. It felt like being in the center of a glittering universe.

“...” Boss remained silent. I turned around and saw her glaring at me.

“What?”

“Where did you say we were going?”

“*Huh?* I said the hot spring... *Aah!*”

I scratched my head. No wonder she misunderstood. The landscape distracted me and I forgot to explain.

“I didn’t mean anything strange. The hot spring is used for training. Your stats increase faster there.”

Kieeek— Spartan landed on Boss’ shoulder. He skillfully caught up to the dwarven supercar at such a high speed.

“For training?”

— *Prrrr*. Spartan looked at Boss with twinkling eyes. He seemed to be having strange thoughts again.

“Yeah. My stats went up by 2 in a week.”

“Really?”

Boss finally took an interest. She kept mumbling, *Hot spring, hot spring, hot spring...*

“Also, that horse is still following us.”

I smiled wryly. As Boss said, Bucephalus indeed followed us. She appeared to be speed walking and not quite running, yet her speed equaled the dwarven supercar going 100 km/hr.

“She’s super fast, right?”

“...”

Boss nodded in silence.

“Look carefully and you should be able to see her information.”

“...? I can’t see anything. Just a question mark.”

“Ah, I forgot.”

A Lv.13 creature’s information couldn’t be viewed on the 6th floor. Players gained access to more information the higher they climbed and the highest level one could access on the 6th floor was Lv.10. I could only view Bucephalus’ information because of my smartwatch.

“Have you heard of Bucephalus?”

“Bucephalus?” Boss’s eyes widened a little. It seemed she’d heard the name before.

“Of course. She appears in the novel I’ve been reading.”

“...I see. Anyways, that’s her.”

“Hm? How is that possible? Didn’t that horse die a long time ago?”

“Well, I don’t know. Anything’s possible in the tower.”

We continued talking and soon arrived at the hot spring surrounded by emerald-like rocks. White steam obscured the water that sparkled like diamonds.

“We’re here.”

“Oh...”

The beautiful scenery impressed even Boss.

“...!”

Boss scrutinized the hot spring and suddenly widened her eyes. She must’ve received the system notifications regarding the stat buffs.

“Um... Hajin, should I just go in like this?”

“Huh? Oh... um...”

I looked at Boss with her clothes on. She wore the Lv.4 leather armor and robe that I made for her.

“It’s better to get undressed. Completely.”

“What?” Boss frowned at me.

“Well, we’re like family, so it’s noth... I’m joking. Boss, you know how to put up a barrier, right?”

I could sense her face turning grim and quickly retracted my words. She didn’t know how to take a joke.

“Barrier?” Boss seriously asked.

“Yes. Just get naked inside a barrier. The hot spring will be most effective that way. It’ll help you train your magic power. Would you like to give it a go?”

“Hmm... Okay.”

Boss walked into the hot spring fully clothed. I stopped Spartan from chasing her.

— *Pieeek...* The bird almost threw a tantrum when I covered his beak. Boss glanced at us before forming a black, dome-like barrier around herself. The barrier divided the hot spring exactly in half.

— *Prrr!*

I let go of Spartan as he rushed towards the barrier.

“Hey, you can’t go in anyways...?”

Swoosh— To my surprise, Spartan easily went through the barrier.

“What?”

I tapped the barrier. *Tok, tok.* It felt firm enough to knock on.

“...”

To enter Boss’ barrier without losing a drop of blood; this must be a divine bird’s power. I felt somewhat envious and took my clothes off before entering the hot spring. Then I opened my inventory and went over what I had.

[Lv.2 Consolidation Coupon] [Lv.3 Skill Consolidation Coupon]

I received these last week for being the first to enter the 6th floor. The *[Lv.2 Consolidation Coupon]* should obviously be used to upgrade the system. *Chwaak*— I ripped it in half without hesitation.

[You have used a Lv.2 Consolidation Coupon.]

“I would like to apply it to the system.”

[Consolidating Lv.1 Extra7’s System.] [Lv.1 Extra7’s System has increased to Lv.2 Extra7’s System.]

[Your waiting room has increased in size and its effects have improved.] [Your inventory has increased from Lv.1 to Lv. 2.] [You may now access a wider array of information.] [Community...]

I glanced over the system windows. Now, I should use the Lv.3 Skill Consolidation Coupon.

Let’s check my skills first.

[Basic Skill List (3/3)] [Lv.4 Extraction and Permanent Materialization (2 slots)] [Skill Exp 55%] [Lv.3 Synthesis (1 slot)] [Exp 0]

[Extraction and Permanent Materialization] could be upgraded through repetitive training. However, *[Synthesis]* remained at level 3 since it could only be upgraded with skill consolidation coupons.

[Synthesis has increased to Lv.4.] [You may now apply the skill in more

diverse ways.]

[*Synthesis*] became Lv. 4 after I used the coupon. The maximum level for a normal skill stopped at 11. It almost reached half, so I should be able to do what I've been planning.

"Let's take the Hot Spring of Peace back to my waiting room."

I took out the reward from the castle attack.

[Lv.4 Special Chemical Activity Beaker] Lv.4 Property Transformation

Property transformation activated as soon as I filled the 1 L beaker with the hot spring water. The water inside the beaker turned into a heavy liquid similar to mercury.

Then I used [*Synthesis*], which also had the power of compression. The semi-solid water compressed and created extra space in the beaker.

I repeated this process multiple times from 1 L to 2 L, 4, 8... In the end, I compressed 128 L worth of spring water inside the 1 L beaker.

"All done."

I spoke with a wide grin. Now I just had to bring this over to my waiting room. Then I'd turn the compressed water into liquid again and release it inside the mini hot spring I prepared.

Leaving the hot spring seemed like a waste, so I came up with this after much deliberation. Of course, the spring water would lose its purifying ability after compression, but stigma's magic power should take care of that.

As I prepared to return to my waiting room with the beaker...

Splash—

I looked up and saw Bucephalus splashing water with her front legs. *Splash splash splash splash*. Water splashed all over my face.

“...”

I feigned indifference and messaged Boss.

Me: Boss, can you help me with my training after you're done?

Boss: Trauning?

Me: Yup. Training.

Boss: Ok. But what kind of traoning are you referring to?

Me: Archery practice. And it's training, not traoning. I'll shoot, so all you have to do is evade.

Boss: It's a typo.

The 6th floor featured many other training grounds beside the Hot Spring of Peace. For example, the Jewel Forest could be used for training skills and the Dark King Mountain Range for training traits.

Me: You can spend 3 more hours in there. It feels nice, right?

Boss: Yes. It's good.

Boss sent one more message along with a screenshot. *So she learned how to take a screenshot. Good for her.*

Boss: (Photo)

Boss: Lol.

Spartan was splashing water in the photo and smiling like the happiest bird in the world.

“...”

I felt bitter for some reason. Why did I feel jealous?

“Cough.”

I closed my eyes and almost peeked with Spartan’s vision, but held back. I endured thanks to my amazing endurance stat at 7.207.

* * *

Time flew as Boss and I trained.

Boss restored 3.5 points of her magic power while I raised Master Sharpshooter to 57% of grade 5 and *[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]* to level 5. I also succeeded in creating a smaller version of the hot spring in my waiting room. It wasn’t as good as the original, but was still worth 1-2 hours of my time every day.

— *Prrr, prrr.*

Most importantly, I finally tamed Bucephalus after 4 more days of playing hard to get.

— *Hiiiing.*

[Lv.13 Bucephalus has consented to become your pet!] [This relationship can break anytime with Bucephalus’ weak loyalty.]

I felt satisfied with our temporary relationship. I had enticed her with delicious food every day until she became my pet.

“Boss, can you recommend me a name?”

Boss only had about an hour left on the 6th floor. I asked her as I stroked Bucephalus’ mane.

“Can’t you just call her Bucephalus?”

“No. That stands out too much.”

“*Hmm...*”

Boss rubbed her chin.

“Kwangmyung. What do you think? Kim Kwangmyung in Korean.”

“...”

My mind went blank. I seriously doubted my hearing at such a weird name.

“*Hm.* Do you not like it?”

“*Huh? Ah...* It’s...”

Well, I suppose it’s better than Spartan.

“It sounds good, but she’s a girl.”

“*Ah.* That’s right, a girl. Then... how about Sannuri?”

“Oh? I like it.”

An unexpectedly pretty name. I asked Bucephalus for her opinion, but she didn’t care and simply nibbled the grain I had given her.

“Alright, let’s go with Sannuri.”

[Lv.13 Bucephalus’ nickname has been set to Sannuri.] [Lv.13 Bucephalus secretly likes her new name.]

For the record, tamed animals could be kept in the waiting room. I already prepared a stable with an automatic feeding machine.

“I’ll see you later.”

I said to Boss, who held a ticket in her hand.

[7F Ticket] You may use this ticket to travel to the 7th floor. You cannot return to 6th floor ever again after using this ticket.

“Okay. I’ll go on ahead.”

However, she didn’t use the ticket. Instead, she placed her hands on the crystal stele nearby and returned to the 3rd floor. She probably wanted to save the first-time rewards for me.

“...”

Boss acted unexpectedly considerate when it came to such things. I stood there for a while before turning around. I had about 4 hours left with nothing urgent, but still needed to meet one more person.

I wonder what he’s doing right now? I closed my eyes and shared visions with Spartan flying across the 5th floor as I had ordered.

“He’ll be here soon.”

I confirmed that he had arrived near the Forest of Fairies. Then I returned to the Hot Spring of Peace and took a dip until I grew tired of waiting.

Tik, tik—

Time passed from 30 minutes to an hour, 2 hours... I only had about 40 minutes left.

Rustle—

I felt a presence behind me, but didn’t bother getting up. I simply sat with a smile and waited. The rustling grew louder along with footsteps. My heart beat a little faster as the distance shortened. I finally smelled him after 5 minutes that felt like 30 minutes.

“...Oh?”

A confused voice sounded from behind me. However, I didn’t turn around. I leaned against the rocks surrounding the hot spring and simply grinned. I didn’t have to check to know who finally arrived.

“You’re here.”

I stared at the water’s surface, which reflected his face. A well-tended undercut and a flawless appearance. Kim Suho looked at me with a puzzled expression.

“Long time no see.”

We finally reunited after 3 years. I felt glad and also a bit nervous. I faced him not as Black Lotus, but as Fenrir and Kim Hajin.

* * *

[5f, Materialized Demon Realm]

A party made up of Aileen, Yi Yongha, Jin Seyeon, and Shin Jonghak explored deeper into the demon realm.

“The demon race’s executives aren’t anything to worry about.”

Shin Jonghak smiled as he recalled the demon he just pierced a moment ago.

“*Haha*, you were outstanding. You have the potential to become a spear god in the future...”

“I don’t know about that.”

Jin Seyeon played along, but Aileen seemed uninterested. Honestly, Jin Seyeon originally planned on traveling alone. However, Shin Jonghak had asked to join and she couldn’t refuse. After all, she owed a great debt to his grandfather, Shin Myungchul, even though it happened more than 20 years ago.

“Shall we set out again?”

“Yeah, whatever. Let’s go.”

Aileen answered Shin Jonghak, obviously annoyed. Shin Jonghak had

nothing to fear as a member of this amazing party. He walked with confidence and the monsters that appeared from time to time indeed couldn't match them.

Jin Seyeon's arrows killed most of the monsters before they could even reach the group. Aileen's Spirit Speech, Yi Yongha's hellfire, and Shin Jonghak's spear easily destroyed the rest that managed to come close.

"Let's walk a bit faster."

Shin Jonghak led the way. He felt a little strange not being the leader of a group, but just being a member of this one satisfied him. They continued for about 10 minutes.

"Ah, there's a crystal stele." Jin Seyeon pointed into the distance.

"Where? Where?" Aileen widened her eyes in that direction.

"It's about 3 km away, so you might not be able to see it, Miss Aileen."

"You're joking."

"*Haha...*"

Jin Seyeon smiled and observed the scene. Three robed individuals stood next to the crystal steles. One of them seemed quite tall, probably over 2 meters with a sturdy build. Another one looked slim with a spear. The last one seemed like a woman wearing heels.

"..."

Jin Seyeon couldn't figure out their identities. They seemed familiar, but she didn't recognize them. Suddenly, the largest one turned his head and looked in their direction.

"Who is it? What is it? What or who are you looking at?" Aileen asked in a hurry.

Jin Seyeon whispered without averting her eyes, “They certainly don’t look friendly. We might have to confront them to use the crystal stele.”

“Yeah? Then let’s confront them.”

As expected, Aileen continued forward without a hint of hesitation.

“Yes. Let’s go.”

Yi Yongha, Shin Jonghak, and Jin Seyeon followed her.

Chapter 193

Hierarchy (1)

A lone castle stood on a cliff somewhere near the Mediterranean Sea before a wealthy man purchased it as his vacation home a year ago.

Its Middle Age style looked fancy, but it remained empty inside. A conference currently took place in a room without a single piece of furniture.

“We encountered some resistance, but managed to achieve our goal.” The secretary bowed.

“That’s good.” A deep voice filled the room.

“You did well.”

“Thank you, Chairman.”

An elderly man sat on a throne in the deepest part of the castle. His name was Joochul, also known as Changdo, the owner of Daehyun and head of the prestigious Chae family in Korea. Only his pressure and his presence filled the empty room.

“However, we still haven’t identified them yet. They are too human-like to be djinns, but much too violent to be humans.”

The secretary’s report went unusually long today. Something neither djinn, monster, nor human. Something stronger than djinns that possessed intelligence equal to humans. Chae Joochul listened with his eyes closed and grabbed the cane beside his throne.

“Strange beings.”

Koong. Chae Joochul’s cane touched the floor and a shockwave

immediately pulsed out. The magic power in the atmosphere trembled and the entire castle shook.

“The association exists to deal with such things. Just leave it to them.”

“Understood.”

The secretary nodded respectfully.

“Another matter also requires the Chairman’s attention.”

A strange hologram appeared and Chae Joochul’s face showed a slight change. A light flickered from his sharp, frowning eyes.

[Black Lotus]

Chae Joochul recognized that symbol. It meant the children who scattered long ago had resumed their activities. A pet he had once abandoned.

However, Chae Joochul didn’t feel anything. His heartbeat remained slow as always and his skin felt cold as ice.

“We’re currently contacting guilds and information agencies about him.”

“...”

Chae Joochul put out his hand without a word and the secretary gave him a stack of documents.

“The first page is our top choice.”

[Truth Agency]

Chae Joochul had heard of it before. The Truth Agency’s motto was swiftness and accuracy. It had quietly grown into a giant in its field over the years. Of course, the general public didn’t know about it.

“We already sent them a message, but they’ve recently entered a hiatus. We believe they are in the middle of expanding their business and network of informants.”

“*Hmm.*”

Chae Joochul flipped through the documents one by one before throwing the stack away.

“Don’t concern yourselves with it.”

They wouldn’t dare bite him if they recalled the past. After all, even an abandoned dog remembered its master.

Chae Joochul almost ended the conference when a trivial curiosity struck him.

“How is my granddaughter doing?”

“Young Lady Nayun is doing well inside the tower. She will soon enter the top 100 rankings.”

“That’s enough. You can leave now.”

“Understood.”

The secretary immediately disappeared at his words. The old man slowly closed his eyes in the huge, empty castle. Suddenly, he recalled a past when he still faintly had emotions.

The rookies introduced themselves as the Chameleon Troupe and dared to offer him a deal. The children drunk on power tried to grab onto his sleeves. Unfortunately, he couldn’t clearly recall the memory.

Ssss—

The small lamp lighting the room flickered off and darkness descended. Chae Joochul opened his eyes in the dark. They glowed with deep magic power.

Leaves swayed in the wind and hot water bubbled from the ground as gentle sunshine enveloped everything. The footsteps of wild animals filled the quiet mountain.

I waited for Kim Suho to speak in this peaceful scenery that suited classical music.

“...Kim Hajin?”

Finally, he called my name. Only then did I turn around with a grin.

“Hey.”

“...Is that really you?”

“You bet. Stop spacing out and come in. I don’t have much time left.”

The number [216] sat above Kim Suho’s head. He received 16 more hours than me. We probably treated the system equally, but Kim Suho must’ve received more because of his righteous alignment. As for me, my alignment must be something like neutral, just fitting for a side character.

“...”

Kim Suho approached without a word and awkwardly scratched his neck in front of the hot spring.

“Come in.”

He finally stretched his leg towards the water.

“You’re gonna keep your clothes on?”

“Oh, right.”

Kim Suho went to take his clothes off behind the bushes. I couldn't see

him, but could hear his clothes falling to the ground. It sounded... how do I put it... quite unpleasant.

Kim Suho entered the hot spring after placing his heavy leather armor and other garments on the ground. We finally stood face to face. *Splash, splash.* He splashed the sparkling water a few times before asking.

“Where are we?”

“The Hot Spring of Peace on the 6th floor. The system should’ve told you that already.”

“It did, but...” Kim Suho looked at me suspiciously.

“What?”

“Nothing. Anyway, it’s good to see you.”

He suddenly raised his upper body, but I quickly reached out to stop him.

“Don’t come near me.”

“*Hm?* Why?”

“Just because. I feel kind of uncomfortable.”

Kim Suho’s body most likely looked flawless. Not only did he have a perfect body with well-balanced muscles, but his manhood should also be perfect. I wasn’t too bad myself, but I didn’t want to compare.

“Okay, sure.”

Kim Suho sat back down as I asked.

“Has it been... 3 years?”

Kim Suho smiled and shook his head.

“4 years.”

“That long?”

“Yeah. It’s been a while. Oh, by the way, thanks for the armor and guidebook. I’m still using the same armor.”

“That’s good.”

Silence followed. We didn’t have much to say despite our first reunion in 4 years. It felt awkward, but that was okay. I wasn’t here to chit-chat.

“Kim Hajin, are you the only one here?” Kim Suho asked. I could sense a hidden meaning behind the question.

“Hmm? Ah.”

I quickly realized what he meant. Right about now, everyone should be thinking Black Lotus had entered the 6th floor first. Kim Suho was quite smart, so he must’ve made the connection.

“No. Another person besides me also came here.”

Technically, I wasn’t lying. Kim Suho widened his eyes.

“Then you saw?”

“Saw who?”

“Black Lotus.”

The way Kim Suho spoke sounded somewhat childish. He had the desire to challenge a stronger opponent like any protagonist.

“...”

I silently nodded. The thought that I might be Black Lotus didn’t exist. He trusted me that much and I didn’t want to betray that faith.

“Ah, then did you fight Black Lotus?”

“Huh?”

Kim Suho’s eyes suddenly twinkled. Well, I did constantly battle against myself over smoking, but...

“No wait, maybe you won? After all, Black Lotus isn’t here and you are.”

“Well, no. I didn’t need to fight him. The 6th floor is huge and the time given to each player is limited. I just caught a glimpse of him.”

“Ehh... You’re lying.”

I managed to come up with an excuse, but he kept teasing me.

“Oh, whatever. You do know that you have 216 hours to train here, right?”

I changed the topic and got straight to the point.

“Hm? Oh, yeah. That sounds reasonable with all the buffs and I already found a 7th floor ticket.”

Kim Suho took out the ticket from his inventory.

“You know what they say, *Never hastily spend what you earned with ease.*”

“Exactly.”

Kim Suho needed to become stronger than in the original story. I would even sacrifice myself for that since anything that benefitted him would naturally benefit me as well.

“I don’t have much time left, so I’ll be quick. Listen carefully.”

First, I explained about the Hot Spring of Peace.

“Your stats will increase faster if you meditate here, so spend at least 3-4 hours doing breathing exercises every day.”

Kim Suho knew a unique breathing technique that he learned from his original world. He should be able to easily raise all his stats by 3 points.

“You’ll find a bamboo forest that looks like it’s made of jewels to the right of this place.”

Next, I explained about the Jewel Forest and the Dark King Mountain Range. I taught him all the places that he could use for training. This should save him about 12 hours that he would’ve spent looking.

“You got it?”

“Y-Yeah. I took notes through the system.”

“Good. Here.”

I only had 3 minutes left. Lastly, I took out 8 stigma crystals. I extracted 2 crystals every day and saved 8 just for him.

“What are those? Gemstones?”

“They’re medicine to speed up your growth. Take one every day.”

[Lv.4 Origin Mana Crystal – Growth Bonus] Lv.4 Stat Increase Bonus: Upon consumption, you will receive a 7.777% growth increase for 24 hours (only valid on the 6F).

“Eh?”

Kim Suho’s expression became somewhat strange. Even his cheeks appeared rosy, perhaps because of the hot spring.

“W-Why are you looking at me like that?”

“Huh? Oh... It’s just that... I’m grateful, but why are you doing all this

for me? Did you know I'd come here? How come your explanation is so detailed? I'm quite moved."

"..."

Fair questions, but I didn't have time to answer.

"Don't worry about that. Just start training."

I wanted this tower to coexist with the outside world and I needed his help for that. I did everything I could and the rest would be up to him now.

"It was good to see you."

A system window popped up the moment I finished talking.

[0:00] [Time is up.] [Returning to the 5th floor.] [You may no longer enter the 6th floor.]

"Hey, wait..."

Kim Suho tried to say something, but my vision distorted and I couldn't hear him. The hot spring's warmth instantly disappeared and I felt the cold ground beneath my feet. An icy wind blew and my whole body trembled.

[5F, Materialized Demon Realm]

I returned to the 5th floor.

"Ugh, so cold."

I took out my gear from the inventory and wore them back on. Then I tried to use the 7th floor ticket right away. However...

Boom!

I heard a loud bang from far away.

“Whoa! What was that?”

It sounded too big to ignore, so I scouted the area with my thousand-mile eyes and everything became crystal clear.

“Oh?”

A huge fight involving almost 20 players created the chaos. I couldn't fully grasp the situation with all of them fighting each other.

“*Hmm.*”

I drove towards them in the dwarven supercar and recognized a few familiar faces when I arrived. I didn't want to get caught up in it, so I climbed a nearby mountain and observed from above. Other players also watched from a distance.

“Wow.”

Cheok Jungyeong undoubtedly stood out the most. Simply put, he looked like a war god in the high level equipment I gave him. The price one had to pay for messing with him seemed too great. *KWANG! BOOM!* With just one punch, the earth cracked and a huge explosion burst into the air. Most players couldn't even dream of approaching and even Aileen struggled to stop him with her Spirit Speech.

“Hajin.”

I became completely absorbed in their fight when someone grabbed my sleeve. I glanced back, but didn't see anybody. *A ghost?* I got goosebumps when a voice came from below.

“Over here.”

I lowered my gaze and discovered a little girl around 6-7 years old. Her skin looked fair and she had beautiful blonde hair.

“Who are you?”

The girl grinned.

“It’s me, Jaaiin!”

“*Huh?*”

* * *

Jain told me the entire story. A quarrel broke out between the 3 Chameleon Troupe members and Aileen’s party consisting of Jin Seyeon, Yi Yongha, and Shin Jonghak. They fought over the special crystal stele that the Chameleon Troupe had found.

“*Mmm*. So it doesn’t function as a checkpoint, but gives out quests instead.”

Fights often broke out over quest-giving crystal steles on the 5th floor.

“Quest? *Ah*, it did give us a quest,” Jain answered while disguised as a child.

“What was it about?”

“Protecting the crystal stele for 3 hours. The reward is a special skill book called Secret March.”

“*Ah*.”

Secret March was quite a good skill. I would’ve fought in their shoes too.

Their fight over the quest captured many players’ attention. Of course, most wouldn’t dare to intervene, but a few greedy djinns joined in. Evil Society’s Kim Hakpyo, Satan’s Servant Kim Oh-Sung, and other famous djinns jumped into the fight with their followers.

“What about you, Jain?”

“I ran away. I didn’t want to fight.”

The young Jain sounded quite amusing with her high-pitched voice.

“By the way, is that what you looked like as a child?”

“Ah? Yeah.”

“Doesn’t a child stand out more?”

“That’s true, but people usually hesitate before attacking me in this state. Then it’s the end for them because I’ll kill them first.”

Such harsh words didn’t suit her cute appearance. I formed an elegant black bow with aether. Some might even mistake it for a peak grade artifact. I nocked 5 arrows and pulled on the bowstring.

“You’re gonna shoot them?”

“Yeah. Just the djinns.”

“Hajin really hates djinns. Always trying to kill them.”

I gave a small smile. I hadn’t anticipated this situation, but the djinns I wanted to get rid of all gathered in one place. I only let them be because killing them one by one would’ve wasted my time.

“Jain, you get out of here first.”

I infused 2 streaks of stigma into the bow and arrows. *Woong*— The bow resonated with my magic power and glowed dark red. I planned to shoot from multiple angles and kill exactly 10 djinns with the 5 arrows. Well, maybe not Kim Hakpyo and Kim Oh-Sung.

“Won’t you stand out if you shoot from here?”

“It’ll be fine if I run away right after.”

“How?”

I smiled.

“You’ll see.”

I would use the 7th floor ticket right after shooting.

“Okay. Then I’ll get going.”

I waited for Jain to retreat far enough before releasing the bowstring.

Chwaaak—

The arrows enhanced with stigma’s magic power went in different directions towards their targets. It took less than a second without a sound. The victims fell to the ground without ever knowing what happened.

Chweeek—

The arrows returned to me after completing their tasks and I tore the ticket in half the moment I retrieved them. My whole body violently shook before the others could locate me.

[Entering the 7th floor.]

A system window popped up.

[Welcome to the 7th floor, Game Center.]

Chapter 194

Hierarchy (2)

The situation quickly turned chaotic. Aileen and her party didn't intend to fight. At first, they only wanted to register at the crystal stele's checkpoint. She planned on persuading them before using brute force if the mysterious people refused. However, the crystal stele wasn't a checkpoint.

[Quest discovered!] [Summary – You have discovered a group trying to steal an ownerless crystal stele.] [Goal – Steal the crystal stele from that group.] [Reward – Special Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.3 Secret March, Lv.5 Crystal Stele]

A quest suddenly popped up and the opposing group treated them as an enemy. Aileen felt slightly surprised. The giant from the opposing group smiled as they recognized each other.

“You.”

The fight began after she muttered a single word. The giant man took off his robe and shot forward like the wind. He clearly wanted to fight, but Aileen stopped his charge with one word.

“Stop.”

The giant froze in front of her. His feet dug into the ground as he tried to resist the Spirit Speech. However, a slim man holding a spear also attacked Aileen's group.

“I'll be your opponent!”

Shin Jonghak intercepted him and the two spearmen began fighting. *Koong!* Shin Jonghak felt a heavy pressure as their spears made contact. However, he could manage it.

“Hold on.”

Long ranged reinforcement came from behind as Yi Yongha’s hellfire shot towards them. Jin Seyeon’s arrows also came flying without her even using a bow.

Cheok Jungyeong’s body clashed against Yi Yongha’s fire as Jin Yohan’s spear clashed with Jin Seyeon’s magic arrows. Shockwaves burst and whirlpools of magic power erupted. The ground cracked from a single exchange and further exchanges shook their surroundings. The full power attacks from these high rank superhumans even split the clouds in the sky.

Then the hyenas jumped in when Cheok Jungyeong and Aileen ran low on magic power.

“Miss Aileen, more enemies are coming. I’ll shoot them down.”

Jin Seyeon noticed them first with her excellent eyesight. Several hundred arrows rained from the sky towards the enemies. Her attack swept away half of the 50 djinns. However, Evil Society’s executive, Kim Hakpyo, blocked the arrows with his demonic energy tentacles and Satan’s Servant, Kim Ohsung, created a powerful barrier around himself.

“Uhahahaha!”

Cheok Jungyeong burst into laughter at the djinns’ sudden appearance. His laughter shook the earth as he faced them with sincere happiness.

“Come!”

He roared and the resulting shockwave caused blood to burst from a few djinns’ ears. Cheok Jungyeong went wild as his armor deflected their attacks. He jumped like a gorilla and crushed the heads of every djinn he came across.

“He’s really crazy.”

Aileen murmured apathetically and chased after him. *KWANG! KWANG!* She unleashed another wave of magic power as Cheok Jungyeong's fists swept through the djinns.

"Stop, you gorilla bastard."

Spirit Speech restrained Cheok Jungyeong's movements as his eyes turned towards Aileen.

"Where do you think you're going? You should play with me."

They both smiled at each other. As they planned on estimating each other's true power...

Silent streaks of light flashed through the battlefield and the world seemed to stop for a moment. *Thud, thud.* Eight djinns pierced by the mysterious streaks fell to the ground. Blood flowed from their necks as their bodies scattered away.

No one had seen this attack coming. Everyone on the battlefield fell silent and tried to comprehend the situation. *Ssss—* Meanwhile, Jin Seyeon unleashed her magic power and restrained her allies' movements.

"...?"

Yi Yongha and Shin Jonghak looked at her curiously.

"Don't move."

Jin Seyeon muttered. In her mind, the previous attack had served as a warning. If anyone moved, the next attack would come at them. Jin Seyeon searched for the sharpshooter with her Divine Archer eyes. However, she couldn't detect anyone at all. The battlefield remained silent...

"Fuck!" Kim Hakpyo finally shouted and broke the silence. His body had turned completely black in his devil transformation. Thanks to this, he managed to survive the ambush.

“Waiting room!”

The remaining djinns also couldn't locate the mysterious sharpshooter and decided to escape using their [*Emergency Waiting Room Teleportation Tickets*]. The hyenas all retreated and only the original forces remained.

“Tsk.”

Cheok Jungyeong clicked his tongue, seemingly having been contacted by someone.

“Screw off.”

He shooed Aileen's party away as though his interest had disappeared. However, Aileen didn't move an inch until Jin Seyeon urged her.

“Miss Aileen, let's fall back for now.”

“...”

Aileen clenched her teeth. Was she shocked or just too proud to give up?

“We didn't plan on fighting anyways. We'll be at a huge disadvantage if we continue.”

The previous attack would've taken their lives if it had targeted them. However, the mysterious sharpshooter only attacked the djinns. Jin Seyeon didn't know why, but they should retreat if the sharpshooter wanted to let them go.

“Aileen.” Yi Yongha also chimed in.

“Haa.”

Aileen finally sighed and turned around. “Fine, I'll leave.”

Aileen's party slowly distanced themselves from the crystal stele.

Like that, a single sharpshooter ended the huge battle between many high rank players.

* * *

[7F, Game Center] [Welcome to the Game Center.] [You have received the special skill acquisition book, Lv.4 Algorithm, as the first player to enter the 7th floor.]

I arrived at the 7th floor lobby along with the new system alerts. It didn't look like an arcade from Earth despite its name. It looked much more futuristic like something out of a science fiction movie. Humanoid robots walked around and a huge, grey pathway led to an unknown destination.

— Welcome, customer.

A robot wearing a suit approached me. Its body resembled a human, but its face looked like a machine. I had designed this floor, but seeing it in person still awed me.

“Hello, nice to meet you.”

I knew this robot's identity, so I talked politely on purpose.

— I am APG-365. I must identify and register your existence. You may refuse, but you will have to return to the lower floor.

“No, that's fine.”

I emphasized my willingness to cooperate.

[Lv.??? APG-365]

I couldn't see the robot's high level until I confirmed it was level 55 with my smartwatch. The robot's name referred to the Great One and 365 of them existed on the 7th floor. Each of them could obliterate the current Cheok Jungyeong or Aileen in one blow.

— Please present your wrist.

I didn't dare to offend it in any way. *All hail AlphaGo.*

“Ah, yes.”

I placed my arm out and the robot grabbed my wrist.

— You may pay 5000 TP for an advanced neurotech implant chip. You may also choose to pay 1000 TP for a basic electronic chip if you lack the funds.

“I'll go with the advanced chip.”

I took out 5000 TP without hesitation. Most players would choose the 1000 TP chip or skip the 7th floor entirely, but that was the worst choice. This advanced neurotech chip was one of the 7th floor's best gifts.

“Here you go.”

I handed the robot 5000 TP.

— Confirming...

A beam of light shot out from the robot's eyes as it scanned the TP. Then it collected the money and jammed a chip into my wrist. A sharp pain instantly traveled through my arm and shook my spine.

“*Kuuk!*”

— This chip is linked to your nerves and will restrain you if you cause any trouble on this floor.

“Got it. *Argh*, that hurt.”

I slowly stretched and stared at the system alerts.

[Your body has been linked to the 7th floor's advanced neurotech chip

(now called Extra7's personal chip).] [You have luckily received a master grade chip!] [Your strength and speed have increased by 0.5 points.] [Extra7's personal chip is being analyzed for unique effects...] [You have received battle sense support from your chip!] [You may upgrade your chip inside the Game Center's upgrade center.]

The 7th floor contained one of the methods to artificially enhance my innate physical limits. I could easily reach the 8th floor, but it would be best to spend more time here.

— Player Extra7 has been confirmed.

“How many are inside right now?”

— Four individuals are enjoying games at the moment.

“Mmm.”

One should be the 7th floor's administrator and the other three should also be administrators from other floors. Players weren't the only ones who could climb the tower. Prestige's citizens could climb too if they wanted, but it would be difficult since they didn't have player benefits like the inventory, private waiting room, etc.

— The Game Center contains many games. You may purchase rewards with the points earned from games. Please take your time looking around.

“Hmm.”

I scanned the 7th floor's scenery. All sorts of games existed on this floor like fighting games, RPGs, board games, poker, etc. A system alert popped up.

[A total of 53 different types of games exist on the 7th floor.] [Players may receive special rewards depending on the records they set in different games.] [The special rewards will be given once 1000 players enter the 7th floor.]

First, I headed towards the section specializing in virtual reality

games.

Wiing— Wiing—

Meanwhile, my smartwatch continued to vibrate.

[You have obtained 7SP.] [You have obtained 6SP.]...

The arrows I shot must've caused a commotion. I followed a sign that said *[Virtual Reality Games]* and arrived at an arcade. Rows of virtual reality capsules lined up in the huge room.

[Virtual Reality Gaming Capsule] [This capsule contains 27 games.] [You may purchase special rewards with points earned from playing games on the 7th floor.] [You must exchange your TP for cash, the Game Center's currency, to play games. (Note: You cannot re-exchange cash for TP)] [You may receive cash as a reward depending on your performance.]

Players could use the cash currency to purchase items, including the 8th floor ticket. If I recalled correctly, it should cost about 10000 cash.

“Hnng.”

I stretched in front of a capsule before placing my wrist against it. Sss — It opened and revealed a bubble chair inside, but I needed to do something first.

“Scan.”

The number 26 flashed on the capsule. That would be more than enough. *[Young Dwarf's Dexterity]* would help me with all the physical aspects of games and the *[Random Consolidation System]* would enhance the capsule's overall functionalities. Fighting games, RPGs, FPS, and MOBA games could all be played on the capsule. I felt confident in placing first in every single player game.

“How comfortable.”

I lay in the enhanced capsule. Even the seat's comfort had increased.

“Oh right.”

[Boss you can come up now.]

I sent Boss a message before closing the capsule. Soon, my vision turned dark and system messages popped up.

Welcome, Extra7. Here is a list of games you may play.

1. Fierce Charge 2. Gladiator's Battle 3. Princess Maker...

* * *

“We just learned our standing in the hierarchy, *haha*.”

Jin Seyeon laughed amidst a somber atmosphere in the Riry Restaurant.

“You think this is funny?”

Aileen furrowed her brows.

“What do you mean our standing in the hierarchy? We only retreated because you couldn't find that sharpshooter! Shouldn't a sharpshooter handle the opposing sharpshooter?”

“*Cough*, you're right. It seems I still lack training.”

Honestly, Jin Seyeon's performance couldn't be called lacking. After all, her rain of magic arrows killed 20 of the 50 djinns. However, she couldn't accomplish the most important task, so she didn't make any excuses.

“*Hnnng*, how embarrassing. Just how many people watched that fight?”

Aileen buried her head in the table and squirmed. *Wiggle, wiggle*. Soon, she slightly raised her head with a mark on her forehead.

“Most people would’ve seen the footage by now because of the tower’s system. I suggest you don’t look at the public forum for a while.”

Koong!

Aileen slammed her head on the wooden table once more.

“How’s everyone else doing?”

Jin Seyeon stopped paying attention to the depressing kid and turned towards Shin Jonghak. He looked at his food with a somewhat solemn expression.

“Shin Jonghak?”

“...”

He didn’t answer even when Jin Seyeon called. The shock he received seemed too great. Shin Jonghak spent the entire time fighting one on one with the unknown spearman. Their fight hadn’t concluded, but it felt one-sided. Shin Jonghak had been overwhelmed and his opponent had gone easy on him too.

“How come you’re the only one who’s unaffected?”

Jin Seyeon looked at Yi Yongha eating fried rice without a care in the world.

“*Eh?* Oh, *um*, I’m the type who doesn’t get stressed by such things.”

Yi Yongha strived to live a leisurely life and only joined the Temple of Justice because of his innate talent. He would undoubtedly be equal to Aileen if he worked harder. After all, they called him a genius whose gift and talent equaled Aileen’s.

“What about you? You don’t seem affected either.”

Yi Yongha asked. Jin Seyeon bitterly smiled and shook her head.

“No, I’m affected.”

The mysterious sharpshooter’s attack was one thing, but his stealth astonished her the most. *Where did he go after shooting his arrows? Did he fire from beyond my eyesight’s 4 km range? How did an attack from such a distance carry such killing power?*

“I feel very uncomfortable as well.”

Even the Divine Archer Jin Seyeon felt threatened.

* * *

[Fierce Charge] [1st – Extra7]

[Gladiator’s Battle] [1st – Extra7]

[Mini-game Heaven] [1st – Extra7]

[Spring Gunner] [1st – Extra7]

[2031] [1st – Extra7]

...

I took first place in every game other than the three that Kim Suho would place 1st in. Not even an administrator could surpass my overwhelming results.

[Cash – 38,624]

Naturally, I received more than enough to purchase the 8th floor ticket. With that, I had finished everything on the 7th floor and could go up to the 8th floor after a single day. However, I had to do one last thing before that.

“Huuu.”

Jin Sahyuk would soon arrive on the 2nd floor. I would have to pay

her another visit as I promised. I put on my hood and left the arcade.

“Woah!”

“Hmm?”

I almost bumped into someone with white hair and a sly-looking face. His face looked like a stereotypical Western noble.

“Oh, how’s it going?”

He smiled at me. I felt like I knew him and smiled back.

“Ah, yes.”

“I’m the 7th floor’s administrator, Simad.”

Simad reached out and shook my hand.

“Ah, nice to meet you too.”

“Haha, I’m happy to have my first customer. Not to mention...”

He glanced at the arcade with a thin smile.

“Such an accomplished one too. I have a suggestion. Do you want to play cards with us?”

“Cards? Us?”

I tilted my head. I didn’t expect the 7th floor’s administrator to make such an offer so easily.

“Yep. Someone ran away, so we’re short one person. Administrators don’t often hang out with players, but you’re the first to enter my floor.”

“...”

I looked at Simad. Honestly, I didn't know his character too well since this floor didn't appear much in the original story.

"Sorry, I don't have time."

I felt confident in winning any game. Still, I didn't want to follow him. Gambling on this floor only occurred in cash and that wouldn't benefit me anymore. Cash could only be used on the 7th floor and resided in the chip that every player had to buy. TP could be exchanged for cash, but not the other way around. I already had plenty. The only thing left was to upgrade my chip.

"We'll be gambling with TP. Your pocket seems full, so—"

"I'll join."

Now that sounded worth it.

"*Ohoho*, what a bold young man. Great, follow me."

I followed Simad without hesitation. I wondered how much I could take without angering them too much. We arrived at a VIP room adorned with gold after walking past a lobby guarded by several robots.

"Open."

The door opened at his command.

"I'm back. I found someone, so we can play a bit longer."

"*Hm?* Who did you bring? I told you, I'm not going to play with robots."

A familiar voice spoke.

"I brought a player, not a robot."

"What? Are you mad?"

“I’m completely sane. He’s quite rich and we can always go easy on him. We’re only playing for fun, right?”

Simad glanced at me as he explained. I walked up and stood next to him. Then I looked around the VIP room.

“Eh?”

A short exclamation came out of my mouth. A gambling table stood at the center of the huge room and one of the two administrators around it was...

“Oh?”

The 3rd floor’s administrator, Medea.

Chapter 195

Hierarchy (3)

The immense magic power condensed in the tower had summoned the floor administrators into existence. Some like Medea, Eirene, and Heimdall used to be mythical heroes while I had created the others like Luke and Simad.

Mythical hero or not, they all had their own obsessions and desires with a self-consciousness far greater than any human. They helped or hindered players from climbing the tower for their own reasons.

Administrators also valued TP.

“Raise.”

Medea threw an additional 5000 TP on the table.

“Call.”

I placed down 5000 TP as well.

“*Hmm.*”

Medea rested her chin on one hand while keeping a poker face.

We played without any complicated rules like the high-low rule. Just the traditional Texas hold'em where the player with more guts and better luck won.

Surprisingly, we started evenly matched. I didn't receive anything better than two pairs and I often had the worse hand. I panicked a little thinking the administrators might be scheming against me.

However, the economies of scale and the law of large numbers finally

played their part. Over time, I gained the upper hand as the rounds progressed.

“...”

My opponents included Simad (the 7th floor administrator), Cadmus (the 5th floor administrator), and Medea (the 3rd floor administrator). Half of their money on the table now became mine with only Medea left.

“How much did you win from me?” Medea casually asked. I won quite the sum after 2 hours, at least 100,000. Medea had abandoned her formalities and addressed me casually now.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe 130,000-140,000?”

“...”

Medea silently bit her lip. Then she threw a golden bill worth 10000 TP on the table.

“Will you keep going?” I smiled at her.

“Yes, of course.”

I had no idea what cards she had. I didn’t even know the proper amount to bet and generally had no clue how poker worked. Still, I could only lose if she cheated. However, the cards we used had been made with great magic. Even I couldn’t see through them with my gift. Medea couldn’t possibly forge cards like these. Well, perhaps she could, but the magic power required to do so would surely be noticeable.

“Really? You must have a nice hand.”

“...”

I silently placed 10000 TP forward. The money on the table grew to 148000 TP. Even Medea couldn’t casually glance over that amount, but she still added another 30000 TP.

“You calling?”

I finally started feeling a bit anxious... or not. I pretended to think long and hard while scratching the tabletop with my fingernails. Then I sighed and took out all the TP in my inventory.

“I only have 23000 TP left.”

I took off the robe that Medea had been eyeing. “Will this work?”

A small smile spread across her face before she quickly hid it and nodded. “Yeah, sure. That’s okay.”

We would reveal our hands now. I felt a little nervous, but I shouldn’t lose. The best she could have was a four-of-a-kind.

“Please, you go first.”

“*Pft.* Sure.”

Medea opened her hand with a smile. Four aces, as expected.

“...!”

I widened my eyes and my gaze shivered at her cards. I wasn’t acting.
To think all this TP belongs to me now...

“Well then, I’ll take them now.”

Medea’s lips curved into a smile. She placed both arms on the table and wrapped them around the 200000 TP. Then she began raking in the money and robe when... *Squeeze!* I grabbed her.

“What? Are you crazy?”

“Ah, a bummer.” I spoke in a trembling voice to the frowning Medea.

“Oh, I, I won.”

I showed her my hand and Medea's body instantly stiffened. Her sparkling eyes lost their vitality. She became a frozen statue as her elegant gestures disappeared.

"Oh! A straight flush? Wow, this is, wow!" Simad watched from the sidelines in amazement.

"I've played poker for 100 years and I've only seen this hand 1001 times. *Uhahaha*, congrats!"

"I'm sorry."

I pushed Medea's arms off the table. She moved without any resistance and leaned against her chair. She looked as if her soul had left, but only had herself to blame. No one could've cheated. Medea knew that better than anyone else. We played fair and square, but unfortunately, she went against me.

"Good game."

I placed the 200000 TP in my inventory. Medea vacantly watched as the money disappeared into thin air.

"N-no way..."

Gambling would lead to the path of ruin... for most people, but not me.

[363,324 TP]

I robbed them big time considering that I started with 25000 TP. Two-thirds of the money probably came from Medea.

"A straight flush over quads... W-What's going on? Just what is..."

Medea buried her face in her hands and hadn't yet recovered from the shock. I found it so pitiful I placed the robe back on the table.

"You can have this robe."

Take it as the winner's tip. I didn't bother saying the last part out loud. After all, nothing good would come from provoking an administrator.

* * *

I left the gambling house and went to a corner that read *[Upgrade Center]*. Time to splurge on enhancements now that I had the money.

— Welcome to the Advanced Neurotech Chip Upgrade Center.

A robot that looked similar to APG, but with different clothing welcomed me.

“Hi. I'm here to make enhancements.”

— Please select what you would like from this list.

The robot projected a catalog in the air.

[1. Increase Strength by 1 point: 15,000 TP] [2. Increase Speed by 1 point: 15,000 TP] [3. Increase Stamina by 1 point: 15,000 TP] [4. Increase Perception by 1 point: 15,000 TP] [5. Increase Vitality by 1 point: 15,000 TP] [6. Increase Unique Function of Extra7's Personal Chip, Battle Sense: 30,000 TP] [7. Add Function, Connection & Synchronization: 120,000 TP] [8...]...

— You may repeat enhancements as many times as you'd like, but the price will double with every purchase.

“Yeah, I know. For now, I would like 1 through 6.”

I could do everything, but I didn't recognize one on the list.

“What does number 7 do?”

— I have detected something other than your personal chip around your body. You may connect and synchronize it to your personal chip for easier use.

“My body... Ah, you mean aether?”

I gathered aether onto my palm and the robot scanned the transparent ball.

— Yes. This appears to be the material. It is quite special and marvelous. It only adheres to you and makes your body stronger.

“Uh, so that means I can connect my personal chip to aether?”

— Yes. The price is high because of the complicated procedure. However, this aether will become much stronger after the initial sync.

Robots didn't lie. I couldn't imagine spending 120000 TP under normal circumstances, but I didn't have any reason to reject it now.
Thank you, Medea.

“Then I'll do everything up to number 7. You'll be performing the procedure, right?”

— Yes, that is correct.

“Before that, can you give me your hand?”

The surgeon robot stretched his arm towards me. I grabbed his wrist and murmured.

“Scan.”

Robots, despite their intelligence, were considered objects. The number 22 flashed on his wrist. With this, he should be able to perform the surgery better.

“Here, 225000 TP.”

I paid in cash as the robot opened the door towards the operating room.

— Please follow me.

“How long will it take?”

— An hour should be enough.

“That’s good. Can you make it so it doesn’t hurt?”

— That is impossible.

“...”

* * *

[3F, Prestige]

The English Royal Court’s hideout housed a total of 23 guild members. The hideout increased to level 4 and now featured an office for the vice leader. Rachel’s reputation as an elementalist grew day by day. The dignified vice leader currently browsed the public forum in their hideout.

[Anyone seen Black Lotus on the 5th floor?]

— *I did. Too bad I didn’t have a recorder :(*

— *How was it?*

— *I couldn’t see clearly. He shot some arrows and instantly killed the djinns, then everyone stopped moving. He was like, I’m here to finish the war!*

— *Why didn’t they move though...*

— *To evade any arrows that might come their way? Have you never fought before?*

[Seriously though isn’t this Lotus or whatever basically on the same level as Nine Stars in reality? It doesn’t make sense otherwise.]

— *Probably as strong as the Immortal, I’d say.*

— *But isn't Chae Joochul stronger than the Nine Stars?*

— *Here's my verdict as someone who's seen the battle. Chae Joochul wins in close combat and Lotus wins in long ranged combat.*

— *Is Chae Joochul or Lotus your friend? Who are you to judge them?*

[Has anyone been to Earth recently? Is there a bounty on Black Lotus?]

— *What bounty? He hasn't committed any crime yet. And even if he did, who the hell is going to kill him? lol They'd be dead long before they even see his face.*

— *lololol What can you do even if a bounty existed lolol*

— *Black Lotus is gonna come and find you after reading this lol*

“...”

Rachel just returned from a castle attack, but everyone only talked about Black Lotus. She pouted with pursed lips.

“Hmm.”

Rachel checked for anyone nearby before searching her name.

[Search ▷ Rachel, Elementalist] [How did the castle attack turn out this time? Heard there was an elementalist.] [Elementalists must be super effective in castle attacks for the top guilds to allow that lousy English Royal Court guild to keep participating.]

“...”

It only made her feel worse. *Don't talk bad about my guild after complimenting me.* She regretted it and pulled up the Guild Alliance group chat.

[Guild Alliance (25/25)]

This chat room only consisted of guild leaders and executives.

[There will be 2-3 days of rest before we capture the 5th castle. Everyone can return to Earth or do what they want in the tower.]

WeaponMaster: Essence of the Strait will leave behind 7 members and return to Earth.

Youngfly: Desolate Moon will leave behind 6 members.

They wanted everyone to take a break together. If some took a rest while others worked, then the ones on break would feel like being left behind. To prevent this, everyone would rest at the same time. Rachel agreed and felt like returning to England.

Ding—

She suddenly received a message from *[Extra7]*. He finally replied to her message from a couple of days ago.

“...36 hours.”

He replied after 36 hours. Rachel narrowed her eyes at the message.

Extra7: Oh, rest days? Yeah, I read about it on the public forum lol They even made an announcement. I plan on heading out then, too.

The Guild Alliance actively encouraged the rest days. They even asked individual rankers for cooperation.

Me: Where are you now, Hajin?

Rachel thought to herself as she sent the message, *Will he take 48 hours to reply this time?*

Extra7: Me? I'm on the 4th floor. Just grinding for something I need to make.

Surprisingly, he replied right away.

“...”

She awkwardly rubbed her neck and wrote back in a lighthearted tone.

Me: Aha =) Then come see me in England. There's a festival on Clancy Islet this time of the year (◡ > < ◡)

Extra7: Lol Okay. You said things were going well in England?

Me: Yes 🐼🐼. Please give me a call when you arrive. I'll send someone to pick you up.

A minute passed. Then 5 minutes... 10 minutes...

“...”

As expected, the replies stopped shortly afterward. She had already grown used to it. Something probably came up or maybe he ran into somebody. Rachel turned off the messenger and opened the auction house.

“...?”

Something immediately caught her eye.

[Lv.4 Black Suit (J - Green Order)]

Rachel didn't know, but its real name was actually, *[Lv.4 Black Messiah's Horrible Suit]*. Kim Hajin had used it for a while before placing it in the auction house as he switched to better gear.

“Ah...”

She couldn't help but exclaim the moment she saw the suit. The design looked beautiful and it had great effects as well. Rachel swallowed her saliva and slowly moved her finger towards *[Bid]*.

The third tutorial ended the next morning and the players arrived on the 2nd floor.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk hid by wearing a robe she bought in Tutorial Town and even applied stealth oil all over her body. She also had that skill from the black ticket, so surviving shouldn't be too difficult. It felt humiliating to hide like a cockroach, but she constantly reminded herself to take a step back for the sake of two steps in the future.

Everything went well in the beginning. She didn't stupidly display her magic power like last time. Strange men calling themselves newbie hunters attacked her, but she easily fought them off and even stole their TP. However, she suddenly felt a chill as she searched for an elevator in the jungle. A wind blew and she instinctively threw herself to the ground.

“Kuuk!”

Something shot forward and brushed her side. It only grazed her, but took away a lump of flesh. She stopped the blood with magic power and thought to herself, *He's here.*

Her body trembled and her heart rate went up.

Where is he?

She scouted the area by infusing magic power into her eyes, but found nothing. Streaks of light much stronger than before rained on her.

KWAAAANG!

Jin Sahyuk shrouded herself in magic power and rolled on the ground. The air pressure cut her hair and left a scar on her cheek.

“Fuck.”

She couldn't predict the attacks or pinpoint his location. The shooting from a distance felt thousands of times more threatening than a blade

in the open.

Jin Sahyuk ran with all her strength through the bushes and jumped over swamps as she trembled. Not out of excitement or exaltation. Not happiness, joy, or delight. She had never felt like this before. She didn't want to admit this feeling, but the streaks of light forced her to.

KWAAAANG!

The arrows caused explosions all around her. Jin Sahyuk managed to jump into an animal hole in the ground.

“Haa, haa.”

She covered the hole with a barrier and caught her breath. Then she checked her HP.

[Vitality: 33/100]

The situation had turned dire. She would die again at this rate. The anger and resentment brought tears to her eyes. Her lungs filled with blood and her nose reddened.

“That fucking bastard...”

Jin Sahyuk whispered in a shaky voice. Then a pillar of unknown magic power suddenly shot up from the ground and slowly took the form of a man. Jin Sahyuk recognized this familiar phenomenon.

“Bell!”

She called his name. He completely materialized and smiled, but Jin Sayhuk felt more furious than welcoming.

“You son of a bitch!”

“Don't get so upset. I came to help you, after all.”

First, Bell put up a dome-shaped barrier around the hole. *Sssss—*

“You asshole, if you hadn’t taken my ticket in the first place...”

“*Shh*. You’ll break the barrier if you cause a disturbance.”

KWANG! The next explosion shook the hole, but Bell’s barrier managed to block the arrows just once. However, that would be enough as a violet light filled the hole. Bell activated his skill, mass teleport.

“What the hell is this? You, you fucker.”

“Teleportation.”

“What?”

“Let’s go home. Even I can’t win against him right now.”

Bell said with a grin as Jin Sahyuk clenched her teeth. Bell was right. They needed to escape.

“I’m gonna kill you. I’m gonna kill you for real.”

“I know. I said it myself, right? You’ll have to do so someday.”

They shared a greeting and a curse before turning into violet magic power and flying away.

A man tilted his head from 3 km away on top of a tall zelkova tree.

“*Woah*.”

Kim Hajin stored his bow away. It didn’t matter if the target escaped. From the start, his goal had been to make sure she didn’t notice. She would undoubtedly die from the arrow that grazed her.

“Return.”

He collected the dark ore arrows with a murmur. They took about 3 seconds to fly back. He had shot them from an incredible range. Jin

Sahyuk only survived the initial shot because of the distance between them.

“ ... ”

He failed to kill his target, but looked at the tip of an arrow without regret. It had a small amount of a dark, sticky liquid.

[Lv.4 Liquified Banshee's Curse Crystal]

Kim Hajin made this solution from crystals he collected on the 4th floor by being deliberately cursed by 13 banshees. Then he extracted the curse from his body and applied it to his arrows. By now, the curse should've seeped into every part of Jin Sahyuk.

“I wonder how long she'll last.”

He would never show mercy or he would be the dead one. Kim Hajin stared at where Jin Sahyuk had disappeared and tore up the entrance ticket to the 8th floor.

Chapter 196

A Not-so Restful Rest Day (1)

[You are the first player to enter the 8th floor!] [Welcome to 8-1F, Field of Trials.] [You have gained the first entrance rewards.] Your bones have become sturdier. Your muscles have become thicker. Your spirit power capacity has increased.

[The news of your advancement will be announced to all players in 12-36 hours.] [You have reached the tower's middle stage.] [You may advance to 8-2F when you reach the end of the Field of Trials.] [Be careful! The end of the Field of Trials contains those who despise outsiders. They will attempt to hinder your advancement and will only acknowledge you when you reach the end through every obstacle.]

I arrived at the 8th floor, or more precisely, floor 8-1. Strictly speaking, I had climbed about 40% of the tower now. However, it could also be considered 60-70% since one would climb much faster after the 9th floor. In the original story, the 9th-14th floors ended in about 7 chapters. About half of those chapters had to do with the 9th floor's calamities.

“Huu...”

I took a deep breath and opened my eyes to the beautiful scenery. A vast grass field, a clear blue sky, and sunlight streaming down through the clouds. Then I examined aether fused with my body.

[Aether Enhanced with Neurotech Chip – Awakened, Fused] [Mystic – Formless] [Evolving] A corporeal, but formless weapon. Will adhere to its master or their weapon, reinforcing their strength. A mystical elemental's power has partially awakened its potential.

— Master Selection: Will not adhere to another being after it gains a master. — Physical Body Reinforcement: Will increase its owner's variable stats by 0.7 points. — Weapon Reinforcement: Will adhere to its master's

weapon and strengthen the weapon's attack power. Aether itself can also form a weapon. (Current weapon rank – high rank) — Detail Materialization: Aether can manifest color and texture (cannot be too complex). — Evolving Weapon: All of the above functions will evolve along with the owner. Other functions may develop depending on aether's state of awakening.

▷*Mysteries of Science: Aether has become connected to your veins and internal organs after fusing with the neurotech chip. — Internal Strengthening: Will increase physical stats by 1.4 points. — Battle Sense: Aether can support you in battle. — Mechanical Movement: You may concentrate kinetic energy to parts of your body.*

I experienced aether's new benefits as I tracked Jin Sahyuk.

“It feels amazing.”

The new aether completely changed my body. I felt it when I sniped Jin Sahyuk. Humans couldn't possibly shoot from 3 kilometers away. The same applied to superhumans in this world. That's why archers used magic arrows with almost no air resistance.

However, I could hit such a target with a physical arrow. This couldn't be explained with just a gift. Seeing the target was one thing, but one's bowstring also had to be strong enough. The strength needed to pull the arrow also drastically increased. Such a shot would be impossible without aether.

My body moved like a machine after it fused with the neurotech chip. I easily surpassed my previous power with the new mechanical movement skill and could feel an invisible force helping me move.

“By the way, can I take this with me when I return to Earth?” I asked the system.

[Yes. A few special items acquired from the tower may be brought to the outside world.] [TIP! The same applies to the mysterious pouch in your inventory.]

“Thanks. That's good to know.”

My strength greatly increased with this. *Let's worry about the outside world later and focus on clearing the 8th floor.* I surveyed my surroundings and muttered.

“Summon.”

A black clump of light descended from the sky and transformed into a black horse.

— *Prrr.*

Sannuri snorted unhappily and seemed drenched in warm water.

“Were you taking a bath?”

— *Prr.*

She narrowed her eyes and nodded.

“Sorry, but I need you right now.”

I took out the special armor I made for her from dark ores. Each piece easily reached Lv.5. *Click, click.* Chest, back, head... Soon, the armor covered most of her body. I also fed her a body strengthening medicine.

“All done. How is it?”

— *Prrr, prrr.*

Her eyes smiled at me.

“Nuri, this field stretches for about 200 kilometers.”

We just had to travel to the end of this field. Of course, it wouldn't be easy. The world looked beautiful at the starting line, but the earth would turn black, the sky would turn red, and powerful magic blasts would rain on us as we proceeded forward. However, I believed in Sannuri.

“You think you can do it?”

— *Prrrrr.*

As expected, Sannuri confidently replied. I had to do one last thing and took out the *[Special Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.4 Algorithm]* from my inventory.

“Use.”

I learned it without hesitation. With this skill, aether would reach a new level of power.

[You have acquired Lv.4 Algorithm.]

[Lv.4 Algorithm] [Your equipment will become stronger and more precise.] [You may now set or change your body’s physical response algorithm.]

“Algorithm set, aether, automatic defense.”

[Aether has connected to your body.] [Aether will now automatically defend against hostile attacks.]

“Algorithm set, aether, skill delegation, *[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]*.”

[Aether has been delegated a skill.]

Aether should protect me from any attacks now. I looked forward to testing its power and jumped on Sannuri.

“Nuri, run to the end of this world!”

— *Prrrr!*

She responded enthusiastically and I didn’t worry at all as I pulled on her reins.

— *Hiiing!*

Sannuri shot forward like the wind as the scenery changed and arrows rained on us. However, she masterfully zigzagged and aether blocked any attacks that she couldn't avoid.

“Hiyaa!”

She reacted to my spirited shout as magic cannon shells hurled towards us from the horizon. They wanted to blow up the ground to stop us.

Aether reacted first this time. It crystallized the magic cannon shells with *[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]* before they touched the ground. The explosives no longer posed a threat and Sannuri continued forward without any hindrance.

Meanwhile, I stared into the horizon at the ones firing arrows and magic.

“Wait a minute.” I suddenly felt weak and drowsy as the world spun.

Why is there an illusion circle there? My mind fell into chaos the moment I saw it.

“Urgh...”

I wouldn't have normally fallen for such a thing, but my thousand-mile eyes could see it clearer than anyone else. My body began to shut down. I had to quickly drink a potion, but I couldn't remember which one. My head turned blank as I leaned against Sannuri's back. Thankfully, aether's automatic defense continued and Sannuri remained unhurt. I could only trust them until I woke up...

* * *

[Lv.8 Chameleon Troupe's Hideout]

Players in Prestige thought this building belonged to a rich NPC. It looked the most beautiful besides Medea's palace. The Chameleon Troupe members talked about the rest day suggested by the main guilds.

“Are you also returning?” Boss asked Jain.

“Yep. *Ah*, take a look at this, Boss.” Jain grinned and took out a small box filled with shiny jewels.

“What are those?”

“Jewels I can take out of the tower.”

Players called such items effective goods. They could be sold for high prices and most were either ores or gemstones. Jain bought the gemstones from the auction house and turned them into jewels.

“What are they good for?”

“I’m going to keep a few for viewing and turn the rest into necklaces and other accessories.”

“Ask Hajin to do that for you.”

Hajin’s craftsmanship surpassed most artisans.

“*Ah*, good idea.”

“Where’s Gyeong and Jin Yohan?”

“Cheok Jungyeong is training his special skill right now. I think it was called Special March? Jin Yohan’s been having fun training a basic skill too, so I don’t think either plan on leaving.”

Boss nodded and briefly pondered before looking at her messenger.

Extra7: Boss, don’t skimp out and make sure to buy the 5000 TP chip on the 7th floor. You can visit the bank there and tell them my name. I left a currency called cash for you, so you can immediately buy an 8th floor ticket.

Tap, tap. Spartan’s eyes suddenly shot open as Boss typed a response with her inexperienced fingers.

“PIEEEEK!”

“Kyaak!”

Jain jumped at Spartan’s sudden shriek and fell on her butt. However, Spartan didn’t stop.

“PIEEEK! PIIEEEK!”

“W-What’s going on? What’s wrong with him?”

“PIEEEEEEK!”

Jain blocked her ears and tried to drown out the sound as Boss calmly examined him. *PIEEEK— PIIEEEK—* Spartan shrieked and pulled on her clothes. He wanted to take her somewhere.

“What’s...”

A bad feeling suddenly struck her. She quickly opened her friend list and checked Extra7’s location.

[Current location – ???F]

The question marks meant he was at least on the 7th floor. Spartan must be going crazy because he lost connection with his master.

“Don’t tell me...”

The small ripple in Boss’ heart quickly grew bigger.

“Jain, wait for me here.”

“What? Why? What happened?”

Boss didn’t reply. She hadn’t looked so serious in 3 years as she tore up the ticket to the 7th floor.

[6F, Splendor]

Woong. Magic power undulated like falling cherry blossom petals. A longsword transformed into several blades and stabbed a black bear. Neck, stomach, arm, leg... every body part that touched the longsword immediately froze. The bear's injury would've been critical for a human.

KUOOO!

However, the [Lv.6 Gem Black Bear] continued to move and brandished its claw against the opponent. *Clang!* The longsword clashed with its claw and magic power exploded on impact. *KWANG!* The explosion erupted in front of the black bear's face and ended the fight.

"Hua."

Chae Nayun wiped her sweat with a sigh as the mountain-sized bear fell next to her. She had chased that monster for 2 days before finally killing it. Her growth speed had undoubtedly increased inside the tower.

Chae Nayun turned away without much thought when a system window popped up.

[Please pick up the items?]

"Hm?"

She turned back after hearing the system message. Indeed, an item list appeared above the bear's corpse.

"Oh right, thanks."

She thanked the system and placed the items inside her inventory.

[Lv.5 Invitation Letter to the Love Room] Summoning: You may summon a chosen player to your location. Note: You cannot be on a battlefield when using this item.

[Lv.3 Infinitely Multiplying Origami Letter] Lv.3 Delivery of Feelings: You may send a letter to a player whenever you wish.

[Lv.6 Black Bear's Gall Bladder Gem] Lv.5 Medicine: Will increase your stats upon consumption.

Consumable items that randomly dropped from monsters like the *[Heart-Piercing Magnifying Glass]* and *[Card of Fate]* often had amazing effects.

“Are these any good?”

The items this time didn't seem all that useful to her. She didn't want to summon anyone or send any letters.

“Guess I'll sell everything other than the gall bladder...”

A flash of insight struck her as she prepared to leave. She recalled why she had entered the Tower of Wish.

“...”

Chae Nayun looked at the *[Invitation Letter to the Love Room]*.

You may summon a chosen player to your location.

She thought of only one person and clenched her teeth after staring at the item with trembling eyes.

“I don't even know his nickname.”

Chae Nayun blamed her stupidity and walked back to her companions. She left the Dark King Mountain Range and headed towards the Hot Spring of Peace.

Soon, she discovered Yi Jiyeon and Kim Suho busily chatting. She almost called out when she overheard their conversation and quickly hid.

— Really?

Kim Suho looked surprised as Yi Jiyeon made a mischievous face.

— Yeah, really.

— Wow, *haha*.

Kim Suho laughed in astonishment.

What are they talking about? Chae Nayun wondered. However, the words that followed made her speechless.

— Hajin actually came to see Chae Nayun?

— *Ah*, quiet! Keep your voice down. It's still a secret.

* * *

I opened my eyes to an unfamiliar ceiling. *Why was there a ceiling on floor 8-1?*

“...?”

And why was I lying on such a comfortable surface? A blanket even covered me in bed.

Where am I? I couldn't have died since the system didn't alert me.

“You're awake?”

A low, scary voice rang out. I glanced at a muscular man standing by the door.

“Who are you?”

“If it were up to me, I would’ve let an outsider like you die, but...”

The man mumbled something that had nothing to do with my question. This guy... acted like a true NPC.

“Consider yourself lucky. The Ironblood Duchess wished to keep you alive.”

“Ironblood Duchess?” I asked with genuine curiosity. *Who the hell was that?*

“Right.”

“*Er*, who’s... or rather, where am I?”

“This is the Crevon Frontier.”

“...?”

I fell into greater confusion. Crevon was the second residential area, a civilized world with magic and science. Furthermore, I needed to protect the World’s End Bridge located at the eastern end of this residential area.

“How’s your body?”

The NPC suddenly asked. I checked his information before replying.

[Lv.8 Royal Guard]

“Ah, yes. I’m fine.”

“Then get up. The Ironblood Duchess wishes to see you.”

“...Yes, sir.”

I got up without much thought. I should find out about this Ironblood Duchess and how I arrived here.

“Oh right.”

I suddenly recalled Bucephalus as we came out into the hallway. I most likely survived because of her.

“Where’s my horse?”

“In the stables.”

“Is she getting along?”

“No, she’s quite the violent one and kicked out all the other horses. She’s galloping around the front lawn right now.”

“*Cough*, sorry.”

I wouldn’t have believed him if he said she got along with common horses. Only a horse on a similar level like Red Hare could meet her eyes. I continued following the NPC.

However, we kept walking for several minutes and opened door after door. *Was this a maze or some sort of a prison?* We finally arrived at a giant door.

“It is my honor!”

The NPC greeted the two knights guarding the door.

[Lv.12 Moonlight Knight]

The two knights in full armor lightly nodded.

“You may leave.”

“Yes!”

The NPC respectfully left as the knights grabbed the doorknob.

“The Ironblood Duchess wishes to...”

— Geez, just let him in already.

An annoyed voice rang out from the other side before the knights could finish. They awkwardly coughed and opened the door.

“You may enter.”

I walked through to a rather informal and empty reception room despite the flamboyant decorations on my way here. A person sat at the head of a long table in the center.

“*Hiya.*”

My mind turned blank when she spoke.

“...*Eh?*”

I couldn’t think of anything as though my brain had malfunctioned.

“Where’s your reply?”

“*Eh?*”

Slightly brown skin, an athletic figure, and a beautiful foreign look. The woman in front of me looked unfamiliar, yet I knew her all too well.

“*Heh, I’m... hehe, the Ironblood... hehe, Ironblood Duchess.*”

I stood dumbstruck as she introduced herself as the Ironblood Duchess. *How was she here? She shouldn’t be here!* My head spun with countless questions.

“Don’t tell me you don’t remember me?”

I didn't reply. I couldn't understand what was happening.

"We went to school together."

A single question filled my head. *How was she here?*

Chapter 197

A Not-so Restful Rest Day (2)

[8-3F Crevon Mainland, Ironblood Duchess' Mansion]

“Follow me.”

The Ironblood Duchess led me to her office without any explanations. I absentmindedly followed and tried to piece it together in my head, but failed. I peeked at my smartwatch, but no alerts popped up. Recently, it stopped warning me about such changes because they occurred too frequently now.

“*Hehe*, your face looks funny. Were you that surprised?”

The Ironblood Duchess offered me a seat in her office and smiled.

“S-Stop joking around. Seriously, tell me how you’re here.”

“Should I explain that first?”

“Yes, please.”

She finally explained how and why she arrived here. I only became more dumbfounded, but it didn’t feel impossible. Still, I couldn’t help but ask.

“What? An invitation?”

The Ironblood Duchess casually nodded.

“Yeah. You came in with an entrance ticket, right?”

“...”

I stared at her calm expression. The villain I created and converted to good, Tomer. Once again, she appeared in the main story after a turn of events. *Did the co-author want to give a supporting cast an important role?*

“What exactly is an invitation?”

“An invitation is an invitation. It invited me to the tower.”

According to Tomer, she joined a group of mercenaries about 4 years ago after dropping out of Cube. She planned to transfer and become a hero after gaining some experience. However, the mercenaries discovered an underground dungeon that winter. They decided to illegally conquer the unregistered dungeon to avoid taxes. Tomer naturally participated as their best soldier.

They successfully conquered it, but she met an unfortunate end. The mercenaries told her to take a break and left her inside. Then they ran away and sealed the entrance. She woke up from her nap and realized they betrayed her. She discovered the invitation after desperately searching for an exit.

“What did it look like? What did it say?”

Tomer shook her head.

“Just something like, *You are invited to the land of fantasy*. I assumed anywhere would be better than that damp dungeon, so I tore the ticket right away.”

“Did anyone else receive an invitation?”

“Probably a dozen or so?”

“A dozen?”

I panicked. That meant at least a dozen people existed outside the setting.

“Yeah, but no one is as important as me. At least not on the 8th floor.”

“...” I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Does that mean you started on the 8th floor?”

“That’s right.”

Tomer grinned mischievously. Her appearance had changed a lot since I last saw her. She obviously lived a good life after overcoming her trauma. She used to have a sharp look, but seemed softer now.

“Also, what’s up with the Ironblood Duchess title?”

“That’s my nickname, I guess. I trained hard as soon as I arrived. Unlike you guys, I have something called a level system. I can grow stronger by leveling up, so I trained a bit.”

Tomer cheerfully continued, “Monsters come pouring in every month and I made a name for myself while fighting them. I’m already level 35.”

“35?”

“Yeah and I’m also super rich. I even received a title and that’s how I’m posing as a noble here. What do you think? Cool, right?”

She grew nearly as strong as the minotaur, one of the level 40 calamities on the 9th floor.

“You can take it easy. I’ll pay you back 100 times, no 1000 times what I owe you.”

Tomer smacked her chest. That’s right, she owed me at least a couple hundred million. I’d been making so much money that I forgot.

“So, I skipped floor 8-2 thanks to you?”

“Yep. Oh, but it’s fine if you want to go back and train there.”

A player could climb to floor 8-2, Crevon’s Temporary Fortress, after

reaching the end of the Field of Trials. Players could earn performance points from quests in the fortress to reach floor 8-3.

“No, I don’t need to.”

Only those with potential could grow stronger through fighting. I couldn’t use normal means since my innate talents already reached their limits.

“Why, because you’re already at the top?”

“...?”

Tomer grinned as if she knew something.

“I’m pretty close with the administrators. I’m like their right arm, so I know a secret or two.”

“Really?”

“Yep. Who would’ve thought you took all that money from Medea?”

I silently stood up and stared at the window behind Tomer’s seat.

I could see a full view of Crevon. Shops neatly lined up beside sidewalks. They looked bigger than houses, but smaller than buildings. Nothing like modern ones or Middle Age ones either. A unique world populated by thousands of people.

“Are we on the west side?”

“Yeah. Northwest, to be exact.”

Crevon had 3 districts with a river in the middle. First, the North and the South. Both residential areas equaled the size of Gyeonggido. Then the East, a narrow plot of land between the North and South. They also called it the World’s End, a place where NPCs didn’t dare to go. The World’s End Bridge lay at the very end and acted as Crevon’s final border.

“Here, have this first.”

Tomer handed me something as I looked over Crevon.

[VIP Identification] You are now a guest of the Lv.15 Duchess' Mansion].

On the surface, Tomer's mansion appeared higher leveled than Medea's palace. However, the architecture of Medea's palace easily surpassed even a level 30 palace. Its low level only resulted from its geographic location, Prestige.

Tomer continued, “Stay here for the time being. You have other companions, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I'll look after them, too.”

“Oh.”

I smiled. Most players struggled in Crevon due to inflation. The cheapest product at the Upgrade Center on the 7th floor cost 15,000 TP. The level of civilization here resembled the 21st century, so the value of TP decreased even more. Tomer's words couldn't be more dependable.

“Trust me. I'll show you loads of fun events later.”

Crevon hosted several huge events where players could earn TP to make up for this. The Colosseum, the Virtual Reality Game Tournament, the Monster Hunt, and the Dance Competition to name a few. However, players had to dismantle monsters and negotiate prices on their own without any common quests here. Agencies didn't exist like on Earth.

“How's the weather right now? Is it cold?” I looked down at the street with patches of snow.

“Yeah. It's probably around -23°C right now. This place has 4 seasons just like Earth, but it tends to be more extreme.”

“Yeah? And how much are the buildings here?”

The system informed me this time.

[Crevon does not offer the Hideout System due to its dense population and limited residential areas.]

“You can’t buy buildings here. It’s overcrowded, so we decided not to sell any to outsiders.”

“...?”

Once again, this had changed from the original story.

“Really?”

“Yeah. The administrators’ subordinates proposed a legislation one day after receiving a revelation about outsiders.”

The revelation occurred in the original novel as well, but not the legislation. I sighed. The administrators on this floor should still be Agamemnon and Moses.

“By the way, how did you know I was here?”

“You were the first player to reach the 8th floor. It’s been a long time since I saw anyone from Earth, so I went to take a look. I hardly recognized you since your face changed so much. Did you get plastic surgery or something?”

“No. I just became more handsome.”

Tomer frowned.

“I’m kidding. Of course, I didn’t get any surgery. I just lost my baby fat as I grew older.”

“I don’t think that’s it. Anyway, do you know how to go up?”

“Yeah.” I nodded without hesitation.

“Oh, really? How did you know?”

“I have a way.”

I fixed my gaze on Tomer. “I want to ask you one more favor. Is that okay?”

She grinned before I even told her. “It doesn’t have to be just one. Thanks to you, my dad... *Cough*. Whatever, continue. I’ll do anything my dad’s friend asks me to do.”

I felt slightly guilty at her touching words and nodded with a wry smile.

“Thanks. The thing is...”

I explained my plans to Tomer. She thought for a moment before nodding.

“That’s hardly a favor.”

Nice. Blocking that bridge should be much easier now.

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

We shook hands to celebrate our reunion. Suddenly, a stern voice came from the crystal ball in the office.

— Your Grace, a player is causing a commotion on floor 8-1.

* * *

A woman destroyed all their attacks with a terrifying wave of magic power and reached the end of the field. She only took 15 minutes.

A bulwark, an army of soldiers, and a general stood at the end of the field. They respectfully stepped aside and showed her the stairway to floor 8-2. It stretched far into the sky, but she didn't climb the stairs. Instead, she turned to the general.

"Answer my question."

The magic power she emitted left marks on the ground.

"Outsiders are not allowed to ask questions."

Crevon's general stepped up without being intimidated. He looked even more ready to fight than her. Ssssss... Magic power flowed from his hand and engulfed his blade. This sword reinforcement aura couldn't be compared to the sword qi that every swordsman dreamed of.

"I will ask again."

The woman spoke up. Her stern voice echoed across the field.

"Then I shall say it once more. Outsiders are not allowed to ask any questions."

The general maintained an upright stance like a mountain that didn't bend or waiver.

"Did a man pass by here or was he killed without making it through? Answer."

Of course, she knew death in the tower wasn't permanent. Still, she felt a duty to avenge her subordinates.

"Questions are not allowed. Take the stairway or return to the field. Those are your only options."

Their conversation didn't last long. Stones and trees naturally couldn't communicate. A question left unanswered could only be addressed with violence. The woman emitted black magic power as her eyes turned red. The general's eyes also glowed with determination. They

almost went at each other when a whisper interrupted.

“Boss.”

She recognized the voice right away and turned towards it.

“Stop, Sir Kipha.”

The general also stopped after hearing the voice that spoke next. The tension between them instantly disappeared.

* * *

I went to the Crevon Mainland on floor 8-3 floor with Boss. We talked while walking along the unfamiliar streets.

“Hoo... oho... ooh...”

Boss acted like a child next to me. Everything piqued her curiosity here. A horde of airships filled the sky and beautiful magic occasionally decorated the sidewalk. Strangely, they still used horses for transportation.

“Hey Boss, why did you try to fight Kipha?”

“Mm? Ah. I would’ve won.”

“Geez.”

I felt touched that she came all the way here to save me, but I should discourage that confidence. Kipha was a legendary flowering knight from history. Boss shouldn’t be sure of victory until she restored at least 70% of her abilities.

“Are you doubting me?” Boss narrowed her eyes at me.

“Of course, you would win in a regular one-on-one match, but you haven’t learned any skills yet.”

Boss must be the only player without any skills at this point.

“Learn what I recommend to you later. Don’t be so picky. Actually, find the skills you want to learn by yourself.”

“That’s not how you should talk to your bo—“

I casually interrupted her. “By the way, how did you come here?”

“You... *Haa.*”

Boss wanted to say something, but simply sighed. I didn’t know why, but she frequently gave in to me these days.

“Spartan helped me.”

“Ah, did you worry about me?” I smiled at Spartan on Boss’ shoulder.

“T-That’s not it.” Boss waved her hand in a fluster and suddenly looked at the sky.

“L-Look. I’ve never seen an airship like that in my entire life.”

“Ah, really?”

BOOONG. We watched the magical airships that displayed video screens. Then a system alert popped up.

[Lv.4 Black Suit (J-Green Order) has been successfully auctioned.]

I wanted to check who bought it when Boss spoke.

“This floor seems much better than the 3rd floor.”

“Well, on the surface, yes.”

The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. Most players would have a harder time here than in Prestige.

In fact, Prestige wasn't that bad nowadays. It actively developed towards its full potential. Many ordinary people currently lived there thanks to the work I put in. These artisans and manufacturers couldn't obtain performance points because they couldn't hunt monsters.

They would've been forced to scrape up 1000 TP to leave the tower, but now they had hope. Ordinary people also slowly obtained skill books and should be motivated enough to develop Prestige as news spread that they could return to Earth with their skills.

"Will you be okay?" Boss said worriedly.

"What are you talking about?"

"People might find out you're the seat of black if you continue to climb at this pace."

I smiled at her words. *Extra7 is Black Lotus*. It sounded reasonable since Extra7 achieved first place in the highest difficulty tutorial and Black Lotus climbed the tower the fastest. I changed my ID to a different one at the Game Center, but someone could still grow suspicious.

"Don't worry about it. Instead..."

"Mm?"

I placed a hat I made on Boss.

[Lv.4 Hat Made By Kim Hajin] Lv.4 Heat Preservation, Lv.4 Appearance

It looked like a beanie with a cotton ball on the tip like a Santa hat.

"It's a present since Christmas will be soon."

"..."

Boss suddenly stopped walking. She blankly blinked for a few seconds before tilting her head to look at herself in a shop window. She

definitely smiled, but only briefly. Then she clenched her teeth with complicated thoughts. I wondered if I had done something wrong.

“Thank you.”

She sounded like she had a lump in her throat.

“Boss. Did you do someth— *Hmm?*”

BEEP— I received a message.

“Hold on a second.”

Captain Britain: I'll be heading home now, Hajin.

It came from Rachel and I quickly replied.

Me: Me too. I'll see you on Earth.

Then I asked Boss.

“Should we head back to Earth now? Looks like today's the start of rest day.”

It should take at least a week for Tomer to create the system I asked for. Other players would reach floor 8-3 by then. That should be enough time to enjoy a short vacation.

“Okay.”

“Great, then let's... No wait, you stay here, Boss.”

I stopped her from buying a return ticket.

“What?”

Then I handed her the *[VIP Certificate]* as she frowned.

“Take this and go to Tom— I mean, the Duchess and decide which skills you want. She should have lots of skill books. You need to choose at least one before I get back. It’s your homework, okay?”

“What? Who in the world gives homework to their boss—“

“It’s all because you’re too difficult. Come, Spartan.”

I called Spartan, who had been sitting on Boss’ shoulder all this time. He reluctantly returned to me.

“I’ll be off then. I’ll check your homework when I get back, so don’t slack off.”

“...”

Boss became speechless and blankly stared at me.

“Let’s go, Spartan. To Earth.”

— *Pururu.*

Spartan used his authority, the Passage of Light. A circle shone down from the sky and surrounded us. Then a strange sensation enveloped my entire body.

Chapter 198

A Not-so Restful Rest Day (3)

Day and night couldn't be distinguished in Prestige, but the flow of time could still be felt even without a clock because of the moon-like mass in the sky.

This moon-like mass sprinkled fragments of light on Prestige during the daytime. However, these white particles only lasted half the day. Currently, the particles faintly shone beneath the western horizon, so that signified dawn.

“Haaa.”

Chae Nayun hadn't slept a wink since yesterday, so the dawn felt rather long. She lay in bed in Essence of the Strait's Hideout with a room full of other guild members. She kept thinking about what she had heard the day before in Splendor.

— Hajin actually came to see Chae Nayun?

— Ah, quiet! Keep your voice down. It's still a secret.

— When?

— A while ago when the banshee cursed her.

She clenched her teeth.

I shouldn't have trusted anyone.

The ashes deep inside her heart lit up again, but Chae Nayun realized this wasn't a big deal for them.

— Ah, no surprises there. Hajin isn't the type to stay still after hearing

about that. So? What happened?

— Well, I shouldn't say anymore. Anyways, that's why I'm wondering... is it true they used to date?

Yi Jiyeon wanted to lure something out of Kim Suho.

— I don't know exactly. You should ask them directly.

— Come on. Then what was the point of me telling you all that?

Chae Nayun didn't have the guts to call Yi Jiyeon out. She remained hidden in the shadows and listened in on them. Plus, she felt it would be strange to get angry while eavesdropping.

Chae Nayun joined them a while later and pretended not to have heard anything. She tried to act normal and returned to their hideout after a day of training. Then she handed her loot to Kim Youngjin. Her contract stated that she had to yield everything in the tower to them. Yoo Yeonha said Chae Nayun didn't need to, but she did so anyways.

Contrary to Chae Nayun's expectations, Kim Youngjin took a liking to the *[Lv.3 Infinitely Multiplying Origami Letter]*. He praised her in front of the other guild members now that they could communicate when the messenger didn't work.

It seemed like a good item when he put it that way. She blamed herself for not coming up with such a use. As a reward, he let her keep the remaining items.

Chae Nayun couldn't fall asleep for 6 hours. According to Yi Jiyeon, Kim Hajin had visited her when she fell unconscious and hovered between life and death.

She tried not to think about it because the image of him looking down at her in pity filled her with disgust and anger. Instead, she turned her train of thought to Extra7, an old acquaintance since her Cube days and the one who gave her the antidote. She found something suspicious about Yi Jiyeon's words. Then Yi Jiyeon must've met Kim Hajin and Extra7 around the same time. Of course, Kim Hajin and Extra7 should be separate individuals, but...

Wait.

Chae Nayun's eyes turned cold.

Maybe that's not necessarily the case.

Her gut feeling told her they had some sort of relationship. It didn't feel logical, but her sixth sense tingled.

— *Cough.*

A noise came from the next room. Kim Youngjin, the most diligent and punctual member, had already woken up. Chae Nayun, sick and tired of thinking, also got up.

Zzz...

Yi Jiyeon slept in the adjacent bed. Chae Nayun silently stood and stared at her drooling.

I couldn't sleep at all because of you. What is it that you know?

Chae Nayun coldly stared at Yi Jiyeon. Then her hand rushed towards Yi Jiyeon's cheek.

SLAP!

"ARGH!"

The sharp pain woke Yi Jiyeon up. Her consciousness still felt blurry, but her eyes filled with tears as she grabbed her cheek and looked at Chae Nayun.

"W-W-W-What..."

"A mosquito. A huge mosquito. You okay?"

Chae Nayun showed her hands. Indeed, she had crushed a mosquito to death.

“S-Still, i-it hurt a-a-a lot...”

“It hurt? Sorry.”

Chae Nayun hit her as weakly as possible, but Yi Jiyeon still whimpered. Tears almost flowed from her eyes.

“Alright, get up. Let’s go train.”

However, Chae Nayun grabbed her wrist and forcefully pulled her up.

“Wait, Nayun. I wanted to go home during the rest day. O-OWW—”

“You can’t. Why do you think I taught you how to reach the 6th floor? Today, we’ll train until death. Let’s grow stronger together. Kim Suho is waiting for us.”

“Wait, wait, it hurts! My wrist! Wrist! It’s gonna break! AAK!”

* * *

[It has been more than 100 days since you first entered the tower. You may now acquire one skill outside the tower semi-permanently.] [Special skill — Lv.4 Algorithm] [Be careful, for death will rob you of your skill.]

System messages appeared beneath my eyelids. I opened my eyes after reading them and found myself in the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout on Earth. Only Jain and I returned. The huge lobby contained goblins busily cleaning.

“Oh, so it’s true you can bring a skill outside. By the way, you have a mission, Hajin.”

“A mission?” I almost went to call Khalifa, but stopped and tilted my head.

“Yeah. Boss told me to give you one. I’m gonna go back to Jeronimo and fetch it, so get ready.”

Jain handed me a jewel box.

“And this.”

“What’s this?”

“Effective goods. They’re valuable jewels. Can you turn them into rings or necklaces? Something like that?”

I looked inside. These jewels would be quite valuable even with current technological advancements like blood diamonds and black opals. Only jewels like icelight stones and firesilver stones could be found inside the tower.

“When did you get these?”

“*Hehe*, I call myself the Phantom Thief for a reason. So, can you do it?”

“I can, but what about the cost?”

“*Hmm?*”

“I’m pretty expensive.”

Young Dwarf’s Dexterity combined with aether had become one with me. My hands had a machine’s precision and a human’s delicate touch that surpassed modern craftsmanship.

“...5, 5%?” Jain said with a trembling voice.

“There’s about 20 of them, so I’ll take 4.”

“*AH!*”

She grabbed my wrist with a cry.

“But you, you, you’re rich.”

“I can’t buy things like these with money. How about just 3, then?”

Effective goods could only be obtained through monsters and quests. Jain seemed to have stolen them here and there.

“Fine. Three.” Jain nodded reluctantly. “But you have to do a good job.”

“Don’t worry.”

I said goodbye to Jain and hurried home. However, no one welcomed me like usual. *It’s evening, so she’s probably with her friends from the next block.* I headed to Yun Seung-Ah’s house.

Tirring— The speaker turned on when I rang the doorbell.

— Who is it?

“It’s me.”

— Oh, Hajin?

— *Eh*, who? Hajin? Hajin!

As expected, Evandel’s loud voice came from behind the door. I smiled and waited for Yun Seung-Ah to open the door.

“Welcome.”

“Hajin!”

Evandel ran to me as the door opened. *Tatatata*. Her loud footsteps rang out and she hugged me right away. I picked her up as she clung to me like a cicada.

“Hajiiiiin!”

“Long time no see.”

I stepped inside with Evandel. Haeyeon's parents always seemed busy whenever I visited, but Yun Seung-Ah and another one of Evandel's friends kept them company.

"Good timing. We were just getting ready for dinner."

I glanced at the kitchen and smiled. Luckily, Yun Seung-Ah hadn't started cooking yet.

"Hajin, were you in the tower?" Evandel asked as she rubbed her cheeks against my arms.

"Yeah. You know about the tower now?"

"I learned about it on TV and YouTube."

"*Aha.*"

Two kids and Hayang approached as I held Evandel. If I recalled, the taller one was Haeyeon and the shorter one was Jiyeon.

"Hello."

"Hello."

"Hi."

I lightly patted their heads and placed Evandel down. Then I headed to the kitchen. Today's menu looked like tomahawk steak.

"Can you wait a bit? I'll start cooking—"

"I'll do it."

I picked up the knife with a smile and sent Yun Seung-Ah back.

Two hours later, Yun Seung-Ah called my cooking skills fantastic. The kids also seemed satisfied and sprawled around the sofa. However, Evandel widened her eyes at the TV as her friends fell half-asleep from

the meal. I also looked and saw the festival in England during Christmas.

“Evandel says she wants to visit England.”

“*Huh?* England?”

“Yeah. I took her with me when I went to Paris for work. It looks like she’s taken an interest in traveling abroad since then.”

Evandel kneeled in front of the TV and watched with sparkling eyes.

“*Hmm...*”

England. I guess she recognizes her home instinctively, but I’m not sure home is the right word. BEEP. I checked my smartwatch. Jain had sent a message from Jeronimo.

[Hajin. Your mission as Fenrir is in England this time. You like England, so there should be no problems, right?]

I smiled as I read it. *Perfect timing.*

“Well then, we’ll just have to go.”

* * *

Fenrir fired his gun for the first time in nearly half a year in mid-December. He practically carpet bombed England’s Merseyside county. The power of each bullet exceeded a cannonball, yet the wolf’s aim seemed precise as ever. He easily destroyed the sea monsters and their habitats. As usual, no civilian casualties or property loss occurred. Other experts in the field clicked their tongues at his meticulous skill. He neatly removed the monsters like a scalpel. Fenrir announced to the world that he had returned from the tower stronger than ever.

“Thank you for taking on the mission.”

Rachel called him as England’s princess and the English Royal Court

guild's representative.

“A subjugation mission had been planned, but they delayed it to minimize damage to the nearby city.”

Sea monsters could cause tsunamis when enraged and that would destroy homes. However, Fenrir didn't give them the chance with his precise shooting. It only took him 15 minutes to destroy their habitats. He even broke his old record and set a new one. Like Rachel, Kim Hajin had grown stronger from the Tower of Wish.

— That's what partners are for. You should be careful though. England isn't as safe as the tower.

“Don't worry. I learned a good skill.”

Rachel looked out of her limousine as she headed to the English Royal Court guild. *What a coincidence.* She spotted the person talking on the phone. He wore sunglasses, but she recognized his silhouette. She almost rolled down the window when she spotted someone else and froze. Kim Hajin held hands with a child with blonde hair neatly tied in a ponytail.

“...?”

The limousine passed and her face shocked Rachel. The girl smiled next to Kim Hajin and happily skipped with an ice cream in her other hand. She also wore a cute bunny hat. Rachel had undoubtedly seen her 4 years ago in what she called her future premonition. The limousine turned the corner and the two disappeared from view.

“W-Wait. Stop!” Rachel quickly shouted to the driver. *Kiiik.* The limousine skidded to a stop.

— *Huh?* Stop?

Kim Hajin's voice rang out from her watch as Rachel got off the car. She definitely just saw something strange and hurried back around the corner.

“...”

“Stop what? Rachel?”

— Stop what? Rachel?

Rachel found Kim Hajin in an alley. He still wore the sunglasses and she didn't have to check because his voice matched what came out of her smartwatch. Next to him wasn't a girl, but...

“*Arf arf!*”

A cute pomeranian. The puppy ran towards Rachel, her golden fur fluttering in the air. Kim Hajin turned around to follow her.

“Hey, where are you go... *Huh?* Rachel?”

“...”

Kim Hajin's eyes widened and Rachel nodded at him.

“I passed by in a car, so I came running.”

That's all Rachel could say.

“I see... It's nice to see you. What a coincidence.”

Kim Hajin reacted quite dull. He didn't seem too surprised as if he knew she would be here. Rachel suspiciously asked, “Excuse me, Hajin, but weren't you with someone just now?”

“With who?”

“A child. A girl about this tall.”

“A child?” Kim Hajin tilted his head.

“*Um...*”

Was it all in my head? Or did I mistake him for someone else?

Poke, poke. The puppy pressed against Rachel's legs amidst her confusion.

"..."

"Don't just watch. You can hold her."

"Huh? Oh... Okay."

Grr, grr. The cute puppy snuggled in her arms and its smile resembled a human. Rachel patted its head and continued.

"I thought you left right after the mission."

"I stayed to watch the festival."

People began to gather around the alley. Rachel's popularity couldn't be matched in England, so she couldn't hang around the streets.

"I should go now." Rachel tried to put the puppy down.

Arf, arf.

However, it didn't want to let go of her. Kim Hajin had to separate them himself. He patted the whimpering puppy after taking it away.

"Your puppy... acts a lot like a human."

"Is that so?"

A limousine approached the alley as Kim Hajin smiled.

"You should get going. It'll be harder if more people gather."

"..."

“I’ll see you later.”

Rachel nodded as the alley grew more crowded. She smiled at the puppy in Kim Hajin’s arms and left.

“Princess! Oh, my princess...”

She smiled reluctantly at the cheering people and got in the limousine. Then she looked at Kim Hajin from the window.

— Say goodbye.

Kim Hajin grabbed the puppy’s hand and waved with it. It looked cute, but Rachel felt distraught. She couldn’t have imagined it, but nothing else could explain what she saw.

“Then, I’ll start the car.”

The limousine drove away as Rachel pondered.

* * *

[Tower of Wish]

At 3 p.m. today, a huge explosion erupted on the 5th floor’s northeast gateway no.5. The Guild Alliance controlled the gateway since countless casualties would occur if ordinary people tried to capture it. No one had challenged the Guild Alliance’s rule until now.

The gateway disappeared without a trace today. It crumbled into nothingness after the explosion. The Guild Alliance hurried to the scene to find the perpetrator.

“Um... We think... Black Lotus destroyed it.”

— What? Seriously?

However, their burden became lighter since they couldn’t possibly retaliate against the opposing party.

“Yes, no doubt about it. I’m looking at his symbol on the ground right now.”

— *Haa*. Withdraw then.

How could they stop a ranker from capturing the gateway when he possessed power equal to a single guild? The Guild Alliance members sighed and turned back.

“Yes sir. We’ll return.”

— Yeah.

They turned around and left.

“*Hm*. That’s done.”

Black Lotus hadn’t attacked, but his superior did. Boss impersonated her subordinate for his sake.

No one could imitate Fenrir because he used a gun. No one else could display such terrifying power with bullets. However, Black Lotus could be imitated with some effort. Boss decided to erase a suspicion that could become Kim Hajin’s fatal weakness.

The media should be covering Fenrir’s mission on Earth. Even if someone discovered Kim Hajin’s identity as Extra7, he would be Fenrir and not Black Lotus.

“...”

Boss waited until the Guild Alliance members reported the explosion as Black Lotus’ doing and returned to Crevon on the 8th floor. She felt tired after imitating those arrows, but still had to finish the homework from that cocky underling.

Boss entered the Ironblood Duchess’ study. The soldiers guarding the study stepped aside like docile puppies in front of her VIP ID. She picked out only the skill books, but the sheer amount still made it hard for her to choose. Boss even banged her fist against a bookshelf.

She finally managed to pick out 2 skill books after some great perseverance.

[Basic Skill Acquisition Book — Lv.0 Magic Power Circulation] [Basic Skill Acquisition Book — Lv.1 Magic Circuit Remodeling]

Both passive skills involved magic power. *These should be enough.* Boss turned around.

“...?”

Someone stood right in front of her.

“Hello.”

The woman had been behind her all this time without a presence. Some words sat above her head.

[Lv.??? Ironblood Duchess]

Chapter 199

Damned Long Story (1)

Rachel probably still suspected something. Evandel also became excited after seeing Rachel and threw a huge tantrum for the first time. Blood truly was thicker than water.

It took 2 days to appease Evandel. I did my best to lighten her mood with Clancy Islet's festival. Then I made her a beautiful bracelet with one of the jewels from Jain and promised her that I would eventually let her meet Rachel.

I wasn't lying. I had to reveal her to the world someday, but not yet. Once I had the power to protect her and she had the power to protect herself.

It would be wrong to waste her talent because I wanted to protect her. Evandel had a peerless talent for stronghold defense in the original story. That shouldn't have changed.

"You had fun today, right?"

"*Uun.*"

We finished touring England and returned to the underground training room I built for her. She created many spirit animals over the years and they currently flew around the room. Eagles, wolves, horses, hippos... a huge mystical army greeted us. Even at a glance, one could see over a thousand of them. Evandel commanded them with a single flick.

"Everyone, *clickety-clack.*"

She muttered strange noises.

“Squish, squoosh.”

Her spirits moved according to the different sounds.

“Chico, chico.”

She waved her arms like a conductor and commanded them to dance.

“Sparkly, sparkly!”

That one seemed to be an attack as they took an aggressive stance. Then they spread apart and charged forward at multiple angles.

“That’s enough. Perfect score! Well done.”

I praised Evandel and held her up as she smiled in my arms.

“I can command them even better with my magician hat and wand!”

“Oh, really?”

I made a mental note to upgrade her gear later and looked around the training room. However, I didn’t find any special spirits.

“Um, Evandel, where’s Fenrir?”

I couldn’t find Fenrir in the sea of monsters.

“Over there.”

She pointed to the corner as I followed her finger to a black wolf lying by the wall. Only he radiated an imposing aura.

“Little wolf.”

His eyes shot open and he quickly ran over with his tongue out. I left Fenrir with her since I knew the tower would treat him as equipment.

“He got smaller?”

“Un! Otherwise, he’s too big.”

“I see.”

I checked Fenrir’s stats.

[Ghost Wolf] [Servant] [High-intermediate rank] The first servant created by Evandel the witch. ▸Basic Stats [Strength 12.150] [Bite 12.850] [Stamina 8.635] [Speed 13.950] [Perception 13.950] [Vitality 8.850] [Magic Power 9.950]

Absurd didn’t even begin to describe him. He would crush me in a fight. I wouldn’t be surprised if he reached the real Fenrir’s level soon.

“Alright, Evandel. Can you play with your friends for a bit? I need to do something.”

“Okay!”

Evandel cheerfully nodded as I bent into a sitting posture. I didn’t have a chair, but aether automatically transformed into one.

I turned on my smartwatch and entered Violet Banquet.

[Welcome, Truth Agency’s administrator.] [You have 77 clients eagerly waiting to hear back.]

As expected, I received a huge backlog of requests and looked through the list. The ones that caught my attention came from Frost Sanctuary, Desolate Moon, and Essence of the Strait’s Yoo Yeonha.

I can tell Yoo Yeonha that I operate the Truth Agency, right?

I pondered as I checked her request.

[I hope you are doing well, Truth Agency. I am LadyU. I’ve contacted you once before. Today’s request is something purely to satisfy my curiosity. I

will not take it to heart even if you decline knowing how busy you must be. I hope you do not think I am bothering you with trifling questions...]

She sounded quite serious. It must be because of my clause, *[Being respectful and polite may quicken the response time]*.

As I read the main content of her request...

[Is Yun Seung-Ah from Creator's Sacred Grace in a romantic relationship with Jeronimo Mercenary's Kim Hajin?]

"Cough. W-What, is she crazy?"

I became so dumbfounded I choked on air. *What strange fantasy did she have now?* I quickly replied and made a mental note to look into it later.

[They are only neighbors.] [We will not require any payment for such a simple request.]

I went back to scrolling through the list.

"Eh?"

A certain name caught my attention.

[Hello, I am contacting you as the representative of Daehyun's chairman, Chae Joochul the Immortal...]

* * *

Aileen returned to Earth for the first time. She felt like she had regained her missing honor and authority from the tower. Requests for interviews flooded in as news of her return spread. After all, Aileen stood at the peak of her generation and entered the tower with the first wave of heroes.

She enjoyed interviews and participated in a press conference. She even made it a huge event on the Tower of Heroes' front lawn to

showcase her rewards. Aileen reminded herself to keep one hand on her waist at all times.

Indeed, she became the main character for the first half, at least.

“We’ve been receiving reports that Pandemonium’s infamous terrorist, Black Lotus, has also entered the tower.”

“This man known as Black Lotus...”

“If there is anything you know about his identity...”

“Sir Vast Expanse also commented about him. We would like to hear Miss Aileen’s comment as well!”

However, their attention quickly turned to another player. Feeling sour, Aileen responded half-heartedly and sent them away. The seasoned reporters couldn’t raise any objections in front of her.

“I’m not Black Lotus, so why are you asking me? That’s it for the interview. Please go back.”

Please go back. With just three words, the reporters all packed their belongings and returned to their cars.

“Unni?”

Only one person resisted her Spirit Speech after the reporters left like cockroaches. Yun Seung-Ah approached her.

“What.”

Aileen glanced at Yun Seung-Ah holding a plastic bag with tofu.

“Congrats on leaving the tower. Welcome back.”

“*Hmph*, it’s not like I went to jail or anything.” [1]

She took the tofu despite grumbling.

“Unni, are you out for good or are you returning soon?”

“I’m going back tomorrow.”

At first, Aileen wanted to make an excuse and leave the tower halfway, but she decided to climb until the end after witnessing the mysterious power of skills. The tower also grew increasingly interesting.

“You’re here because you have something to say, right? Where do you want to go? My house or my office?” Aileen asked while intending to show off her skill.

“*Mm*, well... I don’t care either way.”

“Okay, let’s go to my office.”

Aileen grabbed her hand as Yun Seung-Ah grew flustered at the unusual action.

“W-Why are you grabbing my hand?”

Aileen didn’t respond. The world flipped 180 degrees as a new scenery greeted them. They found themselves in the office.

“W-W-What?”

“*Huhu*, how is it? As I thought, my skill seems even stronger outside the tower.”

Aileen looked perfectly calm as Yun Seung-Ah panicked. She had used the skill, teleport. Unlike blink, it needed some time before activation, which made it trickier to use in battle. However, it could transport up to 2 people. Of course, it required more magic power, but that didn’t affect Aileen outside the tower.

“A chantless teleportation spell that doesn’t require a magic circle?”

“I was shocked when I first learned it too.”

“Amazing...” Yun Seung-Ah looked jealous.

“Why don’t you enter the tower too? It’ll be a great opportunity.”

“You know why. I’m busy with my guild.”

“Why are you sacrificing yourself for a guild? Don’t be stupid.”

Yun Seung-Ah smiled bitterly.

“Anyways, why are you here?” Aileen spoke as she sat. Their height difference had been bothering her for a while.

“Well, I’m here to bribe you.”

“Bribe?”

“I’m close with two kids inside the tower. Unni’s one of the strongest in the tower, right?”

“*Cough.*”

Aileen leaned against her chair.

“I *am* the strongest.”

“Right, exactly.”

Aileen’s lips trembled. Compliments always made her weak.

“Alright, that much shouldn’t be hard. One should be Kim Suho, but who’s the other one?”

Yun Seung-Ah hesitated before continuing.

“Fenrir, Kim Hajin. Do you know him?”

“Fenrir? I do, but I haven’t run into him.”

“Treat him well if you happen to meet him. Help him too if he’s having trouble.”

Yun Seung-Ah sounded serious, so Aileen confidently replied, “I got it. Trust me.”

Then Aileen busily went around after their meeting. She enjoyed the attention and threw several media events, lectures, and conferences while Yi Yongha quietly rested at home with his wife.

Aileen returned to the tower after spending the night on Earth. However, shocking news confronted her before she could even recall Yun Seung-Ah’s request.

*[A player has entered the 8th floor.] [An unknown player has cursed you!]
[A bounty has been placed on your head!] [Anyone who defeats you will
receive 5000 TP.]*

Three seconds. Aileen stood in a daze for 3 seconds. Then she rubbed her eyes, but still couldn’t comprehend the system messages.

“What bullshit is this?”

Aileen spat out a curse.

* * *

[Tower of Wish, 8-3F Crevon Mainland]

I returned to the tower after a 5 day vacation. I ended up spending an extra day outside, but the tower didn’t experience any dramatic changes. Only the news of me reaching the 8th floor filled the public forum.

[The player on the 8th floor must be Black Lotus, right?]

— Almost certainly.

— Nah, it might not be him! I heard Black Lotus and Fenrir fought each

other and the latter came out on top.

— *What? Fenrir?*

“What?”

A strange comment caught my attention as I light-heartedly looked through the public forum. The player’s ID read, *[JiSUPERYoon]*. She must’ve heard from Kim Suho.

“This girl...”

Was she in charge of spreading rumors? Well, it would be good if more people perceived Black Lotus and Fenrir as different people.

“You go, Yi Jiyoona!”

[JiSUPERYoon] posted another comment.

— *Yep lol Fenrir is using a gun inside the tower. He entered with the black ticket lol and seemed to have brought a gun with it. He’s practically a grand general inside the tower.*

“...”

I exited the public forum and stood in front of the *[Ironblood Duchess’ Mansion]*.

“You know me, right?”

“Of course, welcome back! Our honored guest, Kim Hajin.”

“Thank you.”

I entered the mansion’s lobby after passing by the knights at the entrance and walking through a beautiful garden. First, I tried to locate Boss and aether responded to my thoughts.

[Aether Algorithm – Vision Improvement]

My vision instantly expanded and the thousand-mile eyes penetrated the walls. Aether displayed a clearer view of my target.

*[Player Boss found.] [Vitality – 100/100] [Magic Power – 100/100]
[Status – Reading a book] [Predicted Future Action – 99% chance of
turning the page.]*

It displayed all sorts of extraneous information. *Interesting.* I walked to the library upstairs.

“Boss.”

I called her with a smile.

“Oh.” She briefly glanced at me and nodded.

“You’re late.”

“I ended up staying another day.”

Boss seemed hurt for some reason. I examined her closely. As I thought, she had bruises under her left eye, above her collarbone, and near other parts of her body.

“Boss, did someone beat you up?”

“Mm.”

Boss snickered. “I’ve been sparring with the Ironblood Duchess recently.”

“Huh?”

My jaws dropped. Did that mean Tomer beat her up? Tomer wasn’t weak by any means, but she should be a few levels below Boss...

“Boss, how much of your stats have you recovered?”

“About 50~60%.”

It seemed Tomer had grown incredibly strong inside the tower.

“Keep up the good work. Crevon doesn’t have a hideout system, but it does have bonus stat boosts for sparring.”

Crevon contained many powerful NPCs. Naturally, many quests and events involved them. One could only fully reap this floor’s benefits through strength.

“I plan to spar for the next month. The Ironblood Duchess seems to enjoy sparring me too.”

“Yo.”

A voice suddenly called us. I turned and saw Tomer walking towards us with a grin.

“Here, it’s what you asked for. I got it ready while you went back to Earth.”

She trudged up and handed over a small crystal.

“Oh, already?”

[Lv.7 Location Crystal Stele]

I could teleport to the World’s End Bridge whenever I wanted by infusing this portable crystal stele with magic power. It would be much easier to prevent players from reaching the 9th floor now.

“You should be able to reach the eastern border with it. It was quite expensive, so don’t lose it. It cost 20-30 times the money I owed you.”

That meant this crystal was worth at least 6-9 billion won. I stored it away and tapped Tomer’s shoulders.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. Also, you can only use it 5 times, so don’t forget. And

here.”

Tomer handed me a box that seemed even more important than the crystal stele.

“What’s this?”

“Half a year ago, monsters began dropping strange pieces of paper. We threw them away at first, but it seemed fishy so I collected them all into this box.”

“Paper?”

A sudden thought flashed across my mind. *Paper!* This box might be the most precious treasure chest in the entire tower. I quickly opened it.

*[Item Experience + 50 Coupon x 11] [Item Experience + 70 Coupon x 4]
[Item Experience + 100 Coupon x 4] [Lv.2 Consolidation Coupon] [Lv.4
Skill Consolidation Coupon x 3] [Lv.3 Skill Consolidation Coupon x 2]
[Skill Experience + 30 Coupon x 11] [Skill Experience + 60 Coupon x 9]
...*

An absolute gold mine. I almost fainted from shock at the item windows.

“I can’t use these, but I figured the rest of you probably could.”

“...”

I felt so touched that my body automatically moved and hugged Tomer.

“H-Hey, are you crazy?”

“Thanks, friend.”

“It’s hot.”

She easily pushed me away like tossing aside a puppy clinging to her leg.

“Don’t squeeze me if you’re going to hug.”

“Well, you see, I’ve been needing these. I still can’t believe you have so many. How long did you collect them for again?”

“Six months.”

I suddenly felt a sharp gaze and turned around. Boss glared at us.

“Oh? Why are you glaring?” Tomer asked teasingly. I couldn’t understand what happened as Boss flinched and looked away.

“*Cough*. Duchess, would you like to spar again today?”

“A spar? Sure, I’d be happy to. Follow me.”

Boss went outside with Tomer. The way they left made Boss seem inferior.

* * *

The Guild Alliance quickly climbed the tower after news of a player reaching the 8th floor.

They attacked castle no.5 four days later. Even Aileen, Jin Seyeon, and Yi Yongha participated this time. They thought Black Lotus might show up again, but he must’ve reached the 8th floor as the castle attack ended without anything special. Rachel greatly contributed as an elementalists like usual.

As expected, castle no.5 contained the crystal stele that led to the 6th floor along with the sun’s essence that Medea wanted. They climbed to the 6th floor after giving the sun’s essence to Medea and claiming the reward. Players needed [100,000] performance points to reach the 6th floor, but most Guild Alliance members already surpassed that.

[6F, Splendor]

A beautiful view immediately greeted them. Someone seemed to have hammered a wooden sign into the ground.

[Use this place to train.]

Was it some kind of a trap? Such a thought crossed everyone's minds. The administrator arrived and allocated their time to them as they discussed the matter. Some received 6 hours and some received 100, but the average player received around 48 hours.

Essence of the Strait, Frost Sanctuary, Desolate Moon, and the English Royal Court guild decided to train. The rankers also chose the same while other guilds and the djinn alliances climbed up.

The ones who climbed to the 7th floor Game Center encountered an unbelievable sight.

“What?”

“How is this possible?”

“The hell! It's SevenPoker again!”

Curses and cries of astonishment rang out throughout the Game Center. One person took first place for most of the virtual reality games. Players suspected SevenPoker was the floor administrator, but the letter *P* next to the ID signified a player.

“It looks like Black Lotus wiped this place clean!”

“Fucking hell, how can he be so greedy! Can't we put a bounty on him?”

“We don't know his nickname. Even if we did, who would dare challenge him?”

“I guess you're right.”

A week went by and most players ran out of time on the 6th floor. They passed through the 7th floor's Game Center and began to gather on floor 8-1, the Field of Trials.

"We just have to reach the end of this place?"

A warm breeze blew across the vast field.

"Looks like it, Lady Aileen."

Aileen's party consisted of Jin Seyeon, Aileen, Yi Yongha, and Shin Jonghak. They all stood at the starting line.

"Should we divide the task somehow?"

Kim Suho's party consisted of Chae Nayun, Yi Yeonghan, Yi Jiyeon, and the Fermun siblings.

"We probably don't need to. Just look around for any djinns nearby."

"Djinns? *Ah*, right. Someone put a bounty on Lady Aileen."

Jin Seyeon frowned when she thought about how someone dared to target Aileen.

"You be quiet. Like I care about some idiot putting a bounty on my... *eh?*"

Something caught Aileen's attention. A cute squirrel appeared on the field. It looked a little bigger than usual, but Aileen loved cute things and didn't suspect anything.

"Come here, little squirrel. I'll give you treats."

The squirrel stared at Aileen warily before scurrying up to her. However, it began acting strangely after arriving beside Aileen and rubbed its hands on her pocket.

"*Haha*, look! This squirrel is adorable."

Aileen only found it to be cute and didn't notice what was happening. -30 TP, -40 TP, -20 TP, -30 TP... Jain could transform into an animal now and ran to Aileen as soon as she spotted her from the forest.

“What are you doing here? Are you hungry? Do you want food?”

The grinning Aileen looked like an idiot.

Jain happily smiled.

“Look! This squirrel is smiling. It must like me a lot! Should I take it as a pet?”

Aileen kneeled and patted the squirrel's head, unaware that it had robbed her in broad daylight.

1. It is a Korean tradition to eat tofu after leaving prison. 🤔

Chapter 200

Damned Long Story (2)

The squirrel ran around from player to player for about 5 minutes before disappearing into the tall grass. Aileen looked disappointed, but soon turned serious again.

“What’s the plan?”

Aileen asked Kim Suho’s party. Yun Seung-Ah had asked her to help Kim Suho, but he should be able to survive without her babysitting.

“If you want, I can cover for...”

Aileen stopped in the middle of her sentence. Kim Suho took out a cool vehicle in black and gold that resembled a snowmobile. It looked sturdy at a glance.

“Ah, *um*, we have a way already.”

Kim Suho scratched his head at Aileen’s shocked expression.

“Looks like he’s more prepared than us, Lady Aileen.”

“Kim Suho, what’s that? Where did you get it?”

Jin Seyeon expressed her surprise while Shin Jonghak looked envious.

“*Er*, I found it on the 2nd floor.”

“It’s fine.”

Aileen also felt envious, but took out a small kite shield.

“This is enough for us.”

Aileen snorted. Her confidence wasn't unfounded as the Spirit Speech Master.

“This shield will become large enough to cover all of us.”

Her words turned into reality. The kite shield that only covered half her body suddenly expanded. Its weight didn't change, but it grew so big Shin Jonghak had to carry it instead.

“For the next 15 minutes, this shield will block all attacks less than my total magic power capacity.”

“Pf, pfft.”

Aileen spoke seriously, but her cute manner of speech and the way her small head bobbed from side to side caused Jin Seyeon to snicker. Jin Seyeon instinctively moved her hand towards Aileen's head, but stopped after realizing what would happen if she patted it.

“We're going ahead. You can follow us after the first wave of attacks.”

Aileen informed the other party as she moved behind the kite shield.

“Yes, thank you.”

“Alright, get ready. Us four will move at the same speed like one body.”

“Understood.”

Aileen's party accepted her Spirit Speech without resistance. *Three, two, one!* They shot forward simultaneously.

“We should get ready too.”

Kim Suho spoke as he watched Aileen's group leave. Vanessa and Paolo Fermun finished their preparations, but Chae Nayun remained

silent.

“Nayun, are you ready?”

A wave of arrows rained on Aileen’s group. However, none of the attacks could penetrate the kite shield.

“Chae Nayun, are you still wondering about SevenPoker?”

Yi Yeonghan nudged her as she stood in a daze. She snapped out of it and gripped her longsword.

“*H-Huh?* N-No, I’m just meditating to reach my peak condition.”

“Don’t lie. You didn’t listen at all.”

“I’m not lying. Plus, I already know who SevenPoker is.”

The mysterious SevenPoker dominated most of the games on the 7th floor’s Game Center. Chae Nayun felt like she knew his identity. She easily made the connection between SevenPoker and Extra7 since she already knew about Extra7’s incredible gaming skills. Chae Nayun wondered about Extra7’s true identity.

“I’m ready, so let’s go. I’ll protect the car.”

As soon as Chae Nayun spoke...

“*Mmm*, as I thought.”

A cheesy voice rang out next to them.

“The Guild Alliance members have arrived too.”

Kim Suho’s party turned to the side and spotted Zurahan arriving with his Ordinary People Alliance.

“Zurahan.”

“Nice to meet you, hero Kim Suho.”

Kim Suho glared at him, but Zurahan simply smiled.

“Hero? What hero?”

A displeased voice rang out. Kim Suho’s party only knew him as the loud baldy, but a select few knew him as Kaita, the Chameleon Troupe’s seat of silver.

Yi Jiyeon whispered, “Who are they?”

“You don’t need to know.”

Kim Suho’s reply made Kaita frown. “She doesn’t need to know? Aren’t you being a bit rude?”

“Let’s get going. We don’t need to trouble ourselves with these guys.”
Kim Suho placed his foot on the accelerator.

“What? Where are you... wait, where did you get such a good ride?”

Kaita’s snake-like eyes flickered with greed. *Kwaaaaa*— Kim Suho stepped on the gas and the dwarven supercar shot forward, throwing dirt and grass on Kaita.

“*Pfft*. Ah, hey! You little fucker! Stop! I said stop!”

Kaita cursed and shot a silver ray of magic power, but the dwarven supercar already escaped his range.

* * *

[3F, Lv.4 Bell’s Hideout]

“...”

Jin Sahuk opened her eyes and felt hazy. She couldn’t bare the excruciating pain.

“Haaa...”

She sighed and raised her upper body. Then she infused magic power into her blackened body. It intertwined with the curse and burned her flesh. Jin Sahyuk clenched her teeth as she removed the thin film of her own flesh.

“—!”

Severe pain followed, but she could only survive by removing the curse that exposed itself. Jin Sahyuk fell to her knees.

“A-*Argh*...”

“Sahyuk!”

Her comrade rushed in.

“Are you okay?”

Jin Sahyuk looked at Rumi. She wanted to say something, but her lips refused to move. Her eyes wandered to Rumi’s hands as she mumbled inaudible words. Rumi held a bowl of well-cooked porridge, but Jin Sahyuk only felt fear. The curse interfered with eating and she would experience unbearable pain from swallowing any food.

“*Ugh*...” Jin Sayhuk shook her head.

“You have to eat to get better.”

“No, no.”

“Bell is trying hard to make a counteragent.”

“No, no.”

Jin Sahyuk stood in a hurry. She wanted to run away, but fell after a few steps. Rumi caught her thin body that felt as light as a feather.

“It’s okay. Don’t worry. Everything will be alright.”

Rumi gently soothed her. Jin Sahyuk remained in her arms and began to faintly sob.

“...It hurts... so much.”

“It’ll be okay... soon.”

Rumi felt heartbroken because she had never seen Jin Sahyuk like this. Jin Sahyuk would’ve easily overcome any normal injury with anger alone.

“If I... die...”

“You’re not going to die. Who said you will? Stop talking.”

However, the banshee’s curse covered 6 different parts of her body. These Lv.5 curses gave Jin Sahyuk greater pain than death.

“I...”

Nearly a month went by with no cure or improvements. A month felt like a year to Jin Sahyuk. Her willpower had melted away already.

“I’m so, so tired...”

Jin Sahyuk sobbed in Rumi’s arms.

“It’s okay...”

Rumi clenched her teeth. She wanted to take revenge on the man who made Jin Sahyuk like this. However, she didn’t have the power or means to do so. Above all, that wasn’t what Bell wanted.

“Haaa...”

Jin Sahyuk stopped trembling with a groan, but her heartbeat remained the same. She had fainted again. Rumi placed her back in

bed as Bell returned.

“Bell?”

He looked back and forth between Jin Sahyuk and Rumi. Then he smiled.

“I think I’ll be able to get my hands on a counteragent.”

* * *

I drew my own conclusions after watching Boss and Tomer duel.

First, Boss possessed far greater talents and battle sense. However, Tomer’s stats and the skills she accumulated and perfected over the last 4 years posed a big problem. Tomer originally used aether and specialized in using her environment. She simply overwhelmed Boss with her skills.

“Uk!”

KWANG! Boss slammed against the wall. Tomer only used psychokinesis, a basic skill, but it synergized well with her magic power.

“Let’s do one more.”

Boss didn't give up. The process might be different, but the results would remain the same. Boss needed at least 3 more months to match Tomer.

“Hmm.”

I took my eyes off their duel and checked my inventory. Tomer gave me quite the treasures. I felt pleased at the mere sight of them and tore them without hesitation.

[You have used Skill Experience + 30 Coupon.] [You have used Skill Experience + 60 Coupon.] [You have used Item Experience + 100

Coupon.]...

[Synthesis] increased to Lv.5, [Extraction and Permanent Materialization] increased to Lv.6, and my only special skill, [Algorithm], rose to Lv.5.

[Upgrading aether with advanced algorithm...] [Skill level 5 has been achieved!] [Challenge completed — Basic Understanding of Skills] [All stats have increased by 0.25.]

I finally unlocked the system I had been waiting for.

[You have successfully recovered your stats!] [Your body has perfectly adapted to the tower's environment.]

▷Strength 8.000 ▷Stamina 7.935 ▷Speed 10.055 ▷Perception 10.355
▷Vitality 8.005 ▷Magic Power 4.5

The experiences I gained inside the tower also applied. My stats rose 1.5-2 points higher than before.

“Sigh, finally.”

The real growth would begin now.

KWAANG!

Boss fell flat on her face after an earsplitting roar. Their second duel had ended.

“Hey.”

I called Tomer as she tilted her head at me.

“What?”

“Spar with me too.”

“Huh?”

Tomer silently stood before grinning.

“Pfft. Why so suddenly?”

“Just because. It made me feel a little uncomfortable seeing you bully Boss.”

“Oh yeah? Then come at me.”

I brushed my knees and stood up. However, Boss suddenly intervened.

“Stop it, Hajin.”

She looked at me with a serious expression and shook her head. “I understand how you feel, but I’m okay.”

“...?”

Ah, that’s right. I forgot that she took jokes too seriously.

“I’m the one who asked for a spar.”

I nodded after seeing Boss’ profound gaze.

“Oh, okay.”

Then I walked over to Tomer without any warm-ups. We counted in silence. *One. Two. Three.* Tomer unleashed her magic power and formed a dome around us.

“What’s the name of this skill?”

“Dome prison. It’s invincible not only against one, but many opponents. Watch.”

Tomer shook her hand and several fragments from the dome flew towards me. Aether responded by turning them into crystals and placing them in my inventory.

“Oh, looks like you have a pretty cool skill too.”

“Yep.”

“Then... *Haa!*”

Tomer moved so fast I couldn't see her, but my body reacted first. *KOOONG!* Her fist made contact with my arm. Aether had moved my body on its own to block.

“...”

“...”

Less than a second had passed. A gun came to my mind. *If only I had a pistol in my left hand.* A handgun suddenly appeared thanks to aether. I aimed and pulled the trigger.

“*Uk!*”

The bullet scratched Tomer's cheek. Of course, I hadn't misfired. Tomer just dodged it at the last moment right under her nose. Only a monster could pull that off, but I simply smiled. I would've won just now with a shotgun instead of a handgun.

“I went easy on you, yet you...”

Tomer's kick landed on my thigh.

“...!”

It felt like my leg would fall off even though aether's automatic defense alleviated the pain.

Kieeeeeek!

Tomer prepared to throw me to the ground when Spartan appeared out of the blue and wailed.

“What’s that?” Tomer stopped as I widened my eyes at Spartan’s signal.

“People are trying to cross the bridge already.”

I pulled out my hood from my inventory. “Ah, about 30 people arrived a week ago.”

“Yeah. Those guys must be the allied djinns.”

“Show them who’s boss. I heard they’ve been meddling with the locals.”

I held the portable crystal stele in one hand. I had already recovered from Tomer’s kick with the *[Lv.4 Orb of Regeneration]*.

“I’ll be right back. I’m heading out, Boss.”

I infused stigma’s magic power into the crystal stele and space warped around my body.

* * *

The Evil Society Alliance arrived at the World’s End Bridge that led to the 9th floor after kidnapping and torturing several Crevon NPCs.

“So we have to get past here.”

Kim Hakpyo folded his arms. The bridge’s name suited it. They couldn’t see where it ended and it looked as if beasts would jump out at any moment from the dark forest on either side.

“Get moving, guys.”

Kim Hakpyo sent the others first. He stood near the middle, safely surrounded by his subordinates.

“Don’t be scared. Nothing’s gonna come out.”

They walked for about 5 minutes with Kim Hakpyo's encouragements. Suddenly, a flash of light came from the sky. It turned into a streak of wind and hurled towards them. An arrow reflected in Kim Hakpyo's eyes.

"What!"

His henchman magician managed to form a barrier in time. *TONG!* The arrow couldn't pierce through and fell to the ground. It seemed like an ordinary wooden arrow. That made him embarrassed for being so afraid.

"*Ha, hahaha.* What's this? Is this supposed to be a trap?"

Kim Hakpyo picked up the arrow and showed it to his subordinates. They laughed along with him and no longer feared anything on the 8th floor.

"*Hahaha... Mm?* Excuse me, team leader."

Silasen laughed until he discovered something and squinted.

"What?"

"*Um,* something's dangling at the end of the arrow."

"*Huh?*"

Kim Hakpyo looked at the arrow's tail. A piece of paper hung from the lower side.

"What the heck is this?"

"It looks like a message. You should open it."

"You do it." Kim Hakpyo dumped anything that could be a trap onto his subordinates.

"Yes sir."

Silasen unfolded the note without hesitation and tilted his head.
“*Hmm?* This is...”

“What?” Kim Hakpyo took the note back. It only contained a single sentence.

[I will only allow 10 steps forward.]

“What’s this?”

“Please look below. There’s a drawing.”

Kim Hakpyo followed Silasen’s words and saw the lotus at the bottom right corner.

“A lotus...”

“It’s drawn with ink.”

In other words, a black lotus. Everyone knew what that symbol represented.

“*Hmm.*”

Kim Hakpyo thought for a moment. *So Black Lotus almost reached the 9th floor too.* However, that note wouldn’t change his mind. The Evil Society Alliance had 20 members including him. They had stolen various stat boosting items and skills. Kim Hakpyo felt confident they could win against anyone.

“*Hmph,* a mere rookie dares to be so bold? All the praises must’ve gotten to his head.”

His pride also played a big role. They wouldn’t just retreat without even confirming the enemy. Kim Hakpyo also believed he had far more experience. Only a handful of people could look down on him in the entire world.

“Set up barriers in case of an attack. You know the spell, right?”

“Yes sir!”

As expected of an Evil Society executive, he didn't gloss over any details.

“Let's go.”

First step, second step, third step... They walked with a heavy tension. Finally, they reached the 10th step as stated in the message. Black Lotus' warning immediately proved to be true.

Kieeeeeek!

A bird cried and something black flew from the corner of the sky. Kim Hakpyo had prepared to face it head-on.

“Barriers!”

A total of 15 sturdy barriers shot up one after another. A mere arrow couldn't pierce through all of them.

“Silasen, you figure out where that arrow came from...”

Kim Hakpyo leisurely gave out the next command when he realized something. His instincts roared as the arrow approached. Like a meteor, it split the atmosphere in half. A torrent of magic power caused the air to burn and the clouds tore apart as the arrow descended.

His thoughts didn't last long as the streak of light fell.

Chapter 201

Damned Long Story (3)

Fifteen barriers shattered in less than a second as the arrow descended like lightning and struck the ground. A huge explosion erupted and the wind swirled like a storm before shooting up into a pillar of fire. *KWANG!* Another explosion erupted inside the pillar as the vengeful spirit grenade tied to the arrow exploded. A breathtaking silence followed. The entire area had turned to ash and only a hot fog remained.

I calmly stared at the area. Time passed and the fog subsided.

“Whew.”

The World’s End Bridge remained unscathed even after several explosions. However, the djinns attempting to cross had disappeared without a trace. As expected of an attack that used 3.5 streaks of stigma. It did a fantastic job.

I even attached a vengeful spirit grenade to the arrow. Kim Hakpyo should’ve died at least once unless he had a special defensive skill.

“Argh.”

I overworked myself as well. I hadn’t used that much stigma in 6 months. My vision spun and my stomach churned.

“Auu...”

I sat on the ground and gripped the Orb of Regeneration. Spartan also flew down and sat on my shoulder.

“...”

I didn't have the strength to say anything and hoped he wouldn't bother me too much.

— Pieeek

Spartan unleashed his magic power and it warmly enveloped me like the Hot Spring of Peace. *Wait a minute.*

“Oh, right.”

I shouted the trigger word to enter my waiting room. The feeling of moving through space made me feel nauseous, but I arrived at a wonderful place.

[Welcome to Lv.7 Extra7's Waiting Room.] [Your vitality will recover 50% faster here.] [Your magic power will recover 50% faster here.] [Light injuries will naturally heal and the waiting room's clear air will loosen up tense muscles.]

My waiting room appeared 16 times larger than most waiting rooms and featured all marble floors. I decorated the interior with a luxury bed, couch, and other furniture I crafted. I even set aside a portion of the room for Sannuri to run and play. I went straight to the *[Miniature Hot Spring of Peace]*.

“Ahh, amazing...”

I relaxed inside the warm water to restore my energy.

* * *

[8-1F, Field of Trials]

A longsword hung behind Chae Nayun's back.

“I'm ready.”

The wind blew against her face as the dwarven supercar sped forward. She faced ahead and held her sword.

“Go for it.”

She unsheathed her sword at Yi Yeonghan’s encouragement. *Ssssk*— Blue magic power surrounded the blade. Concentrating magic power around an external object felt as easy as moving her finger now.

Chwaaaaa...

A wave of arrows dyed the sky black like a flock of starlings. Even so, Chae Nayun stood fearless and swung her longsword in full force.

“—!”

She shouted with her teeth clenched and the magic power around her blade roared. *BOOM!* A crescent sword qi shot out and burned the arrows to ashes.

Soon, the sky cleared up again.

“Damn.”

Yi Yeonghan muttered in astonishment. Chae Nayun’s sword qi completely engulfed the enemy’s attack. However, she didn’t stop and continued to slash out waves of sword qi.

No more arrows came their way. It seemed the attackers had given up.

“I heard you devoured the curse with your magic power, but this...”

Chae Nayun smiled at the shocked Yi Yeonghan.

The dwarven supercar safely reached the end of the field. A 6 meter metal fence blocked their path. Honestly, the fence should’ve been called a castle wall with watchtowers and artillery units behind it.

“Didn’t we succeed?”

“I think so. Where’s Aileen?”

The fence descended underground as Yi Yeonghan and Kim Suho murmured. Startled, they backed off. *Jiing*. A man in full plate armor appeared and they all checked his name.

[Lv.??? Kipha]

An NPC whose level couldn't be seen. He seemed much stronger than most NPCs. Kipha scanned Kim Suho's party with a heavy gaze and nodded.

"You have the qualifications. Your entry shall be permitted."

Kipha turned around and left. Kim Suho's party looked at each other in confusion before following.

They walked along a narrow pathway. Soon, a mystical scenery unfolded before their eyes. A staircase continued endlessly into the sky and clearly led to the next floor.

[8-2F, Ten Thousand Staircase to the Temporary Fortress]

"This is the Ten Thousand Staircase. You'll reach your destination at the end."

"..."

Kipha only briefly explained. Climbing the staircase didn't seem complicated. However, Kim Suho felt curious about one thing. He had been thinking about Kipha's name. The knight's Eastern look and armor also confirmed his suspicion.

The ancient Silla epic, Praises and Songs, recorded this man's legend. He must be Silla's flowering knight, Kipha, whose tale remained in modern times.

"Will I be able to come back to this floor?"

Kim Suho felt awestruck at meeting one of his personal idols. He wanted to exchange swords with him. Kipha looked at Kim Suho with a steady gaze.

“If you want.”

Kim Suho felt more than satisfied.

“Thank you.” Kim Suho lightly bowed and caught up with his companions who went ahead.

“Ah, it’s going to take forever to climb these stairs.”

“We don’t need to walk.”

Kim Suho took out the dwarven supercar once again.

“Eh? You can ride that thing on stairs?”

“Yep.”

Terrain didn’t affect the dwarven supercar. Kim Suho shouted with confidence, “Get on!”

* * *

Boss and Tomer ate lunch together after 13 spars in a row. They didn’t even know each other a week ago, but a friendly atmosphere surrounded them because of Kim Hajin.

“It’s better if you talk casually. You’re older than me too.”

“*Cough*, if you say so.”

They quickly figured out how to address each other. Tomer looked at the beauty in front of her and lightly smiled.

“So, what’s your relationship with Kim Hajin?”

“Hm?” Boss suddenly stopped while picking up a lobster tail.

“I’m just curious.”

Tomer shrugged. Boss narrowed her eyes and suspiciously stared at her. She thought back to when Kim Hajin hugged Tomer. Their relationship seemed strangely close and Tomer kept showing interest in him.

“I’m just curious.”

She didn’t seem to be lying. Boss smiled bitterly and sighed.

“Our relationship is just between a boss and a subordinate.”

She could only think of that. However, she felt greatly indebted to him if she had to explain in detail. Of course, she still didn’t know a lot about him. She wasn’t even sure about the truth. Did she kill Kim Hajin’s parents? Did Kim Hajin know? If he did, why did he stay by her side? Boss didn’t know the answer to any of these questions.

If only I had an item that could read people’s hearts.

Boss agonized every night about how to apologize.

“I see. Well, I figured that out from how he kept calling you Boss.”

“...”

“Ah, but why do you talk like that? It sounds kind of boyish.”

Tomer casually asked about Boss’ manner of speech. Jain often pointed this out as well. Boss’ speech pattern, choice of words, and even her habits all came from the Chameleon Troupe’s previous boss. Of course, she didn’t do it on purpose. She naturally became that way with no one else to follow.

“...”

Boss remained silent. She wasn’t a talkative person in the first place.

“Was that too personal?” Tomer didn’t ask any further and gestured at the food. “Go ahead. You must be hungry.”

“Okay.”

Boss accepted her offer. Kim Hajin’s food tasted better, but she enjoyed the high quality meat. After that, the two of them became silent. Only the sound of utensils clacking could be heard. They finished their meal after 30 minutes and Tomer casually offered.

“Oh right, try a chant.”

“A chant?”

“Yep. You know, a spell chant like magicians.”

Boss tilted her head. Only magicians used such cumbersome skills.

“The tower has different laws than the outside world. Chants can directly affect skills. Even a simple one can have a huge effect on the skill’s output. It doesn’t need to be long like magician chants. For example...”

Tomer muttered, “Mi, luz.”

Nothing happened at first, but Boss’ eyes soon widened. The chairs, table, and every dish floated about 50 cm.

“Detailed psychokinesis is hard to notice.”

Tomer grinned and the floating objects landed.

“I just increased the power of psychokinesis by 50% with a simple chant. You should try it too.”

“I can just say whatever I want?”

“No, it has to be something meaningful or important to you. I guess you could say, *Kim Hajin, my love?*”

“What?”

Boss frowned at the lighthearted joke, but Tomer only snickered and waved.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding.”

“I don’t like jokes like that.”

“Okay, I won’t do it again.”

Tomer nodded and suddenly took out a pamphlet.

“What now?”

The cover read, *[Martial Tournament]*.

“What’s this?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like. Try to get first place. You’ll win an amazing reward.”

Tomer smiled mischievously. Boss wasn’t pleased as she looked over the pamphlet.

[1st place prize] 1. Emotion Potion 2. Ancient Black Drake’s Leather 3. Thought Piercing Magnifying Glass or Inefficient Glove 4. 30,000 TP

“I can guess the others, but what’s this emotion potion?”

Boss asked while making it sound like she murmured to herself. Tomer briefly explained, “Think of it as a love potion.”

“Love potion?”

“Yep, make Kim Hajin drink it. If you set the potion’s target to you... voila! He will...”

Tomer stopped halfway as Boss’ face contorted into a frightening frown. She looked like an Asura from hell. Tomer instinctively felt like she would have to give up parts of her mansion if she teased her any

more than this.

“I’m kidding.”

Tomer backed off for now.

“But isn’t it better than someone else taking it?”

Tomer had been the primary culprit behind Rachel and Kim Hajin’s awkward relationship at Cube. She also wanted to tease this woman known as Boss.

“What if some strange woman takes the potion and uses it on Kim Hajin?”

“...”

Boss remained silent at Tomer’s monologue. However, her eyes slightly trembled.

“Okay, I’ll be leaving now.”

Tomer left feeling content with herself.

* * *

[8-3F, Crevon Mainland]

Another week passed. Many players arrived in Crevon Mainland and I returned to wearing my hooded robe everywhere.

“Lady Aileen, cheer up. It’s been a whole week. Forget about it and move on.”

The restaurant I just entered contained several familiar faces. I spotted Aileen and Jin Seyeon comforting her.

“Why does this keep happening to me... I’m just curious...”

Aileen slouched at the table in tears. *What's wrong with Aileen? Did something happen?* I strained my ears out of curiosity.

“We’re not going to the 9th floor, right?”

The topic quickly changed as Yi Yongha asked the other members.

“Are you talking about the bridge that Black Lotus is protecting?” Jin Seyeon asked. News about the World’s End Bridge had become quite famous. The public forum and even news stations outside reported on the archer protecting the pathway to the 9th floor. I also gained 200 SP as a result.

“Yep. I refuse to go even if I die. *Haha*, I don’t want to die even once. I promised my wife.”

Yi Yongha scratched his neck with a wry smile. Jin Seyeon agreed with his words, which could be taken as a sign of fear.

“I agree. Six parties challenged the bridge and all failed. It wouldn’t be any different if we went. Let’s focus on growing stronger for now.”

I sighed in relief since Aileen’s party scared me.

“*Auu, auu, auuuuuu...*”

Aileen began to squirm and flop her arms. *What happened to her?*

“You’re right. What can an idiot who always loses her money even do? I should just go die...”

“Come on, just forget about it. We can make lots of money on this floor.”

“Like what?”

“The martial tournament, craftsmanship tournament, smithing tournament... This floor has all sorts of events.”

Jin Seyeon took out a pamphlet and read the contents. Aileen glanced at it as well.

[Crevon Martial Tournament], [North River Craftsmanship Tournament], [South River Smithing Conference], [Magic Seminar], etc. Crevon also hosted a bunch of random events. Of course, I skipped most of them in the original story. *Tiring*— My messenger suddenly rang.

PhantomThief: Hajin, it's Phiunel, right?

It came from Jain.

Me: Yep.

I couldn't stop players from reaching the 9th floor forever. Their growth speed would accelerate in Crevon and I couldn't restrain them for long.

Me: Keep an eye on what he's doing.

I planned to take what I could from Crevon until the players broke through.

PhantomThief: Okay. I'm following him around as one of his maids right now.

I stood up from my seat. I almost left after paying for my meal when I felt Aileen glance over me. Her sharp gaze made me wary for a second, but I sighed in relief at her words.

"I wonder how much that costs."

* * *

"I wonder how much that costs," Aileen murmured enviously.

"What are you talking about?" Jin Seyeon asked.

"The guy that just left wore such a nice robe. It looked so pretty... like

it had a magic power effect too.”

“Oh, the man that sat over there? I saw him too. He caught my attention when I walked in.”

“Right? *Ah*, if only I didn’t lose my money.”

Aileen sighed again as Jin Seyeon smiled wryly. Then Jin Seyeon looked over at Shin Jonghak busily scrolling through the community.

“Oh right, Jonghak, is it true Chae Nayun joined some group?”

“*Huh? Ah*, yes.” Shin Jonghak nodded.

“Essence of the Strait joined as a whole. They’re focusing on earning TP since the path is blocked.”

“Is that so? Aren’t the NPCs on this floor powerful? Will we be able to compete with them?”

“Surprisingly so.”

Shin Jonghak displayed a post on the public forum.

“*[Outsiders receive special treatment... Crevon’s high level NPCs are absurdly powerful, but players are stronger than most NPCs.]* It’s like that. By the way, Essence of the Strait already has a client.”

“Already?”

“Yep.”

Shin Jonghak glanced at his messenger and nodded.

“The client’s name is Phiunel. He’s a rich businessman from the South River region.”



PDF by: traitor/1ZEN



The Novel's Extra

- 소설 속 엑스트라 -

- VOLUME 3 -

**-AUTHOR-
Ji-gab-song**

[Wuxiaworld]

Chapter 202

Omen of Reunion (1)

[5F, Materialized Demon Realm]

I returned to the Materialized Demon Realm. Players had conquered the demon castles, but no one knew about the secret underground bases and the NPCs that hadn't been rescued.

“Is it here?”

I brought my trustworthy comrade, Cheok Jungyeong, because of the unfavorable terrain for sharpshooters.

“Yep.”

We followed a secret passageway on the outskirts until we reached a huge boulder. I glanced at Cheok Jungyeong.

“It better not be boring.”

Cheok Jungyeong looked like a legendary giant with the armor I gave him. His body grew even bigger with the special skill, *[Secret March]*.

“It'll be somewhat interesting.”

The demons should be high level according to my settings and a demon had even tamed a drake here. I planned to make myself a wrist protector with the drake leather.

“Let's go.”

“Sure.”

We entered what looked like a manhole.

The darkness didn't hinder my vision at all. My eyes penetrated the walls and detected several heat sources. This underground base contained at least 30 enemies and the NPCs resided on the bottom floor.

[Quest discovered!] [Rank – High] [Summary – The demon Ryukai has hypnotized and enslaved many NPCs. The NPCs will only regain their sanity for 3 hours per day.] [Goal – Rescue all the trapped NPCs and undo Ryukai's mind control magic.] [Reward – Mystical Whetstone, Mandrake]

A quest popped up. Cheok Jungyeong saw it too as he squinted at the air.

“Mmm... so what's our plan?”

“Just follow me.”

I led Cheok Jungyeong, but the base's defensive system activated before I could even take a few steps. *Koong— Koong— Koong— Koong* — Something rumbled as Cheok Jungyeong glared in its direction.

“What are those?”

“They're demons.”

Cheok Jungyeong looked frightening at 2.16 meters and 140 kilograms. However, the two giants in front of us appeared even bigger.

[Lv.10 Demon Giant]

“Leave this place.”

One of the giants spoke mechanically and his voice caused the earth to rumble. *Crack, crack*. Cheok Jungyeong lightly stretched.

“Newbie, I've been wondering, but what's the difference between

djinns and demons?”

“*Huh?*”

“Just curious.”

Cheok Jungyeong thought about such things? Well, he was a general in his past life, so he must be a strategist as well.

“Demons are born in the demon realm and djinns are humans who borrow the demon realm’s power.”

“Demon realm? Does it exist?”

“Who knows?”

I shrugged.

“Why wouldn’t it? The universe is vast.”

The demon realm certainly existed. Parts of Earth would soon be devoured by it. This core event would trigger the story’s latter half. The evil gods who commanded djinns always wanted to conquer Earth.

“I won’t repeat myself a second time.”

The demon giant spoke again.

“Leave.”

“You better shut your trap, kiddo.”

Cheok Jungyeong stepped forward. His footsteps sounded quieter and his body looked weaker.

“Take care of them however you want. I’m going ahead.”

“Sure.”

I left them to Cheok Jungyeong and stuck to the ceiling like Spiderman with parkour. Of course, parkour couldn't ignore the laws of physics, so I used a bit of stigma's magic power and shot past the two giants.

A huge wind blew from behind as I almost reached the lower floors. *KWANG!* Cheok Jungyeong's punch exploded into a shockwave and a demon giant smashed against the wall.

I smiled in satisfaction and headed downstairs. A total of 9 demons occupied the second floor. They prepared to fight from the ruckus upstairs.

— Get your weapons!

— Intruders!

— Report to Count Ryukai!

I transformed aether into a bow and took out 5 dark ore arrows. I could've used the Desert Eagle, but didn't want to waste bullets on small fries. I fired the arrows simultaneously without hesitation. *Chwaaaaa*. It didn't matter if my targets hid behind a wall. These arrows could penetrate any obstacles. The 5 arrows pierced every demon's vital organs. Only a split second had passed since they spotted me.

“You done?” Cheok Jungyeong immediately came down with black blood on his face.

“Yeah, follow me.”

We seemed like an undefeatable pair and continued crushing our way down until we reached the bottom floor in just 5 minutes. There, we found a Dracula-like demon and a chubby drake.

[Lv.12 Ryukai]

“Haha, foolish humans. You dare to intrude upon my abode?”

The ferocious giant charged at the murmuring Dracula. Cheok Jungyeong instantly grabbed Ryukai’s neck and slammed him to the ground.

“Auu... uuuk... ek... kek...”

Ryukai groaned in pain and tried to resist, but failed like a human trying to push an elephant. The demon noble’s face turned blue as he flailed and tore apart his fancy suit.

“Kuk.”

Soon, Ryukai stopped breathing. *Crack*— Cheok Jungyeong twisted his neck to confirm his death.

“The real trouble is there.”

“I know.”

Cheok Jungyeong glared at the drake, which joyfully looked at its dead master.

“You don’t need my help, right?” I asked.

“Of course.”

I walked past them and headed to the enslaved NPCs. Surprisingly, this place didn’t look like a prison. The bottom floor seemed like a noble’s mansion and the enslaved NPCs performed physical labor in a stupor.

I walked up to them and took out the mystic key. Then I inserted it in their heads and unlocked the spell that controlled their minds. The NPCs briefly panicked before choosing a young man as their spokesperson.

[Lv.9 Yuken]

This handsome young man had high potential as a master in city management and stronghold defense and offense. Prestige could use his talents.

“Everyone, I’ve come from Prestige to rescue you. My name is... Kim Huijuin. Let us return to Prestige.”

The NPCs hesitated at my words. Meanwhile, a fierce battle progressed nearby. *KWANG! KOONG!* Thunderous roars resounded as Cheok Jungyeong’s fist crushed the drake’s bones and claws.

“Is Ryukai dead?” Yuken asked hesitantly.

“Yes.”

“Then... we refuse.”

Yuken shook his head. I expected as much.

“If Ryukai is dead, it’ll be better for us to live here. To us, Prestige is no different than hell.”

According to my settings, they had left the 3rd floor to escape from Prestige. However, demons had captured them and forced them into slavery. Returning to Prestige only meant exchanging one hell for another.

“Don’t worry.” I shook my head.

“It’ll be okay. Prestige has changed a lot since you last saw it.”

The current Prestige... *KOONG! KOONG!* Cheok Jungyeong was — *KOONG!*... kind of noisy —*KWANG!*... but I used hypnotic suggestion regardless.

“A sun is being created in Prestige. Its citizens are working and living meaningful lives. Children run around the streets with smiles now. There is no shortage of food and water.”

My voice gently flowed into their ears.

“Moreover, Prestige needs your talents.”

* * *

I easily convinced Yuken and the 15 NPCs with the demon’s cunning speech. Then I guided them back to Prestige.

“This... where... what...”

“Where are we?”

“Is this really Prestige?”

The NPCs couldn’t hide their shock. Meanwhile, Henry and Kiri showed up to take care of them.

“Welcome, everyone. Come here.”

Henry and Kiri led them away as I sent them off with a smile. I turned to Cheok Jungyeong after they disappeared.

“Cheok Jungyeong.”

“*Huh?*”

I handed him a parchment.

“What’s this?” Cheok Jungyeong’s eyebrows perked up.

“Locations where NPCs are trapped on the 5th floor.”

“What? Why are you giving this to me?”

I smiled at Cheok Jungyeong, who looked confused.

“I don’t have time to save all of them.”

“You’re telling *me* to save them?”

Cheok Jungyeong shoved his intimidating face forward. “Look at you. Ordering me around now!”

Honestly, I felt scared, but already prepared a response. “Your shoes, clothes, and armor.”

Cheok Jungyeong slightly flinched every time I pointed at something he wore.

“Not a single one didn’t come from me.”

“...”

“I didn’t ask for anything when I gave them, did I?”

Cheok Jungyeong dodged my gaze and scratched his head. I just had to give a reason that wouldn’t hurt his pride after convincing him.

“It’s Boss’ order.”

“*Huh?* Oh, then just say so from the beginning!” Cheok Jungyeong laughed heartily and snatched the parchment from my hand.

“It should be a piece of cake. Let’s see... *Ah*, there’s only 5 people.”

“Five places. There should be around 100 NPCs in total.”

“*Tsk.*”

His face quickly contorted as he put away the parchment.

“Fine, I’ll get it done within 4 days.”

“Thanks.”

— *Pieeeeeek*

Spartan suddenly appeared and flew onto my shoulder. A group attempted to challenge the World's End Bridge again.

“Where did this bird head come from?” Cheok Jungyeong stared at Spartan, who appeared out of nowhere.

“I’ll be off now. Don’t lose that parchment!”

I took out the portable crystal stele and used it for the 3rd time. The crystal stele remained just as bright after I recharged it with the Orb of Regeneration. Items with limited uses could last forever like this.

Sssss—

The ground instantly changed from a brick pedestrian walkway to a wooden board when I infused stigma’s magic power into the crystal stele.

I had built a temporary watchtower and looked down from a height that reached the clouds. Far away, a group... no, an army slowly marched towards the World’s End Bridge.

“The Chinese Alliance.”

I could tell their numbers at a glance. One, two, three, four... sixty-seven. They planned on breaking through with sheer numbers.

“Like that’ll work.”

I coldly muttered. I held the aether bow and dark ore arrows. As always, I shot a wooden arrow first as a warning. *Chwaaak*— Of course, they would ignore it like most players.

* * *

The martial tournament took place the next day on floor 8-3 in Crevon. I applied because of the first place prize and currently looked through the community in my waiting room. I pushed myself quite a bit yesterday, but I should easily pass the preliminary round.

[Another failed attempt to pass the bridge of death.]

— *The Chinese Alliance challenged it this time and Black Lotus absolutely destroyed them. Half of them died and the other half ran away.*

— *RIP Chinese Alliance lol That's what they get for always pushing people around with their numbers. I'm not even mad.*

— *Don't be racist ^^ You should be sad that people died. Their nationality shouldn't matter, right?*

— *Wow... You have to hand it to Black Lotus. He's amazing. But isn't he being a bit selfish? He's saying he's the only one allowed to train on the 9th floor!*

— *No, we didn't receive any alert that a player reached the 9th floor. He probably can't go up either, so I think he's blocking the way until he can.*

[Black Lotus is going wild, but what's the Divine Archer Jin Seyeon doing? Isn't it common sense for a sharpshooter to deal with another sharpshooter?]

— *She should do something about it since she's in the tower.*

— *Divine Archer's in the middle of her training montage.*

— *I don't think the Divine Archer has a chance with what Black Lotus has shown. She only came in recently, so her stats are restricted even more.*

[The Hero Association told Black Lotus to stop.]

— *The Hero Association advised Black Lotus to stop blocking the way. It seems more like a threat. This is the first time the outside world interfered with matters inside the tower. They must have realized no one inside can do anything, so they took action outside.*

— *Who the hell's gonna listen to any warning from the outside world? Not even the association head has any power here.*

— *I wouldn't say that...*

— *No, he's right. I can beat up Chae Joochul as long as he enters the tower.*

— *You must've lost your mind... You should get that treated.*

I finally reached 5000 SP because of Black Lotus' name all around the community and the outside world. I should be able to create another gift now.

— Preliminary round 37! In the blue corner! The beautiful obsidian jewel, Boshy!

The martial tournament host announced the 37th preliminary round. Boss used Boshy as her alias.

— In the red corner! The chickenhead Conrad!

I didn't know any Conrad, but I would be up next. I prepared to stretch... *Tirring*— My messenger suddenly rang.

Nayunjajangman: Hyung, what's your main weapon?

Nayunjajangman: Do you want to do a quest with me?

Nayunjajangman's messages poured in like rain because I hadn't checked them in 3 weeks.

Nayunjajangman: Hyung, why haven't you been replying lately?

Nayunjajangman: Did something happen? You're not dead, are you?

Nayunjajangman: Message me if you see this.

* * *

[8-3F, Crevon Mainland]

Various stone buildings existed in Crevon. Some looked like they came from the Middle Ages and others looked like shopping malls. Crevon's streets looked like a strange mix between the Middle Ages and the modern era. It gave the city a somewhat mystical and beautiful look. Rachel walked through the main street like a tourist. Every view seemed special enough to store in her memory.

"The scenery is indeed better than Prestige."

Rachel nodded at vice team leader Davin's words. About 4 days ago, Rachel and 8 other elite Royal Court guild members charged through the Field of Trials with Rachel's elementals. Then they cleared several quests on floor 8-2 to reach the Crevon Mainland.

Crevon's civilization appeared far above Prestige's like they had been hearing on the public forum.

"It looks like a mix of London and the Middle Ages. I'm in awe no matter where I look."

However, Rachel didn't feel like they wasted investing in Prestige.

"This beautiful scenery wouldn't lose to Prestige."

The Tower of Wish now had close to 60000 players. The first wave only consisted of 3000 tickets, which multiplied to 9000 during the second and 18000 on the third. Now, the tutorial contained close to 30000 players.

"I agree."

However, only one or two thousand managed to reach the 8th floor. Many players still lived in Prestige and couldn't earn enough performance points to climb up. Furthermore, investing in Prestige turned out to be the right decision since outsiders couldn't buy living space in Crevon.

"Vice leader, I've noticed that you always wear that armor."

"Ah." Rachel shyly laughed.

“It’s a suit, not armor.”

“Is it?”

She had acquired the *[Lv.4 Black Suit]* after a fierce battle of wits. It performed fantastically until now as her favorite armor.

“Yes, I can’t recall how many times it saved my life.”

“*Haha... Ah*, have you heard the news? Black Lotus slaughtered the alliance that tried crossing the bridge.”

“Yes, I heard.”

Rachel’s smiling face quickly froze. Yesterday, another group challenged the World’s End Bridge. The Chinese guilds allied for the 8th attempt. A total of 67 people wanted to show off their nation’s greatness until Black Lotus massacred them.

“As long as it’s not too expensive, buy the footage of the battle when it comes out.”

“Yes, understood.”

Parties that challenged Black Lotus always filmed and sold their attempts. Otherwise, third parties would film them and sell it themselves. The most famous video showed the Djinn Alliance’s attempt. A single arrow completely blasted the bridge like a tactical nuke, instilling fear into the hearts of many.

“*Ah*, we’re here,” Davin muttered.

[Lv.11 Phiunel’s Mansion]

They planned to meet for their mission. Rachel spoke to the guards at the entrance and followed the servants inside.

“It’s here.”

They arrived in front of a door that read, *[Conference Room]*. The servants left as Rachel slowly opened the door.

“Hello.”

Rachel gracefully bowed before entering. The people inside all reacted differently to her greeting.

“Ah, nice to meet you, elementalist Rachel.”

“Hello.”

“Hi!”

“It’s been a while, my old friend.”

Rachel scanned the room. Hunter of the Vast Expanse, Kim Junwoo. Desolate Moon’s Shin Jonghak. Essence of the Strait’s Yi Jiyeon and Miyamoto Yohei. One of the recent rising rankers, Chae Nayun, and Essence of the Strait’s chief officer, Kim Youngjin.

Rachel faced old acquaintances that warmed her heart as well as powerful veterans who made her tremble. She tried to remain calm as she took a seat.

“Hiya.”

“...”

Rachel returned Chae Nayun’s greeting with a slight bow. The door opened again and a gentle old man with white hair walked in.

“Welcome, outsiders.”

The following name floated above his head:

[Lv.??? Phiunel]

Chapter 203

Omen of Reunion (2)

[The Tower of Wish has been the topic of interest all around the world. The first wave of players has learned that you may bring back one skill after staying inside for more than 1600 hours. These so-called skills allow even ordinary people without gifts to display supernatural power. The general public now treats these tickets like lottery tickets that could change their lives. Unfortunately, crimes targeting entrance tickets have also risen and dealing with players grows more problematic.]

Yoo Yeonha watched the news in her new office after being recently promoted to Chief Strategic Officer.

[Essence of the Strait Chief Strategic Officer, Yoo Yeonha]

The nameplate sparkled on her desk. She easily rose to the position thanks to the public's attention on the tower. The media would've loved digging into the fact that she became Chief Strategic Officer in less than 3 years.

“Hmm...”

With this, she had built a strong foundation to become Essence of the Strait's vice guild leader. Yoo Yeonha changed the channel with her chin in one hand.

[CH 11] [I Live Alone]

— *I'm wondering if I can also get a skill from the Tower of Wish, so I'm looking around auction houses.*

[CH 12] [Accurate 19]

— *Accurate 19! Find out anything you want to know about the Tower of*

Wish!

[CH 13] [Tower of Wish Special]

— *The strongest person in the tower is...*

— *Black Lotus?*

— *Yes, his selfishness in blocking the path is earning the Hero Association's wrath, but Black Lotus' influence is insurmountable.*

[CH 14] [Public Debate – Issues In The Tower]

— *It's not good that a third party group holds the most influence in the tower. It would've been much better if Essence of the Strait, Desolate Moon, or Frost Sanctuary took this spot. We also can't say for sure that Black Lotus isn't a djinn...*

Every channel talked about the same thing. The media completely drowned in stories regarding the tower after they discovered that one could bring back a skill.

“Sigh... Don't they get tired of it?”

Yoo Yeonha pondered. *Is it worth it for me to go?*

At first, she didn't even consider it and wanted to avoid any needless stress after graduating from Cube.

However, the situation had changed. Essence of the Strait performed well inside the tower and she could scout for new talents there. Recruiting those with good skills seemed even more important now.

— *Black Lotus demolished the Chinese Alliance of 67 people by himself. What was such a powerful person doing on Earth? Could he be a hermit training on the legendary Mount Everest?*

Yoo Yeonha had no connections with Black Lotus and they would likely never meet on Earth. However, that would change if she entered

the tower. He most likely belonged to the Chameleon Troupe, but it would be worth the risks to meet him.

“Hnnng...”

Yoo Yeonha agonized over her options. Of course, Essence of the Strait and its affiliate businesses needed her guidance. However, they didn’t need her that desperately and she could still take care of things from inside the tower. She even thought about just choosing the lowest difficulty tutorial. According to reports, players only needed to spend about 100 nights or 1600 hours inside to acquire a skill. Would it be a foolish or worthwhile gamble?

“I think there’s a skill related to intelligence too.”

Yoo Yeonha smacked her lips as she thought about what skill to bring back and how to utilize it in real life. At this point, she had already made up her mind and possessed a red entrance ticket that allowed her to bring a trustworthy companion.

“Who should I choose?”

Eventually, she came up with a list. *Dad is busy. I hear red ticket users share a waiting room. I’d rather not share the same room with him during the tutorial.*

Then a lightbulb went off in her head: the strongest summoner magician, Ah Hae-In. Ah Hae-In only focused on research after partnering with Essence of the Strait. Recently, she had been asking around for an entrance ticket. Choosing Ah Hae-In might also deepen their partnership.

“Huuu.”

After a deep breath, Yoo Yeonha organized her thoughts and picked up her smartwatch.

* * *

[8-3F, Crevon Mainland]

I passed the martial tournament's preliminary round without much difficulty. I debated whether to use a bow or gun, but ended up using a simple dagger and wire. The Lv.6 NPC didn't pose much of a threat.

"Boring."

"I agree."

Boss muttered as we left the arena. She also easily defeated her opponent and looked into the air as we walked. She seemed to have figured out how to block friends from viewing her system window as I couldn't see what she read anymore. Well, she was probably reading a web novel.

"Is it fun, Boss?"

"Hm? Oh, it's okay."

After walking for about five minutes...

"Aah..."

Boss suddenly exclaimed with disappointment. It must've ended on a cliffhanger. *Damn, the author even made someone audibly yelp in anticipation?*

"Oh right, Hajin." Boss turned to me.

"Yes?"

"Are you planning on getting first place?"

She asked a rather random question, but I nodded anyways. I had no reason to aim for anything else.

"If I can, then why not?"

"Is there an item you specifically want?"

“The first place rewards all sound great. There are four of them, after all.”

A hint of curiosity surfaced on Boss’ face. “The emotion potion too?”

“*Huh?* Oh, yeah.”

The emotion potion would work perfectly on an NPC. It also worked on players, but only inside the tower. The effect would disappear once the player left.

“I see.”

Boss turned away as I nodded without much thought.

“It does seem nice if you want to form a good relationship with someone.”

Boss began talking to herself, but I didn’t say anything.

“If you feel a certain way about someone...”

“...?”

Boss’ murmuring didn’t stop. “You would need something like that to form a relationship, but who would you use it on? I wonder who he’s thinking about. The target of the potion...”

She repeated the same thing multiple times before I realized she wouldn’t stop until I answered.

“I’m going to use it on an NPC. It doesn’t work well on players anyways.”

“...”

Boss remained silent as if she hadn’t asked in the first place. She only made a faint sound like a kitten purring in joy.

“So, *um*, Boss... you’ve heard about the Sunrise Ceremony, right?”

Players somehow managed to find all the materials Medea asked for. Kim Suho probably found the rare shamrock plant.

“I do. Are you going?”

“Yes, the sun will give us a nice present.”

We arrived at a narrow alleyway between two shops. This kind of place would be littered with cigarettes back on Earth. Jin Yohan, Cheok Jungyeong, and Jain stood waiting for us there. However, they seemed a bit strange. Jin Yohan and Cheok Jungyeong spoke excitedly while Jain looked through the community without a care.

“We’re here.”

Jin Yohan and Cheok Jungyeong turned around at Boss’ voice. Their faces even looked red, so I couldn’t help but ask.

“What’s wrong?”

“He saw that weapon!” Cheok Jungyeong yelled in excitement.

I tilted my head in confusion when Jin Yohan raised his Serpent Spear with a smile. Jin Yohan entered the tower with a black ticket and brought along his signature weapon.

“It’s a weapon related to this one.”

“Ah.”

I realized who he might’ve seen. It shouldn’t be Zhang Fei, the Serpent Spear’s original owner, but another legendary general who would’ve fought Zhang Fei.

“Lü Bu?”

“Exactly. His level had question marks next to his name. Lü Bu,

otherwise known as Fengxian. I got goosebumps when I saw him.”

Among NPCs, some wanted to show off their name and others hid theirs. Of course, I could see everything with my smartwatch.

“*Hahaha*, looks like the tower is starting to get fun!”

Cheok Jungyeong burst out into laughter. I tried provoking him a bit.

“It’ll be hard to fight him bare-handed, don’t you think?”

“*Hm*, maybe?”

Surprisingly, he took the time to think about it as Jain grew tired of them.

“Just tell me the plan already. I’m busy. I have a party to attend.”

She wore a fancy dress and wanted to cut to the chase, so I took out a card from my pocket.

[The Banquet of Honor for Crevon’s VIP nobles will be held in Krischen. The host is the noble, Phiunel.]

“*Oooh*, what’s this?” Jain’s eyes sparkled.

“A banquet...”

Boss also narrowed her eyes at the invitation. *A banquet... a banquet...* I explained as Boss murmured to herself.

“This is a banquet that’s also an auction. Almost all VIP nobles, including the royal prince and royal princess, will be there.”

Crevon’s nobles hosted the Banquet of Honor annually. It would begin like an ordinary banquet until the auction that sold precious objects excavated around Crevon. About 100-200 nobles would attend and they only sold the most precious items.

“Ah, I get it. You want to steal from this auction!”

Cheok Jungyeong heartily spoke, but I shook my head.

“No.”

Every noble would gather there, including the royal prince and princess with Lü Bu as their guard. Not even Cheok Jungyeong could fight Lü Bu head-on.

“It’s the opposite. We want to protect these items. Look at the back of the card.”

[Hiring outsiders as guards.] [Come to Phiunel’s mansion by the North River.] [A test will be held to determine your strength.]

The Spyren River divided Crevon’s regions into north and south.

“Protect? Guard?” Cheok Jungyeong frowned.

“Yep, it pays quite a lot. To be exact, 10000 TP per person.

“That’s boring.”

“No, it won’t be that boring. I’ve looked into it and demons threatened to attack the banquet.”

Crevon was about twice the size of Gyeonggi-do, but the entire 8-3 floor equaled South Korea. Demons lived in the west that partially turned into the demon realm and constantly looked for opportunities to topple Crevon.

“Demons? How come they’re popping up everywhere?” Cheok Jungyeong asked.

“They’re the villains inside the tower.”

“Mmm. Shouldn’t they just delay the banquet if demons will attack?” Jin Yohan asked.

“I don’t know. The nobles probably don’t want to give in to terrorist threats. Plus, Lü Bu might be able to stop them by himself.”

Honestly, I didn’t know how this would unfold. The future I knew had disappeared when I blocked the pathway to the 9th floor.

“Ah, they would lose face if they mobilized the army, so they brought Lü Bu instead.”

“Makes sense. Lü Bu would certainly do the job.”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Yohan nodded in agreement.

“Right, so think of our objective as guarding Crevon’s nobles. I’ll take care of everything else.”

“So you’re going to be the only one stealing?” Jain asked with a bright smile.

I nodded. Phiunel was actually a demon spy who planned to take all the precious treasures. It remained the same as in my abandoned setting and I had already confirmed it with the Book of Truth. The auction items would arrive after going through strict security measures and Phiunel would swap them out for fakes after the auction.

Then I would step in and steal them from the thief himself. I wanted one of the unique skill books.

“It’s almost time. Let’s get going.”

The job interview would begin in 30 minutes, so we headed towards Phiunel’s mansion.

* * *

[8-3F, *Phiunel’s Mansion*]

Phiunel finished explaining the guard mission to several players. The

auction would start after the first half of the Banquet of Honor and players had to protect the auction house from potential demons.

“Any questions?”

Phiunel looked at the players as Kim Youngjin raised his hand.

“Will we be enough for such an important event?”

“You’re Team 1. There will be a Team 2 and 3 as well. Each team will be in charge of different areas, but you outsiders should be able to recognize each other, correct?”

Kim Youngjin nodded as Phiunel continued.

“Your job is very important. The royal prince and princess will also be attending this banquet. They are the fourth prince and the fifth princess.”

“*Eh?* So we need to protect them as well?” Chae Nayun asked. She glanced at Rachel next to her, who was also a princess. Her full name was Rachel Elizabeth Louise.

“No, they will be accompanied by two royal guards. Some nobles will arrive without guards out of respect for the royal court. Your duty will be to protect such nobles.”

“*Oh*, then who are the royal guards?”

Chae Nayun curiously asked as Phiunel smiled.

“One is Lancelot, Knight of the Sacred Lake.”

Rachel’s eyes immediately widened. Lancelot came from the legends of England. She couldn’t help but get her hopes up that he might recognize her.

“The other person... well, a knight’s title doesn’t fit him and I personally dislike him as well.”

Phiunel rubbed his beard. “His name is Lü Bu.”

The two characters instantly changed the room’s atmosphere. The name Lü Bu sounded much more familiar to the players. Luo Guanzhong’s *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* exaggerated many things, but Lü Bu’s strength was undoubtedly real.

“Sounds fun.”

Kim Junwoo, the hunter from Vast Expanse, also spoke.

“I see.”

Phiunel smiled, but soon put on a solemn expression and clapped twice.

“As you may know, I will need to test your strength.”

Rachel felt a strange aura creeping from the walls. The others felt the same and clad themselves with magic power.

“I hope you understand. My life is on the line in this business and I’ll pay a hefty fee upfront if you pass.”

Phiunel left as the windows shattered and assassins in black showed up. The players all smiled bitterly at each other.

* * *

Chae Nayun left Phiunel’s mansion 20 minutes later after passing the test. Six other players also passed.

[Guard Team 1] laughed while discussing the test’s difficulty.

“It wasn’t that hard.”

“There were 27 assassins, but are demons that weak? Could it be that Lü Bu isn’t as strong as we think?”

“Don’t underestimate them. It shouldn’t be this easy to earn 10000 TP.”

While they chatted...

“Hm?”

Chae Nayun caught sight of 5 players entering the mansion with hooded robes. They gave her a strange feeling. To be exact, it came from just one person in that group.

“...?”

Chae Nayun could tell he was a man from his build. She couldn’t see anything else, but her intuition told her she had met him before. She suddenly felt a strange urge. Her intuition told her to run over and grab his shoulder, but she hesitated. She usually trusted her intuition because it was a special stat.

“That must be Team 2 or Team 3.”

Kim Junwoo said as he placed a hand on her shoulder. However, Chae Nayun didn’t reply. She watched as the group slowly grew farther away and felt complicated emotions constricting her. Then the wind suddenly blew.

It carried the group’s scent to her. The somewhat familiar smell made her dizzy. Her vision turned misty as she brought her hands to her eyes, but no tears came.

What’s wrong with me? Chae Nayun turned back to the group, but the mansion door had already closed before she could determine the source of that scent or the group’s identity.

“Ah...”

An unknown feeling of loneliness rose within her. She felt out of breath as though a huge rock had fallen on her chest. Then her eyes grew misty again. She wiped them and looked at her stained sleeve with faint droplets.

[8-3F, Crevon Duel Arena]

Jin Seyeon mulled over how to defeat Black Lotus at the World's End Bridge. She felt like her group could win with the help of a single player. Her body and magic power continued moving on their own as she thought. Jin Seyeon distanced herself from Shin Jonghak and shot a magic arrow.

“Kuk!”

Shin Jonghak groaned as the arrow struck him. Prestige's bonus focused on hunting, resting, and training while Crevon's focused on sparring, dueling, and competing. Players began sparring all the time once they found out.

“One more time!”

Shin Jonghak charged again as Jin Seyeon pondered. A sharpshooter had to deal with another sharpshooter since warriors couldn't fly. Walking across the sky was impossible without astounding magic power. Even so, Jin Seyeon had chosen Chae Nayun and Kim Suho as the first candidates in her Black Lotus hunting group. Even the community called those two magic power monsters. Chae Nayun possessed frightening magic power capacity and might be able to reach the sharpshooter. She could clad herself in magic power and detonate magic power behind her to fly like a bullet...

Jin Seyon's thoughts suddenly stopped as her expression froze.

“Wait.”

“Yes?” Shin Jonghak abruptly paused. *Bullet. Bullet. Bullet.* Jin Seyeon seriously repeated this one word.

Stupid, why didn't I think of this before?

Sharpshooting was a fight between distances and Jin Seyeon already knew someone who could snipe Black Lotus from an equal distance, if

not farther.

The monster wolf, Fenrir.

The field of mercenaries highly praised his sniping skills. Supposedly, he could snipe a target 5 km away. Plus, Fenrir's bullets could also pierce magic barriers. Jin Seyeon heard from Kim Suho that Fenrir used a black ticket to enter the tower and brought along his unique form-changing gun.

"Perfect." Jin Seyeon finally opened her mouth.

"What do you mean?"

"I came up with a way to break through the World's End Bridge."

Jin Seyeon proudly smiled. Aileen watched their spar from the side and ran up to her.

"What, what? Tell me."

"Before that..."

The key to finding Fenrir.

"Let's go find Suho."

Shin Jonghak frowned, but Jin Seyeon paid no mind to it. The perfect strategy unfolded in her mind where she and Fenrir would carefully strike at Black Lotus under Aileen's protection while Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak snuck past to the 9th floor.

Chapter 204

Omen of Reunion (3)

“Damn.”

Phiunel scratched his head as he looked at the messy room. This disaster only took 10 minutes.

About 20 minutes ago, 5 country bumpkins arrived at the mansion for a guard team position. They looked no different than any other outsider. However, Phiunel didn't want to let them pass. The entire test was a farce to begin with, but he had a bad feeling about this one.

He also hated the group's arrogant demeanor. As such, he brought in the strongest assassins at his disposal. However...

— *Uuugh...*

— *Kuuuk...*

The elite soldiers all groaned on the floor and not a single piece of furniture he had purchased with care remained undamaged. He couldn't even recognize his own mansion after all the chaos.

“How dare they.”

Phiunel angrily muttered. He had heard about the outsiders, seekers of truth who entered the tower from another world to reach its peak. However, he didn't believe any would reach the top and viewed them like thugs.

“...”

Phiunel clenched his teeth as fury rose in his old eyes. He didn't care about his subordinates, but that group's arrogant words still lingered

in his ears. He recalled how they insolently sat and mocked the demon race in front of him. After that, he simply concluded that they had to die. Everyone knew outsiders had 7 lives, but he would find a way around that. Phiunel took out a small notebook from his pocket.

[Lv.11 Directory]

His most precious treasure allowed him to see the name and details of every individual he ever met. It showed their nickname, real name, and current location.

“Fools.”

Demons specialized in assassination and torture. They would surely find a way to take seven lives with one death.

Phiunel wrote the names of these ruffians onto his kill list.

* * *

[8-3F, Main Street Outside Phiunel's Mansion]

We became *[Guard Team 2]* after passing Phiunel's test. He also gave us mysterious name tags with communication magic in them.

Then we headed to Crevon's western side, which bordered demon territory. It took us 40 minutes on a carriage traveling at 120 km per hour to reach the Ironblood Duchess' mansion.

“Ah, you're here. My friend and friends of my friend.”

Tomer welcomed us with a delicious meal. We lived like aristocrats compared to other players who returned to Prestige just to sleep because of Crevon's high prices. I couldn't help but feel grateful for my relationship with Tomer.

We each received our own rooms after our meal. I got the biggest one while the rest received slightly smaller rooms, but equal nonetheless. However, I had no plans of staying since my waiting room felt much better than most places.

“Create a waiting room ticket.”

[An entrance ticket to player Extra7's waiting room has been created.]

I almost tore the ticket when... *Tok, tok*. Someone knocked on the door. I tilted my head and opened it to find Boss.

“Boss?”

She looked at me intently with a single book under her arm.

“Is that a skill book?”

“Yeah. I looked through the auction house and found what seemed to be a good basic skill book. I came to ask whether I'm right.”

Boss bashfully handed me the skill book. She looked like a student getting her homework checked. I lightly smiled and took a look.

[Basic Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.1 Touch of Fire]

“How much did you pay for this?”

“...5000 TP.”

Boss swallowed her saliva. Her eyes faintly shook as I laughed. I didn't mean much by it, but her shoulders flinched.

“W-W-What's wrong? Did I pay too much for a trash skill?”

“No, it's a decent skill and you got it for cheap too. Well done. You can learn it if you want.”

“*Huhu*, I see.”

Boss smiled as the skill book transformed into a current of magic power that flowed into her.

“By the way, what’s that?”

Boss pointed at the robe and jewels on my bed after regaining her confidence.

“Oh, they’re for the upcoming craftsmanship tournament.”

“Craftsmanship tournament?”

“Yep, I want the first place prize.”

First place at the craftsmanship tournament would win [*Hephaestus’ Chisel*]. I didn’t know what it did, but it wouldn’t hurt to have it.

“Mm, I see. Good luck then. I’m going to train this skill.”

“See you later.”

She spun around and hopped away with a smile, probably towards the training room.

“Oh wait, Boss.”

She turned back. “Hm?”

“You can sleep in my waiting room if you want.”

I generated entrance tickets to my waiting room for the Chameleon Troupe members.

[You have sent a waiting room entrance ticket to your friend, player Boss.]
[You have sent a waiting room entrance ticket to your friend, player PhantomThief.] *[You have sent a waiting room entrance ticket to your friend, player Goryeo’sStrongest.]* *[You have sent a waiting room entrance ticket to your friend, player Hurabono.]*

Of course, I excluded Kaita. He and Zurahan had recently been fighting Kim Suho’s group.

“Your waiting room?” Boss looked at me suspiciously.

“Yeah, I have a good bed and even a hot spring. I sent entrance tickets to the other members too, so tell them to drop by whenever they want.”

Boss’ expression returned to normal after she heard the other members also received an invitation.

“Okay.”

Boss left with a smile.

* * *

I did what I had to do for the next 9 days.

First, I got myself a citizenship ID through Tomer’s help. Then I traveled around Crevon with Sannuri to find the dwarven steles.

Demons lived in the western territory and monsters lived in the mountain ridges. I acquired quite a bit of valuable resources while clearing my way through them. Of course, my luck played a major role.

First, I found an herb called Crevfort, which could be used with a mandrake and shamrock plant to brew an elixir. I could easily sell it to an NPC for 20000 TP.

Next, I found two dwarven steles. The first stele contained information about installing magic circuits into weapons, a miraculous technique that allowed weapons to possess magic power. Unfortunately, the knowledge wasn’t permanent and would disappear from memory after one use.

I decided to install a magic circuit on aether. A faint magic circuit appeared on it after the procedure. It should polish and expand this magic circuit on its own since it possessed intelligence.

The second dwarven stele was a diary about their own existence and

the world known as the tower. This philosophical book contained musings about their birth, their reason for existing, and where they lived. I felt surprised by some of their accurate guesses, but it contained nothing else.

I spent my days productively until the Banquet of Honors.

“You ready?”

I asked the other members. Currently, we stood on the back lawn of the *[Lv.16 Phiunel's Grand Mansion]*, a special mansion recently constructed for the banquet. It looked rather ancient because of the architectural style. The banquet would begin today at 5 P.M.

“I'm ready.”

“Me too. Looks like it'll be interesting.”

Jain and Jin Yohan replied excitedly while Boss nodded in silence.

“Do we have to wear this?”

Cheok Jungyeong seemed bothered by our robes. I made him a bigger one, so it fluttered around too much.

“Don't you have a robe like yours?”

Cheok Jungyeong looked at mine with a hint of envy. For the record, I wore a different robe that looked more like light leather armor with an eagle hood.

“You can rip parts of it off as long as you keep your face hidden.”

“Oh, okay.” Cheok Jungyeong easily accepted that.

“By the way, you know my disguise won't work on you, right?” Jain added in.

“Yes, I do.”

They placed a heavy restriction on players' abilities because the royal prince and princess would attend. Jain could still use her gift, but only on herself. Her ability would bypass even magic barriers in the outside world, but someone's skill restricted it in this mansion.

"Be careful everyone."

I glanced at my smartwatch. It read 2 in the afternoon.

Music rang out from the grand mansion and luxurious carriages arrived one by one at the front entrance. On Earth, these carriages would be like Bentleys and Rolls Royces.

The nobles came out of their carriages and walked gracefully inside.

* * *

[Lv.16 Phiunel's Grand Mansion]

The Banquet of Honor began at 3 P.M. as beautiful classical music played. The nobles either danced or talked and enjoyed the atmosphere.

However, the highest ranking nobles from Crevon's central region couldn't do the same. Atalos, the clan that became the rightful owner of Crevon under Agamemnon and Moses' blessings, could only enjoy the view from the 2nd floor balcony. They didn't join in to maintain their dignity.

"This is why I didn't want to come. It's so boring. I'm a good dancer too! And I practiced so much!"

Araha Von Atalos Diana, Crevon's fifth princess, had just turned 18 and complained.

"Be quiet."

The fourth prince, Aruon Von Atalos Philip, didn't feel too pleased with his younger sister's antics.

“This is why I didn’t want to come. Didn’t the demons send a threat? I guess it’s my fault for being lower ranked.”

The demons sent a letter that they would attack the Banquet of Honor. However, the Atalos Royal Family only scoffed since the administrators ordained the Banquet of Honor.

“Don’t say that anywhere else.”

“I will. I’m going to.”

“...”

Aruon sighed. He wouldn’t succeed the throne, but still needed to maintain the royal family’s reputation. He wasn’t the only one who felt this way. The Atalos Royal Family name never suffered a single speck of dirt even after generations. Of course, the immature Araha might be the exception.

“Oppa, how much money can you spend? I want to buy the Crane Feather Fan no matter what. I saw it in the auction catalog. It’s so pretty.”

“I’ll buy it for you, so be quiet.”

“Yay!”

Araha giggled. She turned sideways and saw a huge, muscular man towering over her.

“Um... Sir Lü Bu?”

Princess Araha carefully called her guard’s name. The great general standing next to her looked over. He had well-defined facial features and wore his hair in a bun. Furthermore, his fiery eyes seemed to pronounce his greatness to the world.

“Yes, Princess Araha.”

He addressed her in a neutral tone that sounded neither respectful nor disrespectful. Prince Aruon furrowed his brows, but Princess Araha liked this royal guard's attitude.

“What will you do if the demons attack?”

“I will dispatch all who dare to harm Prince and Princess.”

His words also meant he only cared about them and not the other nobles. Fortunately, Lancelot stood on the opposite side of Lü Bu and scouted the banquet hall.

“*Hehe*, how very trustworthy. Do you mind if I like you, Sir Lü Bu?”

“...”

“I’ve never dated anyone before.”

Lü Bu remained unfazed by Princess Araha's daring remarks and closed his eyes. Lü Bu already knew about the fifth princess' well-known mischief.

“Do you dislike younger women? Isn't this dress pretty?”

“Araha, please just shut up.”

Aruon couldn't stand her jokes any longer and placed his hand over her mouth.

— Everyone, the Auction of Honor will begin soon!

The host's voice rang out at 5 P.M. Then the grand mansion suddenly rumbled. Lancelot placed his hand over his sword, but bitterly smiled when he realized it was part of the event. The walls slowly drifted apart to create more space as the podium in the middle rose to change the mansion's design into that of an auction house.

“Phiunel made this mansion solely for this banquet? Amazing.”

Aruon smiled for the first time since the banquet began.

“By the way, elder brother, who are those people?”

The prince and princess could see the busily moving guards from the second floor balcony. Aruon also followed Araha’s line of sight and looked at them downstairs. The outsiders communicated with each other and ran to their stations.

“Outsiders...”

Aruon strained his eyes. The players’ names floated above their heads: Nayunjajangman, CaptainBritain, StraitTeamLeader, WindSamurai, CrazyMan, etc. The royal family didn’t possess any special ability. The nametags these players wore displayed their information.

“They’re outsiders?”

Aruon nodded at Araha’s question. “Looks like it.”

“Wow, it’s the first time I’m seeing outsiders. They look somewhat different from us.”

“Stay put, please.”

The host continued as the siblings bickered.

— Please take your seats, everyone.

Luxurious chairs suddenly rose from the ground.

“Make sure you keep your poker face.”

Aruon nudged his sister and put on an imposing expression. The host soon pointed at them and thanked the royal family for coming.

— Let us thank the Atalos Royal Family’s Prince Aruon and Princess Araha watching from above before we begin this auction.

A spotlight fell on the siblings as applause rang out. *Clap, clap, clap*—Araha and Aruon forcefully smiled. Huge sums would exchange hands at this Banquet of Honor in Crevon, the city of the rich.

* * *

[Backyard of Phiunel's Grand Mansion]

[6:15 P.M.]

— The next item is... Kteron's Mantra! This treasure will grant you wisdom in times of need!

I stood guard in the backyard for most of the day and threw away my nametag when the auction approached its end. Then I disguised myself by coloring my armor with aether and entered the mansion. The guards in the backyard decreased from 5 to 4, but Boss' shadow puppet filled in for me.

— The starting price is 30000 TP! *Ah*, it already became 40000 TP! The bid comes from Hail family's Young Lord Yoten!

I infused stigma's magic power into my thousand-mile eyes and watched everything inside.

— This is the Crane Feather Fan... Confirmed. What's the next item?... I think it's Kreton's Mantra.

I could also see and hear Phiunel's subordinates swapping out the real items for fakes. Phiunel kept the real items deep underground, but I already knew how to reach them.

A small pillar at the mansion' right corner held a silver candle and a secret room would appear after slightly turning it. However, one also had to infuse demonic energy into the door, which only demons possessed.

This stopped players and human NPCs, but I already had a source of demonic energy from a crystal I obtained with *[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]*.

I walked as quietly as possible to the corner. Phiunel didn't dispatch any guards here to avoid suspicion, so I should be enough. However, I suddenly sensed a presence from behind. *Tak*. Someone's footstep rang out. Was it really another person? I didn't feel anything just a moment ago. It didn't make sense since even aether didn't notice.

Soon, I understood why.

The Tower of Wish could make the impossible possible with skills. It must be a high level *[Stealth]* skill. I bit my lips, but it shouldn't be that bad. I should be able to suppress them without difficulty.

“Who are you?”

A soft voice came from behind.

Chapter 205

Omen of Reunion (4)

“Who are you?”

A soft voice came from behind. I realized the person’s identity and sighed in relief. Aether’s automatic defense system only reacted to killing intent and hostility. That must mean an ally had appeared.

I confidently turned around after my analysis. Jain stood there disguised as a man.

“*Huhu*, did I surprise you?”

“Yes, a lot.”

Jain’s stealth and disguise ability truly suited her personality. She smiled mischievously.

“How’s my disguise? I tried to copy the guy you told me to be.”

“It’s perfect.”

Blonde hair, a slightly thuggish appearance, a short height, and a cute look unbecoming a demon. She looked exactly like Phiunel’s subordinate, whom I investigated beforehand.

“Don’t surprise me like that next time. Stay put until I message you even if you’re bored.”

“Okay.”

Jain disappeared like a true phantom thief.

I calmed my beating heart before proceeding to the secret room. A demon pretending to be a guard stood in front.

“Oi, who are—”

Aether shot forward before he could finish and pierced his neck. Black blood splurped along with an unsettling gargle.

“Kek, kuk...”

The demon didn’t die as I took out a dark ore arrow to finish him off. I had long grown used to such trivial murder. *Click*— I turned the silver candle to reveal a small, dark pathway.

I needed to prepare before heading downstairs. Two powerful demons should be waiting there.

“Huuu.”

I took out several of the highest quality potions that glowed with different colors.

[You have consumed a Dwarven Potion of Courage.] [You have consumed a Dwarven Potion of Vitality.] [You have consumed a Dwarven Potion of Wind.] [You have consumed a Dwarven Potion of Stone.]

I consumed 4 potions and immediately felt the effects. My muscles roiled as adrenaline rushed through me. I gained a total of 3 points in every stat. It would only last 15 minutes, but I wouldn’t have to worry about anything else as I took out the Desert Eagle. Several system alerts popped up after fusing aether with the Desert Eagle.

[Aether has fused with the Desert Eagle.] [Special skill, Algorithm, has activated.] [Aether’s neurotech chip has activated.] [The Desert Eagle’s output will increase proportionately to your physical stats.]

Aether had learned this extra ability after it fused with me. I learned about it after a mission as Fenrir the last time I returned to Earth. From what I could tell, the anti-material sniper rifle’s power became no less than my dark ore arrows.

[The Desert Eagle has used 50% of aether.]

I only distributed 50% to the Desert Eagle to maintain my defensive functions.

I proceeded down with the gun in hand. As expected, a door appeared after exactly 66 steps. I took out the demonic energy crystal and crushed it. *Sssk*— The door reacted to the demonic energy and opened.

“Oh, you’re here. Kteron’s Mantra is he— what?”

Aether shot forward like last time, but the enemy reacted faster. He released his demonic energy and blocked as his eyes turned black.

“Who are you?”

I raised my handgun at the Lv.14 demon. I would be at a disadvantage if the fight dragged out, so I quickly pulled the trigger 3 times. Each bullet struck the same spot. The first carried an anti-magic property, breaking the barrier around his body. The second carried a piercing property that tore a hole through his tough skin. The final one carried an explosive property that dug into his body.

The first battle ended in the blink of an eye. However, another demon remained.

“You!”

Demonic energy burst from his body and surrounded us. This demonic energy storm seemed to have a life-stealing ability. However, I didn’t need to defend or avoid it.

I changed the Desert Eagle into a shotgun and aimed. Aether automatically blocked his demonic energy and turned it into crystals with *[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]*. It rapidly drained my spirit power, but I calmly pulled the trigger.

KWANG!

The shotgun shell blasted out and obliterated the demon.

“Whew...”

The secret room grew silent as I walked forward to check the items.

*[Lv.13 Crane Feather Fan] [Hwai's Sword Technique] [Lv.14 Cintamani]
[Unique Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.??? Clock Hand of Fate] [Lv.12
Serpent Dragon's Scale]...*

The *[Unique Skill Acquisition Book]* undoubtedly caught my eye the most. It looked like an old, wornout book, but I planned on filling my only unique skill slot with it.

[You have acquired the unique skill, Lv.??? Clock Hand of Fate!] [The roulette of fate has activated for the first time!] [The unique skill's level will be randomly chosen... (the maximum level is 10)] [You have acquired Lv.8 Clock Hand of Fate!]

I felt more than satisfied and prepared to leave as I placed the items in a bag since treasures couldn't be stored in the inventory.

[Crane Feather Fan], [Crystal Rose], [Fiendish Flute], [Da Vinci's Hat], [Prometheus' Wisdom], etc. Each item cost at least 150,000 TP. I left the secret room after packing up and shouted.

“Spartan!”

Spartan landed on the ground after breaking through the window. I handed the bag to Spartan.

“Take this back to our hideout.”

Spartan flew into the sky with the bag. Its weight didn't affect him thanks to the weight-reducing magic I placed on it. My body loosened up after completing the operation. As I sighed in relief...

“Stop.”

Someone appeared from the foot of the staircase. The obvious presence didn't surprise me this time as I turned around without much thought.

“...!”

Then I immediately took back my words about not being surprised.

“I found someone whose identity is unknown, over.”

She held a longsword. The blade seemed sharp enough to slice through anything. I felt all too familiar with the guard looking at me.

“First floor hallway, over. Check the location, over.”

She spoke with someone and it seemed the mansion had some sort of system to detect intruders or perhaps an elemental had sensed me.

“Right, over. The first floor, over.”

I could see her unique current of magic power undulating at the tip of her blade. However, she likely couldn't see through my hooded robe and mask. Even her intuition shouldn't be able to detect anything because of the equipment I made with painstaking care.

“I don't have to say over? Got it, over. *Ah, uh*, okay.”

She still seemed a little dumb. Was it because she didn't possess Homer's Ring like in the original story? I bitterly smiled and looked at Chae Nayun.

“I'll suppress him for now. I don't need reinforcements.”

She swung her longsword, but my body refused to move. The world turned blurry as though time had stopped.

“—!”

With a spirited shout, a crescent sword qi flew towards me. The attack

should've split me in half, but aether automatically defended. The fierce wind from the attack caused my robe to flutter.

“What?”

Chae Nayun's eyes trembled. She might've been surprised that I stopped her attack or perhaps she saw underneath my robe.

“Wait.”

Regardless of the reason, she spoke out as her hands trembled and her sword shook. She examined me from top to bottom.

“You...”

Wind blew in from the window that Spartan broke. A gentle breeze parted Chae Nayun's hair and I clearly saw her face. She didn't look that different from the past.

“Who are you?”

The wind carried her voice into my ears. She spoke with a trembling voice. However, I remained silent, not because of my beating heart or the shock from our sudden reunion. This place just didn't suit a reunion.

Sssss...

Violet light seeped in from outside as an explosion erupted.

I felt a certain urge and aether moved accordingly. *Tssss*— Aether shot out and pulled Chae Nayun towards me.

“*Uwoah!*”

She missed the timing to resist and her longsword fell out of her hands. Soon, something touched my chest. Aether formed a barrier around us as our clothes touched and I used stigma's magic power to further strengthen it.

Kwagwagwagwa!

A storm of demonic energy shook the world. The explosion only lasted briefly and the world soon regained its color, but we remained in the same position. Debris littered the mansion hallway. In the midst of it all, I held onto Chae Nayun as she stared at my chest.

I suddenly felt her body stiffen. Soon, she slowly raised her head to look at me. I couldn't let that happen, so I covered her eyes with my left hand.

“You...”

I sensed the certainty in her tone and felt afraid. However, I didn't know how to stop her either. I panicked, which hindered my rational thought process. Then I condensed aether into my right hand.

“Are you...”

I had to stop her with the only available method.

— *Puk!*

“*Uuk!*”

A short groan followed as I smacked her in the head with aether and she fainted.

“...”

My mind blanked, but the screams snapped me out of my daze. I didn't have time to stand still and quickly messaged Jain.

[I'm done here. Start the operation.]

* * *

[8-3F, Crevon Mainland]

The demons attacked with gargoyles in the sky and giants on land. They used multiple *[Mass Teleports]* for this surprise attack.

However, Crevon's army quickly reacted. The royal family didn't place any soldiers at the grand mansion, but troops heavily guarded the surrounding streets. Crevon's soldiers arrived at the frontlines right away. Furthermore, the famous Flying General Lü Bu and Lancelot of the Lake guarded the prince and princess. Not even the demons could break through them.

"Haha..."

Phiunel happily watched since the demons didn't plan on invading Crevon. They only had to raid the mansion for him to achieve the perfect crime.

"Sir!"

Someone flung his door open and Phiunel put on a worried expression that turned into confusion when he saw who had entered.

"Yoten? What's wrong?"

Phiunel's short secretary with blonde hair and a slightly thuggish look came over.

"There's trouble!"

"What?" Phiunel furrowed his brows. "What happened? Aren't things going well?"

Yoten took several deep breaths before shouting once again.

"T-The items in the secret room all disappeared!"

"What?"

"H-Hurry downstairs and see for yourself!"

Phiunel forgot his old age and ran like the wind. He raced from his office on the 7th floor to the secret room in just 3 minutes and almost received a heart attack upon seeing the empty room.

“T-This.”

Phiunel rummaged his pockets instinctively. He should be able to look up the thief in his directory as long as he met them once. However, he didn't have time at the moment.

“Yoten! Contact the higher-ups immedi... *huh?*”

Phiunel turned around before taking out his directory. Then he saw Yoten standing in front of him with a sinister smile.

“Yoten? What's the meaning of this?”

“*Ah*, you see...”

Phiunel suddenly felt heat rising from his chest. He glared at Yoten, who stabbed him with a dagger. Phiunel never neglected his training, but the opponent's magic power thoroughly overwhelmed his own.

“Yoten... why...”

Phiunel placed his hand on Yoten's neck, feeling nothing but anger and betrayal. He wanted to strangle Yoten, but lost all his strength.

“Your use ran out, old man.”

Phiunel gritted his teeth and glared with bloodshot eyes. “Yoten, you...”

“Don't be so mad. It would be more foolish to trust you when you lived in human society for 60 years.”

Yoten pulled the dagger out.

“*Kuhuk!*”

Blood splurged as Phiunel stumbled forward. Yoten grinned and pulled him up by the hair. Then he brought the dagger to Phiunel's neck.

"Goodbye old man."

KWANG! An explosion blew up the surrounding walls. The wind pressure sent Yoten flying and the woman who appeared quickly suppressed him.

"W-What? Who are you!"

Yoten struggled under the woman's grasp, but the woman responded mechanically.

"I. Am. A. Guard. Protecting. Her. Employer."

Phiunel heard the woman exchanging words with Yoten. He thought, *I picked a good guard...* as his consciousness faded. Whispers rang out in the quiet basement.

"Um, Boss. It's over now. Can you let go?"

"*Shh.*"

"The old man's already fainted."

"You didn't kill him, right?"

"Yup, I avoided any vital organs."

Boss let go of Jain disguised as Yoten. Kim Hajin decided it would be a waste to kill Phiunel, so he came up with this plan.

"We're going to rip him off now, right?"

Jain chattered with a bright smile. Now, Phiunel and the demons would misunderstand each other. Phiunel would cut off contact with them, thinking they had betrayed him and the demons would take this as Phiunel betraying them instead. As a result, Phiunel would

inadvertently fall to the side of humans.

“Well done, Jain.”

“You came in at the perfect time. Your acting skills need some work though. Want me to kiss you?”

“Try it if you’re not afraid of dying.”

“Oh right, Hajin told me to bring an item called the directory. Let’s see...”

Jain rummaged through the unconscious Phiunel’s pockets and stole a little notebook.

* * *

[High Difficulty, Second Tutorial, Nameless Ocean’s Nameless Island.]
[Seven days after the start of the second tutorial.]

“Oh, so we can’t eat summoned monsters.”

Yoo Yeonha murmured in disappointment as her idea got shot down. *Growl*— She hadn’t eaten anything in 4 days.

“Of course not. I’m more surprised you even thought that was possible.”

Ah Hae-In glared at Yoo Yeonha, who suggested eating her summoned beast. How could she think of such a cruel thing?

“Whew...”

Yoo Yeonha stood up without a choice. She had to move when she could if she didn’t want to starve to death. Yoo Yeonha had heard about the second tutorial outside the tower and made ample preparations, but their island didn’t have any materials to make a fishing rod. Swimming to another island also carried too much risks.

Yoo Yeonha could only glare at the sandy beach. Her eyes caught sight of faint movement in the sand after standing in a daze for about 10 minutes.

“Crab!”

She found a fat crab. Ah Hae-In didn’t seem all that excited as Yoo Yeonha chased the crab. *Stay calm. You learned how to catch seafood with your bare hands. Timing is most important... now!*

“Kyak!”

However, Yoo Yeonha couldn’t even get close. She stumbled over a rock because of her weak physical stats.

“Sigh.”

Ah Hae-In guessed the outcome from Yoo Yeonha’s scream and continued staring at the sand. She found it difficult to even summon a simple creature with her restricted stats. Even so, Ah Hae-In stared at the hole she dug in the sand. She called it the singularity point training method and prevented her magic power from wavering subconsciously by focusing her concentration on a single point.

“Come, come, come to me.”

Ah Hae-In felt like she had only focused for 5 minutes, but 60 minutes had passed. Afterwards, a small creature that looked like a baby seal squirmed out of the hole. It looked like it could easily catch some fish once it grew bigger.

“I did it!”

Yoo Yeonha’s voice suddenly rang out. Ah Hae-In turned around and found Yoo Yeonha hugging a huge fish.

“I, I caught one! Duchess Ah Hae-In! I... *uwuah!*”

Yoo Yeonha tripped on a rock while running over with a smile. Time stopped for a moment as she wondered. *Don’t, don’t tell me. Did the fish*

I just caught enter the water again? Yoo Yeonha raised her head with despair.

“*Whew.*”

Thankfully, the fish flopped on the sand.

“Well done, Yeonha.”

Ah Hae-In complimented her and picked up the fish.

“A glossy seafish. Looks like we’ll be having a feast tonight. You can leave the fire to me.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Yoo Yeonha returned a smile. Ah Hae-In grinned and started a campfire with her magic power.

“*Ssp.*”

“*Ssssp.*”

They drooled over the campfire 30 minutes later. Ah Hae-In separated the meat and split it in half after the fish finished cooking. Yoo Yeonha took a huge bite at the glossy seafish in her hand. *Nyam.*

“Wow.”

She had never tasted anything so delicious. It felt like the entire universe exploded in her mind. The fish in her mouth made her realize what it meant to be alive.

“It’s... it’s so good...”

“Right? It must taste better because you caught it yourself.”

Yoo Yeonha teared up at Ah Hae-In’s words. She became enlightened about a new world today.

Chapter 206

A Strange Battle (1)

Crevon's princess, Araha, watched as they suppressed the demons' attack. Her heart beat with excitement as she witnessed a battle for the first time filled with screams, explosions, magic power, and the smell of blood and metal.

— *Kuak!*

— *Kuuk!*

Araha turned to the martial artist sitting next to her after watching this carnage.

“Aren't you going to fight, Sir Lü Bu?”

“I'm here to protect Prince and Princess.”

Lü Bu briefly replied as Araha smiled. She could see Lü Bu holding back his desire to join.

“You can go if you want. I'm stronger than I look. I can defend myself.”

“...”

Lü Bu shook his head. *Chwaaa*— A golden flash of light annihilated a group of monsters. Lü Bu and Araha simultaneously turned in that direction. The black-haired young man looked powerful and also incredibly handsome. Lü Bu stared at him with a burning gaze.

[MasterHolySword]

He held a shining sword befitting his name. The man seemed to be

dancing as he displayed his swordsmanship. His holy sword slashed through magic power and every monster with ease.

Lü Bu's gaze grew deeper as MasterHolySword displayed his strength. Araha easily saw through his heart.

"You want to fight him?"

"...No."

Lü Bu obviously lied and suddenly felt a gaze. It carried the same emotions as his own.

"..."

Lü Bu turned to the side and spotted a robed giant. The giant tore off his robe and sent it flying in the air. He stared at Lü Bu with a thick smile.

Lü Bu stood up and received the giant's gaze. The man slowly walked forward and arrived in front of him.

"Are you an enemy?" Lü Bu asked as he tightened his grip on his weapon, the Square Sky Halberd.

"Cheok Jungyeong."

The giant replied and Lü Bu's eyebrows twitched.

"That's my name."

"Answer my question."

"I've come to fight you."

Araha watched them in confusion and panic.

"I don't have time to deal with personal affairs."

Lü Bu rejected the giant's offer as Cheok Jungyeong frowned and turned towards Araha, who blankly stared at the giant.

"In that case..."

Cheok Jungyeong's large hand reached towards the princess, but Lü Bu grabbed his wrist. The giant exerted even more strength, but his arm wouldn't budge. Cheok Jungyeong had never faced such humiliation before, but he felt happy.

Their gazes clashed like steel. Then the giant grinned and opened his mouth. A thunderous roar came out.

"Let's F—I—G—H—T—!"

Cheok Jungyeong's muscles bulked up like they would explode. His instant, amplified strength shook off Lü Bu's hand.

Lü Bu fell into a dilemma. He held the Square Sky Halberd, but the opponent didn't possess a weapon. An honorable fight should take place under the same conditions, but would it be alright to leave behind his beloved Square Sky Halberd? Soon, a faint smile emerged on Lü Bu's face and his fist shot forward. Cheok Jungyeong also swung and the two warriors' fists collided. A mighty torrent of magic power erupted and shook the heavens and earth.

* * *

[3F, Lv.8 Chameleon Troupe's Hideout]

We returned to our hideout on the 3rd floor six hours later. Boss, Jin Yohan, Jain, and I all appeared fine, but Cheok Jungyeong remained unconscious. He looked thoroughly beaten up and not a single place on his body hadn't been bruised. We placed him on a bed and spread the stolen items on the floor.

"Wow..." Jain's eyes sparkled at the treasures in various colors.

"W-What are we going to do with them?"

“Mmm... we can’t sell them because they’re too precious.”

Each item cost at least 150,000 TP, which no player could afford. We would have to use Crevon’s black market or sell to an administrator, but the first option would take at least a year and our items might get stolen with the second option. The administrators might argue that we committed a crime and forcibly take them away.

“So we’re going to split them among ourselves.”

This auction featured more rare and luxurious items than useful ones. For example, the *[Cintamani]* and the *[Crystal Rose]*. I only wanted the unique skill book, so I didn’t care how they distributed the rest.

I checked the unique skill once again.

[Lv.8 Unique Skill – Clock Hand of Fate] Fate: You may select up to 8 targets to be your fate. For 3 minutes, your variable stats and special stats will increase by 300% when fighting against your fate. (May be used once every 120 hours). Time Reversal: You may return to the past by 3 minutes. (Will recharge once every 720 hours. Up to 3 charges may be stored). Body Reversal: Will activate when your physical body dies. Your physical body will return to its state 10 minutes before your death. (2 lifetime uses).

Anyone would consider this extremely overpowered. I felt immensely satisfied by today’s haul and kindly spoke to the Chameleon Troupe members looking at me.

“Take something you like.”

“We can?”

Jain was a given, but even Boss and Jin Yohan’s eyes sparkled.

“Of course. *Ah*, but let me choose one first.”

I picked up *[Hwai’s Sword Technique]* for Kim Suho. I didn’t know anything about it, but I figured he could use it.

“Me, me! I’ll go next!”

Jain raised her hand and focused on the treasures. Then suddenly...

— Kieeeeek!

Spartan suddenly appeared with a piercing sound.

“Ah, another one...”

I felt exhausted, but another group seemed to have arrived at the World’s End Bridge. They must’ve planned on doing so with Crevon in chaos.

“I have to go.”

“...”

Everyone appeared too busy picking out their treasure to mind me. I laughed and activated the portable crystal stele. Then the surrounding scenery instantly changed.

I stood on the watchtower and shot a wooden arrow at the 6 person party walking on the bridge.

— *Tak.*

The arrow struck the ground in front of them.

— *Uwoah!*

— *Aaak!*

— R-Run!

It seemed they just wanted to test the waters in case I wasn’t here.

“*Whew.*”

I sighed in relief since I didn’t have much energy left. — *Tiring.* I

suddenly received a message.

Nayunjajangman: Hyung!!! Where are you, hyung? Crevon is in chaos right now!!!

Chae Nayun sent a message full of exclamation marks. She wasn't the type to faint for long. I bitterly smiled as I replied.

Me: I know, but I'm okay. I'm on the 7th floor.

* * *

The Atalos Royal Family held a commendation ceremony 4 days later to honor Crevon's soldiers and the outsiders who fought off the demons' attack. Many players gathered on the royal family's lawn.

"He's not here."

Jin Seyeon also attended the ceremony, but didn't seem too interested and kept glancing around for someone.

"Are you looking for something, senior?"

Kim Suho walked up to her. He would receive a grade 3 commendation, the highest out of any player.

"Ah, perfect timing, Suho." Jin Seyeon looked glad to see him.
"Where's Fenrir?"

"Fenrir? You mean Hajin?"

"Yeah!"

Jin Seyeon explained her plan to defeat Black Lotus. Kim Suho nodded with wide eyes after hearing it.

"That does sound like a good plan."

"Right? Then—"

“But I don’t know where Hajin is.”

“*Eh?*”

Jin Seyeon tilted her head as Kim Suho awkwardly scratched his neck.

“I don’t even know his nickname.”

“Aren’t you guys friends?”

“We are, but Hajin has many secrets...”

Kim Suho awkwardly laughed and avoided her eyes. Then he suddenly clapped as though he recalled something. The disappointed Jin Seyeon waited for him to continue.

“I think Rachel might know.”

“Rachel?”

“Yep, she’s right over there.”

Kim Suho pointed into the crowd. The beautifully dressed Rachel greeted Crevon’s nobles.

“*Ah*, okay. Thanks!”

Jin Seyeon hopped over to Rachel.

Aruon Von Atalos Philip watched the commendation ceremony and asked Araha beside him.

“Are you okay?”

Araha looked confused at the sudden question. “What do you mean, elder brother?”

“The Crane Feather Fan...”

“Ah.”

Araha laughed. The demons had stolen almost all the items from the Banquet of Honor and they almost killed Phiunel as well. They clearly wanted the auction's items from the start.

“It's fine. Anyways, look at that girl.”

Araha pointed at a blonde girl. Rachel spoke with Jin Seyeon, who had come to find her.

“Apparently, she's royalty too.”

“She is?”

“Yep, royalty from the outside world.”

“I see.”

Aruon wasn't too interested in the outside world. Their tiny world couldn't compare to the tower based on the education he received from the royal court. Aruon felt more concerned about the 300,000 TP Crane Feather Fan than such a small world.

“To lose 300,000 TP like that.”

“Eh? That's why you looked so down this entire time?” Araha snickered and took out a small machine. It looked like a box with a strange insignia on the lid.

“What's that?”

“It's called a tracking device. I placed a mark on the Crane Feather Fan since something like this might happen.”

“You mean...”

“Yep, the Crane Feather Fan is on the 3rd floor right now,” Araha spoke with a bright voice. “I'm planning on asking Lü Bu. What do

you think?”

“You can’t command a royal guard by yourself.”

“What? Just because I’m the fifth princess and lower on the hierarchy?”

“Exactly,” Aruon replied coldly.

“*Eeeh... hiinng...*” Araha pouted.

“But I, the fourth prince, can.”

“Really? Really, really?”

“Yeah.”

Araha smiled at Aruon’s dignified appearance. “Then I want to go with Lü Bu.”

“No.”

“Ah, why not? Then I won’t tell you anything about the fan’s location.”

“You know, the Crane Feather Fan is yours.”

“*Hmph*, oppa wanted it too. Don’t lie to me.”

“*Cough.*”

He did spend 300,000 TP. He wouldn’t have spent so much for his younger sister if he didn’t want it too.

“We can talk about this later. The commendation ceremony is starting. Focus.”

[Two days later, 8-3F Crevon. Ironblood Duchess' mansion.]

Five days had passed since the demons' attack. I leisurely watched the TV in Tomer's mansion. Well, it looked more like a magic crystal ball. Other than its odd shape, it functioned no differently than Earth's TV with variety shows, dramas, and even advertisements.

— Who will be the winner of Crevon's 17th Craftsmanship Tournament?

The host built up suspense as I intently watched the crystal ball.

— The item winning the grand prize is... *dudududu!*

Hurry up! We just finished watching an ad. I'll snipe you if you cut to another one!

— The Wolf's Fragrance!

I clenched my fist triumphantly.

— The Wolf's Fragrance is a robe that received the highest praise from all 23 judges! Looking at this beautiful robe makes us suspect whether the missing dwarves have returned! Its elegant patterns look like an ancient work of art and the magic power infused in it truly has exquisite harmony with...

"Whew."

The host recited the judges' comments, but I turned the TV off since I knew the results now. I lay on the comfy bed and took out the directory Jain stole from Phiunel.

[Lv.11 Directory] Lv.11 Individual Info: You may view the history of the people you've encountered. Lv.11 Detailed Info: You may view the detailed stats of people you've encountered. (You may only check up to 3 people's information every 24 hours. Stats above 11 points cannot be estimated.)

I checked the stats of 2 characters using the directory's detailed info function.

[Jin Seyeon] ▷Stats: Variable Stats [Strength 9.675] [Stamina 8.350]
[Speed 10.050] [Perception ???] [Magic Power 11.000] [Vitality 10.505]

[Aileen] ▷Stats: Variable Stats [Strength 6.950] [Stamina 6.815] [Speed 8.585] [Perception ???] [Magic Power ???] [Vitality 8.135]

“I might be screwed if they come to the bridge now.”

They would overpower me even with their stat restrictions. I couldn’t prevent them from crossing with the addition of Yi Yongha and Shin Jonghak. Of course, I already succeeded in blocking the World’s End Bridge for 3 months. I should be able to block it for a while longer with the Chameleon Troupe’s help. Things would probably be safe if I could hold out for another month.

Tiring— I received a message.

Captain Britain: Hajin, you’re coming today, right?

“*Hmm.*”

I had an appointment with Jin Seyeon today. According to Rachel, Jin Seyeon wanted to defeat Black Lotus with me. I wanted to reject such a comedic offer at first, but it seemed like the perfect chance to buy some time and earn SP.

“Let’s see...”

I got up and checked my wardrobe. I wanted to wear casual clothes, but Tomer’s guest wardrobe only contained suits.

“This will do.”

I picked what I liked most.

* * *

[8-3F, Heart of Crevon, Aileen’s Hideout Sponsored by the Hail Family]

A small change occurred in Crevon's society after the previous demon attack. A few nobles expressed their desire to sponsor a few players. Of course, only those who displayed overwhelming battle prowess or loyalty during the incident.

"Geez."

Aileen stood out even among players and could select which noble family to sponsor her. She chose the rich Hail Family with their great vision for the future.

"Is he really coming?"

Aileen grumbled in their luxury hideout. Kim Hajin hadn't arrived and 30 minutes had already passed since their scheduled meeting at 6. Jin Seyeon glanced at the clock, then at Rachel who flinched.

"He, he said he'll be here soon... *Ah!*"

Kiik— The hideout door finally opened and Rachel's face lit up.

"Looks like Hajin is... here...?"

Aileen, Jin Seyeon, Yi Yongha, and even Rachel tilted their heads. A man wearing a black suit and sunglasses appeared.

"Sorry, I'm late."

The man bowed as he took off his sunglasses.

"*Ah, whew...* Why were you late, Hajin?"

"I live far away. Sorry."

"*Um*, what's up with the suit?"

"*Ah*, well, I'm meeting 2 famous rankers, so I thought I'd dress up for the occasion."

Jin Seyeon stood up and extended her hand. “Nice to meet you, Fenrir.”

“Ah, yes, me too. You can just call me Kim Hajin. I find the name Fenrir kind of cringy.”

“Sure. Take a seat, Hajin.”

Jin Seyeon guided him to a chair. Kim Hajin sat quietly while Aileen glared at him from the opposite side. Jin Seyeon immediately brought up the main topic.

“I heard Rachel already explained the plan in detail.”

“Yes.”

Jin Seyeon nodded at his reply. She didn’t like to needlessly waste time.

“Then do you mind if we perform a quick test—”

Kim Hajin placed his gun on the table before Jin Seyeon could even finish her sentence. He infused magic power into the gun under everyone’s scrutiny. Then the beautiful handgun transformed into a 1.4 meter anti-material sniper rifle.

“Whoa, is this a water gun?” Aileen’s eyes sparkled as though she found an interesting toy.

“As expected of a gun-related gift...”

Kim Hajin didn’t correct Jin Seyeon’s guess. He transformed the sniper rifle back into a handgun and put it away to not reveal any more information.

“So, about the plan... I heard me, Aileen, and Jin Seyeon will shoot down Black Lotus.”

Everyone nodded at Kim Hajin’s words.

“Yes, we’re thinking about carrying out the plan on Monday in 4 days.”

However, Kim Hajin immediately proposed a different idea.

“All of us won’t be necessary. Give me a month. I can shoot Black Lotus down by myself.”

“Yes?”

“What?”

His shocking statement made Aileen burst into laughter. Kim Hajin looked back and forth between Jin Seyeon and Aileen. They both seemed dumbfounded, but Aileen spoke first.

“You must be crazy. I thought about letting go of the fact that you arrived late because of Seung-Ah, but this... Even without you, we—”

“Wait.” Jin Seyeon raised her arm and stopped Aileen from continuing.

“You can do it alone in a month?”

“Yes, I can make you the first to reach the 9th floor without any flashy plans. Of course, you’ll have to properly compensate me.”

“Like a mercenary mission.”

“Exactly. I am a mercenary and you will be the customer.”

“Wait!” Aileen smacked Jin Seyeon’s arm away.

“What can you do? Also, why a month? It’s not like your water gun will change in a month—”

Jin Seyeon raised her arm once again and stopped her. “Do you have a method?”

“I’ll explain later.”

“No!” Aileen pushed Jin Seyeon’s arm down to speak up. “Tell us now —”

Jin Seyeon raised her arm once again and stopped Aileen.

“Haaaa... I can only be patient for so long...” Aileen’s eyebrows shook with genuine anger.

“Move.”

“What do you mean?” Jin Seyeon tilted her head with a straight face.

“Move your arm!”

“Ah.”

Jin Seyeon placed her arm down. Aileen fumed as she glared at Jin Seyeon, but Jin Seyeon only focused on Kim Hajin.

“Why do you need a month?”

Kim Hajin leaned against his chair at Jin Seyeon’s question. Then he spoke with a serious tone, “It’s better to have more time.”

“What? See, you can’t trust this kid—”

Jin Seyeon raised her arm once again.

“I find that hard to believe. Black Lotus currently stands at the peak of players. Without knowing your strength, we can’t blindly... *hm?*”

Jin Seyeon felt something wet on her arm and curiously turned sideways at Aileen biting her arm.

“What are you doing, Lady Aileen?”

“I told you not to put up your arm—!”

“*Um... ah*, it hurts. It hurts.”

Jin Seyeon didn't feel even the slightest pain, but said so out of courtesy.

“*Uuuuu!*”

“Let go, Lady Aileen. Let go, I'm sorry.”

Aileen bit down and even gritted her teeth while Jin Seyeon pretended to be in pain. Kim Hajin and Rachel held back from laughing.

“*Hmph.*”

After some time, Aileen let go of Jin Seyeon and glared at her instead.

“Try that one more time and see what happens.”

“Yes, yes, I'm sorry.”

Kim Hajin felt proud of himself for holding back his laughter as he took out his handgun.

“Well, you see, I can defeat Black Lotus because of a simple reason. It's a matter of suitability.”

“Suitability?”

“Yes, you could say I'm his perfect counter.”

Kim Hajin transformed his handgun into a shotgun. He turned to Aileen after loading it with bullets.

“Lady Aileen.”

“What?”

Aileen seemed embarrassed by her previous display and averted her gaze.

“Try using a barrier.”

“Barrier?”

“Yep, with full power. I’ll break it easily.”

A thick silence descended in the room. No one dared to make any noise as Aileen looked at Kim Hajin in a daze. She didn’t look angry or displeased, only 100% astonished.

Chapter 207

A Strange Battle (2)

[8-3F, Hospital Medical Office]

Crevon's hospitals felt no different than Earth's. They possessed the same knowledge about sanitation and germs with even more advanced healing techniques. Players exposed to highly dense demonic energy in the previous attack came here for treatment.

“...”

Shin Jonghak didn't come because of any injuries or demonic energy poisoning, but just to see Chae Nayun.

“Why are you staring?” Chae Nayun grimaced in the middle of the holy power treatment. “You're not returning to the hideout?”

“I'm up next. I'm just waiting,” Shin Jonghak replied expressionlessly. Chae Nayun remained silent as the priest cured her.

“It's not painful, so stay still,” the priest spoke. Chae Nayun nervously trembled because the holy power injector looked like a syringe.

“Okay.”

She jumped into battle that day as soon as she regained consciousness. Her right arm received a small injury, so she came to eliminate any demonic energy that might've remained.

“Um, my head is okay, right?”

“Yes, there's nothing wrong.”

Chae Nayun fell into thought at the priest's words. However, she

shook it off and decided not to think about that day. Doing so made her depressed, gave her a headache, and ignited a flame in her heart.

“That should be a psychological problem,” the priest spoke. *Did he have a mind-reading ability?* Chae Nayun scratched her cheek and checked her messenger.

Extra7: Don't overwork yourself. Message me if you're in danger.

Chae Nayun looked at the *[Lv.5 Invitation Letter to the Love Room]* in her inventory. Recently, she felt an urge to summon him. Then a stinging pain struck her arm.

“Ow!”

“There. The poison has completely left your system, so you can go home now.”

“Auu... thank you.”

You said it wouldn't be painful. Chae Nayun glared at the priest as she stood up.

“Have a nice day.”

She opened the door to leave after picking up her longsword, but Shin Jonghak suddenly grabbed her wrist.

“Hm? What's up?”

“I'll be done soon,” Shin Jonghak muttered while looking into the air. *Wait for me and let's head back together.* That's what he wanted to say, but it didn't come out.

“So what?”

“...”

Shin Jonghak knew about the hardships she recently faced. He

couldn't do anything when she suffered from the banshee's curse. He had massacred countless undead monsters, but couldn't find an antidote.

"Do you want me to wait for you?" Chae Nayun said what he thought and placed her hand on his head.

"..."

Shin Jonghak looked at her. He knew who had cured her from the curse, but Yi Jiyeon told him to keep it a secret.

"No, it's fine."

He shook his head and suddenly recalled his grandfather, Shin Myungchul. When Shin Jonghak was a child, his grandfather was a member of the Nine Stars respected by the entire world. Shin Myungchul was a hero among heroes, the pride of Korea, and the glory of his clan.

However, Shin Jonghak knew his grandfather found his fame to be embarrassing. Shin Myungchul often tormented himself for not being able to protect his wife, the person he loved most. In his mind, having saved the world paled in comparison to this mistake.

"Then let go."

Chae Nayun's sharp voice woke Shin Jonghak from his thoughts. He lightly smiled and let go of her wrist.

"By the way, who hit your temple?" he asked out of curiosity and prepared to go after the perpetrator. *Who dares to hit Chae Nayun's head? It's already almost empty.*

"I don't know."

Chae Nayun frowned and pretended to be oblivious.

"I'll pay back this debt 10 times, no, 100 times over if I ever meet him."

Shin Jonghak nodded at her words that carried a deep conviction.

* * *

[8-3F, Aileen's Hideout, Sparring Room]

Aileen tried to avoid the test, perhaps out of pride, but I eventually convinced her. Jin Seyeon and Rachel also helped to persuade her.

“Haa... I don't know why I'm here doing this.”

Aileen laughed in vain as she swung her white hair back. I checked the Desert Eagle and spoke.

“It'll be over soon.”

“I know. *Sigh...*” Aileen unleashed her magic power.

“Be sure to thank Seung-Ah when you return to Earth.”

She cast a textbook, dome-shaped barrier.

“This barrier is going to be sturdy.”

Aileen added her Spirit Speech and it became even more powerful with a single sentence. I raised my gun and aimed at the corner to avoid causing any injuries. I only loaded a single bullet and murmured.

— Scan.

I infused 1.5 streaks of stigma into the bullet. The anti-magic and spell-breaking properties should destroy Aileen's barrier and Spirit Speech simultaneously.

“I'm shooting.”

“Yeah, yeah. Go ahead.”

Aileen murmured while yawning. I immediately pulled the trigger. The bullet shot out and instantly struck her barrier.

“*Yaawn...*”

Chwaaak— The bullet shot past Aileen’s yawning head. *Clang*— Then the sound of shattering glass resounded.

“*Un?*”

It took some time for Aileen to realize what happened. She stood in a daze before looking around the sparring room.

“What?”

An incomprehensible scene unfolded before her. The barrier she formed had disappeared and the pieces of magic power on the floor served as proof.

“W-What? What happened? W-Where’s my barrier?” Aileen reached out to where her barrier should’ve been.

“Where... did it...”

She touched the air as though her barrier had turned invisible. I turned around and faced Jin Seyeon and Rachel.

“How is it?”

They also had strange expressions. A similar level of astonishment replaced their previous doubts.

“What, what did you do?” Jin Seyeon asked while Rachel only blankly stared with her mouth open.

“*Mmm...* a combination of my gift, skill, and weapon?”

“C-Come again?”

I made up a lie by mixing in some truth that I had bought several *[Equipment Consolidation Coupons]* to upgrade the Desert Eagle and that my special skill, *[Algorithm]*, strengthened mechanical weapons.

“I see, but don’t guns have issues with bullets?”

“Don’t worry about that. I have a lot.”

The limited amount of bullets no longer posed an issue for me after I rescued the blacksmith NPC Kedrick. He currently worked in a smith with countless disciples under him. They had more than enough skill to make bullets, so I gave them the specifications a long time ago. Now, they could pump out 20 handgun bullets, 10 assault rifle bullets, and 5 sniper rifle bullets a day.

“Hey, hey, hey! T-This is wrong! Something isn’t right here!”

Aileen hurriedly ran in front of me.

“Do, do it again. I went too easy on you. I forgot about my restricted stats and underestimated you. It’s my mistake, so do it again.”

Aileen spat out a flurry of words. I mulled over my options and agreed to further increase their trust in me. Aileen told the truth when she said she hadn’t gone all out.

“Okay, but hold on a second.”

I turned around and hid from their line of sight. I needed to prepare if Aileen used her full power and I already spent 1.5 streaks of stigma earlier. I modified the bullet’s setting with my smartwatch.

[Anti-Aileen Bullet] Will decrease the power of Aileen’s Spirit Speech related to defense.

[40 SP will be consumed. Would you like to save this change?]

The modification required 40 SP even with its limited use. Was Aileen that amazing or did I just phrase it wrong? I saved the changes and loaded the bullet into my gun.

“Alright! Try it again!” Aileen formed another barrier and shouted confidently.

“This barrier will never break as long as my magic power allows it!”

Aileen shouted like an excited kid. I slowly raised my gun and pulled the trigger. The bullet drew a clear trajectory as it shot forward.

“Ah.”

A short exclamation followed. *Clang*— The sound of shattering glass rang out once again and the results remained the same.

“How...”

Aileen looked like she just lost her country as she murmured in a daze. *Thud*. She fell to her knees and stared at the fragments of magic power on the ground. Did I just shatter her barrier or her confidence? I wasn’t sure.

“Um, honestly, I’m just overgeared...”

I looked at Jin Seyeon. “Anyways, can you leave it to me?”

Jin Seyeon nodded.

* * *

I walked down Crevon’s streets with Rachel. Aileen returned to the hideout in shock and Jin Seyeon went to cheer her up. Overall, things went quite well.

“You’ve gotten so strong.”

Rachel looked bitter as she said that.

“Same goes for you. You must’ve recovered most of your stats from what I hear on the community.”

“I recovered about 80%. Luckily, I received lots of time on the 6th floor.”

Rachel should’ve spent around 120 hours there.

“Oh, and I never revealed your nickname to anyone.”

She didn’t want me to worry.

“Thank you. *Um*, can I ask you for a favor?”

I took out [*Hwai’s Sword Technique*] from my pocket. I brought it with me in case I ran into Suho, but it seemed he wasn’t here. I didn’t know how to meet him either since we didn’t exchange nicknames.

“Sure,” Rachel replied with a bright smile.

“Then here.”

I gave her [*Hwai’s Sword Technique*]. It should look like [*Hwai’s Basic Sword Move*] to Rachel since I used setting intervention to change its name to avoid any unwanted suspicion.

“Give it to Suho.”

“Okay.”

Rachel took the item without even checking it. She tried to put it in her inventory, but couldn’t and tilted her head in confusion.

“...” She blinked and asked with her eyes, *What is this?*

“*Um*, some items can’t go in the inventory.”

“*Ah*, I see...”

Rachel placed it in the pocket of her [*Lv.4 Black Suit*]. It would be rude to not give her anything, so I took out a wrist protector from my inventory.

“Here.”

“Okay.”

Rachel took the item without much thought.

“Wow...” The beautiful design immediately caught her attention.

“Who should I give this to?”

“To Rachel.”

I answered as she stared intently at it.

“Yes?”

“You.”

Rachel’s feet stopped. Then she widened her eyes at me.

“Think of it as a delivery fee.”

I had used this wrist protector before, just like the *[Lv.4 Black Suit]* she currently wore.

“This is a Lv.5 item...”

“Well, I’m quite rich. Try wearing it.”

Rachel blankly stood for a moment before nodding and putting it on. She treated it with extreme care because of its level.

“Oh, it looks good on you. It’s almost like it was made to go with that armor you’re wearing. Use it well.”

I would have to call what she wore *[Kim Hajin’s Old Equipment Set]* if I had to come up with a name. However, she didn’t know this and looked deeply touched.

Time quickly flew and 3 weeks passed. Kim Suho and the other players grew an enormous amount thanks to nobles opening their hearts and lending their guards to spar. As I said before, Crevon provided the best environment to grow stronger through fighting.

Only 10 days remained until D-Day. Then I would have to kill Black Lotus as Fenrir. I didn't need to worry about being discovered since I hired Jain for the show.

[I heard Fenrir will fight Black Lotus.]

[A wolf vs a flower. Obviously, the wolf should win.]

[Yeah, no.]

[I hope the wolf wins.]

[I wonder what's on the 9th floor :O]

“What a party.”

I didn't know how the rumors spread, but Fenrir vs Black Lotus became something like the battle of the century. The SP coming in made me happy. I turned the community off and turned on the crystal ball TV.

— We have prepared an interview with one of the participants in the round of 8, Boshy.

An interview for the martial tournament came up. The tournament started with 512 contestants and now dwindled to just 8.

— Hello, Miss Boshy.

Today's guest featured a robed woman named Boshy.

— Hel... lo.

Boss looked nervous. I could tell from how her hands cusped together and her fingers fidgeted.

— You defeated Masked Knight and advanced to the round of 8. How do you feel right now?

Boss replied after hesitating.

— I feel good.

The MC became speechless at her short reply. A long silence descended on the screen. *Shouldn't they skip to an advertisement now?*

— I see... you feel good. Then what do you plan on doing today to celebrate advancing to the round of 8?

Boss replied confidently this time.

— I'm going sun watching.

—Sun watching... Do you mean you're headed to Prestige?

— Right.

My smartwatch rang at the perfect time.

[Prestige's Sunrise Ceremony will begin in 3 hours.]

A sun would rise in Prestige today.

* * *

[3F, Prestige]

Bell and Jin Sahyuk came out to Prestige's streets. She wore a robe, but no longer gasped for breath thanks to the incomplete curse counteragent that Bell brought from floor 8-2.

“How’s your body?”

Bell looked at her, but she remained silent.

“Stay hidden. We’re in a relatively safe place, but it’ll be difficult if you run into trouble.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t even have the strength to reply. Of course, the curse no longer threatened her life and it would be wiped away after bathing in Prestige’s sunlight. No, Jin Sahyuk’s magic power would devour it with vengeance.

“I’ve suffered enough.”

Bell didn’t bother her about it. He knew the humiliation she went through. Just thinking about those times should bring her pain.

“Do you want to eat something? Like your favorite corn fried rice.”

“Later.”

Jin Sahyuk knew she had to eat to recover her strength. Bell nodded at her brief reply. They slowly walked and stood with the huge crowd. Medea’s palace could be seen in the distance and the first sun would rise above it today.

— How long do we have to wait?

— 10 minutes.

— What happened to the inner wall?

— Oh, apparently they’re gradually pulling it down.

Players talked among themselves as Jin Sahyuk pulled her robe down and sighed.

“Sahyuk,” Bell called her.

“What.”

“Can you wait here for a second? We might not have time to buy the corn fried rice later, so I’ll go buy it now.”

Jin Sahyuk nodded. For some reason, she really wanted to eat corn fried rice today. She only ate porridge until now because of Rumi.

“Then wait here.”

“Okay.”

Bell disappeared as Jin Sahyuk waited for the sun to rise among the crowd. The artificial sun could weaken curses. A mere banshee’s curse should be burnt clean since the administrators said they would bless the first wave of sunlight.

“*Whew...*”

Jin Sahyuk sighed once again.

I held on for so long with all my stats barely averaging 3 points. My patience and willpower surely increased by a hundred times.

Jin Sahyuk recalled a certain man and clenched her teeth. Now, she would soon take revenge.

Just wait 3 months. I’ll catch up to you soon.

— Look, the sun!

— Sun! Hey, take out your recorder!

— Wow!

An earthshaking resonance of magic power occurred as the crowd pointed towards the heart of Prestige and shouted. Jin Sahyuk also

raised her head.

A brilliant orange light rose above Medea's palace. A light that didn't previously exist in Prestige. Jin Sahyuk smiled as the sun slowly lit up the world and touched the people with warmth. *Tak*— Someone suddenly put their arm over her shoulders.

“What.”

Did Bell come back already? What the hell was he doing? Jin Sahyuk frowned and turned.

“...!”

Her heart immediately jumped and her diaphragm constricted.

“It's been a while.”

Jin Sahyuk recognized him. *Hic*. She hiccuped unknowingly at the man who appeared in her dreams the most, the son of a bitch who wouldn't leave her mind for a second because of her pent-up resentment and anger.

“You're alive.”

Kim Hajin spoke to her.

“...”

The person she wanted to kill the most now stood next to her. However, Jin Sahyuk couldn't say anything. She became drowsy and drenched in cold sweat from an instinctive fear instilled in her body.

“What's with that expression? Smile, will ya? Someone would think I came to bully you if they saw.”

Jin Sahyuk felt dumbstruck. She wanted to unleash her magic power and smack him, but her body refused to listen. She couldn't even move her tongue, much less her fingers.

“You’re not gonna smile?”

A cold voice rang out. Jin Sahyuk found herself forcefully raising the corners of her mouth and clenching her teeth. She valued her pride even more than life and would rather bite her tongue than suffer such humiliation. She creaked her head to the side and glared at the man.

“I’m kidding, I’m kidding. Don’t look at me like that. You’re scaring me. *Oooh*, I’m getting goosebumps.”

Kim Hajin smacked her shoulders. This meaningless gesture seeped into her bones and she could feel the vast difference in their stats.

“I can’t kill you today even if I want to, so don’t be so nervous.”

Kim Hajin’s words gave her the greatest humiliation. He meant that he could easily kill her otherwise.

“Wow, isn’t the sun pretty?”

Jin Sahyuk made a wish for the first time in her life for Bell to come save her.

Chapter 208

A Strange Battle (3)

[The sunlight blessed by administrators has completely cured low level abnormal status effects.] [A total of six Lv.2 Banshee's Curse has been cured.] [All stats will slowly recover.] [Challenge, Sweetness After Bitterness, completed – You have endured the banshee's curse the longest] [Will increase magic power stat by 0.5 points and infuse magic power with an undead attribute.]

The artificial sun radiated warmth and revealed a blue sky. Sunlight descended to the earth and enveloped Jin Sahyuk's cold body. It cleansed the curse and blessed her with a special reward for all her suffering.

She had suffered greatly for months. No other time in her life had she cried or been weakened so much. It made her realize that she was only human. so she should rejoice about overcoming the curse today.

However, happiness still seemed distant. Her body refused to listen to her brain as she felt herself wither up from the heavy tension.

“...”

The man's sudden silence made her feel like walking on thin ice. Jin Sahyuk licked her dried lips. *Should I turn around? Should I?* She finally glanced at Kim Hajin.

“Wow...”

He stared at the sun with a stupid, thoughtless expression.

Jin Sahyuk felt her rage explode. *Am I actually afraid of someone like him? Just when did I grow so weak?*

She forcibly moved her body with rage. Her fingers and joints began to listen again.

“Oi.”

Kim Hajin turned and faced her. He glared with wolf-like eyes that froze her body. She could only look, but wasn't sure if it was out of courage or fear.

“Do you have a special resistance stat?” Kim Hajin asked. Jin Sahyuk didn't answer.

“Do you or do you not?”

“...”

“Answer,” Kim Hajin pressed her.

“You're not going to answer? Three, two, one—”

“I do.”

She only found out recently, but a special stat called inhumane resistance indeed manifested. It must've been because she refused to give up against the banshee's curse.

“*Mmm*, I see.”

Kim Hajin grinned, then exerted more strength into the arm wrapped around her shoulders. They looked like close friends from anyone else's point of view. The whole situation disgusted Jin Sahyuk, but she didn't resist. She simply clenched her teeth, raised the magic power inside her, and muttered inwardly, *I'll cut out your heart if you get any closer*. Then the dry, cold voice entered her ears.

“Looks like I'll have to kill you now.”

His sharp voice carried genuine killing intent and goosebumps rose all over her body. Even she felt surprised by her subconscious reaction.

Ssk— Kim Hajin pulled out a gun from his pocket. The beautiful gun slowly approached her neck. Jin Sahyuk stared at the muzzle as the cold metal made contact.

“Huuk.”

She could only eke out a sound and recalled how Kim Hajin placed a vicious curse on his arrow. Would he use an even more brutal curse this time? Would she have to go through all that suffering and pain again? A feeling of terror rose from the depths of her heart. Jin Sahyuk panicked as her body lost all its strength and leaned against Kim Hajin.

“Hmm.”

Kim Hajin had his own worries. Jin Sahyuk didn’t seem to be thinking normally. She didn’t risk her life to kill him because of her laughably low stats and lost all her confidence.

Kim Hajin knew he would instill a powerful effect by killing her this time. His existence would become a trauma for her and might even cause a complete death. He only needed to move his hand a little. However...

[Warning! Many administrators are watching you. Murder is strictly prohibited in Prestige today.] [Warning! It is recommended that you stop your act of hostility.] [Warning! It is strongly recommended that you stop your act of hostility. Otherwise, you will be turning many administrators into your enemies!]

The system even used the phrase, *strongly recommended*. It seemed today wasn’t the day. Kim Hajin sighed and put away his Desert Eagle. The cold metal disappeared from Jin Sahyuk’s neck. Only then did she come to her senses and look up at him.

“I’m proud of you.” Kim Hajin patted her head instead of killing her and forcefully ruffled her hair. “You’re lucky too.”

Jin Sahyuk thought of how he treated her like a dog. She refused to suffer such humiliation. *How can such an unhandsome man...* Rage rose from within her and she resisted for the first time.

“Y-You!” She shook off his hand and glared.

“You son of a—”

“Talk and I’ll kill you.”

However, a single sentence shut her up again. Kim Hajin smiled at her.

“I’m letting you go just this once, so don’t let it dwell in your heart.”

Jin Sahyuk sensed a familiar presence as Kim Hajin spoke. She felt relieved at Bell’s return. Kim Hajin sensed it too and combed her disheveled hair before letting go of her.

“Alright, I’m leaving now.”

He knocked her head a few times for one last bit of humiliation. Jin Sahyuk kept her mouth shut. However, he looked at her one more time as though he found it displeasing.

“Don’t let me see you again.”

Jin Sahyuk stood blankly for a while before grinning. She managed to sneer now that a trustworthy ally had arrived.

“I thought about it...”

Her body still creaked from nervousness, but Jin Sahyuk managed to utter a few words. She glared at her sworn enemy and tried her best to shake off the fear.

“What do you plan on doing when we meet outside the tower?”

Kim Hajin paused. *So he’s afraid.* Jin Sahyuk guessed and tried to feel a sense of superiority. However, Kim Hajin only coldly smiled at her.

“It’ll be the same outside the tower.”

Jin Sahyuk couldn't see it, but the system messages in front of him affirmed his statement.

[Unique skill, Lv.8 Clock Hand of Fate has activated.] [You have met the condition to set a target as your fate.] Completed: Converse back and forth more than 30 times between you and a target. [Jin Sahyuk, the Refugee of a Foolish Grudge, has been added to your Fate Record.] [The condition will change. You must perform a different action to set your second fate.]

“You’ll die if I see you again.”

Jin Sahyuk blanked out for a moment at Kim Hajin’s final words. Soon, Bell appeared and stepped between them. She could no longer see Kim Hajin as Bell eyed him before turning towards her.

“Are you okay, Sahyuk?”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t reply as her body and mind burned with anger. She vowed to make Kim Hajin regret letting her go until he coughed blood. She vowed to deliver him the most excruciating pain and suffering.

“I swear on my clan...”

Jin Sahyuk’s voice trembled, perhaps from the overwhelming rage. She seemed to be crying with tears around her eyes.

* * *

“Wow...”

Yoo Yeonha watched the rising sun from the opposite side of the same floor. This scene filled her with wonder even as someone who wielded magic power and saw all sorts of magic spells growing up.

The tallest steeple of Medea’s palace filled with fire and soon became an artificial sun that rose into the sky. This beauty lay outside the realm of nature, a miracle that one could only watch in a stupor.

“...?”

She only noticed the player standing next to her after a while because of the mesmerizing sun. Yoo Yeonha turned to the side.

“...”

The girl's blonde hair shone brilliantly under the light. Yoo Yeonha became speechless at her beauty that rivaled elves. Rachel graciously bowed as royalty would.

“Hello.”

“Hi.”

Yoo Yeonha nodded. They greeted each other somewhat awkwardly, but had planned this seemingly coincidental meeting. Rachel had sent Yoo Yeonha a friend request along with the following message:

[Hello, Yeonha! It's been a while >.<! Maybe a year. I felt really happy when I heard you entered the tower ♡(● ●。)♡!... (13 lines of omitted text)... I'd like to show you around if you have time. Essence of the Strait and the English Royal Court guild have a good relationship inside the tower too... (8 lines of omitted text)... I won't mind even if you say no! ♡ ●.♡?]

It felt more like a letter than a text message. Yoo Yeonha didn't feel like rejecting such a nice gesture, so she accepted. She initially planned for an Essence of the Strait member to show her around, but it would also be more efficient for her guild if Rachel guided her instead.

“Rachel, your ID is CaptainBritain, right?”

“Yes.”

Prestige's new sun reflected off Rachel's milky white skin as she fidgeted and smiled shyly. Rachel must've heard that Yoo Yeonha became Essence of the Strait's chief strategic officer.

The rank 1 guild's chief strategic officer undoubtedly held great power. If Yoo Yeonha wanted, she could collude with other guilds and drive the English Royal Court guild to the depths of despair.

“You don’t have to talk so formally. It’s fine if you speak like in your text messages.”

Yoo Yeonha projected her system messenger. “Also, where did you learn to type these emoticons?”

“Ah...”

Rachel smiled bashfully. She couldn’t usually say what she wanted because of her position as England’s princess and felt unfamiliar with addressing people with great authority like Yoo Yeonha.

“It’s been a while since we last met, so it’s a bit... awkward.”

Rachel rarely talked if she didn’t need to and kept it simple whenever she did. Of course, she used her keyboard when she felt especially grateful.

“Um, so how are you going to help me?”

“Ah, I’ll explain how to grow stronger in detail...”

Rachel paused in the middle of her speech and looked around. *Didn’t Yoo Yeonha say she came with that person?*

“Duchess Ah Hae-In went back. She said receiving the sunlight’s blessing was enough.”

Ah Hae-In had a 100 day training routine already prepared. She should be in the middle of meditating inside Essence of the Strait’s hideout.

“Ah, I see.”

“Yes.”

“Then we should visit the various hunting grounds on the 3rd floor first. *Erm*, let, let’s go?”

Rachel tried to casually speak as Yoo Yeonha instructed. They used to be classmates and Rachel wanted to close the distance between them considering the potential benefits. Rachel's relationship with Kim Youngjin seemed fine, but Yoo Yeonha would clearly be Essence of the Strait's new head inside the tower.

“...”

However, Yoo Yeonha didn't reply as Rachel dejectedly asked again.

“Shall we head to the hunting grounds?”

Yoo Yeonha remained silent, but not because of how Rachel spoke. She smelled a familiar scent from the princess. Yoo Yeonha furrowed her brows and stared intently at Rachel. This, of course, made Rachel flinch.

“O-Or would you like to go somewhere else? I'd be honored to guide you wherever...”

Did she dislike my casual tone? Rachel spoke even more respectfully, but Yoo Yeonha only focused on figuring out the smell. Then she suddenly approached Rachel and sniffed her.

“You...”

Yoo Yeonha sniffed her one more time to confirm. She became certain now. This smell practically doused Rachel's body. Yoo Yeonha could only blankly stare and knew exactly where this smell came from. After all, the same smell soaked her bed and wouldn't disappear no matter how many times she washed it. Right, it smelled like Kim Hajin.

* * *

[3F, Prestige]

The price of land in Prestige skyrocketed 10 days later after the artificial sun appeared. However, players couldn't buy any land even if they had the money because most of it already belonged to another player.

I owned almost 50% of all available land in Prestige. Henry and Kiri used it to form mutually beneficial relationships with NPCs, so Prestige's citizens didn't complain about my monopoly of wealth.

"How are things going?"

I visited Henry and Kiri for the first time in a while at Riry Shop. I asked them about Prestige's state of affairs and worried if Medea might scheme to take away my land.

"It's going great! We're both really happy!"

"Oh! Our daddy also came back!"

I widened my eyes at Kiri's words. "Really?"

"Yes! Oppa's friend rescued him and brought him back!"

"Cheok Jungyeong did? That's great."

I smiled and patted their heads. All the NPCs that Cheok Jungyeong and I saved possessed useful skills in construction, law, administration, education, and magic. Prestige now rapidly progressed, but Kiri's smile soon faded as she asked with a worried expression.

"I heard about oppa's upcoming battle."

"*Hm?* Oh, the one with Black Lotus. It's tomorrow."

It would take place at dawn since Crevon was least active then due to the morning Fog of Darkness. I planned a flawless show, but it would be better with fewer eyes.

"How are the goblins doing?"

"They're downstairs. Follow me. We expanded our basement a lot!"

Henry and Kiri pulled my hand and led me downstairs. Six goblins

busily worked in Riry Shop's basement. *Weren't there initially three?*

"They multiplied?"

"Yes. Master reached the 8th floor, right?"

"Yeah."

"It looks like the stone tablet leveled up accordingly. It might also have been because of the hard work the goblins put in."

"I see."

I examined the goblins.

[Lv.5 Craftsman Goblin] [In a state of increased efficiency due to being in a suitable environment.] [Feels very satisfied with his residential area. His happiness level has reached 99%.] [Will soon level up.]

"Residential area? This place is a residential area?"

"Ah, yes. I asked Kedrick oppa to separate the basement into different rooms. This is the potion room."

Kiri opened the room next door with a sign that read, *[Playroom]*. I peeked inside and saw a pool table, ping-pong table, foosball table, etc. Another room had a sign that read, *[Bedroom]*.

"Hm? What are they?"

I caught sight of 2 goblins playing cards. They had huge bodies unlike the goblins in the potion room.

"There are 8 goblins?"

"Yes, those two are in charge of the shop's security. They play around during the day when the city guards patrol the area and work at night."

They had the same build as an adult male and also seemed well-equipped. Henry and Kiri provided them with the proper tools to work.

“I see. Well, looks like I don’t need to worry about anything. Good job.”

I smiled and hugged them. The two starving kids I found had grown so much. They felt quite heavy now as well.

“Then I’ll be off.”

“Okay.”

“Stay safe!”

“Don’t worry.”

I left the shop with a smile and headed to the crystal stele at the center of Prestige. Then I used it to travel to the 8th floor.

[8-3F, Crevon, The Final Crystal Stele on the Eastern End]

Aileen and Jin Seyeon waited for me. Jin Seyeon held a recorder and Aileen had a face with mixed emotions.

“Oh, he’s here.”

“Hello.”

Jin Seyeon asked for my plan as soon as I arrived.

“Just bait him into shooting his warning arrow. Black Lotus always shoots a harmless wooden arrow first, so I’ll shoot him down during that brief opening when he attacks.”

“Oh, we thought of doing the same when we first spoke to you. After all, he would leave an opening no matter how fast his reactions.”

I nodded at Jin Seyeon's intimidating words. As I thought, I might've been in trouble if I didn't take on this role. I probably would've even died.

"Can we really take the reward for reaching the 9th floor first? We can wait for you if you want."

Jin Seyeon felt a bit sorry.

"No, it's fine. I don't mind at all."

They would simply be given the qualification to hunt the 9th floor's calamities first. I didn't want that reward anyways.

"Oh, take this."

"What is it?"

I gave them several summoning scrolls. These scrolls could be torn in an emergency to teleport the user to a safe location within a 10 km radius. The emergency waiting room ticket served a similar purpose, but the user would return to the same place after exiting their waiting rooms. That wouldn't help after being surrounded.

"Use it if you're in danger."

Aileen and Jin Seyeon took the scrolls without saying much. For the record, these scrolls cost about 3000 TP each.

"Such precious scrolls... Oh, did you manage to pinpoint Black Lotus' location?" Jin Seyeon asked as she carefully placed the scrolls in her pocket.

"Yes, I spent the past month looking and also found a good sniping spot."

Jin Seyeon nodded without suspecting me at all.

"Oh right, the Atalos Royal Family promised a great reward if Hajin

manages to take down Black Lotus.”

“They did?”

“Yes, they came to us first and seemed curious about the higher floors. That’s also why I brought a recorder.”

“I see. That’s great.”

I didn’t have a reason to decline. I took out the Desert Eagle and fused it with aether. *Creak— Creak—* A strange, mechanical sound rang out as the gun transformed. In just 2 seconds, the Desert Eagle became an enormous monster.

“Let’s go.”

I placed the anti-material sniper rifle on my shoulder.

Chapter 209

A Strange Battle (4)

I kneeled on the ground. Professional snipers used all sorts of equipment like tripods, a scope, and ear muffs, but I only needed aether. *Click*— I aimed towards the watchtower and spotted Jain with my thousand-mile eyes. I hid on a mountain ridge 5 km northwest of the World's End Bridge. A cold wind blew as starlight sparkled in the sky.

Me: Are you ready?

I messaged Jain who prepared for the show.

PhantomThief: Yep, I'm good. How much is your bounty again?

Me: Crevon offered 150,000 TP. You can take all of it.

PhantomThief: Ooh, this is why you're so great. That stingy Cheok Jungyeong would...

That amount felt like chump change to me. It only equaled my daily profit from Prestige, but I received less than 10% because of my various charitable services. The preparations seemed finished. I didn't reveal my nickname to Jin Seyeon and Aileen. Instead, I loaned them a rare item called the *[Lv.4 Infinitely Multiplying Communication Letter]*. Jin Seyeon's handwriting appeared on my copy.

[We're standing at the bridge entrance.]

I examined my weapon. I brought 8 sniper bullets with me, magic bullets personally crafted by Prestige's skilled blacksmiths. Naturally, they packed more power than factory-made bullets.

I infused stigma's magic power into them, but didn't add any special

attributes. Magic bullets flew silently and stigma only amplified their original properties. If I had to modify the names of their properties... it would have to be something like increased fanciness and false bravado.

[Start.]

I wrote the above reply after amplifying my bullets with 2 streaks of stigma. Then I took out the Crane Feather Fan.

“Rise, fog...”

The Crane Feather Fan could control the wind and fog, so I made the Fog of Darkness in the surrounding area even denser.

* * *

[Start.]

That message signaled that the operation would begin. Jin Seyeon and Aileen looked at each other before stepping onto the World’s End Bridge. This bridge couldn’t be destroyed or damaged and seemed like the safest bridge in the universe. However, the two heroes walking on it thought differently. They felt tense and nervous like walking on thin ice because of the psychological pressure from Black Lotus. The surrounding atmosphere also felt eerie. The wind rustled the leaves and a dense fog hid the end of the bridge.

“What skill did he learn?”

Aileen suddenly spoke. She hated scary things and took her attention off the eerie atmosphere by thinking about the question on her mind for a month now. How did Fenrir break her barrier so easily? She decided to think about this until the warning arrow arrived. She even placed a hypnotic suggestion on herself with Spirit Speech.

“How can my barrier be broken so easily?”

Jin Seyeon earnestly replied to Aileen’s muttering.

“Fenrir relies more on weapons compared to other players. He isn’t the only ability user with this problem. People with weapon-related gifts all share this common flaw.”

These ability users could only display their power with weapons. They required weapons rather than preferring one. Most ability users could use any weapon with flexibility. For example, Chae Nayun and Kim Suho wouldn’t lose too much firepower as long as they held something with a sword’s shape. Jin Seyeon could also shoot magic arrows without bows and arrows.

However, ability users like Fenrir Kim Hajin and Weapon Master Kim Youngjin couldn’t do the same. They would be severely weakened to the extent that they couldn’t fight without their weapons. Such special, or perhaps inflexible ability users, often couldn’t wield magic power either.

“I might not look like it, but I placed in the top 300 in theory.”

“Then you should know that this flaw can also become their strength.”

Such ability users usually shined when their gift’s flaw acted as their strength. Their battle prowess increased drastically as their weapons improved because they relied so heavily on them. What if Kim Youngjin received Xiang Yu’s legendary sword Tai’e? Then he would become the Supreme Emperor Xiang Yu himself because his gift allowed him to wield all weapons to their extreme. Fenrir functioned the same.

“No technology in the modern era can strengthen guns. Guns also have a shallow history, which is why they rarely exist as artifacts. We don’t have the technology to create guns surpassing artifacts either.”

“I get it.”

Aileen agreed. They weren’t on Earth and the Tower of Wish had items and skills that could strengthen any equipment. Fenrir’s gift displayed amazing synergy with the tower and he managed to elevate his gun’s state of existence. However, Aileen still wondered where he obtained his bullets.

“So he turned his life around with a black ticket.”

“I wouldn’t go that far. He already did well before entering the tower. Anyways, let’s focus. It’s about to begin.”

Aileen nodded. Black Lotus’ warning arrow should arrive soon.

“I’m going to focus from now on.”

Aileen used Spirit Speech on herself and her perception of the world slowed. The wind blowing past her stopped and Jin Seyeon’s foot hovered in midair.

Aileen walked and felt every microsecond in detail. She had trouble moving properly in this state, but could perfectly observe anything around her.

Suddenly...

She felt the flow of air twisting from far away. Aileen could see it clearly. A wooden arrow flew towards them. Black Lotus had fired his warning shot. Aileen could also see something else. A white streak of light traced the wooden arrow’s path before it could even touch the ground.

Fenrir’s bullet... no, bullets. A total of 8 shooting stars perfectly tailed each other. The shooting stars far surpassed the wooden arrow’s speed and dyed the sky white.

It looked beautiful. Aileen widened her eyes and watched the mesmerizing display.

Meanwhile, Black Lotus’ arrow still hadn’t reached their location. It still flew through the air, yet Fenrir’s teeth had already reached the nape of Black Lotus’ neck.

Then the wolf bit the lotus.

A white explosion erupted. Each bullet continued the previous eruption of power, creating a chain explosion that amplified their

destructive potential.

BOOOOOOOM...

The eastern mountain ridge roared from the magic bullets. The earth split and trees crumbled. The mountain ridge shook and a heavy rumbling resounded. The mountain peak began to crumble and an avalanche occurred. As expected, the wolf thoroughly finished the hunt. He destroyed the mountain itself to eliminate Black Lotus' path of escape and ensured his death.

"Ah..."

The mountain crumbled under the white light. Just 8 bullets devoured an entire mountain and left the bite marks of a beast. Aileen turned and faced Jin Seyeon, who clearly saw Black Lotus being struck by Kim Hajin's bullets with her Divine Archer eyes. The subsequent explosion blocked her vision, but she knew Black Lotus had died.

Thud.

Only then did Black Lotus' wooden arrow strike the ground. It all happened in a mere 3 seconds. Black Lotus' arrow flew several kilometers and finally reached the ground in front of them.

"So?" Aileen asked nonchalantly. She quickly calmed down because she had witnessed far more preposterous scenes in her life.

"I think he died."

Jin Seyeon picked up the wooden arrow and opened the letter tied at the end.

[I will allow only 10 steps forward.]

This arrow undoubtedly belonged to Black Lotus, but its owner had just died.

Aileen and Jin Seyeon stared at each other and exchanged a meaningful look. Then they mustered the courage to step forward.

One step, two steps, three steps... ten steps. The attack they waited for didn't arrive and nothing stopped them. Black Lotus had died.

[You have arrived at the Door of Calamity.] [You are the first to open the Door of Calamity. You have gained the qualification to defeat the 9th floor's calamities first.] [You may not give up this qualification.] [The 9th floor's calamities will now descend to the 8th floor.]

* * *

I climbed down the mountain as soon as I finished. The show met my desired conclusion. I caused a proper avalanche thanks to weakening the mountain's foundation beforehand with the mystic key. Aileen and Jin Seyeon didn't suspect anything from the looks of it.

"Whew."

I sighed in relief. Now, I just had to sit back and collect the SP. I planned on returning home, but a shadow suddenly jumped out of the dark. The assassin grabbed me from behind and strangled me.

"Iik!"

I felt genuinely surprised, but not from the asphyxiation. I hadn't felt any presence and the shout came from a girl as well.

"What..."

Who is this girl? I lightly activated aether and easily pushed her away.

"Kiyak!"

The girl fainted after aether struck her chin. I rubbed my neck, coughed a few times, and stared at her.

"Who is she?"

The girl wore a mask and her NPC name remained hidden. I tilted my head and unmasked her, but still couldn't figure out her identity. She

just looked too average.

“The heck...”

I grew genuinely curious. She possessed an amazing stealth technique, but her follow-up felt sloppy. Stabbing me would’ve been much more effective than trying to choke me.

“*Hmm.*”

I checked my smartwatch since I should be able to view most NPCs with it. Surprisingly, nothing showed up. Was she too insignificant or the opposite? I carried her on my shoulder while feeling a bit confused. She might die if I left her since unimaginable monsters would start pouring in once the 9th floor door opened.

* * *

“So Hajin, why did you do all that?”

Jain asked 1 hour later at the Ironblood Duchess’ mansion. I felt sorry seeing all the wounds on her body. It had taken quite a toll even though she used a puppet for the job.

“Why not? It’s fun and we also made 150,000 TP for free.”

“You’re right, but... well, yeah, money is nice.”

Jain didn’t dig into it even though she had many questions. I liked her personality for this very reason. She didn’t ask questions that made the other party uncomfortable and never pressured them. She knew how to take a hint and always acted easygoing.

“Oh, Hajin, you have a martial tournament match tomorrow, right?”

“Yeah, but I’m going to forfeit.”

“Why?”

“My opponent is Boss.”

I couldn't beat her even if I died and reincarnated. Of course, I had grown a lot stronger and felt confident about beating anyone inside the tower. Even in the outside world, I would be at least high-intermediate rank. I would be surprised if I wasn't at that level with my strengthened Desert Eagle and aether along with the new skills.

Even so, I couldn't beat Boss. No sharpshooter could beat her.

“Boss is going to be disappointed.”

“Disappointed?”

“She felt happy about meeting you.”

“She likes bullying her subordinates?”

“No, I think she might lose on purpose if you ask.”

I smirked. *Boss losing on purpose?* I found that hard to believe considering how she hated going easy on people.

Wiiing!

A loud siren rang, most likely from the Door of Calamity opening. I left Jain behind and ran with my gun in hand. I quickly climbed up the stairs to Tomer's room.

“*Hmm...*”

Tomer looked from her balcony at the western castle wall. A heavy atmosphere filled the air as I tapped on her shoulder.

“Yo, Ironblood Duchess.”

“Oh, you're here.”

Tomer looked at me and smiled bitterly. I also looked at the horde of

monsters rushing towards the western castle wall. Their red eyes shone with bloodlust. Only an hour had passed since the 9th floor door opened, but such a change already occurred. As I suspected, the calamities seemed stronger than in the original story.

“They’re doing surprisingly well.”

Tomer’s soldiers continued to defend the castle wall. I expected as much from the Ironblood Duchess’ elite soldiers.

“Just what are you?” Tomer looked at me with a piercing gaze.

“What.”

“Are you a prophet or some sort of reincarnator?”

“Oh.”

I thinly smiled. Was it three months ago? I told Tomer to train her soldiers more strictly so they could reach at least level 13. I also grilled her not to be cheap and invest in their equipment. Tomer didn’t understand, but trusted me enough to do so. I thoroughly prepared her soldiers since the royal family wouldn’t listen to an outsider like me.

“Are you a reincarnator? No, you must be a regressor.”

Tomer strangely misunderstood me now.

“Regressor? As if someone like that could exist.”

“Shin Myungchul was one.”

“*Cough.*”

I scratched my neck. Shin Jonghak’s grandfather, Shin Myungchul, was the world’s only regressor. Of course, it had never been confirmed.

“No one knows for sure whether that’s true.”

“It’s more or less a fact.”

“Regardless, I’m not a regressor or anything like that.”

I took out my gun. The 1-2 km distance between Tomer’s mansion and the castle wall wouldn’t hinder me.

“I can shoot from here. Should I help them?”

“No, leave them be.” Tomer shook her head. “They need real combat experience.”

Tomer’s soldiers overpowered the monsters on the battlefield. Her hellish training proved quite effective.

“Eh?”

She let out a strange sound. I didn’t even have the time to ask what happened. She suddenly hugged me and something soft touched my skin.

“Hey, you...”

Tomer unleashed her magic power before I could say anything. It surrounded me and burnt something off. Then she separated herself.

“What was that? A sudden confession?” I tried acting unfazed.

“Do I look crazy? You had a tracking spell on you.”

“What?”

At first, I thought she lied to hide her embarrassment. I found it hard to accept that aether couldn’t detect a spell on me. However, Tomer looked serious and I wasn’t the kind of handsome man who would receive confessions.

“I didn’t notice until up close. It should be Medea’s doing.”

“...”

I suddenly felt a chill down my back. Indeed, Medea would be capable of placing a tracking spell without me noticing.

“Be careful. It’s not like administrators can’t kill players.”

“Why would she do that? We’re not in a bad relationship.”

“Didn’t you take all her money? Don’t you know Medea loves money the most? Plus, she ranks in the upper echelons among administrators. Only a few can stop her if she sets her mind on something.”

I felt a bit nervous since I knew Medea’s personality better than anyone.

“You must’ve gotten on her nerves if she placed a tracking spell on you. Oh, did you see the craftsmanship tournament? Do you even know what that is?”

I nodded. *Of course, I won the grand prize!*

“Medea is eyeing the item that won first place.”

My eyes shot open. The Wolf’s Fragrance would soon return to me along with the first place rewards.

“She is?”

“Yeah. Try to get it for her if you can. She likes receiving gifts and always repays her debts.”

“Okay, thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Medea played an important role in the tower. Her Sorceress title wasn’t just for show. Gaining her favor wouldn’t be disadvantageous at all.

“Oh, I forgot something.”

I told Tomer about the mysterious girl I picked up before leaving. She currently slept in the 2nd floor guest room.

“A girl? Okay, I’ll take a look.”

Tomer nodded without much thought as I opened the door.

“Ah, geez.”

I flinched at Boss standing right in front of the door.

Chapter 210

List of Calamities (1)

I opened the door to leave.

“Ah, geez.”

And flinched at Boss standing in front of the door. She simply glanced at me.

“Did you also come to speak with the Ironblood Duchess?”

Boss only glared in silence. She was quite tall for a woman and felt daunting today.

Why is she so upset? Did Jain tell her I would withdraw from the martial tournament?

Boss stood for a while before stretching her arm past me. I felt startled, but didn’t mind. Then she grabbed the doorknob behind me. *KOONG*— And completely shut the half-opened door.

“Boss? Aren’t you coming in?”

“Just now.”

Boss’ lips slightly quivered and she mumbled a question as if speaking to herself.

“Just now. What did you do inside?”

“*Huh?*” I tilted my head.

“You did something inside.”

Boss repeated. I quickly realized what she meant. She probably witnessed the strange scene just a moment ago.

“Ah, that was nothing. Wait, were you peeking on us?”

Boss’s shoulders slightly trembled as she frowned.

“Peeking? That’s no way to speak to your boss.”

I simply smiled. “Then why did you come here?”

“What you did just now—“

“She’s my centurion.”

Tomer interrupted Boss and opened the door. Then she softly smiled at Boss.

“Welcome.”

“...Yes.”

Boss greeted her in an unusually brusque manner.

“I’ll have to listen to your report later. I have something else to do.”

Tomer simply walked past us. Boss felt slightly disgruntled as she watched her disappear.

“...”

“Hmm... Boss, how's your sparring with Tomer going?”

I tried asking. Some time had passed since we arrived on the 8th floor, but their relationship remained the same. Things would be different if she won at least once.

“We’re now evenly matched, on-par, equal.”

She said several phrases that meant the same thing.

“It won’t be long before I win.”

Seeing Boss like that aroused my curiosity. “Have you been reading a wuxia novel?”

“Mm? What are you suddenly talking about? I did find an interesting wuxia novel. Should I tell you the title?”

Boss grinned like anyone else recommending their favorite novel and opened her system window.

“No, that’s okay.”

I declined with a smile, but grew curious about something else.

What did her stats look like now?

I took out the directory.

▷Stats: Variable stats [Strength 10.1] [Stamina 10.5] [Speed ???]
[Perception ???] [Magic Power ???] [Vitality 11]

Question marks indicated that her stats surpassed what the directory could accurately estimate. Seeing this great progress only deepened my curiosity. What kind of environment did Tomer experience and what skills did she learn to win against Boss in this state? I closed the directory.

“Hmm.”

Then I opened it again. This time, I infused it with 0.5 streaks of stigma. Perhaps the stat limit would increase. Contrary to my expectations, the question marks didn’t change. However, additional sentences and details appeared as if they had been burned onto the page.

[Current Emotion – Slightly Annoyed, Curious] [Slightly irritated by the

huh and the word, regressor. Also hungry.] [Wants to read the next chapter of the webnovel, New Martial World.]

“Oh, by the way, Hajin.” Boss put on a cold expression as I read the directory.

“Kaita was killed.”

“Ah.”

We went silent for a moment. *Kaita was killed*. Boss repeated solemnly. It didn’t surprise me. I knew exactly who would’ve defeated him.

Kyaaaaak! A shriek suddenly came from downstairs. It sounded like Tomer and we hurried towards the sound. *Tadadada...*

“Duchess!”

We quickly arrived and Boss immediately checked for Tomer. It seemed Boss took a liking to her, but Tomer simply slumped on the floor without any injuries.

“Hey, y-you... This person.” Tomer shuddered as she pointed at the bed where I placed the assassin.

“What’s wrong... *Huh?*”

I took a closer look at the person in bed. Her plain appearance had been a disguise and completely wore off by now. The bare face revealed a person I had seen before.

Araha Von Atalos Diana.

I mumbled with a sigh. “Why is Princess Araha here?”

“Where, where did you meet her?” Tomer asked in a flurry.

“The eastern mountain.”

I opened the directory and examined Araha's status.

[Current State – Asleep] [I have to catch the thief who stole the Crane Feather Fan... So sleepy.]

“...”

It looked like she came for the Crane Feather Fan, but how? I glanced at the item in my pocket and scratched my neck. I had no clue why the princess foolishly came here alone, but she couldn't just be brushed off. Maybe she planned to be captured like this. She was quite smart and ambitious for a 17 year old.

“Will people suspect that we abducted her? She looked different when I placed her there,” I explained to Tomer.

“Don't worry. I have an excuse in my mind. She disguised herself, which means she ran away from home. Everyone knows about the fifth princess' eccentric behavior.”

Tomer stood up and wiped the sweat off her forehead.

“First, tell me what happened.”

I nodded and recounted the events.

* * *

[3F Prestige, Lv.8 Essence of the Strait's Hideout]

Kim Youngjin, the tower subjugation team's chief officer, received a report at their hideout which could accommodate over 100 people now.

[I would like to inform Chief Officer Kim Youngjin that the mission succeeded.]

The report came over the infinitely multiplying letter. It informed him that Black Lotus had been defeated, Aileen's team successfully entered

the 9th floor, and the door to the 9th floor wouldn't open for a while.

“So?”

Yoo Yeonha silently listened and asked him. Technically, Kim Youngjin was in charge inside the tower. Yoo Yeonha didn't want to take that away from him. She held a superior rank outside the tower, but Kim Youngjin possessed better insight concerning tower matters.

“*Haa.*” Kim Youngjin sighed.

“Fenrir succeeded.”

Yoo Yeonha nodded at the solemn declaration. Her thoughts jumbled together and she felt a headache coming on. However, she didn't express any of her mixed emotions.

Chae Nayun stood in the same room and clenched her teeth. Kim Hajin had defeated the man considered the strongest in the tower. That cruel fact definitely provoked her.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha continued to quietly think. Things had gotten serious now. Kim Hajin knew Black Lotus belonged to the Chameleon Troupe and killed him. He meant it as a declaration of war and would continue to hunt the Chameleon Troupe members. Perhaps more thoroughly and brutally than she could ever imagine.

“Well then, I'll take my leave now.”

Chae Nayun suddenly stood up and rushed out of the hideout.

“*Ah*, Nayun. Again...” Yi Jiyeon mumbled words of concern as she watched Chae Nayun leave. Yoo Yeonha didn't miss her knowing attitude.

“Again, what?”

“Oh, *um*. She’s been smoking again lately... Boss.” Yi Jiyeon carefully added the honorific at the end.

“Smoking? They sell cigarettes here?”

“Yes. People with strange skills began making and selling them.”

“I didn’t see any on the 3rd floor.”

“They’re only on the 8th floor. They don’t sell any luxury items on the 3rd floor since they can sell for a higher price on the 8th.”

“I see.”

Yoo Yeonha scratched her head and stood up with a sigh. Then she chased after Chae Nayun.

As Yi Jiyeon said, Chae Nayun went for a smoke on the 3rd floor balcony.

"Nayun?"

Yoo Yeonha softly called out. Chae Nayun turned around to face her.

"What are you doing here?"

"Oh, this?"

Chae Nayun shook the cigarette between her fingers and threw it in the portable ashtray.

"It's nothing. I only smoke 3 a day. I earned a good trait from it too."

Chae Nayun smiled, but didn't look happy at all.

"What kind of traitRelated how?"

Yoo Yeonha leaned against the wall and stared at her. The smile on

Chae Nayun's lips glowed under the pale moonlight.

"I'm not supposed to tell others, but I'll make an exception for you. I can convert toxins into magic power."

"Hm? Really?"

"Yep. I got this trait from the curse a while ago. Cigarettes provide a decent source of magic power. Three a day can easily restore my magic power."

"I see. That's a good trait."

Yoo Yeonha gently looked at her. She felt various emotions as they made eye contact.

"W-What are you looking at?"

"Nothing."

Honestly, Yoo Yeonha still hoped. Her wish may never come true, but she didn't think it was impossible. Suddenly, she thought about what her father once asked her. *Is it weak to lean on hope or is it weak to not believe in hope?* She didn't answer at the time because she didn't think one could judge a person's weakness based on their belief in hope.

"Oh, I heard you became chief strategic officer."

"Yeah."

"Congrats. You're the youngest chief officer in history. That's pretty cool."

Yoo Yeonha still hoped that Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun could smile at each other one day. That they would end all their misunderstandings, resentment, and hatred. That all their wounds would heal and they could smile truthfully again. Even if that dream would never come true...

"Thanks."

Yoo Yeonha thought about her wish under Prestige's beautiful moonlight.

* * *

[7F, Game Center]

Tomer asked me to hide while she spoke to the princess, so I went down to the 7th floor.

"Hmm..."

I took out the directory.

[Directory]

Jin Sahyuk – Current Location: 7F

Aileen – Current Location: 9F

Chae Nayun – Current Location: 8-2F

Kim Suho – Current Location: 8-3F...

Jin Sahyuk also came to the 7th floor, but I couldn't do anything. No one could kill on the 7th floor and AlphaGo would warn me as soon as I took out my weapon. I would turn into ashes before I could even lift a finger.

Tiriring —

Ppororong —

— How does ace-high win in a 4 way pot? *Haha*, sorry boys... Aces full.

I slowly walked past all the gambling, games, regrets, and happiness. Then I arrived at the [*Upgrade Center*]. The most important facility on the 7th floor looked almost empty, probably because it cost too much and everyone else focused on gambling. Only one other customer visited and I carefully walked towards her.

"So you're saying each stat boost costs 15,000 TP?"

— That is correct.

The familiar voice spoke to AlphaGo.

"That's way more than what I expected. Here, what's this individual boost?"

— I will strengthen your intrinsic trait, which is connected to your neurotech chip.

"Mine is way too expensive. Where do I even find 150,000 TP?"

— It is because your trait is perfect.

"Really? *Hmm...* Fine. You're just a robot, but I like you."

I stood beside the grinning woman.

"You better not think of doing anything stupid to make money."

Jin Sahyuk widened her eyes and turned to face me.

"...!"

She jumped to the side the moment our eyes met. I could tell she had completely recovered from her quick response.

"Y-You...!" Jin Sahyuk moved her lips as if to say something.

"We'll probably run into each other more often."

However, I spoke first.

"Wherever you are..."

If it's a place where you can die...

"I'll come and find you, so behave properly."

Jin Sahyuk gave me a sharp glance. She mumbled inaudible words and pointed at me before running away. I took over her spot.

— Welcome, VIP.

"Yeah, good to see you. It's been a while."

— How may I help you today?

"I'm here for the prizes."

I came in first in all but 3 games. The system had sent me a message to retrieve the prizes.

— Understood. I shall convert your score and show you the list of prizes. Your prize score is 150 PT.

The robot displayed the list of prizes.

*[Prosthetic Limb (Effective Good) — 25 PT] [VIP Room Pass — 25 PT]
[Machine Enhancement Service — 100 PT] [Lucky Macaron]...*

Only the machine enhancement service caught my eye.

— You have selected the Machine Enhancement Service for 100 PT. Please submit what you would like to enhance.

"How about my neurotech chip?"

— It is the latest technology, thus further enhancement is not possible.

"Really? Well then."

I handed the Desert Eagle over. AlphaGo grabbed my gun and examined it in detail. It showed rare curiosity for a robot.

— What a mysterious machine.

"Can you do it?"

— Yes, but the process will take around half a day.

The situation in Crevon wouldn't change for now. Monsters still rampaged, but the 9th floor's calamities had yet to descend, probably because Aileen's team on the 9th floor somehow held on. I wasn't sure how helpful this gun would be, but I had already made hundreds of bullets after pushing the Prestige blacksmiths to their limits.

— I have received the Desert Eagle.

The calamities destroyed 1/3 of Crevon in the original story. I believed I could change this fate.

"You're the one doing the enhancement, right?"

— That is correct.

"Show me your hand."

I planned on doing my best as I grabbed AlphaGo's wrist and muttered, *Scan*.

* * *

[9F, *Inside the Door of Calamity*]

The sun that lit up the world fell to the west. Aileen's party stood in the middle of the 9th floor where not a single blade of grass grew.

"I give up. I give up."

Aileen wanted to give up. Jin Seyeon, Yi Yongha, and Shin Jonghak accompanied her on the 9th floor. Indeed, challenging this floor with a party of four could only be called a calamity. Every monster felt like a dungeon boss. Furthermore, the entire system disappeared and they lost their source of recovering energy and health in this living hell. Aileen and the others had endured for 18 hours.

"Give up... I really want to give up..."

"Lady Aileen, the calamities will invade the 8th floor if we back down here."

Jin Seyeon comforted her, who drooped like a wet sponge. The reward they received for being first was *[the right to eliminate the 9th floor's calamities first]*. They could monopolize the 9th floor as long as they wanted. However, they couldn't leave the 9th floor either. No one else could enter as long as they remained. This right could be given up at any time, but the 9th floor calamities would escape through the opened door.

"I know, but..."

Aileen felt somewhat responsible. After all, she had opened the door.

"I can't die here."

"That's true. Well, let's rest for now. We don't know when the enemy will strike again."

They silently lay on the ground after all the fighting. The atmosphere calmed after a long time. Shin Jonghak prepared to sleep and Jin Seyeon took out some beef jerky along with other food from her inventory. They focused on recovering their stamina when Jin Seyeon suddenly spoke as she chewed on jerky.

"Perhaps Black Lotus already knew about this situation."

Jin Seyeon proposed an interesting hypothesis.

"No way." Aileen looked a bit afraid.

"No, there's a good chance. Honestly, I've been thinking about it the entire time," Jin Seyeon said with a grim expression. "Black Lotus somehow found out about the 9th floor's calamities and deliberately blocked the World's End Bridge."

Everybody went silent, but Aileen soon disagreed.

"That doesn't make sense. How could he have known? We were the first to enter."

"I don't know, but hasn't Black Lotus been acting strange this entire time?"

Jin Seyeon recited her doubts one by one.

"Black Lotus didn't have to fire warning shots. He should be aware of the risks in doing so, but he fired them anyways and overlooked those who retreated. That means..."

Jin Seyeon stopped.

"He didn't want to kill. He could've easily opened the door. It only took us a few monsters and some traps to get here, so he didn't block the bridge out of selfishness."

What Jin Seyeon said made sense and a heavy silence descended. Yi Yongha spoke a few moments later.

"It's true that words wouldn't have been enough to stop anyone. Both heroes and djinns were eager to climb the tower. It does feel like Black Lotus calmed the madness a bit."

Honestly, Black Lotus helped everyone appreciate and enjoy the tower.

Aileen ruffled her hair.

"So what? We go outside and say sorry, we messed up. Tell everyone that Black Lotus is actually a cool guy?"

"He does seem kind of cool if what Divine Archer Jin Seyeon said is correct."

"Hey!"

KOONG— KOONG—

The four heard loud footsteps and tensed up. Another monster had emerged from the distance. It looked like a man with the head of a bull. They all recognized this mythical monster, a minotaur. Jin Seyeon grabbed her bow.

"For now, let's buy as much time as we can. They're hard to kill, but they do drop great items."

Fighting against strong opponents always improved one's skills. The four reluctantly moved their tired bodies.

"*Sheesh*. Okay, okay."

Aileen mumbled and glared at the minotaur.

"Listen, cow."

They had achieved their goal a long time ago. Each player had to defeat at least 2 monsters, so they could go to the 10th floor at any time.

"This spear..."

Only their sense of duty as heroes held them back. Aileen formed a sharp spear out of magic power. The sparks shook the atmosphere and gathered at its tip.

"Will pierce your heart!"

She shouted as the magic spear wailed. It soared at the speed of light and appeared moments later through the minotaur's heart as if it had been there from the start.

"Become lightning."

The spear that pierced the monster's heart grew hot and an electrical current burned the minotaur's insides. However, it still stood tall and hadn't died yet.

Chapter 211

List of Calamities (2)

— Monsters are rampaging in the south side too.

— Monsters are invading from the northern beach.

Tomer sighed as she received reports from her communication crystal.

Crevon's monsters began to stir. Not only had their numbers tripled, but they also possessed higher levels than normal. It happened so quickly that players living in Central Crevon didn't even notice.

“And the damages?”

— The northern castle is heavily damaged. It hasn't been toppled, but they're having difficulty holding the monsters back.

“*Tsk.*”

Truth be told, Crevon enjoyed peace for far too long. Tomer heard the last war occurred 100 years ago. As such, Crevon's soldiers also grew lax. Of course, demons had recently attacked. However, they dealt with it in just 3 hours, so Crevon's soldiers and nobles only grew lazier and more arrogant.

“What is the royal family's plan?”

— They plan on dispatching Lü Bu and other generals. They're also planning on hiring outsiders. How are the damages on the western front? It must contain more monsters.

“It's okay for now, but the monsters are growing stronger.”

Surprisingly, Western Crevon suffered little damage despite bordering

the land transformed by the demon realm. Tomer had hellishly trained her soldiers for the past 3-4 months. She also used aid from the central government and her personal funds to upgrade their equipment. As a result, ordinary soldiers averaged level 10 and knights who swore loyalty to her reached level 16. Furthermore, she had extraordinary guests like Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Yohan who enjoyed fighting.

“I’ll need more funds.”

She ran out of funds to pay the soldiers’ salaries, provide their meals, and reinforce the castle walls.

— Understood. I will let His Majesty know about the western front’s situation.

“Thanks.”

Tomer turned off the communication crystal and sighed. A soft voice entered her ears as she pressed her temples.

“Looks like this place is safer than the royal palace.”

Tomer held back from sighing again when she saw Araha lying on the office couch with a sleepy face.

“Princess, when are you going back?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Pardon?”

“They won’t mind even if someone like me disappears.” Araha smiled.
“I’m low rank.”

“No, you have to go back.”

“Why?”

“Because I feel uncomfortable.”

Araha frowned at Tomer's blunt statement.

"See, even Margrave looks down on me because of my low rank."

"I am not. I have to deal with the monster attack."

Tomer's dukedom sat at Crevon's western border. She received the Margrave title along with her own army and always had to be wary of potential attacks because of the demon realm. Such an environment didn't suit a royal princess.

"You speak like you've been ruling for more than 20 years, Duchess," Araha muttered curtly.

"My heart says this is my homeland."

"Fine, then I'll return after I get what I came for."

"You mean the Crane Feather Fan?"

"..." Araha nodded without a word. Another report came in from Tomer's crystal ball.

— Duchess, Phiunel is here.

The sudden report surprised both of them.

"Phiunel? Why is that old man here?"

"Phiunel?"

— He heard that his savior is here and wanted to express his gratitude.

"Savior..."

Tomer recalled the woman working as a centurion in her army who sparred with her at least 5 times a day.

“You mean the centurion?”

—Pardon? *Um...* which centurion are you referring to?

“Let him in.”

Tomer ended the communication and messaged her centurion.

“Where are you?”

— I’m eating.

A dry voice rang out. Boss currently held the official position of dukedom centurion. They spoke politely in public because of this, but acted casually in private.

“Come find me after you’re done eating. Someone wants to see you.”

* * *

[7F, Game Center’s Luxury Hotel, 31st floor]

“...”

I opened my eyes to a fancy ceiling. The executive suite was second only to the presidential suite. I rested for half a day while doing nothing.

“How comfortable.”

Of course, I could’ve rested in my waiting room, but this hotel felt better for lazing away.

— I will help you shower.

The robots gathered around me after I woke up. I continued looking at the ceiling as they did what they wanted.

[Crevon just made an official announcement. They're handing out TP for killing monsters.] [The monsters are too strong. You'd have to be damn powerful if you don't want to die.] [I heard this is all because Black Lotus got killed. Is this true?] [Don't tell Crevon citizens that.]

The comfortable bed I lay in changed into a bathtub. Several hands massaged me and washed my hair as I read the public forum.

“What a party.”

The community turned into a ruckus, but the real calamities had yet to descend. Aileen's party lasted longer than I thought.

The Door of Calamity wouldn't impact players much. They could simply abandon Crevon in the worst-case scenario. The 9th floor's calamities could only stay on the 8th and 9th floors. The residential area on the 3rd floor still remained. People wouldn't miss Crevon that much since Prestige changed from nearly uninhabitable slums to a medieval city.

— Shower has been completed.

Of course, I didn't plan on letting that happen. I got up as soon as the shower ended. The robots also prepared food on the table. I quickly ate and went out to the lobby.

The 7th floor's luxury hotel couldn't be compared to an inn. Most players could never afford a room here and only administrators visited. *Was there one here right now?* Only two rooms existed on each floor. I gazed through the other room's door.

“You still haven't figured out who the maker is?”

A woman spoke with someone through a crystal ball. I shuddered as soon as I saw her. Medea frowned unhappily in the next room.

“Heimdall wouldn't say?”

I could hear their conversation.

— Yes, he is refusing to talk to us.

“*Tsk*, fine. What about Aphrodite? She and Helena looked into it as well.”

— It seems neither of them found anything about the maker. After all, none of us can interfere in the 8th floor’s matters.

“That’s good news, at least.”

I could somewhat guess what they talked about. Aphrodite, Medea, and Helena. These three administrators all liked luxury items and probably wanted to buy the Wolf’s Fragrance. Even I had to admit it truly looked like a work of art. As expected of an item that took all my effort and high quality materials. It probably reached the pinnacle of a luxury item.

“We’ll talk later. Wait, no, you said the 8th floor was experiencing some trouble, correct?”

— Yes.

“In that case, why don’t we...”

Medea paused and suddenly looked around. She probably sensed me.

“I’m hanging up now.”

She walked to the door and slowly opened it. I walked away before she could find me.

“*Huh?*”

Soon, she found me in front of the elevator. We made eye contact and tilted my head as though I had just seen her.

“Medea?”

“...”

She glared at me without a word. Her eyes looked somewhat aggressive, but she soon put on a fake expression and smiled.

“Hello.”

“Yes, hello.”

“I didn’t expect to see you here. Did you come to gamble again?”

I shook my head. “No, I don’t gamble anymore.”

“I see.”

Medea slightly clenched her teeth. *How scary... Should I make up an excuse and run away?* Medea spoke first while I contemplated.

“Oh right, I’m using the robe you gave me as a consolation prize.”

A faint hostility flickered in her voice. The kind that felt much more threatening than open hostility.

“Consolation prize? That was a present.”

“I’m no fool. You took off with 300,000 TP and left that robe to appease me.”

“...”

Medea looked at me with a bright smile as I scratched my neck. She might’ve struck me with a magic spell if we weren’t on the 7th floor. *Damn, she got greedy and lost, so why was it my fault?*

“Cough.”

It felt wasteful to give her a present without asking for anything in return, but I had to maintain a good relationship for Prestige. Plus, I made the Wolf’s Fragrance look pretty on purpose. It should be the fanciest robe in the tower. Its high level (Lv.10) also indicated that, but it lacked in practical use.

“I prepared a present for you, Medea.”

I resolved myself and spoke with determination. However, she immediately declined.

“Yeah, no thanks.”

She continued with a twisted sneer. “I don’t need your sympathy or pity either.”

She completely hates me, doesn’t she?

“Cough, well.”

I felt slightly flustered, but it was her loss. *Let’s see her face when she sees my robe with some other administrator.*

“What a shame. I worked hard to make it.”

“It’s fine. How good can an item made by someone like you be? I threw away the robe you gave me after one use.”

I planned on just leaving, but she kept provoking me. Was she also mad that I got rid of her tracking spell? I started to get angry.

“Really?”

“Yep.”

I smiled forcefully. *Ding*— The elevator arrived and we got on at the same time.

The awkward silence continued as we descended. Thankfully, the elevator only took 2 seconds to travel from the 31st floor to the 1st floor. *Ding*— The door opened again and I set foot outside.

— Hello.

AlphaGo suddenly appeared. Then I realized we hadn’t arrived on the

1st floor. We came to the administrator's 17th floor. AlphaGo looked at me and spoke.

— The 7th floor administrator, Simad, has a message for you.

“Huh?”

— Are you the maker of Wolf's Fragrance?

“Yes, but why?”

“What?”

Medea almost closed the elevator door when her eyes suddenly flashed. My luck helped me out once again to pay her back for looking down on me. I glanced back and forth between Medea and AlphaGo.

“Ah, yes. I'm the one who made Wolf's Fragrance.”

— Administrator Simad would like to buy your work of art.

“But, how did he find out?”

— Simad has been watching over your craftsmanship.

Medea's eyes widened the more AlphaGo talked. *What words should I choose to make her angrier?* While I had such delightful thoughts...

[The first party to enter the 9th floor has given up their right. The Door of Calamity has opened!]

A flurry of system messages popped up.

[The list of calamities is as follows:] [1. Half-man, Half-cow, Minotaur.] [2. Petrifying Enchantress, Medusa.] [3. One-eyed Giant, Cyclops.] [4. Living Hive Mind, Chimera.] [5. Bottom-dwelling Snake, Python.]

[The 9th floor's calamities will now lead their armies towards the 8th floor.] [They will drive Crevon's monsters mad!] [Crevon's demons will

now act more aggressively!]

My expression froze. As expected, two more calamities had been added to the ones in the original story.

“W-What did you just say? Wolf’s Fragrance? T-Then the gift you mentioned...”

Medea placed her hand on my shoulder, but I brushed it off with a snap of my wrist.

“Yes, but didn’t you say you didn’t want it?”

“No, no, no. But, *uh*, y-you made that thing? How?”

“Ah, something important just came up, so I have to return to the 8th floor. Sorry, Medea.”

Honestly, I wasn’t in much of a hurry, but acted otherwise as I ripped the 8th floor ticket.

“Wait, wait, I...!”

Medea’s voice cut off in the middle. *Serves her right for being such a bitch.*

* * *

[The Desert Eagle’s enhancement has been completed.] [Many functionalities have been added in addition to increased firepower.] 1. Tracking Bullet: Your bullets may now track the enemy. 2. Self-Tracking: The Desert Eagle will not leave your body. 3. Exploding Bullet 4. Piercing Bullet

I arrived in Crevon with the enhanced Desert Eagle. Despite such powerful monsters invading, Crevon’s city...

— Buy some beef jerky. Excellent food for traveling!

— This looks different than the cigarettes I’m used to.

— I hear they modified the design so that outsiders can smoke it. It has a weaker taste, but is easier to smoke.

— Mom, I’m hungry.

Its citizens didn’t stop laughing and every shop bustled with activity. One wouldn’t expect such a scene from a country facing a catastrophe. It didn’t feel too surprising considering its history. Crevon’s government hadn’t told its citizens about the calamities to prevent mass panic.

“Spartan, Sannuri.”

I summoned Spartan and Sannuri on the streets of Crevon.

— *Hiiing!*

Sannuri stomped her hooves. Her black fur, mane, and irises made her seem like darkness itself. Such a horse gathered everyone’s attention as I hopped on.

“Go to my companions.”

— *Hiiing!*

Sannuri charged forward as my robe fluttered in the wind. *Clack, clack...* She started on the ground, but began running on air before I noticed. Only a few horses could air walk. I arrived at the World’s End after about 10 minutes.

“You’re here, newbie. How flashy.”

Cheok Jungyeong greeted me from a mountain with a clear view of World’s End as I descended from the sky.

“Hello.”

I fixed my disheveled robe and looked down. The calamities that came out from the Door of Calamity already claimed their respective territories and formed an organized army. I bitterly smiled at the scene. It looked like Eastern Crevon had already fallen.

“What’s our plan?” Cheok Jungyeong asked.

“We’re going to hunt one calamity and immediately go to the 10th floor.”

Aileen’s party should’ve received the reward for being the first to arrive on the 10th floor. I felt slightly regretful, but I preferred them instead of djinns like in the original story.

“And after we get there?”

“We start climbing the tower for real. We’ll be the first to reach every floor until the 15th. Hunting one of those calamities will give us a bonus too.”

From now on, climbing the tower alone would be hard even for me. I planned on climbing as a group while taking all the necessary rewards.

“Hunting those won’t be easy.” Jin Yohan spoke from next to Cheok Jungyeong. He smiled with the Serpent Spear in hand.

“It’s fine. Don’t look here, but way over there to the left of the canyon.” I pointed to a small canyon in the distance. One calamity, a large snake, had claimed its territory there.

“It’s by itself and practically asking to be killed.”

The python was the weakest of the calamities. It should be around level 30 if the minotaur was at level 40.

“I guess. Cheok Jungyeong, where’s Boss?”

Cheok Jungyeong scratched his head at Jin Yohan’s question. “How would I know? Boss likes this little guy.”

“Boss will be here soon. I have already messaged her.”

A group of players appeared on the plain not too far away. I pushed my hood down after spotting Essence of the Strait’s team. Several other groups also arrived. The English Royal Court guild, Kim Suho’s party, Desolate Moon, Frost Sanctuary, and various individual rankers including Vast Expanse’s Kim Junwoo. Players who could call themselves experts gathered one by one.

“Newbie, go out there and strike the first blow.”

“Pardon?” I tilted my head at Cheok Jungyeong’s suggestion.

“It looks like they’ll come together again. What are you going to do if they choose the same target?”

“Oh.”

As Cheok Jungyeong said, the players discussed how to approach the upcoming battle. A few of the smart ones should’ve noticed python was the weakest, but they would have to fight the nearby calamities and monsters if I shot an arrow to start the battle.

“Before that, give me the thing I asked for.”

“Oh yeah, I almost forgot.”

Cheok Jungyeong took out several arrows from his inventory. A total of 60 *[Lv.5 Dark Ore Arrows]* made from dark ores I bought in the auction house or received through rolling the random dice.

[You have consumed spirit power to use Lv.6 Synthesis.] [Synthesizing Lv.5 Dark Ore Arrow with Lv.7 Dark Ore Arrow...] [Warning! The high level items will decrease the success rate.] [Synthesis has succeeded!]
[Warning! The high level items will decrease the success rate.] [Synthesis has succeeded!] *[Warning! The high level items will decrease the success rate.] [Synthesis has succeeded!]*...

Of the 60 arrows, 50 successfully fused with my five Lv.7 arrows and they increased to level 9. Cheok Jungyeong stared at me.

“It’s interesting no matter how many times I see it. Why did you learn such a weird skill?”

I lightly smiled and nocked all 5 arrows onto my bow. A sudden question popped up in my head. *Which was stronger between my gun and bow?* I no longer knew the answer.

“I’m starting.”

“Don’t hide. Walk up to the mountain peak and show yourself.”

Cheok Jungyeong pushed me to the top.

“I’m not an attention-seeker or anything. I don’t mind.”

“What use is there in having cool items if you don’t show them off? You’re good at archery too, so show it off! There aren’t many chances in this vast world to make a name for yourself.”

“If you say so.”

I’d make some SP at least, so it wasn’t a disadvantageous offer. I grumbled and aimed 5 arrows at the monsters. Then I infused stigma’s magic power into them. Some players with keen eyesight noticed me before I even released my bowstring. They pointed and yelled something. This was all Cheok Jungyeong’s fault. I released the bowstring as the 5 dark ore arrows flew towards the armies of each calamity.

Chapter 212

List of Calamities (2)

The Guild Alliance and the rankers responded enthusiastically to Crevon's call for help. They insisted that they had received a lot from Crevon and shared deep bonds, but most only wanted the money. All of them gathered at World's End in the East.

"This is no joke."

The calamities far exceeded their expectations. Four calamities occupied a vast area the size of Jeju Island.

Players stared at the legendary creatures from myths: Medusa, minotaur, chimera, and cyclops. Their overwhelming presence shook the earth and players didn't dare to venture any further. They could only watch from afar.

"*Huh?* What's that?"

A child-like voice broke the silence filled with tension. It belonged to Yi Jiyeon. Everybody turned towards her, who simply stared in one direction. Before long, everyone turned to where she looked.

An archer stood atop a steep mountain and a black lotus engraved on his robe fluttered in the wind. He aimed his bow at the field below.

"Black Lotus."

A series of murmurs and laments broke out. Everyone here knew him all too well. Black Lotus had come back. A wave of panic swept the entire crowd. Everyone watched as he pulled his bowstring. Some tried to put up a barrier and others ran away. However, he fired his arrows before anyone could react. Players screamed and got down on the ground.

No matter how long they waited... the attack never came. Black Lotus didn't aim at them. A series of doubtful murmurs could be heard upon this realization. He actually fired in the opposite direction towards the chimera and a group of monsters near it. *Chwaaa...* The arrows flew in different paths and tore up the monsters.

“Wow.”

“Is this... real?”

“What...”

His archery skills surpassed the human domain. The arrows moved in different directions as if they had intelligence and pierced one monster after the other. One move killed at least 10 monsters.

Gruooooo!

The monsters roared at the surprise attack. Arrows came flying once again, but the monsters showed no fear. That's when the players realized Black Lotus came to help them. They didn't know why, but they had no reason to be fear him now. The most simple-minded guilds acted first. Members of the Chinese guild, Empire of Glory, and the Indian guild, Mumbai Crew, ran to where Black Lotus' arrows landed. They finished off the already half-dead monsters to earn TP. Seeing this, other guilds also rushed in and high rankers had no choice but to participate.

The war finally began.

* * *

Boss joined us soon after the fight broke out, which looked too disorganized to be called a war. We rushed towards the python, a giant serpent with a head that slightly resembled a human. She scattered her bodily fluids and eggs all over the canyon to mark her territory.

“Can I go in and fight now?”

Cheok Jungyeong asked as he stretched. He acknowledged her as a challenging opponent by putting more effort into stretching. Arms as big as my thighs and legs as wide as my body moved about. I wondered what his stats looked like from the size of his biceps, so I took out the directory to satisfy my curiosity.

▷Stats: Variable Stats [Strength ???] [Stamina ???] [Speed ???]
[Perception 10.7] [Magic Power ???] [Vitality ???]

“...”

I became speechless. Everything except for his perception stat contained question marks, which meant they all went above 11. He seemed more like a monster than the python.

“What are you looking at?”

Of course, it made sense since Cheok Jungyeong acquired Secret March, a special skill that boosted physical stats. He already possessed high base stats to begin with thanks to his gift.

“Ah, I see.”

Cheok Jungyeong grinned. His gift, Inheritance, allowed him to connect with his former life as the strongest warrior of Goryeo.

“Our bodies are built differently, so you can never be like me.”

Cheok Jungyeong mistook my gaze for envy.

“It’s not like I want to.”

“Heh, don’t lie.”

“Whatever.”

“Oh?”

“You’re too noisy, Gyeong.”

Boss stopped him as he mumbled in dissatisfaction and retreated. Now, I briefed them on the mission and gathered all my dark ore arrows.

“She’s pretty tough, so we can’t just do whatever we want. Each of us will play a specific role.”

Like an MMORPG, a raid required cooperation and strategy. Cheok Jungyeong liked to play solo and seemed annoyed, but Jin Yohan smiled and nodded.

“I know, I know. We only have four of us though.”

“No, we have seven.”

Sannuri and Spartan appeared next to me like the wind. They also brought Jain, who had been sleeping.

“*Haa...* I wanted to rest for a bit.”

Jain got off and tidied her disheveled hair. Finally, we all gathered.

“Well, then...”

I began assigning roles. It would be better to divide a snake that big into different parts to attack. I placed Cheok Jungyeong in charge of the tail, which was the python’s vital point. Jin Yohan would take the right side while Boss took the left. I assigned myself the head.

“We can leave the nearby monsters to Sannuri and Spartan.”

“What about me?” Jain tilted her head.

“You’re quick on your feet, so please assist anyone who needs help.”

“*Yaaaawn.* Okay.”

We prepared for action as Cheok Jungyeong stepped forward. “So you’re saying I have to get rid of its tail first?”

“Yes, be careful. She’ll probably shoot poison with her tail. It’ll be hard to block even with my armor.”

Item levels and monster levels worked slightly differently. Simply put, item levels held more value. For example, a Lv.3 sword could kill Lv.6-8 monsters. However, Cheok Jungyeong only had the Lv.6 Infighter’s Leather Armor against the Lv.30 python’s venom.

“No worries. My body is even tougher than this armor.”

The blood vessels in his eyes already started to burst. As a warrior, he only grew more excited before a fierce battle.

“Okay then. Let’s go.”

Cheok Jungyeong charged. *Koong, koong, koong, koong!* His footsteps shook the earth and cracked the ground, sending dirt into the air.

“——!”

He roared and jumped. For a second, he simply flew from the strength in his legs. I shot my arrows before he landed on the python’s tail. The other members, including Spartan and Sannuri, quickly chased after him at a speed that almost rivaled my arrows.

* * *

[Party, Chameleon Troupe, is the first to defeat a calamity. This news will be shortly announced.] [You have acquired a calamity core.] [You may now proceed to the 10th floor at any time.] [Entering 10F.] [Warning! Party play is recommended from the 10F and above.]

We reached the 10th floor without difficulty and couldn’t see a thing as though our sight had been blocked. The system also went silent.

“What the heck is this place?” Cheok Jungyeong’s voice filled the air.

“I can’t see anything.” Boss’ voice also echoed out.

However, I could see just fine with my gift, one of the privileges as the original author. First, I walked up to Boss and grabbed her hand.

“Who are you!” Boss snatched my arm and bent it the other way as I touched her.

“Everyone be careful! Somebody tried to grab me! I caught him, but —“

“It’s me, Boss.”

“*Eh?*”

“It hurts.”

“Oh, sorry.”

Boss coughed and let me go. I grabbed everyone’s hands one by one and gathered them. Soon, we formed a line with me leading the way.

“Everyone, don’t let go.”

I said as I tightly held Boss’ hand. A positive answer came from behind. Then...

— Welcome to the 10th floor, the Maze of Insensibility.

A strange voice descended from the sky and shook the atmosphere. We immediately focused on the administrator’s voice.

— I am the administrator of this floor. I assume you are here to find your way to the 11th floor.

The voice sounded cold and its unpleasant tone gave me goosebumps.

— The way to the 11th floor is simple. You must find your way out of the Maze of Insensibility.

“*Phew...*”

I sighed in relief. I had described the 10th floor with less than 100 words in the original story and worried if things might've changed, but thankfully they hadn't.

— However, numerous traps and monsters will be waiting for you in this maze. You will lose your senses one by one as you grow closer to the exit. Just like how you lost your sight.

The administrator briefly paused before continuing. His tone suddenly turned much friendlier.

— However, I am also aware you are the first to conquer a calamity. I highly respect individuals like you. Therefore, I have made a difficult decision to allow you to keep all your senses in exchange for your calamity core.

I sneered in silence. He dared to scheme as the administrator of an insignificant floor.

“No, we'll just do it.”

— You will regret it. I've come to this conclusion after much deliberation. Under normal circumstances...

“That's okay. We'll play fair.”

— Fool. Good luck, then.

The voice abruptly stopped and everything became silent again. The darkness remained since we didn't give up our calamity core.

“Hey, I've got a question.” Cheok Jungyeong broke the silence.

“Why are these administrators or whatever helping us climb the tower?”

My heart skipped a beat since his thoughtless question pierced the root of my settings.

“I don’t know, maybe because they’re already dead?”

The answer to his question required further explanation. Take Crevon on floor 8-3 for example. The Atalos Royal Family controlled Lü Bu, Lancelot, and other heroes from history. However, they didn’t subjugate the demons. This wasn’t because they pursued coexistence or preferred peace. They simply had no other choice.

A dead man was a dead man. Souls like Lü Bu and Lancelot, who once lived on Earth, couldn’t move outside their designated areas. Even Lü Bu, who possessed the broadest sphere of activity, could only move around [8F Crevon Mainland] and some parts of [3F Prestige].

However, this restraint didn’t apply to administrators. They knew they lived in a mere tower. Therefore, they wanted to re-establish themselves in the real world on Earth or simply wished for their soul’s complete extinction. That’s why they helped or hindered players. We played the most important role in their revival or extinction.

“The hell does that mean?”

“I mean I’m not sure either. Let’s get moving for now.”

We took a step into the dark maze.

“Hold on to the person behind you and don’t let go. I’m pretty lucky, so I’ll make sure we reach the exit. Just focus on not letting go. Please, Cheok Jungyeong!”

“Ha, you out of your mind? Why are you pointing me out?”

I didn’t answer and began walking. *Tap, tap.* I could still hear as Boss held my hand. I proceeded down the path according to my luck.

However, my senses grew more restricted as we progressed. Soon, my sense of hearing disappeared. Followed by my sense of touch. I could no longer tell whether I was walking or sinking in a swamp.

Now, I couldn’t help but doubt my sight, the only sense I had left.

Chapter 213

Quick Climb (1)

I clenched my teeth and walked forward. I felt like I would forget how to face forward if I turned around. Was this the right method? I didn't know. The question itself might be a trap, so I simply kept walking. I exerted more strength into the hand holding Boss even though I lost my sense of touch some time ago. Soon, the concept of time also disappeared. I walked for an unknown amount of time with only my sight intact.

“Haa, haa.”

I seemed to have escaped the maze before I even noticed. The sound of my breathing returned and I found myself covered in sweat and blood. A scorching pain finally struck me. I must've stepped on some traps while my senses disappeared.

“I think we're done.”

“I still can't see... *Ah*, wait. What's this? Something's wrong with my wrist!”

Jain gasped when she came out of the maze. I collected my breath and turned around.

“Potion, I need a potion Hajin!”

Jain's hand dangled on her arm. Something had almost severed her wrist in there.

“Haa...”

I sighed and handed her a potion. It felt like we were missing someone as I glanced around. Someone hadn't made it. Boss, Jain, and Jin

Yohan stood behind me, but I couldn't spot the most noticeable one.
Cheok Jungyeong... even after I warned you...

"Wait, Cheok Jungyeong isn't here."

"Oh, you're right. I knew this would happen. That idiot."

"I'll go get him. Stay here."

I agreed with Jain's comment and prepared to enter the maze again.
Boss spoke while still holding onto me.

"Hajin, I'll go with you."

"No, it's better for me to go alone. You should stay here."

[Warning! It is recommended that you do not re-enter.] [Traveling through the maze in reverse will result in a huge penalty.] [The 10th floor administrator will act even more hostile towards you. He has already assigned harsher trials to your party.]

I set a 3 minute timer on my smartwatch and let go of Boss. She tried to grab my hand again, but her sight hadn't returned yet.

"Hajin, where are you... grab my hand... listen to your boss..."

She flailed about before falling.

"I'll be back soon."

I re-entered the maze. A strange feeling much stronger than before came over me as I took the first step. I moved my legs forward while trying to keep myself from throwing up. I continued while not feeling a thing. However, I couldn't find Cheok Jungyeong even after a long time. I turned around feeling annoyed and another strange feeling struck me. Was this me? Was I myself?

— Give me the calamity core and you will easily find your companion.

I snapped out of my stupor thanks to the damned administrator's voice. I shook my head resolutely. I think I said something, but I couldn't hear my voice.

— Fool, you will never escape this place.

The administrator disappeared. Then a holographic window popped up from my smartwatch. The alarm signaled that 3 minutes had passed. I could start over no matter what the administrator did.

[You have reversed time.] [You will return to the past 3 minutes ago.]

I used *[Time Reversal]* for the first time after obtaining the *[Clock Hand of Fate]*. The world seemed to shake as an odd sensation enveloped me. Then I went back in time.

“Hajin, I'll go with you.”

I shook my head at Boss who said the same words. Then I entered the maze once again. I recalled my previous path and chose another one since I didn't find Cheok Jungyeong there. Experiencing this senselessness three times would be enough. I simply headed to where I felt he would be and ended up finding him with my luck.

He fought against some monster. His battle instincts seemed to work just fine even with all his senses isolated. I wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry. Then I walked up to him and dragged him away. We left the maze as my timer ran out.

“What?”

Cheok Jungyeong looked confused as I slapped his chest. *Thwack!* He raised his arms in surprise.

“Why were you fighting, Cheok Jungyeong?”

“I was?”

“Yes!”

“Uh, I don’t know. Did I?”

I wanted to say something, but an intense pain struck my chest. *Koong!* My heart thumped and I helplessly fell as the pain squeezed all my organs. I almost lost consciousness when Boss and Jain ran towards me. They slapped my cheeks and shouted, but I couldn’t hear them. Then a system message popped up.

[You have reached the end of time reversal.] [Warning! Be careful of the consequences!]

I laughed inaudibly at the side effects of time reversal. Sure, the skill had charges, but using it 3 times in a row would probably kill me. Thankfully, the pain slowly faded as aether activated the Orb of Regeneration.

“Kim Hajin!”

I regained my hearing as Boss’ voice entered my ears.

“Hajin, are you okay?”

Jain also asked. I bitterly smiled and turned towards Cheok Jungyeong. He seemed sorry and embarrassed as he scratched his head, unsure of what to say. It did feel like he was reflecting on his mistake.

“This is all because of that son of a bitch.”

I pointed at Cheok Jungyeong with a trembling finger. Boss, Jain, and Jin Yohan all looked at him with serious expressions.

* * *

We breezed through the 11th and 12th floors in the next week. I ended up taking the rewards that should’ve belonged to Kim Suho, but they weren’t anything special. I could always give it to him later if he needed something.

The 11th and 12th floors could be repeated multiple times as solo

stages. A player only had to beat it once to climb up, but they could try it again at a harder difficulty to advance their skills.

“Yaawn...”

We reached the peaceful 13th floor and stayed in a small log cabin with a living room and one bedroom.

“How high does this tower go?”

“Who knows?” I replied to Cheok Jungyeong’s question. He didn’t say anything else because of what happened on the 10th floor.

“Really? I think Hajin knows everything.” Jain grinned.

Is Hajin really a regressor? The knowledge and experience he’s shown so far can only be explained by that...

Boss’ voice suddenly rang in my head.

“...?” I turned to Boss stroking Spartan.

“Ah.”

Spartan’s senses transcended humans. Just now, I heard him reading Boss’ mind through our connection.

“I’m not a regressor.”

“...!”

Boss shook when she heard me. Technically, I went back in time for 3 minutes, but that didn’t count. It almost killed me too.

Boss’ thoughts rang in my head again. *He can even read my mind because of all his experiences...*

“You’re wrong.”

“W-What am I wrong about? Explain that first.”

“Just know that you’re wrong.”

I shook my head and lay down. A clock ticked from above.

[13F, Area of Rest, 63:23:34]

Tick— Tick—

The goal on the 13th floor was simple. *[You will endure a mental trial.]*

We could freely rest here for 100 hours, but would experience a horrible nightmare if we fell asleep.

I stayed awake for about 37 hours. I would’ve probably fallen asleep a long time ago without any companions.

“Ah, I’m so bored! I’m gonna work out!”

Cheok Jungyeong shot up and Jin Yohan looked at him.

“Wanna spar?”

“Sure, follow me.”

The two of them left and Jain also went to watch. They still seemed full of energy and could probably stay awake for 100 hours without any problems. However...

“I’m so sleepy.”

I always got all my sleep and also used *[Time Reversal]* once on the 10th floor and the 12th floor. My condition felt terrible, but we focused on climbing the tower without rest because Aileen and Kim Suho’s party were both catching up.

“Yaawn.”

“Are you sleepy?” Boss looked at me.

“Yes.”

“You’re the one who said we shouldn’t sleep.”

“I know.”

I already explained to them that sleeping here would result in the worst nightmare. *Rustle*— Boss crawled to a drawer in the corner and took out a deck of playing cards.

“Want to play a game?”

“No, I can’t lose, so it’ll only make me sleepier.”

“...”

I thought about sparring with one of the members, but quickly dismissed the idea. I would surely faint afterwards.

“*Auu...*”

I spent the next 3 hours in a daze, yawning and looking at the ceiling. *Don’t sleep. Don’t sleep...*

“...!”

I opened my eyes to a white ceiling above me. *I have to write the next chapter.*

“What time is it?”

I picked up my smartphone next to my pillow. It read 6 P.M. Only 5 hours left until the deadline. I should have more than enough time to finish the chapter.

“*Auu*, I slept for 8 hours?”

I groaned and raised my body. Despite being in a rush, I never forgot to do my wake-up routine: browsing the internet on my phone.

— Hajin, are you still asleep?

A voice rang from outside the door. I tilted my head and looked around. Indeed, I was in my one-bedroom apartment. The bed felt more comfortable than usual, so who was outside?

Drrk—

The door opened and a familiar figure appeared with the smell of cigarettes. My eyes widened at the sudden guest.

“Dad?”

“Stop sleeping during the day and get up. I brought you some food.”

Dad’s face looked a bit blurry. I didn’t hear anything about them visiting, but this wasn’t the first surprise visit from my parents. My vision suddenly turned blurry.

What’s wrong with me?

I rubbed my eyes. Why was I crying and why did my heart hurt so much?

“...jin.”

A soft voice entered my ears.

“What?” I frowned.

“What do you mean what? Get out here.”

“Ah, yes, Dad. Anyways, you said you brought beef?”

I asked in a cute tone as I jumped out of bed. Mom sat in the living room while cooking the beef.

“Mom.”

I ran up and hugged her.

“You smell gross. Go take a shower.”

She smiled even as she said that.

“What are the both of you doing here?”

“We just had some time. You always order delivery, right? We thought we’d cook you a home meal. I also brought some side dishes. Go wash your face first.”

“Okay.”

I ran to the bathroom and stood in front of the sink. Then I paused before turning on the faucet. Mom and Dad came to visit, but there shouldn’t be anything special about today. Still, something felt wrong for some reason. I slowly raised my head and looked in the mirror.

“...?”

I was still crying and my hands shook. I couldn’t understand. Why was I crying? What was wrong with me? *Hajin*. I thought I heard something.

“What?”

— How long are you going to stay in there? The meat’s done!

“Ah, yes. I’m coming.”

I finished washing up and left the bathroom. A hearty meal sat on the living room table. I just woke up, but could eat beef any time of the day. I happily stuffed the rice and meat into my mouth. Just eating with Mom and Dad made me so happy I began to tear up again.

“Hajin.”

“Yes?”

Dad suddenly sounded serious after I finished a bowl of rice. He usually sounded like this when he wanted to discuss life with me. I sat up straight and prepared myself for a long lecture. I could always use my deadline as an excuse if I wanted to escape. However, Dad said something unexpected.

“It’s time for you to go back.”

I tilted my head. *Go back?* This was my home and Mom and Dad were here too. *Kim Hajin!* A faint shout entered my ears.

“Go back where? Oh, you mean work? Don’t worry. My deadline is in 4 hours.”

“He’s right. He can stay a bit more. You’re the one who wanted to see him the most.”

Mom nudged Dad’s shoulder. She wanted to talk more and nudged my shoulder too, asking me if I wanted another bowl of rice. Her habits felt all too familiar.

“Yeah, I’ll take seconds.”

“Oh right, Hajin. You should come home at least once a week. You’re not that busy, right?”

She always said that every time she came over. I normally would’ve said I didn’t have time because of my novel or I would complain about her always nagging me, but today...

“I will. Starting from next week.”

I said what I wanted to say, but Dad cut in again.

“That’s great, but you should still go now.”

“The deadline’s approaching, but I still have—”

“No, not that.”

Dad interrupted me. *I can just tell my readers something came up and delay the chapter.* I glared at him with that thought.

“Not that, Hajin.”

He smiled bitterly at me.

— Kim Hajin!

A clear shout rang out this time. It filled the entire room.

“It’s time to go back to where you belong.”

“Kim Hajin! Wake up!”

My eyes suddenly shot open. My apartment and everything inside disappeared. I took a deep breath, but couldn’t see anything with wet eyes.

“*Haa.*”

Someone sighed in relief and a rough hand softly wiped away my tears.

“You’re up.”

Only then could I see the woman who protected me.

“Was it painful?”

“...”

“You can give up if you want.”

I looked at her in a daze. I seemed to have misunderstood that the most painful memories would resurface in this place.

“Ah.”

Tears came from the bottom of my heart. The small, yet happy living room I lived in and the people I loved. Happy dreams could also be sad because they couldn't come true. I couldn't endure this sadness and I covered my eyes. I cried again for the first time since becoming Kim Hajin in this world. Sounds I couldn't understand escaped from my mouth as my heart and body shook.

My crying turned to weeping until an unknown amount of time passed and I finally regained my senses. I awkwardly smiled at Boss next to me.

“Are you... okay now?”

I nodded with a light sigh. “Ah, how embarrassing. Don't fall asleep like me, Boss.”

She silently looked at me and her calm eyes flickered with complicated emotions. “That felt more painful than I thought.”

I placed my hand on my chest. My heartbeat reverberated throughout my entire body.

“Hajin.” Boss whispered and held my hand. Her warmth enveloped me.

“I'm sorry.”

Her voice trembled as she choked up. What was she sorry about? I looked at her in confusion. She bitterly smiled and spoke in a heavy tone.

“Don't be hurt.”

Chapter 214

Quick Climb (2)

[49:32:15] [49:32:14] [49:32:13]

Boss blankly looked at the clock and turned towards Kim Hajin. He sat on the ground shuffling cards like an elaborate magic trick. He seemed normal on the outside, but clearly wasn't himself.

Boss recalled what just happened. She didn't know what he dreamt about, but the image of him muttering to his mother and father became imprinted in her mind. His sorrowful voice made her heart slightly ache.

"Haaa."

She sighed in the quiet cabin. Spartan had returned to the waiting room and the other members hadn't come back yet. Who knew what they were up to? Boss had no idea how to start a conversation to break this awkward silence. After much thought, she turned on the messenger and typed a message.

[What's up]

"..."

That sounded too unfriendly. *[What's up Hajin.]* She tried adding his name and a period. *[What's up Hajin?]* She didn't like the question mark for some reason. *[What's up Hajin lol]* This one didn't sound too bad.

"Hmm."

She agonized over whether to send it, but ultimately decided not to. She turned off the messenger and simply stared at him again. Should

she apologize and ask for forgiveness?

However, no words came out of her mouth. Anything she said now would be nothing more than deception, but her heart ached every time she looked at him. She didn't know why.

Suddenly, a thought crossed her mind. She had killed many people to this day. Whatever the reasons, they too were all someone's mother, father, daughter, or son. She quickly blocked out such emotions.

It was too late to regret it now. That wouldn't change anything. The people she killed could never come back and she would continue to kill many more.

— Don't fret over what can't be undone. Do what you can and do it well.

The former Boss once told her. She believed that as well and thought any guilt inside her had already disappeared, but...

“Boss.”

A voice called her. She raised her head towards Kim Hajin who came over.

“Why are you doing that?”

Only then did she notice her posture, crouched while hugging her knees. *I wonder why. I guess I'm sleepy too.* She murmured and bitterly smiled.

“Boss, I'm bored. Do you want to play cards?”

“I thought you didn't want to.”

Kim Hajin smiled. “I have an idea. You can start with 10 cards and I'll start with 5. That way it'll be funner. Oh, you know how to play poker, right?”

“Yeah.” She nodded.

“Then let’s do it.”

“Okay.”

He sat some distance in front of her. She watched him shuffle the deck of cards. Then she found herself instinctively trying to spot a trick and became slightly disgusted with herself.

“Alright, I’ll deal the cards.”

Boss felt pleased with her hand. However, over the 37 games they played in the next 3 hours...

“I quit.”

Boss lost 36 times. She held quad queens in the last game, but lost to quad aces. That was the final straw as she placed the cards down and turned away.

“Man, that didn’t work. How about I get 5 cards and you get 14—”

“I quit.”

“...”

* * *

[8-3F, Crevon Mainland]

The players gathered in Eastern Crevon. The city had mobilized magicians to construct a secondary wall just outside the primary wall and built a fortress to attract players. They provided TP and items as bait. The royal family declared that it would lend items to players for free and offer TP for every monster killed. They would completely give away the items if players could destroy all the calamities. The royal family also offered one of their treasures and 100,000 TP to any player who could kill a calamity.

“We only got the entrance reward for the 10th floor.”

Aileen spoke with several Guild Alliance members in a restaurant near the eastern wall. Rachel, Kim Youngjin, and Yoo Yeonha all gathered around her.

“Black Lotus and his gang killed the 5th calamity, python. They also made it to the 11th, 12th, 13th, and 14th floor.”

Kim Youngjin nodded at Aileen’s remark.

“I see.”

During the last 20 days, a series of notifications shocked every player in the tower.

[A nameless party has entered the 11th floor for the first time.] [A nameless party has entered the 12th floor for the first time.] [A nameless party has entered the 13th floor for the first time.] [A nameless party has entered the 14th floor for the first time.]

It took them almost a year to climb from the 1st floor to the 10th floor, but only 2 weeks from the 10th floor to the 14th floor. Players argued over which of the two parties, Aileen or Black Lotus’, had reached those floors first. Today, Aileen herself ended the debate.

“We spent about 3 entire days on the 10th floor, I think? It was surprisingly difficult. Right now, we’re on our way to the 13th floor.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha listened while thinking about something else. She felt a deep sense of anguish from her delusions. Her train of thought went like this:

The Black Lotus team is undoubtedly the Chameleon Troupe. Kim Hajin will probably chase them wherever they go, but he isn’t the type to rely on others. However, that’s too dangerous.

“Then... Senior Aileen... about Fenrir...”

Yoo Yeonha carefully asked. It had been almost a month since she first entered the tower, but she hadn't met him yet. Even when she suddenly smelled Kim Hajin while walking, she only ended up finding Rachel drenched in his smell. It happened again today. Rachel, completely oblivious, happily asked if Yoo Yeonha came to see her. Yoo Yeonha couldn't say no to her smiling face, so they decided to meet Aileen together.

"You're looking for Fenrir?"

Aileen sulked. Needless to say, the public forum also gossiped about him and her party.

"He's not too popular these days."

It all started with the Black Lotus incident a while back. Black Lotus used to attack players before the calamities, but switched sides and attacked the monsters when the calamities invaded Crevon. Of course, the incident surprised everyone. That day, he killed hundreds of monsters with only 5 arrows and gave people another story to tell. They started referring to him as the Dark Hero.

"People are probably bad-mouthing Fenrir as much as me. Are you worried about him?"

"No, he's not the type to concern himself with such things."

"Really? Well, I don't know anything. He seems to do well on his own, so he's probably fine."

Yoo Yeonha seemed disappointed at her remark.

"Cough."

Rachel quietly stepped forward. *I'm on good terms with Aileen, so I'll try to get her to talk for Yoo Yeonha's sake.*

"Excuse me, Ail—"

"So you were here."

The restaurant door opened and someone entered before Rachel could say anything. They all turned towards the door as a magician similar in size to Aileen walked in.

“*Eh, eh?*” Aileen widened her eyes at the unexpected encounter.

“Ah, she’s my companion. She said she wanted to meet you, Senior Aileen, at all costs.”

Yoo Yeonha stood up and introduced her companion, but Aileen remained in a daze. High heels echoed off the floor as the magician approached them. She barely stood 160 cm tall even with her kill heels and her round face gave off a child-like vibe. However, the way she walked and her expression exuded the epitome of elegance and pride.

“*Cough.*”

Kim Yongjin desperately held back his laughter as Rachel looked adoringly at the doll-like figure. Only Aileen seemed more serious than ever.

“Aileen.”

Ah Hae-In spoke as Aileen’s jaw dropped.

“It’s been a while.”

Many facilities called talent education centers could be found on Earth. At military agent academies, children under the age of 11 only took classes until 2 P.M. due to children’s rights. Private institutions grew in popularity to educate and train these children during subsequent hours. The Veritas Education Center in Gangnam, South Korea was the most famous in the world. Both Ah Hae-In and Aileen attended there while growing up. Aileen first registered at 5 years old and Ah Hae-In entered at 11.

“...”

They shared a long history, but Aileen didn’t offer any greetings and

simply swallowed her saliva. The two had fought to the death a long time ago. Literally, to the brink of death. *Click, click*— Ah Hae-In arrogantly approached and sat in front of Aileen.

“...”

“...”

The two little adults silently stared at each other. It seemed like a staring contest between cats and dogs. They looked dead serious, but the atmosphere between them only felt cute and funny to outsiders. *Tok, tok.*

“...?”

Yoo Yeonha tapped Kim Youngjin’s shoulder for him to take a look at the messenger. Kim Yongjin pretended to look at the time and checked his messages.

YooYeonhaYeonha: I just received a report about a massive artifact site being uncovered in Central Asia.

Kim Youngjin slightly widened his eyes before calmly turning off the messenger. He felt sorry for Rachel, but they had to keep this a secret.

“Senior Aileen, Fenrir will most likely continue to chase Black Lotus. Please tell him that I want to see him if you happen to run into him.”

“*H-Huh?* Oh, o-okay...”

Aileen nodded at Yoo Yeonha’s words while studying Ah Hae-In’s expression.

“We have to go now. Please take your time.”

“*Huh?* G-Go where? You can stay. No, you *should* stay...”

Yoo Yeonha stood up with the others and they all left Aileen behind. A woman who had been eavesdropping coldly muttered.

“Idiots.”

Jin Sahyuk felt extremely frustrated. Everyone kept talking about Fenrir going after Black Lotus or how Fenrir killed Black Lotus. *What a joke.* She wanted to tell them like how that barber shouted about the king’s ears in the bamboo forest. [1]

Kim Hajin is Fenrir and Black Lotus, you brainless fools!

However, Jin Sahyuk didn’t tell anyone. Not because she feared Kim Hajin, but because she simply hated mudslinging. It couldn’t be called revenge.

“How am I going to make 150,000 TP?”

Rather than that, earning TP concerned her more since she wanted to use the Upgrade Center on the 7th floor. She could easily rob rich NPCs or hunt other players, but Kim Hajin’s threat kept her in line. She consoled herself by saying that not just her, but no one in the tower could stand up to him. *Ding*— A message suddenly arrived.

Bell: Sahyuk, I heard from our informant that artifacts have been discovered in Central Asia.

So what? Jin Sahuk didn’t bother replying. Right now, even time spent eating felt like a waste. She needed to kill monsters to collect TP and use the upgrade center as soon as possible.

Bell: It looks like the Chameleon Troupe will be there as well. What do you think?

Her gaze sharpened like a blade the moment she read that.

Me: You sure? By Chameleon Troupe, you mean Kim Hajin?

Bell: Probably? You know how I’m acquainted with their boss. I’d say there’s a 90% chance, but why? Do you want to fight him, so he can kick your butt again?

She clenched her fists. Not inside, but outside the tower. She felt

confident in winning on Earth. No, not confident. She felt *sure* she would win. Her self-esteem that sunk to the bottom rose again as she muttered with resentment.

“I’ll bite and chew every piece of...”

“Here are your chicken legs.”

The waiter set down a plate of 20 chicken legs in front of her. Jin Sahyuk took the legs and tore them apart. *Nom, nom.* Her eyes shone with fury as she chewed the tender meat.

* * *

[15F, Genkelope’s Abandoned Vessel]

The Chameleon Troupe decided to halt their climb on the 15th floor. We found ourselves inside an abandoned warship that looked like it came out of a sci-fi movie. Cheok Jungyeong and I sat on a bench covered in moss.

“We’re stopping here?” Cheok Jungyeong asked.

“Yeah, we have to go back to Crevon now.”

The other calamities besides the python still remained and continued attacking Crevon as we climbed. Kim Suho should defeat Medusa soon enough, but not the remaining calamities like the level 40 minotaur and chimera and the level 45 cyclops. Furthermore, more calamities besides them still waited on the 9th floor. We simply skipped the 9th floor by killing a calamity instead of clearing it.

“Oi, Cheok Jungyeong?”

“Ah? Oh, what’s up? Sorry, I’m not used to you talking so casually.”

“Is that so?”

“Uh... Well, I’m not saying you shouldn’t talk to me like that. *Haha,*

I'm sure I'll get used to it."

I silently smirked. Faking a near-death experience proved quite effective, but I could've actually died.

"Um... does it still hurt?" Cheok Jungyeong asked while scratching his cheek.

"I'm somewhat alright."

I planned to visit the upgrade center again and raise my stats since the time reversal's side effects felt too severe. I'd been putting off the painful operation, but I should raise all my stats by the maximum 3 points.

"What do you mean somewhat? Alright is alright."

"Whatever."

I stood up. The 15th floor consisted of one giant machine called *[Genkelope's Abandoned Vessel]*. The warship equaled twice the size of Jejudo and featured sci-fi phenomena scarier than monsters. We needed to restart the ship to reach the 16th floor. In short, we needed at least a month to clear this floor.

"Mmm... I'm going back to Crevon. No, before that, to the 7th floor."

"Gotcha. Then I'm heading back to Crevon first. I need to take care of a fella there."

Cheok Jungyeong stretched his body. His remark sounded slightly suspicious, so I asked.

"Why? To avenge Kaita?"

Cheok Jungyeong paused. He awkwardly turned to me, embarrassed that I read his mind. However, he soon smiled.

"Once a comrade, always a comrade. No matter how stupid you are."

He probably thought he sounded cool, but it didn't work on me. For the record, Kim Suho had already killed Kaita twice.

“Are you gonna avenge him or not?”

“I will, you bum.”

Cheok Jungyeong curled his lips in a pout. I felt disgusted. Why did he act so gross these days?

“So, I don't need to do anything today?”

“Yeah.”

“Then I'm leaving.”

Cheok Jungyeong went down using the crystal stele. Boss, Jain, and Jin Yohan already left the tower a while ago. They probably went out to look for Genghis Khan's artifacts. It also served as an important turning point in the original novel.

My heart suddenly sank. Chae Nayun would meet the djinn who killed her mother there. Then should I head there as well? I hadn't decided yet, but I needed to grow stronger for Crevon's sake. I went down to the 7th floor with the crystal stele.

[7F, Game Center]

I passed by the familiar lobby and went straight to the Upgrade Center. The familiar AlphaGo greeted me as I opened the door.

— Hello.

“Yeah, hi.”

— How may I help you today?

“I'm here to do what I don't want to do.”

I'd been putting off the stat enhancement operation because it would hurt like your limbs being severed and put back together.

— Are you referring to the stat enhancement operation?

“Yes. Can you do it?”

— Yes. This operation may be performed up to 3 times. Player Extra7 may undergo this surgery 2 more times.

“Okay. Then I...”

I planned on enhancing every stat other than magic power and easily paid the 150,000 TP. Then the door suddenly shot open and someone hurriedly entered. I recognized her as the robed sorceress, Medea.

“Hey, it's great to see you. I knew you'd come back, so I've been waiting for the last 20 days.”

Medea gracefully spoke and approached with a beaming smile.

“You waited for me?”

I played dumb.

“Yes, Extra7. Remember what you said last time?”

“I don't like being called by my nickname.”

“Oh... Really? Sorry. Then—”

She tried to continue, but AlphaGo grabbed me.

— The operation will begin soon.

“Ah, really? Sorry, administrator. I need to go into surgery now.”

Medea looked at AlphaGo, slightly irritated, but nodded.

“Yeah? Then... I'll wait until it's over. Oh, isn't this expensive? Do you want me to pay for it?”

“I already paid.”

“...Is that so?”

— Please follow me.

AlphaGo's mechanical voice pressed me and I followed him while pretending to be sorry.

Jiing— Kwaaaa— Wiinng—

All kinds of horrible sounds filled the shop.

I came out 4 hours later, overcome with pain. Medea dozed off in a chair as I drank a few potions to recover my stamina. *That setting probably hasn't changed if she's this obsessed with luxury.*

“Oh, are you finished?”

Medea woke up and bitterly smiled. She handed me a potion, but placed it back into her pockets after seeing the empty ones I already drank.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Well. You know, about what you said last time? Something bad happened, so I was in a horrible mood. First, I'd like to apologize. Simad told me you really did make it.”

I silently listened while reading the notification window that popped up in the air.

[Warning! The calamities in Crevon are now raging!]

“I wasn't too surprised. I've been thinking about how great your craftsmanship is, but a lot of administrators will visit you from now

on. Such a marvelous robe can't be found anywhere else. I don't intend to receive it for free. Of course—"

"Woah!"

"What?"

I widened my eyes and screamed on purpose.

"Sorry, administrator. Something important came up in Crevon!"

"H-Huh?"

I left Medea perplexed while I reclaimed my belongings from AlphaGo and took out the portable crystal stele.

"Let's talk about this some other time! It's a huge calamity!"

"W-Wait, kid!"

I felt a sense of déjà vu as my body warped.

1. A Korean folklore about a barber who swears secrecy regarding the king's strange ears, but yells the truth inside a well and unintentionally spreads it to the entire world. 📖

Chapter 215

Reason for Meeting (1)

The Tower of Wish could be considered a miracle. A tower's origin and its creation still remained a mystery. An entity that could bring back the dead, a vast world that ignored the laws of physics and even the laws of magic, administrators who maintained this place...

“Haaa.”

The most famous administrator, Medea, currently sighed. A beautifully adorned door stood in front of her, but she only felt bitter as she opened it. The room beyond featured several elegant pieces of furniture.

Administrators still recalled their past lives. They all used to be humans and wished to live as humans. However, they couldn't fully interact with NPCs and players, so they created their own private gatherings to display new magic and interesting artifacts around the tower. Today, Medea came to participate in such a social gathering.

“...”

From the Ancient Era to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance to the Modern Age, everything came together to form a beautiful interior. Each member had decorated this place with amazing items. However, no one had arrived yet. Medea sat in a chair feeling dizzy. Only fools ever came early. The five administrators, including Medea, believed arriving late was quite fashionable and made them seem more like the main character.

[Phenomenon Realm Gathering]

Medea gritted her teeth at the sign on the wall. In the beginning, administrators actually discussed what they could do for themselves. Over hundreds of years passed and now the gatherings were nothing

more than political battles.

“Phenomenon Realm...”

She still couldn't give up her one wish. *The Phenomenon Realm*. To obtain her body again after death and return to being human. This 200 year old wish required two things: fulfillment and state of existence.

Fulfillment referred to one's achievements like how Medea built an artificial sun over Prestige. Honestly, she didn't care about the NPCs at all. After all, they were all dead souls. Only the living players mattered to her. As such, Medea erected a sun in front of all the players. That should've been more than enough of an achievement.

Her state of existence proved to be more of a problem. One could increase their state of existence in many ways. It might seem strange, but one such way was through her beauty. Then why couldn't they just equip countless artifacts?

The answer was quite simple. The tower's artifacts were no different than trash to administrators. Relics left behind after their owners' deaths. Happily wielding an artifact only honored the original owner, who would receive an increase in their state of existence instead of the administrator.

Medea only desired original beauty. She kept a close eye on the *[Crevon Craftsmanship Tournament]* for this reason. She believed her hard work would be rewarded even though dwarves had gone extinct. Then she saw that elegant, original beauty. She wanted that robe at all costs even if it only slightly increased her state of existence.

“How should I coax him?”

The door slowly creaked open while Medea mulled over the matter. Four administrators walked in from the other side: Aphrodite, Penelope, Helena, and Athena. *Athena*?

“You came early?”

Medea smiled at Aphrodite's greeting. The former goddess' status only

belonged in the past. Now, she was an administrator just like Medea. A hundred years had passed since they decided on how to address each other.

“Hi.”

“Hello.”

“Have you been well?”

Helena, Athena, and Penelope spoke respectively. They sat in their seats while chattering as Medea glanced at their attires, which looked no different than what they wore last time. *I guess they can't improve anymore at this point.*

“Oh right, Medea. I heard you've been chasing after the player who crafted Wolf's Fragrance.” Aphrodite brightly smiled at her.

“I'm not chasing him. You must've heard wrong.”

“Oh please. Don't you know how rude that is? Simad planned to give it to me all along—”

“By the way, why is she here?”

Medea paid more attention to Athena than stupid Aphrodite. Athena left the Phenomenon Realm Gathering 100 years ago. She still considered herself a goddess and viewed everyone else as mere human heroes.

“Is that woman after the robe too—”

“No, not that.” Aphrodite interrupted Medea.

“I want something else.” Athena interrupted Aphrodite.

Did Athena finally suppress her pride as a goddess? She seemed okay with Medea's casual way of speaking.

“I want an arrow.”

Medea couldn't understand what Athena just said. “What? An arrow?”

* * *

[8F, Crevon Mainland]

I returned to Crevon after leaving Medea. The Atalos Royal Family declared a state of emergency, advising all citizens to stay indoors. The bustling streets became empty now.

— *Hiinng!*

“Let's go.”

I summoned Sannuri and jumped on her back. Then I faced towards the distant eastern battlefield while sitting on the comfortable saddle. Thousands of monsters marched from the east. They didn't move just based on instincts. Chimera, the hivemind of monsters, commanded them.

— *Hiing.*

“Thanks.”

I quickly reached a high vantage point. Sannuri tackled the nearby monsters while Spartan shot blasts of magic power.

“Well done.”

I stood at the edge of a sharp cliff as Sannuri and Spartan drove away the monsters. The fierce wind blew past the army of monsters below me.

A few arrows couldn't deal with such a large number. Dark ore arrows required stigma's magic power to display their maximum potential. I could only control 5 dark ore arrows for about 10 minutes if I used all 4 streaks of stigma.

I checked my number of bullets instead. Due to slowly making them over time, I now had 300 handgun bullets, 600 rifle bullets, and 90 sniper bullets. Assuming each bullet could kill 1.5 monsters, that would amount to 1500 monsters.

I suddenly wondered about something while calculating my battle potential. *Did I even need to fight?*

— A wave of lightning will rage! Die!

Aileen's childish voice summoned a lightning storm that swept through a crowd of monsters.

— Hellfire.

Yi Yongha's inextinguishable fire also spread from one monster to another, lighting the battlefield into a reddish-black hue.

— I'll focus on sniping the liches, spellcasters, specters, and other magic casters.

Jin Seyeon shot down monsters that posed more of a threat. Meanwhile, Shin Jonghak also put on a fantastic show. Kim Youngjin had obtained the legendary Azure Dragon Crescent Blade and utilized his Weapon Master gift to its maximum potential. Kim Junwoo danced through the battlefield with his sword. As expected of a hunter from the Vast Expanse. Jin Sahyuk fired a flurry of magic weapons amidst the chaos. *Wait. Jin Sahyuk? Was that really Jin Sahyuk?* I narrowed my eyes.

"The heck..."

Indeed, Jin Sahyuk sweated among the players and worked hard to defeat monsters. *What is she doing here?* I briefly thought about it and concluded she probably needed TP. After all, she seemed quite interested in the 7th floor's neurotech chip. I nocked my arrow and aimed at Jin Sahyuk.

[Warning. Crevon is currently at war. The player you have targeted has joined Crevon's war effort as an ally. Killing this player may result in punishment from Crevon.]

She even officially joined the war effort. I didn't care that much since the punishment didn't come from an administrator. Jin Sahyuk seemed to have sensed the danger with her sharp intuition and suddenly turned around in the middle of battle. Her eyes scanned the surroundings and soon landed on me. We gazed at each other over the long distance. Jin Sahyuk gritted her teeth at me. Not long afterwards, her mouth moved. I couldn't hear her, but understood what she tried to say.

I'm not doing anything bad right now!

Then she added another sentence.

Don't shoot. Dammit!

Her desperate shouting made me laugh. Regardless, I released the bowstring. *Chweek*— The dark ore arrow shot forward with a sonic boom. Jin Sahyuk quickly formed a barrier, but it couldn't block stigma's anti-magic attribute.

—...!

Her barrier shattered and my arrow dug through her shoulder. She should've felt an unimaginable pain.

— Fuck...

Jin Sahyuk managed not to scream as an absurd thought popped into my head. Would it be possible to change her too? Like how Shin Jonghak and Chae Nayun changed? Of course, I didn't need to test such a hypothetical question. I would still kill her without hesitation if given the chance, but perhaps I'd been excluding the possibility of reforming her.

—...

Jin Sahyuk glared at me full of pain and frustration. I could feel her rage from over here. For now, I didn't plan on letting her live in peace. I raised my bow and nocked another arrow, but she suddenly disappeared.

“How quick.”

I refused to let her escape and infused stigma’s magic power into my eyes. Jin Sahyuk had gotten quite far as she clenched her teeth and held her shoulder. Fortunately for her, the other nearby players stole my attention: Kim Suho, Venessa Fermun, Paolo Fermun, Yi Yeonghan, and Chae Nayun.

— Be careful everyone!

They fought Medusa some distance away from the main battlefield. A white aura emanated from Kim Suho’s golden sword. It looked like the Hwai sword technique that I gifted him.

— You’re the one who should be careful!

Chae Nayun swung a claymore the size of her body. The powerful strike left a gaping wound on Medusa and smashed away her minions. They didn’t seem to need my help, so I slowly lowered my bow.

—!

Then Medusa suddenly screamed and activated her magic eye of petrification. However, Kim Suho swung his sword and his gift easily severed Medusa’s authority. The rest of his party remained unaffected. The real problem came from above as several hundred harpies appeared in the sky.

[Lv.10 Harpie]

— *Pieeeeeek!*

Monsters with a human head and a bird’s body. They screamed and spat out venom, drawing the attention of Kim Suho’s party.

— What are those?

Chae Nayun sent a sword strike into the sky, but the nimble harpies dodged it.

Only Venessa Fermun specialized in long ranged attacks. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun struck down a few harpies here and there, but that took their attention away from Medusa. The tide of the battle began to shift, but Kim Suho's party had to defeat Medusa today.

"Hmm..."

I raised my bow again without a choice and nocked 5 arrows. They only needed my help with the harpies. I infused my 3 remaining streaks of stigma into the arrows. Lightning crackled around the 5 dark ore arrows as I aimed at the chirping harpies. My bowstring grew tense and the arrows howled until I released them. Then they flew silently towards their targets.

Chwaaa—

The 5 black streaks pierced every monster in their paths. Soon, harpies rained from the sky and formed a mountain of corpses.

* * *

I returned to Seoul since they could all hunt the calamities without a problem. I'd been going back and forth between the tower and Earth using Spartan's authority.

"Hajin!"

— Meow.

Evandel and Hayang greeted me at our apartment in Gangnam.

"Have you been good?"

"Uun!"

Evandel grew by the day. She looked like a 5 year old at birth, so she grew quite slowly. However, her current appearance matched her real age now.

“I missed you.”

“Me too.”

I couldn't send her to school because of her origin. I would've happily entrusted her to a worthy tutor, but not many could teach her.

I did have one in mind. A magician with ample teaching experience who also used summons, but I didn't have a good first impression of Ah Hae-In. From what I heard, she charged an absurd 5 billion won for a single lesson.

“I came back too late today. What should we do tomorrow?”

Evandel's eyes sparkled at my words.

“You'll be here tomorrow too?”

The door opened and Yun Seung-Ah walked in with a grocery bag. Her eyes shone the moment she saw me.

“Oh, who's this? The famous Black Lotus killer.”

I almost greeted her before flinching at her words. “*Huh?*”

“You thought I wouldn't know?” Yun Seung-Ah smiled mischievously.

“Everyone knows that you killed Black Lotus.”

“Oh...”

That made sense, but that wasn't why I felt surprised. I looked at Evandel before looking back at Yun Seung-Ah. I didn't want Evandel to hear such words like killer or killed.

“Ah, it means he plucked a flower. Nowadays, Evandel, you're not allowed to pluck flowers that aren't yours.”

“Okay!”

Evandel giggled as she watched Yun Seung-Ah try to save the situation. Then she grabbed the plastic bag in Yun Seung-Ah's hand and skipped over to the kitchen. She enjoyed taking the groceries out.

"This is chicken. This is onion. This is garlic. This is egg..."

She wanted to help with her aunty's work. I took the ingredients Evandel laid out and used *[Dwarf's Dexterity]* for the first time in a while.

* * *

Evandel fell asleep with Hayang one hour later after finishing her meal. Yun Seung-Ah turned off the TV and buried herself on the couch with a yawn.

"Let's get back to business."

Genghis Khan's artifacts had been found in Central Asia. Yun Seung-Ah and I talked a bit about it earlier while I cooked.

"As you know, those artifacts are causing quite a headache in Central Asia right now. The association normally would've given up since that land doesn't fall under any country's jurisdictions. The surrounding regions belong to djinns and Pandemonium is nearby too."

Yun Seung-Ah continued with a serious face.

"Everyone is wondering how this information got leaked. Pandemonium djinns managed to find out and began building an excavation site around it."

I already knew everything, but pretended to be oblivious.

"We can't just watch them take all the artifacts, so the association reluctantly chose to fight. After all, we're talking about Genghis Khan's artifacts."

Genghis Khan, also known as Temujin, the emperor who founded the largest empire in history. His empire didn't last long after his death,

but he reached a legendary status that spread throughout the world. Furthermore, Genghis Khan's army boasted greater power than its numbers. As such, an old weapon used by a nameless soldier could potentially be higher than a low grade artifact.

"Of course, we still have time. From our estimates, they need at least 2 weeks before they can excavate artifacts."

Yun Seung-Ah paused and looked at me. "So I was wondering..."

I had a hunch about what she would say next.

"You're a mercenary."

"I start at 50 billion."

I had already prepared a response.

"Hm?"

Yun Seung-Ah slightly jumped back.

"Didn't you just call me the Black Lotus killer? My value just skyrocketed."

I smiled at her as she scratched her head with a flustered expression.

Chapter 216

Reason for Meeting (2)

[8F Crevon]

Jin Sahyuk hid in a dense forest and even dug a hole in the ground to escape from Kim Hajin's attacks. She didn't have the time to feel humiliated. In a mere minute, she dug a hole deeper than most underground tunnels and tended her wounds inside.

“Uk!”

Her shoulder injury looked serious. The arrow cleanly pierced it and her right arm would've fallen off if the attack had been 1 cm closer.

Sssss...

A handful of magic power resonated and appeared in front of her as she took out a potion.

— Hurt again?

Jin Sahyuk glanced towards the voice. It sounded human, but came from a tiny cat.

“Shut up, Bell.”

Bell disguised himself as a cat and wagged his tail.

— You said you didn't like the mouth, so I changed it to something cute. You don't like it?

The cat perked its ears to appear cute. Bell could turn his entire body and parts of it into magic power. The cat resulted from him reshaping his eyes and mouth. He chose to be a cat because that was the only

animal Jin Sayuk didn't hate.

“Can't you tell by looking? I'm not in the mood to talk.”

The cat's eyes widened. Her remarks sounded quite gentle considering her shoulder had been shot. Did the cat thing really work?

— Before, you would've started cursing by now. Jin Sahyuk, you've surely changed! Or am I just too cute? *Meow?*

Jin Sahyuk even withstood that stupid remark. She sighed and continued to ignore the damn cat.

— Do you want me to avenge you?

That question caught her attention. She paused and sharply glanced at the cat sitting cross-legged.

— I think I can kill him at least once if it's a surprise attack.

Bell carefully tested the waters.

“Don't you dare.”

Her curt reply felt expected and unexpected.

Bell smiled. At this point, he thought she would accept help.

“I'll be the one who kills him.”

However, she hadn't lost her fighting spirit yet.

— I understand. Take care of that wound.

Bell disappeared into thin air as Jin Sahyuk sighed alone. She reflected on today's events while hiding in the serene forest. A single shot almost took her arm off, but she felt like she had a chance of winning now. She could definitely close the gap in their abilities.

Jin Sahyuk held a potion in her left hand and twisted the cap off with her mouth. *Pong*— She poured it over the wound. *Tzzzzz...* Steam rose from the point of contact and the pain felt even worse than the initial shot. Her bloodshot eyes swelled until they almost burst. She recalled his face while enduring the pain. *I want to kill him. I will kill him myself. With my own two hands, I'll...* She endured with tears streaming down her face, but never screamed.

A monarch must always be calm and collected on the outside.

She learned that from reading Machiavelli.

* * *

[Party 'Kimchipay' has defeated the calamity, Medusa!]

Kim Suho's party members sprawled on the ground to catch their breath.

"Haa... Haa..."

"Aiya..."

Was it a groan or a sigh? The indistinguishable sound echoed across the field. They finally won after 3 hours of desperate struggle. They utilized their advantages until the end. Medusa's magic eye of petrification required extreme caution since petrification would result in eternal death. Medusa knew players could resurrect, so she would've kept them as stones in her stomach.

However, the Sword Saint gift could cut through anything, including the magic eye of petrification. She became nothing more than a slightly more powerful monster.

"By the way, that was Black Lotus, right?" Yi Yeonghan suddenly asked.

They all harbored the same question despite the victory and joy. They lost the advantage for a moment in the middle of the fight when hundreds of harpies appeared. The party planned on retreating or

calling for reinforcements, but arrows suddenly came flying from the distance. The dark streaks appeared out of nowhere and decimated all the harpies. That magnificent scene of destruction lingered in their minds.

“Probably. Those arrows definitely belonged to Black Lotus.”

Kim Suho placed his hand on Misteltein and raised his upper body. He looked up at where the arrows came from and recalled the man standing above there. Did he help them out of amusement or was this part of his heroism like others believed? Kim Suho stared at the cliff for a long time feeling slightly confused.

“I don’t like this party name no matter how much I think about it.”

Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes at the system. They initially decided on Kim Chae Fe Yi with the first syllables of their family names, but Yi Yeonghan needlessly turned it into Kimchipay.

“It’s funny. It sounds like your dad’s company, Daehyun Pay.”

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth at Yi Yeonghan’s remark.

“That’s nice and all, but this damn system keeps making fun of me.”

Chae Nayun’s system looked like this:

[Kimchipay has defeated Medusa.]

[Nayunjangman Chi Nayun’s contribution is 14%]

It deliberately wrote her name as Chi Nayun.

“You wanna die?”

Her threats only made the system mock her more.

[Kimchi Nayun’s contribution is 14%]

“Sigh.”

It's useless to fight something you can't even see? Chae Nayun lay on the ground as the others clicked their tongues. As expected of the magic power monster, she still seemed energetic even after using so much magic power.

“The weather's nice.”

Chae Nayun looked at the sky. A thought suddenly crossed her mind and she widened her eyes.

“Wait, didn't Black Lotus kill all the harpies!”

“What the heck? Somebody's a little late.”

“Huh?”

“We've been saying this entire time that was Black Lotus.”

“Really?”

Chae Nayun awkwardly scratched her cheek. She didn't pay attention because the system kept picking fights with her.

“Why did Black Lotus...”

...help us? Chae Nayun mumbled as she opened the messenger. The only person she recently exchanged messages with was Extra7. He used to be her teacher, but now he seemed full of mysteries. She kept messaging him because she felt he had something to do with Kim Hajin. She pulled up their conversation log and examined the last couple of messages.

Me: Hyung, can we meet? I have a dangerous mission next week.

Me: Not joking, I might actually die lol It's a super dangerous mission.

Me: Hyung, I want to take lessons from you before I leave.

Extra7 still hadn't replied to any of them. She smacked her lips in disappointment when another system notification popped up.

[Rewards For Defeating Medusa] [You have received 2 Effective Good Selector.] [Effective Good Selector — You may turn a Lv.6 item or lower into an effective good.]

“Oh, what's this?” Yi Yeonghan shouted.

“Effective good selector? Hey, Suho! Isn't this really good?”

“You're right. Lv.6... What should we bring outside?”

Kim Suho smiled and Chae Nayun also beamed as she looked through her inventory. A ticket that could transform an item into an effective good, which meant the item could be brought outside the tower. *I don't even have to think about what to bring outside. Of course, it'll be the [Lv.6 Jack Churchill's Claymore] that I'm holding right now.* However, another item suddenly caught her eye.

[Lv.5 Invitation Letter to the Love Room]

If I can use the ticket on this Lv.5 item... Another system notification popped up.

[Return to the royal palace and claim Crevon's rewards.]

[100,000 TP will be divided according to the contribution rate.]

[The weapon that Kimchi Nayun rented, Lv.6 Jack Churchill's Claymore, will be permanently bestowed to Kimchi Nayun.]

“Are you kidding me? Say Kimchi Nayun one more time...”

“Hey, what are you doing?” Yi Yeonghan yelled at her. She turned back and saw everyone preparing to return.

“Let's go claim the rewards!”

“Okay.”

Chae Nayun glared at the air and followed them.

* * *

A peaceful home on a peaceful evening. I patted Evandel’s head as I answered various questions for the Truth Agency.

“Oh, so something like this happened.”

I’d been receiving lots of requests these days thanks to word of mouth. The djinns of Destruction wanted to uncover which hero killed their executives. Of course, I had no intention of accepting their request. I discovered someone familiar again as I browsed the requests.

“What’s wrong with her?”

[Dear Truth Agency,

This is LadyU from the other day. My request this time is also driven by pure curiosity. I am incredibly sorry to take up your time with such questions. Then again, my question is out of sheer curiosity and lacks a specific purpose, so please don’t feel obliged to accept. And please don’t get upset that my request is a repeat occurrence and kindly consider it as a silly girl’s immature curiosity...]

Yoo Yeonha and her extremely polite writing. This time, she requested about...

[Are the English Royal Court guild’s vice leader, Rachel, and Jeronimo Mercenary’s Fenrir, Kim Hajin, lovers?]

“Has she gone crazy these days?”

Perhaps her business mindset always assumed the worst. Still, how far have her delusions gone? I quickly replied.

[The answer is no. Fenrir Kim Hajin does not have any lover.]

I made myself clear so she wouldn't ask again. *Is she going to ask if I like men next?* After I replied... *Ding*— I received a text from Yoo Yeonha.

[Hey. I just got out of the tower. Tell me your nickname if you're out too.]

"Hmm."

I could probably tell Yoo Yeonha. She was close to Chae Nayun, but wouldn't spill the beans like Yi Jiyeon.

"Uuunn..."

Evandel began wriggling in my arms. She narrowed her eyes as if having a nightmare and dove deeper into my arms.

"Cute."

I smiled and patted her. I surrounded my touch with stigma's magic power and she peacefully fell back asleep.

— Hajin. There will be a meeting.

A voice rang in my ears. Boss recently learned this skill called *[Magic Power Transfer]*. She figured out how to use it to communicate through the mind. I placed Evandel in bed and stepped outside.

No stars appeared in the sky outside the apartment complex at 11 P.M. I recalled Crevon's sky filled with stars. Boss had purchased an apartment unit nearby that I recommended a long time ago.

She owned building 101, the largest and most expensive in the entire complex. Its market price had since gone up by 5 billion. Housing prices always cost a fortune around here, but the Tower of the Wish increased them even more.

I arrived in front of building 101's suite #902 and opened the unlocked door. The house looked empty. Only a single chair stood on the marble tiles covering the spacious living room. Boss sat in the chair with her eyes closed. She probably tried to set the mood, but...

Click. I turned on the lights first.

“...”

She frowned at me.

“Boss, where’s Jain?”

— I’m here.

A reply came from below. I followed the voice and discovered a small puppy.

“*Huh?* Is that you, Jain?”

— Isn’t this amazing? I’ve never been so small in my entire life. I feel like I’ve surpassed my limits after coming out of the tower.

The cute puppy spoke while panting.

“It’s cute.”

— *Haha*, really?

I turned to Boss again and she looked at me.

“The reason I called you here today is...”

— Central Asia, you know? They found artifacts there. Let’s get to the point quickly, yeah?

Before Boss could say anything... *Jiiiiiing*— Beams of light came out from Jain’s eyes like a projector. They all picked some weird skills from the tower.

— This is the catalog of core artifacts.

A list of Genghis Khan’s artifacts came up. [*Temujin’s Bow*] and the

[*Saddle of Khan*] caught my eye. A desire surged from deep within me the moment I saw them. I never thought of myself as materialistic, but I felt a strong urge to obtain [*Temujin's Bow*] to use it with the [*Dark Ore Arrow*]. Of course, I already had the [*Blessed Bow of Horus*], but the more the merrier.

— Among these...

“We’ll leave the small fries and take the big ones.”

Boss interrupted Jain, “But Kim Hajin.”

“Yes?”

I tilted my head at Boss. She only said one thing.

“You won’t be participating in this mission.”

* * *

I walked down the streets of 8-3F Crevon with Boss one week later.

“Are you upset?” Boss asked with only two days left until the mission.

“No,” I answered nonchalantly.

I agreed that they didn’t need me in this next mission. The excavation site had limited space, but a sharpshooter required enough distance to survive. The terrain didn’t suit me.

“It’s okay. I’ll be training for a while.”

“Yeah.”

We finished talking and continued our walk.

Boss seemed bothered and began muttering to herself.

“It’s not bad to wear your heart on your sleeve when you’re upset. It’s healthier to openly talk to others rather than piling things up inside. Which book did I read from? If we fall out over something like this, then that means I didn’t communicate very well with my subordinate. It’s my fault...”

I thought about covering my ears when I saw Rachel on the other side of the street with Princess Araha. Rachel left a great impression on the royal family during the defense against the calamities. She had officially become a royal guard and probably came with Araha to watch the [*Crevon Martial Tournament*] today.

“Oh, who are you up against Boss?”

The final round had been put on hold for various reasons. However, the royal family’s optimism returned after defeating two calamities without many casualties.

“I’m against a man I don’t know.”

“Mm. Yeah? You can go on ahead to the waiting room.”

“Okay.”

A question popped up in my mind as Boss left.

“Ah, Boss.”

“Yes?”

She turned around as if she expected it.

“What’s the nickname of the guy you’re fighting?”

“He’s called Yeokma.”

“Mm, well, good luck. Not that you’ll need it.”

We smiled at each other as she disappeared inside.

“Hmm...”

I decided to look around before the martial tournament began. A lot of powerful players and nobles came to watch. I spotted Kim Suho and Chae Nayun. Both of them looked disappointed that they didn't know this tournament existed.

Who was Yeokma if he wasn't one of them? Kim Junwoo? I tilted my head. Suddenly, I felt a sense of uneasiness and quickly took out the Book of Truth.

Who is the Yeokma participating in the Crevon Martial Tournament? A one-dimensional question like this would use too much stigma, so I asked the Book of Truth another question instead.

[Is the Yeokma in the Crevon Martial Tournament the person I know as Bell?]

I spent 1 streak of stigma and charred letters appeared over the Book of Truth's page 5 seconds later.

[Yeokma is indeed the person you know as Bell.]

“...!”

I ran to find Boss as soon as I read those words.

Chapter 217

Reason for Meeting (3)

I ran to the packed colosseum. Various events would take place today on top of the martial tournament's final match. Finding Boss among the crowd wasn't easy even for me.

My vision transformed the moment stigma's magic power flowed into my eyes. Like a satellite, I observed the entire colosseum from the sky. I finally found Boss heading towards her waiting room and chased after her. I ran like crazy and grabbed her shoulder. She turned around in surprise.

“...”

“...”

We blankly stared at each other. Boss didn't say anything and I didn't know what to say either. I calmly collected my thoughts. Boss might go crazy again if she went up against Bell.

Would she be able to beat him? I doubted it after seeing Bell's gift with my own eyes.

He most likely had the Magic Power Body gift. A gift I wrote in my settings book, but never implemented in the original story because it was simply too powerful.

Boss would never be able to defeat him because of his gift.

“Boss, I...”

After much thought, I decided to try using the *[Demon's Cunning Speech]*. It probably wouldn't work on someone as strong as her, but how much the target trusted me also affected the skill. To my

knowledge, Boss trusted me quite a lot.

“Why don’t you just forfeit and go to the 15th floor with me? We need to do something there.”

Unfortunately, the magic power in my words scattered before entering her ears.

“What are you doing?”

Her face froze as she felt what I attempted to do.

“Pardon?”

“What did you try to do just now?”

“Oh...”

I smiled bitterly and scratched my head. What should I say in this situation? Just let her fight and cause a scene? No, the colosseum had heavy security, especially during a fight. Princess Araha attended too, so I might get banned from Crevon if I interfered.

“Ah, well, it’s nothing much. Just something I learned recently.”

I decided to stay with Boss.

“I was going to use a hypnotic suggestion if it worked on you.”

“Hypnotic suggestion?”

“Yes, to tell you to do your best.”

I made up a poor excuse, but it didn’t sound *that* strange considering our relationship. A subordinate could worry about their boss.

“I guess it doesn’t work. Alright, let’s go to the waiting room together.”

“Okay.”

I walked to the waiting room with Boss. We sat on the couch in the large room. I bit my nails while thinking, *This battle likely won't end until one of them dies...*

“Ah!”

I suddenly thought of a good method. Stigma's magic power could last for 30-40 minutes after leaving my body. If I gave Boss an item with the anti-magic attribute... No, Boss wouldn't take it given her personality.

“Tsk.”

I clicked my tongue. Then Boss' black glove caught my attention.

“Boshy, the final will be in 5 minutes.”

“Got it.”

“Wait, Boss.”

I gently held her gloved hand before she got up.

“...?”

Boss widened her eyes at me as I secretly infused stigma's magic power into her glove. Obviously, I gave it the anti-magic attribute.

“W-What are you doing so suddenly?”

“...”

“Kim Hajin?”

I needed some time while gradually transferring it.

“I’m cheering you on so you don’t lose,” I murmured to the flustered Boss.

“What?”

“Don’t lose.”

— *Ah...* We’d like to apologize to all the guests. We’ve just been notified that participant Yeokma would like to forfeit. Instead, an exhibition match between Boshy and Lü Bu will take place.

“*Eh?*”

I blankly stared at the speaker on the ceiling.

“What?”

“You can let go now.”

“*Ah*, y-yes.”

I hurriedly let go of Boss’ hand.

* * *

[13F, Area of Rest, 49:03:02] [49:03:01] [49:03:00]

A familiar clock ticked above. Aileen’s party resumed climbing as soon as they took care of Crevon’s calamities. They quickly reached the 13th floor with the theme of rest. The quick-witted Jin Seyeon noticed that the challenge was to not fall asleep on this floor. Currently, they hadn’t slept for over 50 hours.

“Is Desolate Moon doing okay?”

Jin Seyeon asked Shin Jonghak. Everyone forced themselves to talk so they would remain awake.

“Of course, they wouldn’t be one of the world’s best guilds if they

couldn't do well without me.”

“Yeah, you sure are great. So... great...”

Aileen mocked Shin Jonghak's proud reply. She became oversensitive from the lack of sleep, but also hated heroes from guilds. Individuals or countries owned guilds and they primarily existed for profit.

“Ah, I'm dying to sleep. I can't just sit here anymore. I'm going to work out.”

Aileen shot up and skipped over to the room next door. Jin Seyeon turned to her.

“Don't fall asleep, Lady Aileen.”

“I won't. Don't worry.”

“Keep the door open.”

“...”

Aileen glared at Jin Seyeon and left the door half-open. Jin Seyeon carefully observed her through the gap. Not long afterwards, Aileen began to do push-ups with her small body.

“One, two, three... *uk*, eighty-six, eighty-seven... *uk*, one hundred forty, one hundred forty-one...”

“Guess I don't have to worry about her.” Jin Seyeon muttered and faced Shin Jonghak again. Was it because her brain seemed half asleep? She suddenly thought she should tell him her true feelings after looking at him. After all, they'd been in the same party for a long time now.

“Shin Jonghak, what do you think about your grandfather?”

She already knew he felt proud of him. Shin Jonghak was the type to brag about his family background.

“My grandfather?”

“Yes, hero Shin Myungchul. Many people still honor him for his part in stopping that calamity.”

“If you’re asking about the twilight of his life... I can only say I still don’t understand it.”

His reaction surprised her. “Pardon?”

Shin Jonghak closed his eyes and recalled the faint memory of his grandfather.

With great power comes great responsibility.

Apparently, his grandfather’s words came from a comic book about heroes in a time when heroes didn’t exist yet. His grandfather, Shin Myungchul, deeply carved those words in his heart. In the end, he saved humanity by sacrificing his life. However, he had abandoned his grandson who loved and respected him.

“The calamity would’ve been stopped even if my grandfather didn’t sacrifice his life. After all, the world contains many strong people.”

The hero who tried to carry everything by himself died and the heroes who didn’t lived. The young Shin Jonghak resented that. If his grandfather sacrificed his life to save the world, then why did the Nine Stars exist? Where were the other eight?

“Grandfather should’ve lived. He should’ve stayed in this world to do far greater things.”

His grandfather, Shin Myungchul, was a true hero to him.

“I see.”

Jin Seyeon didn’t ask any further. Shin Jonghak didn’t say anymore either. Silence filled the air between them.

“Can I ask a more sensitive question this time?”

“Are we playing a truth game or something?”

Shin Jonghak defaulted to his usual sarcastic tone out of fatigue. He quickly realized his mistake, but didn't correct himself. Thankfully, Jin Seyeon didn't mind.

“I guess you can say so. I can answer your questions too if you'd like.”

“Then you can start.”

“What is Nayun to you?”

Jin Seyeon went straight to the point. Shin Jonghak frowned, but that name made him recall fond memories.

At first, he thought Chae Nayun was the only girl worthy of him. The only family that suited Jinsung was Daehyun. That was the worthless belief he used to have.

He stopped caring about such things as time went on and learned more about her. He simply enjoyed the time they spent together and felt like a weight had been lifted off his shoulders. The world that always seemed grey turned colorful when she smiled. Everything became brighter.

“She's just someone I like.”

Because of this, he hated the damned wolf who took away her smile.

“I see.”

“Then it's my turn next. Do you have family?”

Shin Jonghak asked a sensitive question on purpose. Jin Seyeon hated revealing anything about her family.

“Of course. My father was also an excellent hero.”

She spoke with a perfectly calm face.

“My mother passed away while giving birth to my younger brother. Then my younger brother died of an illness at the age of 3.”

“Uh, you don’t have to go that far...”

Shin Jonghak averted his gaze and felt apologetic. Jin Seyeon only gently smiled.

“Oh right, take this.”

She took out a small bead from her pocket.

“What’s this?”

“An effective good. Hold onto this orb and set a goal. The greater the goal, the greater the reward when you achieve it.”

Shin Jonghak checked the item’s description.

[Lv.??? Orb of Hope] Lv.??? Set Goal: Set a goal you wish to achieve. Lv.??? Achieve Goal: When you achieve the goal you set, this orb will change into an item befitting the goal. (Effective Good)

“I obtained two, so I figured I should give you one.”

Shin Jonghak glanced at her, then cheerfully put away the orb. After all, effective goods were quite rare.

“Thank you. By the way, what goal did you set?”

“...”

Jin Seyeon didn’t answer. He tilted his head at her as she took out her own Orb of Hope and squeezed it tightly.

“Revenge.”

“...?”

“To take revenge. That’s it.”

Shin Jonghak didn’t expect that. It didn’t suit her at all. Someone who devoted herself to volunteer work wanted to take revenge?

“I have to meet someone no matter what.”

She would meet that person one day as long as she kept earnestly wishing. Of course, no one could guarantee a happy ending to their meeting.

“*Mmm.*”

Koong! Koong! Koong! Koong! A loud noise rang from the room next door. They turned around at the shocking scene before them. Jin Seyeon muttered with a sigh.

“She must’ve fallen asleep while we weren’t looking.”

Of course, Aileen had caused the commotion. She quietly wailed while pulling her beautiful, white hair. The magic power from her sadness devastated the cabin.

“*Um*, Lady Aileen?”

Aileen didn’t reply to Jin Seyeon.

“*Uaaang...*”

She began to cry and her tiny hands slammed into the floor. *What could she be dreaming about?* Jin Seyeon ran up to her and held her like a child. Aileen clung to her arm and cried even louder.

“Don’t cry, don’t cry... Jonghak, do you have anything sweet?”

Jin Seyeon continued patting Aileen’s back. Shin Jonghak took out a half-eaten piece of chocolate from his pocket.

[15F, Genkelope's Abandoned Vessel]

I returned to the 15th floor alone. A dark, eerie scene greeted me. The empty passageway resembled darkness itself and a water puddle splashed every time I took a step. Honestly, I felt too scared alone, so I summoned Spartan and Sannuri.

— *Hiing.*

— *Pururu.*

“Good. Keep chatting.”

I continued walking while listening to them chat. The 15th floor divided into 6 parts like hopscotch. I had to complete several quests and expend a huge amount of TP just to conquer one part. In the original story, I summarized everything by saying Kim Suho transferred his authority over to an NPC.

“Let’s see...”

I identified the most important part of the vessel using the Book of Truth. [Area 3] on the right side contained hibernation capsules with NPCs sleeping inside. I could easily wake them up and order them around.

“Let’s go.”

I ran forward with Sannuri and Spartan. Meanwhile, we sensed several eerie auras that caused goosebumps to rise on my arms, but I did my best to ignore them.

— *Kieeeeeek!*

An alien creature suddenly blocked our path. [Lv.12 Alien Host] Its black carapace contained holes all over it and venomous fluid dripped from its large claws and tail. No other word could describe this creature other than grotesque.

“Geez!”

I immediately fired my shotgun. *Kwang!* The alien turned into several chunks of meat. Its blood and venom splattered towards me, but aether formed a barrier in time.

“Collect the venom.”

[You have obtained Alien Host's Venom Crystal.]

I continued running through the vessel designed like a maze. It didn't take long to arrive at *[Area 3]*. I opened the tightly shut door and walked inside. The alien creatures outside couldn't follow me anymore.

“Whew...”

I sighed in relief and wiped my sweat.

— *Hiing.*

— *Pururu.*

“What.”

Spartan and Sannuri also entered and seemingly made fun of me.

[Turning on power...] [Activating spatial defense and isolation...] [Only 3% fuel remaining.] [Fuel may be purchased with TP.]

“Oh...”

This scenery far surpassed modern technology. The floor consisted of some sort of carbon alloy. Complicated machines for controlling the vessel sat in the center and oval hibernation chambers lined up around the walls. First, I checked the NPCs sleeping inside the chambers.

[Grade 5 Navigator Liole] [Unlocking Condition – 15000TP or Quest Key]

[This NPC will follow the player who wakes him up.]

“Mm, it’s the same.”

Thankfully, nothing changed from my original settings. Of course, I didn’t plan on paying any TP. I took out the *[Mystic Key]* from my inventory with a smile.

* * *

[Mystic Key] Lv.7 Unlocking

The Mystic Key became level 7 thanks to all the item experience coupons from Tomer. I inserted the key into the hibernation chamber and twisted it. As expected, it immediately opened.

“Huaaak.”

I ignored the navigator who just woke up and continued waking up the other NPCs. Altogether, I awakened 8 navigators of various grades.

[Grade 1 Captain – Honer] [Unlocking condition – 300,000 TP, Calamity Core, or Clearing a Specific Quest] [This NPC will follow the player who wakes him up.]

As expected, the captain of the ship couldn’t be woken with just the mystic key.

“Hmm.”

Can you withstand this? I imbued the mystic key with 2 streaks of stigma and jammed it into the hibernation chamber again. *I’ll acknowledge you if you can withstand this.* —Click. The hibernation chamber opened this time.

“Huuaak.”

After Captain Honer, I unlocked the *[Chief Technician]*, *[Chief Scientist]*, *[Elite Doctor]*, *[Army Commander]*, and many more.

“It’s going to take an entire day to get through everyone.”

I murmured with a sigh and looked around. The NPCs that woke up all stared at each other in confusion.

* * *

The Essence of the Strait team looked around their surroundings and waited on standby inside a state-of-the-art building constructed by numerous magicians and agents. They constructed their outpost near a Central Asian grassland.

— The association only set four guidelines. First, guilds can only enter with their permission. Second, guilds are prohibited from fighting each other. Third, guilds must select their own areas. Fourth, guilds are not to drag out any fight.

Currently, 13 core members gathered inside the outpost’s conference room as Yoo Yeonha briefed them from a holographic screen.

— Essence of the Strait sent 35 members. Three of them learned a skill called [*Mass Teleport*] from the tower, so in case anyone is injured or in danger...

The briefing continued, but Chae Nayun couldn’t focus. She rummaged through her pockets and didn’t pay attention to Yoo Yeonha.

— Oh right, the highest quality potions have been prepared for all of you, so feel free to use them however you want. Good luck, everyone.

“What are you fiddling with?”

Kim Youngjin asked Chae Nayun as soon as Chief Strategic Officer Yoo Yeonha finished speaking.

“Huh?”

“You don’t have to hold it in if it’s a withdrawal symptom from not smoking. Just go smoke outside.”

“No, it’s not that...”

Chae Nayun scratched her neck and didn’t explain any further. She kept fiddling with a certain ticket. Kim Youngjin stared at her with an odd look before asking in a nice tone.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes? *Um*, what’s up all of a sudden?”

“The 13th floor. I heard you gave up midway.”

Last week, Chae Nayun and the rest of Kim Suho’s party challenged the 13th floor. However, they had to quit halfway because of Chae Nayun. She couldn’t handle the happy memories she experienced.

“I heard you cried a lot—”

“B-Bullshit!” Chae Nayun interrupted him.

“W-What? Bull what? You know I’m your superior—”

“I-It’s because you keep saying weird things!” Chae Nayun shouted and shot up.

“Wait, you...”

“I’m going to the toilet!” Chae Nayun quickly ran away.

“*Sigh...*”

Chae Nayun looked at herself in the bathroom mirror.

“I bet that bastard Yi Yeonghan told everyone again.”

What happened on the 13th floor became one of her darkest recent memories. She had lounged around until she accidentally fell asleep. It didn’t take long for her to have a nightmare.

Could she really call that a nightmare? A happy future she never dreamt of unfolded before her. She cried after waking up because of the harsh reality. Her tears wouldn't stop and her trembling body wanted to reject the truth. In the end, Kim Suho took it upon himself to give up halfway.

“Haa...”

Chae Nayun turned on the faucet and doused her head in cold water. Then she murmured in a teary voice.

“Why did Kim Hajin appear there?”

— *Huup!* A gasp sounded from one of the stalls. Chae Nayun flinched. *Was someone else here?*

“Who is it?”

Chae Nayun quickly ran to the stall with water dripping from her hair and kicked open the door.

“Hiik!”

She knew the girl inside quite well.

“H-Hi, Nayun...”

Chae Nayun knew she slipped up after seeing Yi Jiyeon. *She must've heard what I just said. Should I smack her head real hard and make her lose her memories?* However, doing so wouldn't solve the problem this time.

— Hey, Nayun.

A familiar voice came from Yi Jiyeon's smartwatch. She was on the phone with Essence of the Strait's Chief Strategic Officer, Yoo Yeonha.

Chapter 218

Process of Fate (1)

[15F, Genkelope's Abandoned Vessel]

“Ugh, so tired.”

Out of all the NPCs that required stigma to unlock, I first rescued the *[Grade 1 Captain – Horner]*, *[Chief Technician – Matt]*, and *[Chief Scientist – Davon]*. I still needed to release 4 more chief rank NPCs, but ran out of stigma.

“Excuse me, are you alright?”

I spent 2 streaks for the captain, 1 streak for the technician, and the last one for the scientist. I couldn't even answer their questions afterwards. Who would've thought I would deplete all my stigma outside of battle like this? I looked at them while laying on the floor. I had carefully created these NPCs even when the settings grew messier. They could clear all the quests on the 15th floor for me if I simply let them be.

“Is there something wrong with your body?”

“No, I'm okay. I slightly overworked myself trying to deactivate the hibernation.”

“Oh, I see.”

Horner, a promising captain in his early 30s, sighed in relief.

“Actually, we're from the Genkelope Zone on the 16th floor.”

The NPC began to explain their story. Their crew had been sailing through the *[Tower's Void]* to escape from the demons that took over

the 16th floor when unidentified creatures attacked their vessel. They concentrated all their efforts on Area 3 and hibernated to wait for help from the future.

“*Hmm.* So all of you came from the 16th floor?”

“We originally lived on the 15th floor, but another floor came into existence after we placed our ship in the tower’s void. In any case, we’re the last survivors of Genkelope.”

“...”

I nodded. The Genkelope Zone used to be an old residential area, but the demons destroyed it. Demons also grew stronger the higher they climbed. Horner looked at me with big eyes and continued.

“In addition to Area 3, thousands of people are sleeping in the depths of the ship’s basement. Other crewmen should be hiding in Area 1 and Area 2 as well.”

“Please help us!”

A young NPC came up to me and bowed before Horner could even finish.

— Please help!

— We beg you!

Behind him, a group of 50 or so NPCs whom I just released also followed. System notifications popped up in front of me.

*[A massive quest has occurred — Recovery and Reactivation of the Vessel]
[Extra7’s database has been registered in Area 3.] [Player Extra7 has been nominated as the owner of Area 3.] [You may now spend TP to renovate Area 3.] [You may relinquish these rights at any time.]*

I felt pressured, but the ending I wanted also included them.

“That’s exactly what I’m here for.”

The atmosphere grew darker on the 15th floor, which sat in the middle of the tower. Demons had completely taken over the 16th, 17th, and 18th floors. No dreams, hopes, or humanity existed there. The stark scenery served as a warning to the human race in the Tower of Wish.

“Oh, so that means...”

“First, I’ll turn the power back on.”

I did the only thing I could do while lying down: spending money.

[Area 3 Management] [You have spent 50,000 TP to restore 12% of power to Area 3.] [Power has returned to Area 3.]

Fortunately, I saved up plenty of TP. Still, this ship sucked a lot of money. I wouldn’t be able to completely restore it even with a year’s worth of profit from Prestige. However, this ship would probably be worth it. Honestly, I didn’t know for sure since I skipped the details when writing about it. In the original story, Kim Suho believed destroying the tower would allow the souls trapped inside to finally rest in peace. He also wanted to make the selfish administrators pay, so he attacked relentlessly starting on this floor. The middle and latter half of the tower episodes became a mess.

“Now, I’ll get serious. Prepare yourselves.”

I began spending huge amounts of TP.

[You have spent 50,000 TP to reconstruct the basic medical facilities in Area 3 — AUTO BOT has been activated.] [Reconstructing basic training facilities — Shooting Range, Armory] [Extending basic defense facilities — Barrier Upgrade, Prison Transfer, Reformation System] [Reconstructing basic sanitary facilities — Bathhouse, Cafeteria, Dormitory] [Reconstructing basic survival facilities — Food Repository, Artificial Farms]

Something strange happened in Area 3 as the notifications popped up. Rays of light shone from the empty ceiling and various facilities

appeared out of nowhere.

“Oh!”

“What kind of miracle is this?”

Cafeteria, bathhouse, shooting range, armory, etc. I only spent money through the system, but the NPCs hailed me like devotees in the face of God.

[The NPCs of Area 3 have accepted you as their savior.]

Area 3 appeared to be half the size of Yeouido and served as the central vessel's core. The next step would be to enhance the facilities here and use them to free other areas such as *[Area 1]*, *[Area 2]*, and the *[Hangar]*.

“You all must be hungry. Please eat first. Then focus on recovery and combat training for the next week. Tomorrow, the military expert over there...”

I glanced at the hibernation chamber and hesitated. The captain quickly explained, “That’s Colonel Erenner. He’s an experienced soldier with great combat skills and excellent command abilities.”

“Yes, yes. I’ll wake him up later. Let’s restore this place step by step.”

I printed a photo through the system.

“This is also for later when the ship becomes stabilized and players like me begin to appear. If you ever run across someone who looks like this...”

I handed the photo to Horner, who curiously looked at it.

“She’s a beauty. Is she your wife?”

“No, no. There’s no way she’s my wife.”

The most important facility on the 15th floor was the prison. Anyone locked up in Genkelope's prison would be placed under system restraint. Of course, I couldn't lock up just anyone with the captain watching me, but I could bully at least one player.

"Lock her up. She's a criminal by the name of Jin Sahyuk. She's brimming with confidence, so she'll respond if you call her name. Keep that in mind."

"Yes sir."

I raised myself with a groan. "*Kuuk*. I'll stay here until tomorrow."

Boss told me to stay out of the mission, but I didn't think I could.

"Spartan?"

Spartan flew back from his walk with Sannuri and sat on my shoulder. Horner widened his eyes at the handsome eagle.

"Just tell him if anything happens. We're connected."

* * *

[4 days later, 8-3F Atalos Royal Palace]

Only the chosen could access the sacred garden of Atalos. Rachel trained in this garden filled with jewel-like buds and soft grass.

"Try to accept the elementals more. Think of it like sprinkling magic power to make them happy. You don't control them. You work with them. Remember that."

"Yes ma'am."

She became *[Princess Araha's Knight]*, the biggest rise in status for an individual player, and found a new elemental teacher with Araha's help.

“Then let’s try again.”

“Okay!”

Yuhael, Crevon’s best elementalist, was much more skilled than Shin Yeohwa, Earth’s best elementalist. The two couldn’t be compared in terms of teaching.

Rachel had suffered much humiliation and distress from her former teacher, Shin Yeohwa. She truly felt happy when Shin Yeohwa accepted her 4 years ago as a disciple. Then she found out about the 1 billion won per day tuition fee and her heart dropped. However, she promised to become a person worthy of such value and diligently attended the classes.

Shin Yeohwa would get angry over the smallest mistakes and needlessly spend half of class physically punishing her. At times, Shin Yeohwa would even beat her with a cane.

For such reasons, Rachel felt depressed whenever she had a lesson and her motivation gradually waned. The harsh training always wore her out, but she withstood it all with sheer willpower and became a full-fledged elementalist.

Shin Yeohwa’s envy continued even after their lessons ended. She purposefully spread the rumors about Rachel and Fenrir, but Rachel didn’t take any actions out of respect.

“Good job, Rachel.”

Yuhael operated completely differently and genuinely praised Rachel when she did well. She also mercilessly corrected Rachel’s mistakes when she didn’t do so well.

“You have a real gift. As expected of my student.”

Rachel bashfully smiled at Yuhael’s compliment. This benevolent teacher taught her the pleasure of learning. That didn’t mean Rachel hated or blamed Shin Yeohwa. Rachel still considered Shin Yeohwa one of her masters and thanked her like a fool for developing her skills in the beginning.

“Let’s stop here for today. Any more and you won’t be able to move tomorrow.”

“Okay. Thank you.”

Yuhael patted her on the shoulder as Rachel politely bowed.

“I look forward to seeing what kind of knight will be born when elementals meet with the sword.”

“Thank you.”

“Well then, I’ll take my leave. Rest well.”

“Yes. Thank you for your hard work.”

Yuhael disappeared into the distance with her wind elemental. Her usage of elementals truly opened Rachel’s eyes.

“Wow...”

Rachel wanted to become strong just like her. Rumors floated around that Lancaster recently formed a large force. No one knew what he was scheming as he traveled between Pandemonium and Africa, the land of monsters. Rachel desperately needed the power to defend against him.

“That’s my knight.”

The sound of applause caught her attention. Princess Araha watched from the corner of the garden as Rachel walked over.

“Have you been well, Princess?”

“Yeah. I’m having a lot of fun these days thanks to you. I got to see the martial tournament and theater rehearsals. I would’ve paid more attention to the Crane Feather Fan if I knew I’d meet you.”

“*Hm?* Crane Feather Fan?”

“Yep! It’s an incredible treasure that can help you wield elementals, but some ruffian stole it. Well, that’s a story for another time. Come in. You must be hungry.”

“Yes, Princess.”

Rachel kept a few steps behind. She walked elegantly and her gracious form amazed Araha.

“Wow, you must really be a princess.”

“*Haha.*”

“That’s right, do you have a boyfriend?”

Rachel smiled at the girlish question. “I don’t.”

“Then someone you like?”

“I... don’t.”

“*Huh?* You paused for a second there!”

“There isn’t one.”

Rachel calmly shook her head in disapproval. She didn’t know what it felt like to fall in love yet. With such thoughts, she casually checked her messenger. Most of the people she exchanged messages with belonged to the Royal Court guild, but she recently sent a message to Extra7.

[Hajin, which floor are you on? I’m on the 12th. If you’re nearby, would you like to climb togethrr? ^▽^?]

He still hadn’t replied. Was it because of her typo? He did seem fussy about grammar. Rachel pouted and stepped inside the castle.

“Come play pool with me tonight.”

“I don’t see why not. As long as Princess Araha finishes all her homework.”

“*Hmph.*”

In the palace hallway, portraits of former kings lined up against the wall. Rachel would always stare at one of the four kings.

[Arthur Von Atalos Pendragon.]

The embossed letters formed a familiar name. England’s legendary hero, King Arthur, had stabilized Crevon after being resurrected here.

“My great-grandfather is indeed handsome.”

Araha innocently murmured, which Rachel found to be quite cute. Then Rachel suddenly received a call from her messenger. She excused herself.

“Yes. This is Rachel.”

An urgent voice broke out.

— Vice leader! Genghis Khan’s artifacts have been discovered in Central Asia!

“*Huh?* W-What artifacts?”

— We found out about it too late. Looks like a battle is about to break out. The association and other guilds probably worked in secret.

Rachel blankly listened and finally realized why other guild leaders recently avoided her and many Essence of Strait and Frost Sanctuary members had left the tower.

“I understand. I’ll hang up now.”

Rachel clenched her teeth. Sadness and dejection slowly rose within her. She thought they had become comrades, but they still treated her

like a stranger.

It couldn't be helped since she belonged to a weaker guild. You couldn't rely on others for information. You had to earn it yourself, so she couldn't blame them. They could only blame themselves for being weak.

“Haaa...”

She felt quite upset, but inwardly denied it.

* * *

[Central Asia]

“Everyone on standby.” Yi Jin-ah, Essence of Strait's vice leader, spoke in the cold underground tunnel.

“We're entering in 10 minutes.”

Their team planned to enter through an underground tunnel and would take charge of the fifth basement. They had earned this site full of artifacts thanks to Yoo Yeonha's political maneuvering.

“Everyone, inspect your weapons.”

At Yi Jin-ah's words, the members all checked their weapons.

“Yi Jiyeon, please confirm your active buffs.”

“Yes! Every guild member has received a physical ability boost and a magic power application buff. Only Yohei and Shen Yuan received an application boost buff since their gifts relate to their attributes and only Weapon Master Kim Youngjin received speed-related buffs.”

“Good. Yi Jiyeon and the healers remain on standby at this tunnel's midpoint.”

“Understood”

The supporters quickly answered and backed away. Vice leader Yi Jin-ah began roll call just before the Genghis Khan Grassland Operation.

“The teams will be divided as discussed beforehand. The team leaders will be me, Kim Youngjin, and Yi Yoonho. Please confirm.”

“This is Kim Youngjin with 11 team members.”

“This is Yi Yoonho with 12 team members.”

“Confirmed. Those next in line after the team leaders, please confirm.”

“This is Shen Yuan, vice leader of Team Yi Jin-ah.”

“This is Chae Nayun, vice leader of Team Kim Youngjin.”

“This is Yohei, vice leader of Team Yi Yoonho.”

“Good. Use the *[Multiplying Letter]* in case of any issues. Proceed!”

The 35 members took care of formalities and split off to 3 separate paths. *Dadadada...* Kim Youngjin’s team entered first and would take charge of the 1 km eastern tunnel. They went through the tunnel while carefully studying the area, but didn’t encounter any enemies.

[East, confirmed.]

Kim Youngjin sent a message through the *[Multiplying Letter]*, an effective good they brought from the tower.

[West, confirmed.]

[North, confirmed.]

Everything proceeded smoothly so far.

“...”

Kim Youngjin nodded to his members and silently approached the artifact excavation center. They moved as stealthily as possible, but a ray of light suddenly shone on them.

Doong!

The bright light revealed their surroundings and they calmly faced the enemies. Their team only consisted of elites who had gone through all sorts of struggles in the tower.

— I knew you'd come, you vermin.

A husky voice insulted them. The team gazed at the voice hidden in the dark.

“Get ready to fight.”

They all took out their weapons at Kim Youngjin's order.

— You call djinns the evils of society, but you're no different from us at the end of the day.

Koong, koong. Loud footsteps followed. Chae Nayun infused the [Lv.6 Jack Churchill's Claymore] with her magic power. Kim Youngjin also grasped the sword once wielded by an ancient Korean warrior. Soon, dozens of djinns appeared from the dark.

“You're here to steal our stuff, aren't you?”

Their leader stepped forward. His hair stretched out like a mane and more hair covered his chest and chin. He easily stood over 2 meters tall and reminded them of a lion.

“We're not here to steal. We're here to exterminate humanity's evils.”

“There you go with your shitty sophistry. *Hahaha...*”

The man laughed with his teeth baring. Then he stopped when his gaze turned to the woman next to Kim Youngjin. His smile

disappeared and he widened his eyes. Chae Nayun frowned from his gaze.

“You’re lusting after a woman even in this situation? Stupid beast.”
Kim Youngjin spoke to the man in contempt.

“*Kuhahahaha!*”

The man’s laughter resounded throughout the tunnel and a few guild members covered their ears. He pointed his huge finger at Chae Nayun.

“You! It’s you!”

“What’s this douchebag saying?”

“*Hmm?*”

He briefly paused at Chae Nayun’s dull response before nodding.

“Ah, you wouldn’t know me. *Haha*, I guess I’ll introduce myself. I’m sure you’ll be happy to find out.”

The man nonchalantly confessed as if talking about the day’s weather.

“I’m the one who killed your mom.”

* * *

Meanwhile, Bell scouted the area around Genghis Khan’s excavation site from above. He had turned his body into magic power and swam through the clouds.

His magic power eyes could see through obstacles, so he already finished grasping the general situation. Essence of the Strait, Frost Sanctuary, and Desolate Moon just entered one after the other. Creator’s Sacred Grace entered last with only 8 members and they headed towards the first basement level, the cheapest and most dangerous site.

“Where could they be?”

Bell continued to search for someone, but gave up 7 minutes later when he couldn't spot any signs of them. That meant they already infiltrated with Jain's gift at least 2-3 days ago.

“Give up, Sahyuk. We're never gonna find them. Let's just leave.”

—...

His partner didn't seem to think so.

“Jin Sahyuk?”

— Shut up. I think I found him.

“*Huh?* Found who?”

She didn't answer. He searched again to make sure, but couldn't find anyone. Jin Sahyuk replied about 3 minutes later.

— Found you, shitty wolf.

Her voice overflowed with excitement. Bell asked in surprise.

“You did? Really?”

— *Haa... Oi*, Bell. We're outside the tower, correct? We're on Earth?

“We are, but how did you... No, I won't ask. Instead, leave him alone until he makes his move.”

— I know, I know.

Her voice trembled as she clenched her teeth. *She seems quite excited. Just how far can Kim Hajin drive her?* Bell grinned.

— I have no idea what this bastard is planning.

The voice full of resentment couldn't wait for revenge.

— But I'll kill him at the most crucial moment.

Chapter 219

Process of Fate (2)

“Yaawn...”

I lay belly down on a patch of grass in Central Asia. I left the tower the day before even though I didn't plan on joining the scramble. I just thought I should help out if anything unexpected happened.

The underground excavation site wouldn't affect my shooting. I added an obstacle-piercing attribute to my bullets and my anti-material sniper rifle specialized in piercing objects like helicopters and tanks. Stigma's magic power further strengthened everything.

I also took out the *[Blessed Bow of Horus]* at 5 in the evening. The sun had set early, so the sky already turned dark. I could activate the *[Eye of Horus]* for 5 seconds if a fight broke out. Its authority would grant me an unavoidable lock-on. This ability bypassed the world's law of physics as long as I could see my target. My attacks would hit no matter the obstacles.

I continued observing from a far distance. It took a while to find a hiding place because of the flat terrain, but I perfectly disguised myself with aether. I would look no different than a patch of grass if someone observed from above.

“Hmm...”

My thousand-mile eyes captured some heroes beginning their operation.

— Stay quiet and follow me.

Yun Seung-Ah acted as field leader for the first time in a while. Creator's Sacred Grace entered the underground excavation site's 1st floor. Unfortunately, the 1st floor remained closest to the surface and

naturally contained subpar artifacts. They would only find low intermediate grade artifacts at best. Of course, Creator's Sacred Grace happily settled for that. The heavens would be touched by their efforts and grant them a special gift.

The American guilds, General and Lost Child, currently explored the 2nd floor beneath them. These two guilds vied for America's number one spot and would self-destruct themselves because of it.

Frost Sanctuary explored the 3rd floor and also hired the world's greatest mercenary group, Jeronimo. The Chameleon Troupe members mixed within their ranks.

Desolate Moon took charge of the 4th floor. Shin Jonghak arrived late and should've stolen the leader position, but listened surprisingly well to the guild's designated leader.

Next, Essence of the Strait on the 5th floor...

"Hmm."

I subconsciously murmured at the scene. Just now, Chae Nayun's team encountered the djinn, Gunyuden. This large muscular man belonged to Satan's Servants. He also murdered Chae Nayun's mother in the past. Gunyuden stared at Chae Nayun and shouted.

— I'm the one who killed your mom.

* * *

"I'm the one who killed your mom."

Those words sunk into Chae Nayun's heart. Even so, she stayed still because she needed time to process them. Daehyun had used every method in its arsenal to find the murderer, yet they came up short. Chae Nayun had accepted the reality that she would never avenge her mother and already buried that desire deep within her heart. However, the man in front of her pulled out her pent-up sorrow and resentment.

“Stay calm, Chae Nayun.”

Kim Youngjin tried to warn her.

“No one could find a single clue about the assassin who infiltrated Daehyun. Such a light-mouthed fool couldn’t possibly be that assassin.”

Chae Nayun’s face contorted even more despite Kim Youngjin’s convincing words. She glared with bloodshot eyes at the man who claimed to have killed her mother.

“*Hah?* No one found a single clue? I told everyone I met about my heroic deed, but no one believed me. Don’t tell me, did you buffoons think humanity’s power could reach Pandemonium?”

The man took out a large sword that looked more like a sharp piece of rock from a boulder. Only the word barbaric could describe it. *Haaa...* Chae Nayun sighed with rage and pointed her claymore at the djinn.

“Did you really do it?”

The man grinned from ear to ear. “Why, of course.”

“I see... but that’s too bad...”

The corner of her mouth curled up and a stream of tears fell as she forcefully sneered.

“You have no evidence. I’ve met a lot of guys like you. Djinn’s all act like having a death wish is something to be proud of.”

Chae Nayun glared at him with disgust. The man rubbed his chin in thought.

“Don’t try to provoke me and shut your damned trap—”

“Evidence? *Mmm...* evidence... *Ah*, wasn’t that corpse missing a thumb?”

“...!”

Chae Nayun’s eyes instantly shook. She whimpered under her tightly shut mouth and fierce magic power swirled around her claymore. Kim Youngjin and the other members also covered their weapons with magic power. They naturally grew angry as well.

“My client told me to cut off her finger for proof. That’s exactly what I did.”

“Y-You fucker!”

Chae Nayun couldn’t hold back anymore. Anyone else would’ve reacted the same. She shot forward like a bullet and the magic power from her claymore flashed.

“You son of a bitch!”

A large stone sword collided with the claymore. *KWANG!* An explosion erupted and magic power dyed the world white.

* * *

Woong— Yun Seung-Ah briefly paused after feeling a faint rumbling from beneath her. Then she examined the nearby presences. The djinns standing guard on the 1st floor hurried down. Yun Seung-Ah turned to her 7 elite members and excitedly spoke.

“The number of enemies has decreased. We’ll quicken our pace.”

They moved stealthily, but quickly into the 1st floor’s *[Area A]*. Artifact excavation sites often consisted of multiple areas. The 1st floor only contained mediocre artifacts with many smaller areas like ant tunnels. Their investigation showed 6 areas in total.

“The Chameleon Troupe might also be here, so stay on guard at all times.”

Yun Seung-Ah warned them before entering Area A. No one knew about the Chameleon Troupe’s participation in this artifact scramble,

but Yun Seung-Ah felt certain Jain would come.

“By the Chameleon Troupe, you mean...” Kim Suho asked.

“Yes, it’s the organization Black Lotus belongs to. You know it?”

“Yes.”

Kim Suho nodded. He heard about it from Jin Sahyuk when they coincidentally met in a Crevon dungeon. Jin Sahyuk told him a certain organization was chasing her as she ran away. Kim Suho remembered because that was the first time they didn’t fight after meeting each other.

“I guess it’s not too surprising. Their name is slowly spreading nowadays.”

“...”

Then why was Jin Sahyuk chasing Black Lotus? Kim Suho seriously contemplated that when Yi Yeonghan asked.

“Black Lotus is here? As a guard?”

“No, the Chameleon Troupe isn’t a djinn organization. Its members are likely all human.”

That was a problem in itself. Yun Seung-Ah recalled the past Chameleon Troupe.

“In any case, Black Lotus is an archer. He won’t enter such a confined space if he can help it, so don’t worry too much.”

Yun Seung-Ah stopped talking and held the doorknob to Area A. She looked at Kim Suho before opening it.

“Don’t spare any djinns.”

She strictly warned him.

“Understood.”

Kim Suho hesitated, but nodded nonetheless. He could still recall memories of his home world that transformed into the demon realm. Djinnns who sold their souls became no different than devils. An existence without a soul couldn't be considered human.

“Then we're going in.”

Yun Seung-Ah opened the door and the 8 members stormed in. No one spared a single djinn guarding Area A and they all died without even being able to scream for help.

Woong— The elite members from Korea's former rank 1 guild could all sense the rumbling beneath them.

* * *

The battle on the 5th floor began disadvantageously. They had 10 members vs 30 djinnns and couldn't easily make up the difference in numbers. Not to mention, these djinnns felt stronger than ordinary ones. However, Essence of the Strait's heroes used the skills they acquired from the tower and slowly gained the advantage. Chae Nayun greatly contributed by holding up their leader alone.

“You're stronger than I thought.”

Gunyuden swung his stone sword as he murmured in surprise.

KWANG!

Chae Nayun defended the attack and sneered. “Are you sure you're not just weak?”

“*Mmm.*”

Gunyuden swung again and finally destroyed Chae Nayun's qi reinforcement. She quickly retreated and reproduced another qi reinforcement.

Gunyuden smirked. “I don’t think so.”

“*Hmph.*”

Chae Nayun smirked even bigger after recovering her qi reinforcement.

“You should’ve cut off my neck if you had such a trick up your sleeve. Watch and learn, idiot.”

Chae Nayun stretched her sword out. About 10 meters stood between them, a distance no sword could normally cover. However... *Tzzzzz...* Magic power rose from her claymore and formed a giant blade.

“What’s that?”

“—!”

Chae Nayun attacked without replying. The magic power blade absorbed even the smallest particles of magic in the surroundings as she swung it. Gunyuden took the blow without difficulty. *Crack!*

“What’s this?”

A part of the stone sword shattered the moment it touched Chae Nayun’s magic power. The weight of pure magic power couldn’t be taken lightly. Gunyuden’s face flickered with unease as Chae Nayun continued with horizontal slashes, vertical slashes, cross slashes, spin slashes... Her 10 meter blade dominated the entire area. Gunyuden frantically blocked, but his stone sword broke down with every exchange and the duel gradually approached its end.

For some reason, Gunyuden seemed too carefree. He smiled as he received Chae Nayun’s attacks and recalled what she said earlier. *You should’ve cut off my neck if you had such a trick up your sleeve.* That’s exactly what he planned to do.

“—!”

A gap appeared in Chae Nayun’s defense as she made a huge swing.

Gunyuden threw a glance to the side and something immediately fell on Chae Nayun's shoulder.

“What!”

She quickly tried to throw it off, but a sharp pain struck her back and her body lost all its strength.

“What... did you...”

“Hehehehe.”

The figure that fell on Chae Nayun's back lightly jumped and returned to Gunyuden's side. She glared at him while panting.

“You cowardly son of a bitch.”

“Ah, well, to tell you the truth, it was him. The one who killed your mom.”

Gunyuden smiled and pointed to the short, ugly man snickering.

“He's my brother, Yudoren.”

“Y-You b-bastard.”

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth. *Brother? You damned bastards!* She tried to stop the bleeding with her magic power, but the younger brother's gift prevented her bleeding from stopping. Her vision blurred as quickly lost blood.

“Chae Nayun!”

Kim Youngjin shouted. However, the other djinns stopped him. She couldn't expect any help, but then she recalled an item as she gasped for breath. *Call me if you're ever in danger.* She recalled that man's words...

Chae Nayun tried to take something out of her pocket. However, the

small man stopped her. Yudoren threw a knife that pierced her hand, but Chae Nayun didn't feel any pain. That wasn't a good sign.

“...”

She glared at the two djinns as her bloodshot vision blurred. *Not now. The sworn enemies who killed Mom are standing in front of me. I can't give up now. I can't...* Chae Nayun unleashed her magic power for one final attack, but did the heavens abandon her?

Chwaaak!

An arrow descended through the walls and mercilessly pierced her heart. She blankly looked down at the magic arrow in her body and instinctively knew the attack had been fatal.

Tears streamed from her face and a light flashed before her eyes. Memories of happy and painful times appeared. Strangely, she saw Kim Hajin in both memories.

“Ah...”

She slowly closed her eyes.

Maybe it's better to just die like this. It's been too painful. My consciousness is slowly fading now. Right. That's enough. I tried hard. I tried so hard. It's okay to rest. Mom and oppa will understand...

Still, her death didn't come after 5 seconds. Then 10 seconds passed. Chae Nayun managed to think again. *Wait. It doesn't hurt?*

“What is this?”

* * *

I received an alert about a settings change for the first time in a while.

[Problem – It doesn't make sense that a giant wielding a stone sword can assassinate someone without leaving any evidence.] [Modification – A

younger brother with a different skillset has been added as the assassin, creating a more logical cause.]

“Haaa...”

A strange djinn had been added. Chae Nayun would’ve won if things continued. I watched everything and raised the Blessed Bow of Horus that could shoot healing arrows. She could overcome her trauma by herself as long as I healed her injuries, so I decided not to kill Gunyuden and Yudoren.

The current time read 5:59 P.M. I activated the Eye of Horus with one minute left. My vision instantly expanded and thin strands of light entered my eyes. This state only lasted 5 seconds, so I had no time to revel in the mystical sensation. My body moved automatically.

I looked down at the world. *4 seconds*. And set my target. *3 seconds*. I released the bowstring. *2 seconds*. The arrow flew through the air. *1 second*. It seeped into the ground and struck the target.

As I watched the results of my action...

“...?”

Killing intent suddenly surrounded me and a familiar figure flew towards me.

“Hey!”

A cold voice called me. I twisted my head and stared at her. Goosebumps immediately rose on my arms. We stared into each other’s eyes with only a hair’s breadth between us. Jin Sahyuk covered herself in magic power and grinned.

“You...”

I couldn’t continue as a fist infused with magic power struck my stomach. It easily broke through aether’s defense. I coughed a mouthful of blood as my body shot back like a soccer ball. She hurled countless magic weapons at me.

The fight inside the excavation site also affected the outside world. Magic power shook the air and the earth. However, Jin Sahyuk only kept her eyes on one man. He observed the excavation site under a strange grass-like membrane.

She wanted to charge at him, but held herself back. First, she hid her killing intent and magic power to enjoy even greater happiness later.

I will crush you at the most crucial moment...

KOONG!

Thankfully, that moment didn't take long to arrive. The excavation site shook and Kim Hajin took out a bow. Then he formed a magic power arrow and his eyes turned blue as well.

Jin Sahyuk's instincts roared that she should kill him now. She drew out every ounce of magic power in her body and shot forward. In less than a second, she reached her prey and smiled at his flustered expression.

"Hey!"

His wide eyes filled her with joy. However, this joy soon transformed into rage.

"You..."

First, she punched his stomach to shut him up. He went flying just like that. As expected, she could beat him outside the tower. However, she didn't chase him and sent her magic power weapons instead.

B-B-BOOM!

The weapons rained on him. One, two, three, four, five... Counting them would be as pointless as counting raindrops during a storm. Her happiness increased with every explosion and her body tingled with delight. An electrifying sense of ecstasy traveled down her spine.

“Haa...”

She finally stopped her bombardment and covered her face with her hands. Jin Sahyuk staggered from side to side in pleasure. She looked at the man's tomb through the gaps between her fingers. Dirt, grass, and a current of magic power covered him. Her cheeks flushed at the sight. However, this blissful moment only lasted a moment.

“Did I finish it too quickly? *Hmm.*”

Jin Sahyuk felt happy with the result, but somewhat regretted finishing him off so quickly. If possible, she wanted to toy with him more and make an example out of him.

“...”

Rustle, rustle. Jin Sahyuk's eyes widened. *Rustle, rustle.* It sounded like a living person. *Rustle, rustle.* Kim Hajin hadn't died.

“*Auugh...*”

He survived even though magic power buried him deep underground. His body suffered various cuts, but he hadn't died. Then he dusted the dirt and rocks off his body. Jin Sahyuk felt surprised, but also happy at the same time.

She smiled that her wish had been granted.

“Great, now that's more like—”

“Wow!” His sudden exclamation interrupted her. Kim Hajin spoke apathetically and ruined her enjoyment.

“What do you mean wow?”

She frowned at him.

“This is the first time I've felt anything like this.”

He continued to mumble incomprehensible things. *Did he damage his brain?* Jin Sahyuk created more magic power weapons in the air. Kim Hajin glanced at them and began to laugh.

“Hahahaha...”

“Did you go crazy?”

“No.” Kim Hajin shook his head.

“I just found it funny. You actually came to find me?”

He sounded full of leisure. Jin Sahyuk almost berated his arrogance when she felt something with her body. He emanated an overwhelming power. Not magic power or a magic spell, but something much purer.

“This will be my first time fighting in close range.”

He murmured nonsensically and shot forward. A crater appeared where he kicked off and a dust cloud rose behind him.

“...!”

Immediately afterward, intense pain struck Jin Sahyuk’s solar plexus. Her magic power armor instantly broke. Jin Sahyuk coughed blood from the devastating punch. Her vision blurred and every internal organ throbbed. Kim Hajin’s face popped out from the dust cloud before the pain even left her body. His wolf-like eyes glowed blue and his monstrous body easily caught up with her body in flight.

“I told you last time.”

He reached out and grabbed her face. Then he murmured.

“That I’ll kill you if I ever see you.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk blankly stared at him with half-closed eyes.

“That it’ll be the same inside and outside the tower.”

Finally, he made a twisted smile.

“Why didn’t you listen?”

He smashed her body into the ground.

Chapter 220

Process of Fate (3)

He sent me flying with a mere punch without any magic power, but only pure strength. I couldn't understand how. The pain sweeping through my body couldn't convince me of that fact.

How?

I learned to not arrogantly let my guard down after my first encounter with him. I investigated him thoroughly. He was only a sharpshooter from what I saw with my own eyes and from what others knew. I couldn't sense the state of magic power from him that distinguished a master from a rookie. It didn't look like he practiced any special techniques either.

That should be the case, so what the hell is this?

Such a thought flashed across my mind as his punch broke my armor and sent me flying. However, even that thought didn't last long. He appeared from the thick cloud and caught up to my body in flight.

"I told you last time."

His coarse hand clutched my face and stopped my body. I saw him through the gap between his fingers. His icy glare weighed heavily on my mind and body. Soon, a low whisper rang in my ears.

"That I'll kill you if I ever see you."

His voice filled my head and his grip felt like it would crush me. I tried to raise a hand, but my body wouldn't move.

"That it'll be the same inside and outside the tower."

His lips curved into a cold smile and my heart stopped for a moment.

“Why didn’t you listen?”

Immediately, he smashed me into the ground. My body felt like it shattered, but this was only the beginning. His combat technique lacked individuality and fundamentals. He simply pulled me off the ground and slammed me again on the opposite side. Then he tossed me to the other side. Like that, I swayed like a pendulum until he threw me into the air and kicked me.

KOONG!

His kick crushed my ribs and sent me flying through the air. Then he caught up to me again and punched me in the opposite direction. I didn’t give up on fighting back as he toyed with me. I formed a barrier and shot my magic power weapons at him.

However, an unbelievable sight unfolded. My magic power shattered the moment it came in contact with him. Not a single bruise or scratch appeared on his body. Naturally, he continued beating me without stopping. It hurt and kept hurting. It continued until the damn end. I clenched my teeth. Why did I have to be beaten like this?

“GOD— DAMMIT—!”

I shouted while standing and my roar echoed in every direction. He finally stopped, but my body refused to move. Magic power only focused on recovery when the body took damage beyond a certain degree. I couldn’t keep fighting anymore.

Thud.

I quickly lost the strength to even stand. He began to approach. *Tap, tap.* I could hear his footsteps and tried to move in vain. *Did something happen to my head after all that beating?* I suddenly had a terrible thought. I felt scared. Was I going to die? Like this, for nothing? I thought I would be indifferent in the face of death. No, I couldn’t die here. Not now. Not like this. I had a wish to fulfill. My home, my country, my parents, and my loyal subordinates. I...

Words instinctively came out of my mouth before I could finish my thoughts.

“...spare... me.”

My voice trembled as I choked on tears. Then he stopped. I could only see his legs. I don't know if I felt glad that I couldn't see his face, but I desperately stretched my hand and placed it on his shoe.

“...”

A breathtaking silence descended. I held onto my faint consciousness and spoke words I never would've imagined.

“I'm... sorry.”

I had nothing to be ashamed of anymore with my brain this damaged. Only a single thought occupied my mind.

I want to live. I... have to live...

* * *

When Jin Sahyuk's attack first crushed my body, I thought...

Should I use time reversal?

However, I dismissed it before my body even touched the ground.

Even if I did use it, I would be done for if I couldn't finish her in 3 minutes. Of course, I could activate my fate ability after time reversal, but I might also die from a heart attack.

The side effects from time reversal made my heart feel like bursting and caused all my stats to decrease by 3-4 points for a day. I assumed the side effects would be similar for *[Fate]*. In all likelihood, *[Fate]* and *[Time Reversal]* couldn't be used consecutively.

I activated *[Fate]* before any more blows landed. Jin Sahyuk already

became my target during the sunrise in Prestige. My stats suddenly increased by 300% and I felt an absurd amount of power. The world instantly slowed with only one opponent in front of me.

“This will be my first time fighting in close range.”

I dashed towards Jin Sahyuk. My body filled with excitement and moved on its own. Perhaps it moved according to aether.

I sent her flying with a punch. Then chased after her and grabbed her face before her body could even touch the ground. *KWANG!* I slammed her body to the ground. *KWANG!* I pulled her back up and threw her again. *KWANG!* I continued smashing her back and forth. This was my first time fighting in close range, so I might’ve subconsciously imitated the Hulk that I watched in a movie.

I blacked out for a moment after that.

“GOD— DAMMIT—!”

Her sudden roar woke me up. I stood still and stared at her. She glared with half-open eyes and fell to the ground with a thud.

“Hmm...”

The battle ended quite fast. I approached the unconscious Jin Sahyuk sprawled on the ground. Her body still functioned and slowly healed itself. I prepared to kill her, but words I never expected came out of her mouth.

“...spare... me.”

“...”

My legs stopped as I stared at her. What did she just say? Was I hearing things?

“I’m... sorry.”

Her words sounded even more ridiculous than before. Goosebumps rose all over my body. I couldn't comprehend what she just said, so I pretended not to hear it. She would be better off dead.

I reached out, but stopped. I saw my bloody hands and my subconscious defense mechanism activated. Even my numbed mind with high perseverance had a limit. Until now, I had never killed anyone without my weapon. I tried to take out the Desert Eagle from my pocket.

"Freeze!"

My 3 minutes had already passed and Fate lost its effects. I sensed multiple presences.

"This is the Hero Association's Special Task Force! Put your weapon down!"

"What."

Ten or so elite members of the Hero Association introduced themselves. They pointed their weapons at me and raised their magic power.

"You guys, move over."

A woman walked through them in an imposing manner. The short Aileen appeared and seemed to be participating in this mission as a commander. She made a dramatic entrance and looked at me.

"What are you doing here?"

"..."

I couldn't bring myself to answer. My body began to stiffen from the side effects. Aileen pointed at Jin Sahyuk.

"She's not a djinn. Why are you fighting her?"

“...”

“It’s also way too intense... to be a quarrel between lovers.”

Aileen mumbled as she looked at the blood between us. Without a word, I lay on the ground. Aileen frowned at me.

“What should we do?” Aileen’s subordinate asked.

“What do you mean? That’s Fenrir. A guild probably hired him. As for the girl... well, I don’t know who she is, but let’s just leave these two alone and take care of *them*.”

Aileen pointed in the opposite direction. Like the Hero Association, the djinns also called for reinforcements.

“That’s Kim Ohsung, right?”

A slender man caught Aileen’s attention. Kim Ohsung, an executive of Satan’s Servants, was 3-4 times stronger than Gunyuden.

“Yes, I think you’re right.”

“Then let’s go.”

Aileen glanced at me before walking towards the battlefield. Swirls of blade-like magic power shot up from her feet. However, she soon controlled the overwhelming magic power and shouted.

“Listen well! The ground will turn upside down!”

The ground beneath the djinns shot up into the sky. A single sentence reversed heaven and earth. The man-made disaster caused an entire layer of earth to soar.

— Kuaaak!

— W-What’s going on?

— *Uwoah!* H-Hold on!

The reverse landslide killed most of the djinns and the pressure from her magic power crushed the others to death. They didn't stand a chance against Aileen.

"Woah..."

I wanted to watch her fight a bit longer, but didn't have the time. I came here in secret, so why did I encounter so many guests today? Soon, another voice tickled my ears.

"Were you hiding it or did you learn it from the tower?"

"..."

I turned towards a talking cat.

"It's just that Sahyuk also learned a pretty good skill. I didn't think she would lose."

The cat smiled at Jin Sahyuk on the ground.

"How awful." I suddenly realized the cat's identity. The gift, Magic Power Body, could be used in all sorts of ways. It had to be Bell. I said only one thing to him.

"Take her."

The cat widened its eyes.

"Really?" I nodded weakly.

"Tell her I was touched by her genuine plea."

Today, I saw a possibility in Jin Sahyuk. In the original story, she seemed like an almighty character who could never die. Not even Kim Suho could defeat her. She actually overpowered him for half the novel. However, that wasn't the case now. The cat spoke again.

“You might regret it later.”

I didn't reply and raised my head to peek inside the excavation site. My fight had ended and Chae Nayun's revenge should also be reaching its climax.

— Please spare me.

Gunyuden begged her on the ground. I couldn't help but chuckle. For some reason, she experienced the same situation as me.

* * *

“Please spare me.”

Pft. The man overflowing with confidence a moment ago now lay on the ground begging for his life. Chae Nayun raised her claymore with a cynical smile.

“You...”

Chae Nayun continued with a stern face. Gunyuden looked at her claymore. The monstrous weapon still raged with magic power. He assumed the longsword would penetrate his heart, but it returned to the scabbard on her back.

“Do you think I'm like you?”

“What?”

Chae Nayun took something out of her pocket. They looked no different than ordinary handcuffs, but could suppress magic power. She placed them on Gunyuden and Yudoren's wrists.

“I'll cut your magic core out and interrogate you thoroughly. I'll also lock you up in the djinn prison so you won't be able to kill yourself.”

“...”

“You won’t be able to die even if you want to, bastard.”

Chae Nayun looked at Gunyuden straight in his eyes.

“...Really.”

“Yep. Look forward to it. I’ll have you spill the beans about that client of yours.”

Thwack! She smacked Gunyuden on the head with her scabbard and he easily passed out without any magic power. A sudden dizziness overtook her. The world spun and her vision turned upside down.

“Uwoaah...”

Someone caught her as she fell.

“Ah?”

Chae Nayun looked up amidst her dizziness. At first, a faint hallucination overlapped with the figure who caught her. The face in front of her undoubtedly belonged to Kim Hajin. He looked at her with that familiar expressionless look.

“You...”

“Nayun! Are you okay?”

“Yi Jiyeon?”

The hallucination soon disappeared and Kim Hajin’s face became Yi Jiyeon. *Am I going crazy?* Chae Nayun returned to her senses and pulled herself up.

“Are you feeling alright? I came here as fast as I could!”

“I’m fine. I already captured these two?”

Chae Nayun finally noticed the man beside Yi Jiyeon. Desolate Moon

should've been in charge of the 4th floor, but Shin Jonghak stood there for whatever reason.

“What.”

Shin Jonghak stared at her. Blood and dirt covered his spear and armor. It seemed he had quite the fight too.

“Why is Shin Jonghak here?”

“...”

Shin Jonghak remained silent at her innocent question. He couldn't tell her that the spy he had planted in Essence of the Strait informed him of the situation. The trace of tears underneath her eyes left him speechless. He couldn't bring himself to say what he wanted to say. Instead, he only bitterly smiled.

“I was always here.”

* * *

The drama unfolding before my eyes depicted a typical scene of youth. Chae Nayun defeated her enemy, but didn't kill him. Once again, Shin Jonghak announced that he wouldn't give up on her. Soon, Kim Suho would join them too. Their story would continue without me as always. I bitterly smiled.

“Kim Hajin.”

A cold voice called me. I could barely breathe as I turned around. Boss frowned to show her anger.

“Ah, Boss. You came?”

“Is that all you have to say? I thought I told you not to participate.”

“...”

We looked at each other in silence. She frowned even more when she noticed I wasn't scared of her. I spotted her white, coarse hands underneath her robe.

“Hmm...”

Looking at her hands, I suddenly recalled the ring. I didn't know why. Was it because I just saw Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak? Homer's Ring sat rotting away inside stigma's extradimensional storage without a proper owner.

Should I give that ring to Chae Nayun? The high grade artifact could amplify her strength and remedy her weakness.

It wasn't impossible. Like in the original story, Chae Shinhyuk would search for a fitting artifact and possibly obtain information about Homer's Ring if Chae Nayun asked him for help. By chance, he might find my Truth Agency and request the ring's location. Then I could coincidentally give it to him.

However, Chae Nayun won today on her own and didn't end her revenge with murder. She seemed happy and deserved to be proud of herself.

She probably wouldn't ask her father for help, especially if it meant depending on an item.

One day, if she asked for such a thing... if her desire to grow stronger reached me by chance...

“I'll make something for her myself.”

Most likely, only I inherited the dwarves' legacy. An intelligence stat boost would be impossible, but I could easily reproduce the *[Magic Power Amplification]* on Homer's Ring. I just had to gather the world's best materials and work 1-2 hours a day for about 3 months.

“Make what?”

Boss snapped at me. I lightly chuckled. Boss was no less of a magic

power monster than Chae Nayun. Chae Nayun's magic power capacity only applied to swords, so Boss wouldn't be as efficient. However, the ring also suited Boss. She wouldn't sell it like in the original story if I gifted it to her.

"Boss, come here for a second."

"Kim Hajin. I'm not joking. Depending on your answer—"

"I have something..."

Plus, I wanted to appease her.

"...that I want to give to you."

"Haaa."

Boss sighed with a sour expression, but approached anyways.

"What?" She squatted in front of me as I forced my creaking joints to move.

"Close your eyes."

"You weren't supposed to be here during the mission. You weren't even supposed to be nearby. Jain lured in the association and djinns, but if you're here they'll be suspicious that—"

"Hush."

It didn't look like she would close her eyes, so I covered them with my hand. Then I tried to put the ring on her finger, but stopped. Was this okay? It felt weird to directly put the ring on her. *Ring finger, index finger...* It just felt wrong, so I opened her hand and placed it in her palm.

"Here, all done."

"What is...?"

She didn't finish her sentence. I smiled softly and looked at her. Boss stood as if time had stopped. She stared at the ring with a half-opened mouth and didn't even blink.

“...”

Like that, the owner of the ring changed. Of course, I might regret this decision later, but Boss' expression made it worth it today.

“How is it? I picked it up on my way here.”

I felt more than satisfied.

Chapter 221

20F (1)

Late at night, Boss returned to the Chameleon Troupe hideout for the first time in a while and jumped in bed. Then she stared at the ceiling in a pose that resembled Dracula. She stared for a long time before taking something out of her pocket and flashing it against the light. The platinum ring sparkled. It looked rather ordinary, but its effects couldn't be considered that at all.

Why did Kim Hajin give this to me?

Of course, he said the artifact suited her. Boss accepted it, but still felt conflicted.

She sighed, but resolved to wear the ring. *[High Grade Magic Amplification]* was a top-tier effect that could hardly be found. She thought about which finger to wear it on.

“The finger that hurts.”

One finger still felt her pain.

“...”

Nine of her fingers felt coarse and wrought with scars and calluses. Not even magic could heal them. Nowadays, women who planned to become heroes often received special care from a young age. Boss, of course, wasn't ordinary and never experienced such things.

However, one of her fingers felt different. Her left pinky didn't have any calluses and had never been severed. It didn't have any scars either. As such, biting this finger always hurt. Boss placed the ring on this finger and the ring automatically changed its size to snugly fit.

“Mmm.”

My ring. A gift I received. Boss lay in bed and stared at the ring on her pinky. A small smile emerged on her face.

* * *

The Guild Alliance and the association won the battle, but lost the war. They didn't suffer a single casualty, but djinns took over 60% of the artifacts. The association estimated they could retrieve at least 50%, so they considered this a loss. However, not all guilds failed. Creator's Sacred Grace came out as one of the biggest winners. They discovered 8 expensive artifacts that included Temujin's hat and leather armor as well as other valuable clothes.

“Well done, Suho.”

Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah smiled at each other outside Pyongyang's exclusive hero hospital. Yun Seung-Ah usually seemed stressed, but genuinely smiled today.

“It's all thanks to you, guild leader.” Kim Suho bowed.

Yun Seung-Ah stroked his forehead and he blushed at the light physical contact.

“We're much better off now. You can expect a huge bonus. I plan to give you one of the artifacts.”

“Huh? No, I—”

“Just take it. It wouldn't have been possible without you. Really, how did you dig up so many artifacts in just a minute?”

The sword didn't specialize in digging, but the Sword Saint gift severed the connection between the artifacts and the ground, allowing them to pop up like inflatable balls underwater.

“Haha...”

Kim Suho laughed bashfully at Yun Seung-Ah's praise.

"You can go now. You want to see your friends, right?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll get back to work. I have to report the artifacts, talk to the Association, and... well, I just have a lot to do."

Kim Suho smiled and saw her off. He returned to the hospital after her car disappeared. Then he immediately went to visit one of his friends. He heard Chae Nayun's voice as soon as he entered.

"What? It wasn't you?"

Chae Nayun stared at Yi Jiyeon in shock with bandages wrapped around her head, neck, and arm.

"Of course not. I came after Team Leader Youngjin notified me. I didn't shoot any arrow at you."

"Really? Don't lie to me."

"I'm not lying. You said you healed as soon as the arrow struck you, right? My healing factor can't instantaneously heal someone."

"Then who was it? Other than you, who—"

Kim Suho walked in and sat on a chair. "What are you guys talking about?"

"*Huh?*"

They both turned towards Kim Suho.

"Oh, if it isn't Creator's Sacred Grace who hit it big."

Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes jokingly. Rumors already spread about their achievement. Kim Suho laughed and played along.

“I heard Essence of the Strait obtained some good artifacts too.”

“Yeah, but it wasn’t as satisfactory considering that was the 5th floor.”

“Didn’t your guild find a female horse and a male horse?”

“Oh? How did you find out?”

Four fledglings entered Chae Nayun’s room as they talked about their guilds’ haul.

“*Um*, senior!”

“Hello!”

“How is your body?”

“I hope your injuries aren’t too serious!”

Essence of the Strait’s apprentice heroes came to visit. Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes at the third year cadets from Cube.

“Why are all of you here?”

“We’re here to see you! We heard you got injured!”

“Thanks, but I don’t like things like this. Don’t come next time.”

“Yes! Understood!” They placed their get-well gift on the ground and stared at her, but didn’t leave.

Chae Nayun spoke with a sigh, “Fine. Screw off if you don’t want me to beat you up.”

“*Hehe*... Yes! Understood!”

The four fledglings happily left after the harsh words. Kim Suho tilted his head at the confusing scene.

“Who are they?”

“I don’t know. They like it when I curse.”

“*Huh?* No way.”

“Yes way. I think my personality is growing worse because of them. They won’t listen at all if I tell them nicely. I can’t do anything since they always visit whenever I leave the tower. I’m afraid they’ll eventually follow me into the tower. Scary kids...”

Chae Nayun grumbled, but secretly enjoyed it.

“Oh, what happened? Tell me.”

“Was it 3 months ago? I left the tower for a bit and the guild assigned me to take care of these apprentice heroes.”

They went on a mission together and got into an argument with a foreign guild’s hero about a monster corpse. That hero kept blabbering on, so Chae Nayun got pissed and cursed him out.

“Oh, oh, that incident in Europe, right? Those kids probably thought you looked really cool. Didn’t you used to curse a lot anyways?” Yi Jiyeon added.

“Nevermind that. Kim Suho.”

Chae Nayun sipped on a cup of coffee. “Can you get in touch with him?”

“...”

Kim Suho felt the weight of her words.

“I don’t know,” he replied.

“What if I can?”

“Who knows, but I’ll have to meet him at least once eventually,” Chae Nayun murmured.

Yi Jiyeon kept fidgeting next to Chae Nayun, but Kim Suho asked anyways.

“What if you do meet him?”

“Well...” Chae Nayun continued after a bit of thinking.

“We’ll probably fight until one of us dies.”

Her voice sounded lonely and Kim Suho bitterly smiled. He wanted to ask, *Just how bad did you two break up to want to kill each other?* However, he refrained from doing so.

“Be sure to tell me if you meet him.”

Chae Nayun strongly requested.

She felt confident after overcoming one of the traumas etched in her heart. If they met again, she felt like she could face him and ask about the truth.

“Okay.”

Chae Nayun shot up. “I’m going to Yeonha now.”

She went off to find Yoo Yeonha holed up somewhere. Chae Nayun felt like she knew where to look. Yoo Yeonha should be waiting for her guild members in surgery.

— *Koong!*

She swung the lounge door open. The door made a dull thud and seemed locked, but Chae Nayun saw Yoo Yeonha’s familiar figure inside. She seemed to be eating cup noodles.

“*Cough, cough. Pfft.*”

Yoo Yeonha spat out the noodles as Chae Nayun entered. She wiped her mouth as if nothing happened and slowly looked up.

“*Mmm*, you’re here, Nayun.”

Chae Nayun laughed at Yoo Yeonha’s nonchalant act. “You’re eating ramen?”

“*H-Hm?* Ramen? What, what ramen?”

Yoo Yeonha told a strange lie. Chae Nayun pointed at the cup noodles on the table.

“You were just eating that.”

“Oh... this?”

Yoo Yeonha stared at Chae Nayun, then at the cup noodles, then back at Chae Nayun, then the cup noodles, then Chae Nayun, then the cup noodles... In the end... *Tak!* She flicked her hand and swiped the cup noodles away. Chae Nayun dumbfoundedly looked at the mess all over the floor.

“What are you doing?”

“*Ah*, this?” Yoo Yeonha stared at the food she just spilled.

“Why did you do that?”

“*Mm? Uh...* Oh, what’s this?”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly yelled as if she just noticed the cup noodles on the ground. Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes. “Are you joking?”

“*Cough*, I’m your boss, you know. You’ll be punished if you talk to me that way.”

“...”

Chae Nayun chose to forget what she just saw and walked up to her. The cup noodles disappeared without a trace by the time Chae Nayun sat in a chair. Yoo Yeonha undoubtedly did something with her magic power.

“Do you need something, Nayun?”

“I’m waiting for my teammates too. How are the surgeries going?”

Yoo Yeonha grinned. “Good. Everything’s fine. No loss of limbs or magic power.”

Chae Nayun nodded with a sigh of relief. She felt glad no one suffered any grave injuries. Then she brought up a lighthearted topic.

“Oh right, what’s up with that scandal?”

The first news she saw after leaving the tower involved Yoo Yeonha in a relationship. According to the report, Yoo Yeonha was dating Lorain, the son of the multinational corporation, Lesrain.

“It’s bullshit. I’m already taking legal measures.”

Chae Nayun nodded at Yoo Yeonha’s reaction. “Yeah, I guess we’re both a long way from dating anyone.”

“*Hmm?* I’m already in a relationship.”

Chae Nayun instantly widened her eyes at Yoo Yeonha’s comment. “What? With who?”

Yoo Yeonha smiled. “With work.”

She meant it as a joke, but Chae Nayun didn’t get it.

“Who’s Work?”

“*Eh?*”

Yoo Yeonha left the hospital and called someone after all the heroes successfully underwent surgery. *Tiriring—Tiriring—* The phone continued to ring and just when she worried he wouldn't pick up...

"He, hello?"

— Yeah, what's up?

Kim Hajin's indifferent voice rang out. Yoo Yeonha sighed in relief as soon as she heard his voice.

"You haven't been picking up or replying to my texts. What have you been up to?"

— All kinds of things. I'm resting now though.

"..."

All kinds of things. He sounded like he was hurt. *A lot.* Yoo Yeonha sighed.

"Don't do it."

— Don't do what?

Kim Hajin pretended to be oblivious.

"You know what I mean."

— *Huh?* What do you mean?

"I already heard you killed Black Lotus."

— Oh, so?

Does he take me for a fool? Yoo Yeonha glanced around and continued

in a whisper.

“I know you’re chasing after the remaining Chameleon Troupe members.”

This time, Kim Hajin didn’t say anything. It probably meant she hit the mark.

“It’s too dangerous alone. So—”

— No, I don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not chasing after anyone.

“*Huh?*”

Yoo Yeonha shut her mouth. For a moment, she wondered if everything was all in her head.

“Really?”

— Yeah. I killed Black Lotus because Aileen requested it. It’s not like I’m chasing after the Chameleon Troupe for personal reasons.

“What floor are you on? Let’s meet and talk inside the tower.”

— Then meet me on the 15th floor.

Yoo Yeonha’s voice went up a tone.

“What? You’re already that high up? So you *are* chasing after them!”

—... I’m not. Anyways, get to the 15th floor. I’ll come looking for you then.

“*Hnnng...* I still think you’re lying, but okay.”

Yoo Yeonha wanted to talk with him more since he didn’t answer any of her questions. However, Kim Hajin seemed busy and she had things to do as well.

“Don’t do anything too dangerous.”

— I don’t do dangerous jobs.

“Yeah, yeah. If anything happens... just call me. I’m hanging up.”

— I’m telling you, nothing hap—

Yoo Yeonha hung up and called someone else.

“Hello.”

A cold, icy voice came out of her mouth, completely different from the soft tone she just used.

— Yes, *um*, Team Leader Yoo, I hope you saw the apology letter I sent...

“No.”

— Pardon?

“I read it. That’s my reply.”

Suhanmoo Corporation used to be one of Essence of the Strait’s subcontractors that became a medium-sized company in developing new technologies thanks to their guild’s funding.

However, Suhanmoo secretly sold their technology to a foreign company when their contract neared its end. Yoo Yeonha felt dumbfounded when found out one of her subcontractors acted like a foolish industry spy.

“You have two choices.”

— I’m sorry, but please, Team Leader.

“You can walk into your grave on your own or watch yourself be placed in it.”

Yoo Yeonha's Falling Blossom guild discovered their secret trade. She immediately tied their executives to Korea by banning them from traveling and freezing their funds.

— T-Team Leader, I have children! I...

Yoo Yeonha hung up as the man desperately yelled.

“Haaa...”

She bitterly sighed. Essence of the Strait didn't show mercy to traitors and thoroughly repaid any debts. Today, that rule would be kept once more, but she felt a sense of emptiness and grew lethargic.

Then two heroes at a bench caught her eye. They embraced each other under the setting sun and locked lips.

“Oh my.”

Yoo Yeonha clicked her tongue. For some reason, her eyes continued to stay on them. The couple's tongues began to intertwine... *gulp*. One tongue attacked the other, almost like two whips. *Gulp*. Yoo Yeonha swallowed her saliva at this lewd scene. Then her secretary's limousine stopped in front of her.

“Sorry for being late.”

“Y-Yes?”

The secretary quickly came out and opened the back door.

“N-No, it's fine.”

Yoo Yeonha forced herself not to look at the couple after getting inside.

* * *

I rested for about 4 days with Evandel before returning to the tower. Then I powered up the ship, awakened the NPC soldiers, and reinforced their military power with TP. After all that, I gained 43 heavily armed soldiers.

“Area 3 has returned to normal operations. Fixing the self-powering system seems to have done the trick.”

Currently, the ship’s captain guided me around. Area 3 now seemed like a place where people lived and the NPCs felt grateful.

“Now, we would like to initiate the plan to save humanity.”

“...”

“Of course, that’s as long as the Ship Commander allows it.”

I glanced back at Horner. I had become the Ship Commander.

“Are you confident?”

“Yes, we’ve trained for it many times. We’ve recovered to our peak physical conditions thanks to eating well and everyone is full of enthusiasm.”

“Mm, then go ahead. I’ll allow it. You can use as much TP as you want.”

I had to keep spending to climb up. Some guests finally arrived.

[Three people have entered Area 3.] [Player PhantomThief] [Player Goryeo’sStrongest] [Player Hurabono] [They have been confirmed as the Ship Commander’s comrades. The entrance will be opened.]

Area 3’s management system opened the door with a mechanical voice. Cheok Jungyeong, Jain, and Jin Yohan all walked in.

“You’re here?” I smiled at them.

“Yep, we just arrived.”

Jain took off her robe and curiously looked around the futuristic Area 3.

“Wow, it’s like I’m in a sci-fi movie.”

“Where’s Boss?”

“She said she had something to do.”

“*Hmm.*”

“Oh right, Jain. How many artifacts did you steal?”

I’d been dying to know.

“I wasn’t too greedy. Just half of what the djinns uncovered. I brought a bow for you too.”

She probably referred to [*Temujin’s Bow*]. For the record, I planned to synthesize [*Temujin’s Bow*] with the [*Blessed Bow of Horus*]. After all, I didn’t need two bows.

“Thank you.”

“No problem. I should be the one thanking you.”

Jain proudly displayed the bracelet on her arm. I made it for her using the materials she gave me. She already had a ring and a necklace, so I used the 21 jewels to make a small bracelet. The strap contained moon ice stone, which looked even more beautiful than gold. Naturally, the materials alone easily surpassed 20 billion won. With Dwarf’s Dexterity, it became priceless.

“So, what are we doing today?” Jain asked with a big smile.

“We’re going to the 16th floor.”

“Now?”

“Yes, we can go up whenever we want.”

Area 3 had a hangar with flying vehicles that could travel through the tower’s void. We would see the true demon realm after reaching the 16th floor.

“Sounds good to me!”

Cheok Jungyeong smacked his chest like a gorilla. I smirked and called the captain.

“Horner.”

“Yes, the spacecrafts are ready.”

“We’ll be using them soon.”

We should be able to easily climb to the 19th floor with this. It shouldn’t take more than 2 weeks. However, things would get more difficult from the 20th floor. Like Crevon’s multiple floors, the 20th-23rd floors were all connected. I prepared to lose at least one life.

“I’ll lead the way.”

I followed Horner as the other members trailed behind.

* * *

Horner and the military strategist Erenner met 30 minutes later after Ship Commander Extra7 left with his comrades.

“Ship Commander said he would unlock the hibernation chambers as long as we opened the pathway.”

“Yes, but the question is how to open the pathway.”

“It’s simple. We just have to dig through it.”

“Alien hosts are living underground.”

An alarm went off as Horner and Erenner discussed their next move.

[A being with a high state of existence has entered the vessel.] [A being with a high state of existence has entered the vessel.] [A being with a high state of existence has entered the vessel.]

“What?”

“Someone with a high state of existence?”

NPCs in the ship froze at the unexpected message. However, Horner and Erenner quickly moved to the control room and checked the cameras. They saw two women walking towards Area 3. Two robed beings with extraordinary states of existence. Medea and Athena had appeared.

“Aren’t they administrators?” Erenner asked.

“Yes, but why are they here?”

Administrators couldn’t enter other floors without the permission of that floor’s administrator. However, the 15th floor wasn’t an official floor with an administrator.

“I’m not sure, but it looks like we’ll have to open the door.”

They felt afraid, but Horner quickly came to a decision.

Ssssk—

Medea and Athena walked in with veils covering their faces. NPCs recognized them by their unique magic power and shivered in fear. To them, administrators weren’t kind existences.

“Hello, everyone,” Medea kindly asked the NPCs.

“Is player Extra7 here?”

Chapter 222

20F (2)

I didn't know the official name of Spacecraft A7102. Nevertheless, I boarded it with my comrades. Horner asked if I knew how to pilot it and I nodded with confidence. I never drove anything like it before, but my *[Lv.6 Driving]* gave me mastery over all kinds of vehicles. Even without it, I could become one with any machine through *[Algorithm]*.

"I can have someone accompany you if you aren't accustomed to flying it."

"No, I'm okay. Scan."

I checked the percentage. A 43% consolidation meant my gifts had mostly recovered by now. My abilities inside and outside the tower should sync once I cleared the 20th floor.

[Lv.5 Yggdrasil's Blessing has enhanced Lv.8 A7102.]

I applied a blessing to the spaceship. I called it my 2 stage consolidation.

"Oh, this is?"

Horner seemed half-confused and half-surprised at the spaceship's sudden changes.

"See? I'm good at anything with machines, so don't worry. You can focus on saving humanity or whatever you want to do."

"Yes, I understand."

Horner left feeling relieved as I sat in the driver's seat. I looked at the controls and grabbed the wheel. Aether flowed out and wrapped

around it. Then it spread throughout the spacecraft and instantly connected my body to the machine.

[Aether has connected to the spacecraft.] [Algorithm has activated. Performance and efficiency have improved by 40%.] [Lv.8 A7192 will now move according to your will.]

My eyes widened from the image projected on my retina. Endless darkness lay ahead with faint specks of light. I shouted as the spaceship began to move.

“We’re taking off.”

The trio looked around the spaceship and shuddered.

“H-Hajin. You sure you know how to handle this?”

“Of course.”

“Hey. Hey. *Um*, you know, that dude who just left. Who was he again?”

“Horner,” I briefly answered Cheok Jungyeong.

“Yes, him. Can’t we just ask him to do this?”

“No.”

I refused and started the engine. *Shooooong*— The spacecraft launched from the hangar and fuel erupted from its lower section with an intense explosion. However, the ship’s interior remained silent. Currently, I applied 3 types of reinforcements to this spacecraft: my Random Consolidation System, Algorithm, and Yggdrasil’s Leaf. It became much stronger than most battleships.

“Wow. Look outside.”

The trio calmed down once the shuttle entered its main orbit. They looked out the window at the vast celestial bodies.

“Oh, that circular thing over there is the 16th floor? This is cool.”

“You’re right. The land is shaped differently from Earth.”

“So beautiful.”

Cheok Jungyeong, Jin Yohan, and Jain expressed their admiration.

“That’s right. Jain, how are things in Prestige?” I suddenly asked.

“Prestige?”

Jain’s footsteps resounded over the tiles. She sat next to me in the passenger seat.

“It’s like a metropolis now.”

“Ah, really?”

“Yep. They have pubs, restaurants, buildings, shopping malls, and lots of other stuff. I heard a player is even raising livestock there. They’re also in the process of driving the demons out.”

This overwhelming progress couldn’t be compared to the original story where everything other than the residential area would’ve been destroyed by now.

— A hostile presence has appeared.

The spaceship’s mechanical voice suddenly warned us. Something that looked like fruit flies flew towards us. I recognized them as gargoyles, monsters controlled by demons.

“*Huh?* What’s that?”

“Don’t worry about them.”

Such events occasionally popped up. I took out the ship’s hidden weapon. I didn’t know whether it was a laser, a cannon, or a machine

gun. However, it annihilated the gargoyles with a few shots.

“Oh, they were nothing.”

“Yep.”

As expected, even a basic vehicle grew absurdly strong after several reinforcements.

We chatted and admired the view as we headed towards the 16th floor. *[Genkelope Zone]*, the disc-shaped planet with orange soil, looked like a flattened Mars.

Shuuuu...

The spaceship moved swiftly and landed on a remote corner of the planet.

[16F – Demon Realm Colony, Genkelope] [Team Chameleon Troupe has entered the 16th floor for the first time.] [The reward for first entry is the Special Skill Acquisition Book – Lv.2 Atmospheric Whirlpool.]

The door opened and we set foot on Genkelope.

“...”

We fell silent for a moment and simply stared at the overwhelming scenery. Cheok Jungyeong broke the silence first.

“Well, this is one hell of a scenery.”

The 16th floor looked frightening. The towers in the distance had beating pulses like a living thing and the tree in front of us had a disgusting eye embedded in its trunk.

“*Ugh*, so creepy.” Jain shuddered at the grotesque view.

“We don’t have to clean everything here up, right? Hajin?”

“Right. It’ll take us at least 5 years to completely clean this place.”

The 16th floor couldn’t be compared to the *[5F, Materialized Demon Realm]*. There, demons at least looked like humans, but only monsters in the literal sense existed here.

“So what exactly do we have to do?” Cheok Jungeyong impatiently asked.

“Ask the system.”

How can we reach the 17th floor? I asked the system first.

[Each demon on the 16th floor will carry a random map piece. Defeat them to collect these pieces and form the map that leads to the 17th floor.]

* * *

[15F, Genkelope’s Abandoned Vessel]

“Tsk. So even you guys don’t know when he’ll be back?”

Medea frowned.

“Yes. He left without any promise of return.”

Horner calmly answered even in the presence of administrators. Medea glared at him, but he politely endured her gaze. Soon, the administrator heaved a deep sigh.

“Damn it. One thing after another. I’m so annoyed!”

Athena flinched at her swearing. She placed a hand on Medea’s shoulder.

“You, watch your language.”

“Well, you’re in the same situation as me.”

“I can wait.”

“Oh, really? I feel like just yesterday when you refused to even talk to me because of your so-called divinity. Now you’re willing to wait for a mere human? Oh, how much you’ve changed!”

Medea taunted her, but Athena only clenched her teeth. She also felt embarrassed about her arrogant past self. Athena’s silence brought Medea back to her senses.

“Sorry. I’ve been chasing after him for 2 months. Please understand.”

“It’s fine.”

“Anyways, you guys.”

Medea pointed at Horner and Erenner. She wanted to punish the cocky pair for seeing her outburst, but decided to hold her tongue. If Extra7 favored these NPCs, harming them would only make him despise her.

“We can stay here until Extra7 returns, correct?”

“Yes, we don’t mind, but—”

“We don’t mind either. Surely you heard administrator Athena say she would wait for him?”

“It’s as she says.”

Athena nodded. Horner had no choice but to welcome them. The mere existence of administrators should keep alien creatures away from Area 3.

“Then I’ll show you to the best rooms in Area 3.”

Horner led the two to their most luxurious rooms.

Team Chameleon Troupe began seriously climbing the tower. On day 1 and day 2, they encountered bizarre-looking enemies. One looked like a lighthouse and another looked like a water strider, a mantis, and a deep sea fish. We defeated those demons and stitched the map pieces together.

From day 3 to day 6, we consulted the map and arrived at the tunnel that led to the 17th floor. Then we realized the tunnel itself was the *[17th floor]*. The 17th floor required us to dig through the clogged tunnel ourselves. Countless monsters and demons appeared, but we easily overpowered them.

From day 6 to day 8, we dug through the tunnel and arrived on the 18th floor, a dense forest in the demon realm. Even a simple misstep could cause us to lose our way for eternity due to the illusions, so I led the group.

From day 8 to day 10, we escaped the woods in just two days and arrived on the 19th floor. We proceeded deeper and deeper into the demon realm... Like that, we cleared the 16th-19th floors in 2 weeks. I momentarily returned to Crevon after receiving notifications about the calamities raging again.

I lived up to Fenrir's reputation for the first time in a while. With half of the 2000 bullets I collected thus far, I killed more than 2000 monsters. The combination of *[Random Consolidation System]*, *[Algorithm]*, and *[Aether]* transcended my weapon into something greater than a gun. The assault rifle's precision annihilated endless hordes and players once again praised the name Fenrir. I earned 350 SP and 100,000 TP from my reputation.

* * *

[20F The Hollow of Ordeal - Doppelgänger]

We returned to the 20th floor. It looked remarkably different from the 16th-19th floor, which boasted huge areas. This hollow cave contained several small rooms, each with a nameplate that read *Conquer*.

"Oh, so you're saying there's another guy just like me in this room?"

Cheok Jungyeong only guessed half-correct. As the 20th floor's name suggested, a doppelgänger waited for each player beyond their respective doors. We had to simply fight and win. A coming-of-age cliché that seemed both simple and complex.

“Before we enter, how are we going to split the skill books?” Cheok Jungyeong asked while smacking his lips. Currently, we waited for Boss to join us. We cleared each floor as a team, so she could come to us whenever she wanted.

“How many skill books did we get?”

“Nine. Six are special skills, two are unique skills, and one is an ultimate skill.”

“*Hmm...* Then divide them among yourselves if there's anything you want.”

“Yeah? I'll take this and this.”

Cheok Jungyeong chose a unique skill book and a special skill book. Jain chose a special skill book and the only ultimate skill while Jin Yohan chose the remaining unique skill book and a special one. Most of them were passive skills related to magic power or physical strength.

“Get ready if you're finished.”

Woong—

The crystal stele in the center resonated. The cave shook and a beauty appeared. Boss finally arrived with her long, dark hair.

“Oh, Boss. You're here.”

“Boss, I missed you.”

“...”

Boss silently examined each of us: Cheok Jungyeong, Jin Yohan, Jain, and me. I thought her shoulders slightly trembled when she looked at me, but I probably saw wrong.

“So this is the 20th floor?” Boss nodded.

“Yes, this is the 20th floor.”

“You climbed a lot in such a short period.”

I smiled. Personally, I felt curious about what Boss had been up to for the past two weeks, but didn’t ask.

“It would’ve taken only a week with you around. Well then, shall we go?”

I disbanded the party.

[Team Chameleon Troupe has been disbanded.] [You may only challenge the 20th floor as an individual.]

Each of us stood in front of a door. Ten doors existed, but they all held the same function. Only a limited number of players could take this trial at a time. Cheok Jungyeong took the last door, Jin Yohan stood next to him, and Jain went to the middle. Boss wandered around before standing next to me.

“Be careful. Just remember the doppelgängers aren’t very experienced with our skills”

“Okay.”

“See you alive!”

Cheok Jungyeong shouted and grabbed the doorknob. *Kiiik*— I slowly opened mine. The doppelgängers were only the first in a series of challenges on the 20th floor. Things would only get more difficult from here.

[Warning! Please be extra careful!] [Death will be eternal from the 20th floor!] [You will only have one life!]

“What?”

The heck is this? I glared at the system, but the truth sunk in when my smartwatch vibrated.

“Haa...”

This felt quite shitty, but I had grown used to these situations. A rewritten setting wouldn't change no matter how much I complained. At least I could resurrect twice thanks to my unique skill. I felt more concerned about the others than myself. I stepped inside and closed the door. A man suddenly appeared. He stared into the space with his back turned against me. His appearance from behind looked like mine. No, he *was* me.

“Hi.”

He turned halfway around. His sideways appearance felt slightly unfamiliar. The face I had only seen in mirrors now stood there. Surprisingly, I didn't look too ugly. My body seemed quite sturdy too.

“What's up?”

I shrugged, but the other me responded unexpectedly.

— Who are you?

I frowned at the somewhat stern remark. Was that how I sounded? The doppelgänger was supposed to imitate my way of talking, acting, and even my habits. *Did another setting change?*

“Who am I? You should already know. After all, you're me and I'm you.”

—...

The other me didn't answer. He looked at me with an expression I would never wear. Only then did I feel a sense of unease. Something felt wrong. I wasn't the type to look so serious. *Don't tell me...* A terrifying thought crossed my mind.

"Hey."

—...

The other me didn't answer. His gloomy eyes filled with determination and his frown made him look even sharper. All of these characteristics gave off a somber, melancholic vibe. My head began to hurt as I looked at him. We both went silent as time passed and a dark fog surrounded us. My unsettling suspicion grew into a clear sense of intuition. The other me finally asked after a long time.

— You are me?

I became convinced. The doppelgänger must've realized it too. We could be different people. I clenched my teeth.

"You..."

I agonized over whether or not to ask, but ultimately had no choice. He was the only person who could define me in this world.

"What's your name?"

The doppelgänger didn't answer and only stared. I reflected in his eyes and we looked exactly alike.

"I said what's your name?"

I asked again and he sighed.

— Kim Chundong.

"What?"

— My name is... Kim Chundong.

Chapter 223

20F (3)

— My name is... Kim Chundong.

The man who looked just like me spoke. I couldn't fathom the depth in his eyes. *Kim Chundong*. Hearing that name felt like a hammer striking me in the head. I became speechless and all sorts of thoughts popped up, but the other me spoke first.

— And who are you?

I could easily answer that question. I was undoubtedly Kim Hajin, who wasn't supposed to exist in this world. After all, I took over Kim Chundong's life as an irregular.

— I don't think you're me.

His sentence woke me up. He knew he wasn't a doppelgänger of me.

“You know what situation we're in...”

—...

He closed his eyes and shut his mouth. This didn't change the fact that we had to fight. However, I wanted to ask him something more ordinary.

“Hey.”

He opened his eyes again and we looked at each other.

“What did you do last night?”

He tilted his head in thought. Then he groaned and pressed his temple.

— I can't remember. A portion of my memory is blocked.

“Is it?”

I wanted to ask for one simple reason. If this really was Kim Chundong, then last night for him should be around 4-5 years ago.

— For some strange reason...

Suddenly, he began to examine his body: shoulders, hands, face, stomach, and legs. He touched himself and tried various poses before widening his eyes.

— My body feels stronger than before.

“...”

He probably meant before I came to this world. I wondered how he was doing and wanted to talk more.

“I want to ask, what did you want to do? You would've entered Cube soon. Did you have a goal or anything?”

— I don't know.

Thankfully, Kim Chundong cooperated with me. He seemed somber, but actually gentle on the inside. It didn't surprise me since he regularly volunteered.

— At the time... there was something... something I wanted...

“Something you wanted?”

— I can't remember well... *uk!*

He suddenly clutched his head and knelt in pain. By the looks of it, he

suffered from a severe restriction in this place. I sighed and looked up.
Why did the Tower of Wish place Kim Chundong in front of me?

I knew why, but I wanted to ignore it. The tower hadn't acknowledged me as a being of this world.

"Do you know why you're here?"

— I do. It's written in front of me.

"What does it say?"

Kim Chundong coldly smiled.

— It says I can replace you if I kill you. That I, the doppelgänger, can become the real one.

Goosebumps rose on my body, but I quickly changed the topic.

"Not that."

I wanted to ask about something else.

"I'm asking about how you became me and I became you."

—...

Kim Chundong remained silent. We stared at each other, our identical appearances reflecting in our eyes. Soon, he spoke.

— I know you replaced me.

"How?"

— I just do. It's not something I can explain.

"Then what do you plan to do now? Are you going to kill me?"

Kim Chundong maintained a calm expression.

— I don't want to live by killing someone.

“Hmm?”

— It wasn't a life I wanted to keep living anyways.

Kim Chundong laughed inaudibly and it touched me in a strange way. It didn't just move me. His words resonated with my very soul and I widened my eyes.

[Warning! Synchronization has increased by 5%!] *[Warning! Your synchronization with your doppelgänger has increased!]* *[Warning! A portion of your doppelgänger's emotions has transferred to your subconsciousness!]* *[Warning! You may experience dangerous side effects if your synchronization reaches a high level!]*

I shook my head and got rid of such thoughts. Then I calmed myself with a deep breath and looked at him.

“You.”

The system warned me, but I still wanted to ask more questions. This might be our only chance, so I didn't want to have any regrets.

“Do you know about the Kwang-Oh Incident?”

Kim Chundong flinched.

— I do.

“How?”

— That's easy. It was a huge incident that occurred the year I was born. I figured I could be a victim, so I investigated.

Kim Chundong bitterly smiled.

— Around 3-4 years ago, I found out about something big behind that incident. However, nothing changed even after that. I couldn't do anything without any power or money.

Sssk... He took out a sword that made a sharp ring.

— We have to fight now. I'm bound by the system.

I raised my gun.

— One day, we'll meet again.

“Really?”

— Yes, but do me a favor before then.

Kim Chundong pointed his sword at me and an ice attribute magic power seeped from his blade.

— I want you to find out...

I quietly listened.

— How my life got so twisted and who caused the solitude that rejected my existence.

With that, he charged forward and my surroundings grew cold.

Click—

I easily overcame the bone-shivering cold with aether and transformed the Desert Eagle into an assault rifle. The world slowed in bullet time as I pulled the trigger.

* * *

[15F – Genkelope's Abandoned Vessel]

Aileen's party, *Aileen and Kids*, finally arrived on the 15th floor after much difficulty. The 13th floor caused them the most trouble. Aileen usually slept a lot, so she couldn't stand not sleeping for 100 hours.

"Where the heck is this?"

She quickly erased the dark history of wailing like a kid and bursting into tears. They now stood on the deck of a vast space vessel.

"It seems to be a spaceship of some sort." Jin Seyeon replied from next to her.

"Well, I can see that."

A spaceship that looked like it came out of a sci-fi movie. Aileen couldn't get used to how different this floor looked. Of course, she knew the tower wouldn't present anything familiar.

"Let's go."

"Yeah."

Their party always used the same formation. Aileen, the smallest but strongest, stood at the front. The rest followed in order from Jin Seyeon, Yi Yongha, and Shin Jonghak. They walked slowly while looking at the 15th floor's mystical scenery.

"Oh right, I heard Suho's party cleared the 13th floor too." Jin Seyeon suddenly recalled.

"Did they?" Aileen replied while thinking, *I thought they wanted to focus more on protecting Crevon than climbing the tower. I guess they can balance both.*

"I heard they also killed the chimera.

"What, really?"

Aileen finally showed a hint of surprise and frowned at Jin Seyeon

like she seemed unhappy.

“Yes.”

“Isn’t that their second one?”

“That’s right.”

Black Lotus’ party killed the first calamity, python. Then Kim Suho’s party killed the second calamity, Medusa. Aileen’s party couldn’t beat the minotaur at first and barely escaped using the return scroll Kim Hajin gave them. They finally won after a second time.

“How did they defeat the chimera?”

“Well, we all know Suho’s gift is a cheat.”

He could cut through anything with his top-tier gift.

“Ah, but Fenrir is quite strong too. You’ve seen him before, right? How he decimated all those monsters with his gun?” Yi Yongha interrupted their conversation.

“Yeah. How did he even get all those bullets?”

“Who knows? He has a gun-related gift, so wouldn’t he be able to make them too?”

“I guess?”

Fenrir recently decimated an entire field of monsters in Crevon. The community still talked about his feat from that day.

“You’re right, Yongha. He really is something. Who would’ve thought he would bring his gun into the tower with a black ticket?”

KOONG! An explosion erupted and strange creatures popped out from the floor tiles. One, two, three, four... at least 20 of them. Aileen crossed her arms and frowned.

“Ew, what are these guys?”

Horrifying and grotesque couldn’t aptly describe them.

“They seem to be the enemies on the 15th floor, but their appearance is a bit...”

Jin Seyeon prepared her magic power and Shin Jonghak also raised his spear. Aileen almost activated her Spirit Speech when an overwhelming magic shot up.

“...?”

The surroundings instantly turned white and snow blew around them. A simple ice magic, but its power wasn’t simple at all. All the alien creatures turned into ice sculptures before shattering into tiny pieces.

“What?” Aileen and the rest became dumbfounded.

“Are you okay?”

A woman ran up to them. Clearly, she had cast that powerful, wide-range ice magic. However, they all froze when they saw her.

“Eh?” Aileen recognized her.

“Medea?”

The 3rd floor’s administrator appeared in front of them. *Why was she here and not in Prestige?* As Aileen pondered...

“Aaaah!” Medea suddenly screamed in frustration. Then she glared at the frightened party.

“Dammit! When is he going to get here?”

She stomped away while yelling about something incomprehensible. They simply watched her leave with question marks above their heads.

[20F, Hollow of Ordeal – Station of the End]

I came outside after defeating my doppelgänger. Nothing had changed. I remained Kim Hajin.

“...”

I looked at the gun in my hand. With this, I'd just killed a man who looked like me.

[You have conquered the 20F's doppelgänger trial.] [You have obtained Guidance of the Foolhardy Mist as a reward.] [Be careful! Your comrades might have been devoured by their doppelgängers.] [Be careful! You are currently at 7% synchronization.]

The synchronization began at 5%, but increased to 7% as we fought. I didn't know what caused it, but small changes would occur if it kept increasing.

“Huuu...”

I sighed and looked at the scenery outside. An empty train station under the thick darkness with a grey railway that stretched endlessly to the left and right. I stood in this vast emptiness and couldn't find anything else.

Kiik...

A door opened and a familiar voice entered my ears.

“Where the heck is this?”

Cheok Jungyeong appeared full of injuries, but he seemed extremely happy. He approached me with a big smile. More doors began to open. Jin Yohan, Jain, and Boss all came out in that order. They had defeated their doppelgängers, but my eyes naturally fell on Boss. Her fight seemed the most intense as she panted against the wall. I turned to the empty station again as a system alert popped up.

[Welcome to the 20th floor's residential area, Station of the End!]

“What? Residential area?” Cheok Jungyeong furrowed his brows.

“This place is a residential area?”

The lights came on as he spoke. The surroundings lit up and revealed shops, inns, benches, and a ticketing office.

“Oi, Kim Hajin, looks like we'll have to go to the ticketing office first.”

I shook my head. This station would lead to the tower's final part. We couldn't board with just a single ticket.

“The train has to get here first. We have plenty of time before then.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Ask the system.”

[This station's train runs in 3 month intervals.] [You must wait 61 days, 16 hours, and 33 minutes for the next train.] [At least 100 guests must be present to board.]

“...?”

The system's information surprised me. The last condition that required at least 100 guests didn't exist in the original story.

“Huu...”

Well, it wasn't the first or second time something like this had happened. I looked at Boss, who already came quite close before I noticed.

Yoo Yeonha had said the Chameleon Troupe killed Kim Chundong's parents. Furthermore, the sketch she showed me of the person who brought Kim Chundong to the orphanage resembled Boss. Boss should know who killed Kim Chundong's parents.

“...?”

She suddenly looked at me. Boss seemed to have felt my gaze and brushed her hair back.

“Boss.”

“W-What’s wrong?” She coughed after hearing my serious tone and replied.

I looked at her and continued.

“It looks like we can’t go any further.”

It might not be a discussion to have right now. It definitely wasn’t. Perhaps because of the synchronization or Kim Chundong’s request...

“Can we talk alone for a moment?”

I couldn’t wait.

Chapter 224

Preparation Period (1)

[20F, Station of the End]

“Can we talk alone for a moment?”

I couldn't wait any longer. Boss curiously tilted her head.

“About what?”

“...”

I didn't answer, but she nodded nonetheless.

“Okay, speak.”

“Not here. Come with me for a second.”

“*Hmm?* Why?”

I grabbed her wrist before she could continue. Boss' eyes widened for a second and blankly stared as I pulled her towards a cafe.

“Wait, are you...” A needless suspicion crossed her mind.

“I'm not the doppelgänger.”

“...”

We paid for our seats and sat facing each other at a table. No one said a word in this empty cafe. My suspicions would only grow if I didn't settle it today, so I cut straight to the point...

“Boss, would you like some coffee?”

...Or not. The circumstances weren't right. The timing also felt off. I needed to establish some conversational flow first. Otherwise, who in the world would answer such an abrupt question?

“Coffee?”

“Yes, it's my treat.” I forced myself to smile and brushed my sweaty hair from my forehead.

“I'd like an Americano.”

“Okay, I'll order that.”

I pulled up the automated window at the table and ordered an Americano. Then I continued.

“Ah, that's right. Boss, what did you get from defeating your doppelgänger?”

Boss looked at me suspiciously. “...The Orb of Speculation.”

“Oh really? What does it do?”

“I'm not telling.”

“Huh? Why?”

“You're going to ask me to give it to you.”

“Ah, when did I ever... *cough*.”

Well, I did take all her first place prizes from the martial tournament. I even took the emotion potion that she didn't want to give away. I continued talking about unrelated things for the next 45 minutes and never got to the point. I kept hoping for the right moment like an idiot.

[8-3F, Crevon's Eastern Wall]

Hordes of monsters poured into Crevon every day after the door to the 9th floor opened. Players held them off until now, but they began departing Crevon to climb the tower as the war prolonged.

The upper echelon of Crevon's royal family grew distressed at their weakened forces. However, a rookie suddenly rose to prominence in today's battle. Calling her a rookie didn't suit her skills.

"How long can you maintain your summon?"

Crevon's restless minister of defense asked. He pointed at the creature beyond the castle walls. This summon, which resembled a turtle, stood like a mountain and its grayish, sturdy skin seemed hard as a rock.

The turtle yawned now that the battle had ended, but it moved more agile than anything else while fighting. Sometimes it tackled the enemies with its gigantic body and destroyed their formation. Other times, it opened its mouth to launch a frost breath that froze every enemy.

"A summon that powerful must be difficult to maintain."

"He can stay permanently if certain conditions are met."

Ah Hae-In lightly answered. She had recovered half of her abilities through steady efforts like training and meditation. Now, she could summon a high rank summoned beast.

"Permanently?"

The minister of defense didn't dare to believe her so easily. Crevon contained 7 magic academies that functioned similarly to Earth's magic towers. A few players had already been admitted and summoning magic was one of the most difficult fields.

"I can keep him out all day if you place a mana stone near the Black

Turtle that I can connect to.”

Like the Azure Dragon, the Black Turtle belonged to the 4 cardinal guardians from oriental mythology. This mythical creature ranked in the middle among high ranked summons. It was the weakest among the cardinal guardians, but Ah Hae-In grew close to the Black Turtle ever since she summoned it for the first time in her early 20s.

“Oh! That’s truly amazing!”

“*Haha*, not at all.”

“In that case—”

“You can talk to me about the details.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled and intervened. She had been quietly listening and stepped up when she sensed the negotiation had proceeded to the next step.

“We’ll need to discuss the terms in detail from here. After all, we’re not volunteering.”

Her words sounded gentle, yet purposeful. The minister glanced at Yoo Yeonha before studying Ah Hae-In’s expression, who nodded in agreement.

“*Mn*, I understand. Then let’s head inside the royal palace for further talks.”

“The Atalos Royal Palace... It’ll be a great honor.”

The minister lightly chuckled at Yoo Yeonha’s remark. Soon, a carriage from one of Crevon’s most famous brands, Benlek, appeared with 3 excellent steeds as strong as 300 ordinary horses.

“Please get in.”

“We’re leaving now?”

“Why, of course.”

Yoo Yeonha and Ah Hae-In entered the carriage. The interior was at least 3 times more spacious than its appearance thanks to spatial expansion magic. Naturally, the ride felt quite comfortable as well. The two women sat side by side and stared out the window. The carriage rode off smoothly as Yoo Yeonha contemplated what to bargain and Ah Hae-In checked the community. *A thief who learns to steal late is scariest.* This proverb perfectly described Ah Hae-In, who had never used social media on Earth.

AhHaeInHaeIn: Player Plabo is... so hilarious... lol... I thought my... belly button... would burst... like plop! Lol

Yoo Yeonha watched Ah Hae-In write the above comment and a thought crossed her mind. *She looks like a teenager, but is actually in her thirties.*

“Um, Duchess Ah Hae-In.”

Kim Hajin had once asked Yoo Yeonha about something in passing.

“*Hmm?* What’s the matter?”

If she knew a teacher who excelled in summoning magic, but could also keep a secret and seemed honest. Back then, she didn’t know anyone like that. After all, someone strong couldn’t possibly be honest. However...

“Do you have any plans to take a disciple?”

“Disciple?” Ah Hae-In frowned at the sudden question.

“Yes. I know it’s a bit sudden, but the thought just popped up in my mind. Oh, it’s not a big deal or anything. It’s just that a friend of mine told me he found a very promising magician.”

“...”

Ah Hae-In didn’t answer and simply stared out the window. Then she

wistfully leaned against the glass. She looked like a cute little girl from a bystander's point of view. *Okay, she doesn't want to.* Yoo Yeonha decided to give up without much thought, but Ah Hae-In suddenly muttered.

"I don't accept disciples."

"*Mm.* I understand."

Yoo Yeonha backed down without hesitation, but Ah Hae-In kept glancing at her. Then she realized Ah Hae-In wanted her to ask.

"Can I ask you why if you don't mind?"

"*Haa...*" Ah Hae-In faked a sigh with a distant look on her face. "I used to have a disciple."

She recalled the past 10 years ago when she looked even younger than now.

"That disciple became a djinn."

"..."

Yoo Yeonha simply nodded. It happened quite frequently. Devils always tempted magicians engrossed in research. For this reason, the law required demonic energy sensors in every magic tower and also in the homes of 5 star or higher magicians.

"I'm sorry. I didn't know that."

"No problem, but just how talented is this magician for you to ask me?"

"Well, according to my acquaintance... this magician could rival you in 5 years."

Kim Hajin said no such thing, but Yoo Yeonha simply wanted to provoke her.

“How impudent.” Ah Hae-In only smiled.

“Yes, well, that’s quite nonsensical.”

I guess it didn’t work after all. Most magicians above 7 star would’ve taken the bait out of pride. The carriage continued in silence for the next 5 minutes.

“What’s your friend’s name?” Ah Hae-In suddenly spoke while faking nonchalance. Yoo Yeonha suppressed her budding smile.

“Pardon? Oh, that’s a secret. He’s entitled to his own privacy.”

“...”

Ah Hae-In nodded without any words. The 8 star magician on the verge of 9 stars rested her chin on a hand as if reflecting on Yoo Yeonha’s words.

“Pft, 5 years?” she sneered and continued to murmur.

“In 5 years... Interesting.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled from next to her. It looked like she succeeded in granting his request once again.

* * *

[Player Extra7’s Waiting Room]

Four hours had passed since the 20th floor’s incident. I lay in bed and thought about Kim Chundong’s existence and how I had replaced him. In the beginning, I thought nothing mattered since this wasn’t my life. Perhaps that was the correct stance. After all, we were separate individuals.

“Is it because of the synchronization?”

My encounter with Kim Chundong today changed my views. I didn’t

want to blame everything on the synchronization. After all, shouldn't I at least be held responsible for borrowing his life?

My heart sank at the same time. Kim Chundong told me we would meet again and I intuitively felt that would be my end. One day, Kim Chundong would take over again and I would return to my original Earth.

“...”

I stared at the ceiling. The Earth where I lived for 26 years with my friends, my tiny one-room apartment, my novel on hiatus, my pen name, and my beloved parents. I was a true extra there, nothing but an ordinary person.

I had a lot more in this world after almost 6 years. Money, strength, authority, honor, and...

Boss: Hajin

Boss' message arrived at the right moment as the depression almost swallowed me.

Me: Yes?

For the record, other guests also came to my waiting room: Jain, Jin Yohan, Cheok Jungyeong, Boss, and even Kaita. I assumed they would all be throwing a party in the living room.

Me: Did you not drink? I heard Kaita brought some good wine.

Boss: I don't like alcohol.

I smiled since I knew Boss loved drinking. She would never get drunk, but she enjoyed the taste of ripened alcohol like a true connoisseur.

Boss: What are you doing?

Me: I'm about to sleep.

Boss: Mmm. I see ∇-∇

It seemed she learned how to use emoticons. Of course, she couldn't be compared to a real expert, the blonde British princess. I looked around to find Boss.

"Hmm?"

She lay in bed in the guest room next door while tapping on the messenger. She claimed to not like alcohol, but a bottle of wine that Kaita brought sat on the drawer beside her bed. She also had a slightly faded orb on her lap.

"That must be the [Orb of Speculation]."

Did she use it already? I examined it with my smartwatch.

[Lv.??? Orb of Speculation] Restore a past you have experienced for up to 60 minutes. Through speculation, you may induce even the most unimaginable truth. May be used twice.

"Boss, did you already use the Orb of Speculation?"

Boss: No, not yet. I'm going to use it later when I need it.

I smiled at her lively tone and knocked on the wall. Boss flinched while tapping on the messenger and looked at where the sound came from.

"Are you not going to sleep?"

— *Phew.* You scared me. I will soon. How about you, Kim Hajin?

Her voice sounded gentle.

"I'm going to bed now."

— *Mmm...* I see. I'll stop messaging you then.

“Okay.”

— Good night.

I closed my eyes comfortably thanks to her voice.

Let's forget about all these complicated thoughts and just sleep in peace...

* * *

I decided to head down to the 15th floor the next day. We couldn't challenge the 20th floor, so I wanted to develop *[Genkelope's Vessel]*, which could be used to challenge the floor later. However, when I arrived at Area 3...

“What's this?”

Something strange had occurred. Five administrators came to visit me here. From the looks of it, they all seemed to be after the Wolf's Fragrance.

“You can't measure the value of Wolf's Fragrance with TP, so—”

“He already agreed to give it to me.”

Simad, the 7th floor's administrator brought some kind of robot with him to negotiate and Medea interrupted him as he spoke.

“You haven't reached the 21st floor yet, right? That's my floor. I'll help you out.”

The 21st floor's administrator, Seriko, also came down. Starting from the 20th floor, around 3-4 administrators occupied each floor. Seriko sat at the bottom of this pecking order.

“I would like to know your name.”

The fourth administrator, Andromache, spoke. She threw seductive gazes at me, but I simply ignored her. Athena, the fifth and last

administrator of the 23rd floor, simply stared at me.

Blah blah blah—

Blah blah—

I sighed as they spoke all at once. Their voices naturally contained magic power and I grew nauseous just listening.

I took out [*Wolf's Fragrance*] from my inventory when I couldn't bare the suffering any longer. Everyone stopped talking once the beautiful robe appeared. *Gulp*. Only the sound of swallowing could be heard.

"That's right. Tell them. You wanted to give that to me, right?"

Medea asked with an expression full of anticipation, but I ignored her and began calculating. Based on their offers, the administrator fit to own the [*Wolf's Fragrance*] was... Simad, the 7th floor's administrator. I handed the robe to him.

"*Huh?*"

Medea spat out a single syllable as Simad smiled.

"Good choice."

"However, I want an item in exchange."

"An item?"

"Yes." I told him about the idea that just crossed my mind.

"Isn't there a high performance AI on the 7th floor?"

"There is."

"Help me transfer the AI to this ship that needs it."

“*Hmm?*”

Simad began to think while Medea reeled as though she would collapse. Simad glanced at her and quickly decided. He wanted to claim the robe before she did anything unexpected.

“Fine, but you still can’t receive the Upgrade Center’s service for free since it’s a privilege unique to the 7th floor.”

“No problem. I just want the AI installed on this ship.”

“Then the pact is sealed.”

Simad took out a tiny machine that looked like a phone. He made a call and a large portal appeared in front of him. Another robot came out from the portal holding the chip.

“This is the AI chip.”

“Thank you.”

I received it from AlphaGo and handed the Wolf’s Fragrance to Simad. *Thud*— Medea collapsed on the floor the moment our trade ended. She couldn’t withstand the dejection and her own wrath.

“I, I... for a month... here... wasted my state of existence...”

Medea spoke nonsense in her shock as Simad looked satisfactorily at Wolf’s Fragrance.

“Good deal.”

With that, he left through the portal.

“You’ll regret this. Prepare to die on the 21st floor.”

“You have made the wrong choice.”

Seriko and Andromache also returned to their floors. Only Medea and

Athena remained. First, I handed the AI chip to Horner.

“Horner?”

“Yes, Commander.”

“Plug this into the vessel.”

With this AI chip, [*Genkelope's Vessel*] would completely recognize me as its owner.

“Yes, I will see it done.”

“Aaaaaaaaaaakkkk!”

The scream could've shattered glass. Horner and I covered our ears and turned around.

“W-What was that?”

“You, what were you thinking!” Medea jumped and charged at me.

“Pardon?”

“You said you'd give it to me as a present. You, you bastard!”

“You said you didn't want it.”

“T-That's... b-because of you, I wasted a month's worth of my state of existence!”

Medea probably considered the Wolf's Fragrance hers from the start. An administrator's state of existence also gradually diminished if they left their floor for too long.

“You, don't you dream of setting foot in Prestige ever again—”

“I planned on making you something new. A better one.”

“You goddamn bastard! Better one? What bet... ter...?”

The red-faced Medea stopped for a moment. *Blink blink*. Then she tilted her head in a daze.

“A better one?”

“Yes. I got this from winning the craftsmanship tournament.”

I showed her Hephaestus’ Chisel. *Flinch*. Medea’s whole body shook.

“I could make even prettier clothes with this. Oh, but what did you just say to me? *Goddamn bastard?*”

I pretended to be offended and folded my arms.

“*Hmm*, I don’t consider myself a bastard at all, much less one damned by God.”

I stared at Medea, who blankly looked back. Then she put on a strangely humiliating, yet submissive smile.

Chapter 225

Preparation Period (2)

Medea lost her cool for a moment when someone else stole the artwork of her life. However, she quickly regained her calm, straightened her dress, and smiled modestly. Honestly, her drastic change in attitude felt quite scary, but such a reaction didn't surprise me. Medea never acted normal even in the mythology where she came from.

"I'll be expecting it then. Thank you."

Medea politely spoke before leaving. I accepted her request to make a dress after hearing about an upcoming meeting for administrators. Naturally, she would compensate me for it. I should receive about half of Prestige for one dress. On a side note, Athena also left and said she would return in 2 weeks to privately discuss something.

"Now that the burden has been lifted off our shoulders... Horner? Erenner?"

"Yes, Commander. The pathway to the hibernation chambers has been secured."

"Then let's go."

I went to the underground pathway with Horner, Erenner, and several NPC soldiers. We arrived at a place with hundreds of hibernation chambers after about 20 minutes of walking.

I took out the *[Mystic Key]* and simply unlocked the 200 or so hibernation chambers in the room.

"Now, lead them to *[Area 3]*."

While I gave Horner and Erenner their next order...

[Welcome, player Extra7.] [APG 982, the AI assigned to oversee Genkelope's Vessel, greets the Master. I have been connected to your smartwatch for convenience.] [Power has returned to normal operations in Area 3 and Area 1.] [You may take control of Area 1 by hacking its command system.]

“Please proceed, but don’t hurt the people inside.”

Aileen’s party commanded Area 1, but they couldn’t take advantage of it so I decided to take over instead.

[Understood.] [Hacking has commenced...] [Hacking completed. Area 1 has been synchronized to Area 3.] [Video of Area 1 will now be projected.]

— Eh, what? All of you, look! Something’s strange!

— Huh? What do you mean?

— Look!

— Area 1 now belongs to Master? What’s this?

— W-What? What are you talking about? I just spent TP to power it up!

Aileen angrily shouted after someone stole from her again. I made a mental note to pay her back later and glanced at Horner.

“I delegate some of my authority to Horner here.”

[Understood.]

“Horner, many players will be arriving soon.”

“Yes.”

“Most of them will be summoned to Area 1’s deck, so make them go

through a security check and separate them as needed.”

Then I handed Horner a notebook.

“What’s this?”

“This is, *um*, what should I call it?”

I made a strategy guide for floors 16-19 since I didn’t know how many would die climbing head-on. Using this book as a reward could also power up the vessel in the long run.

“It’s a strategy guide that players would kill to get. Make them do whatever you want and reward them with this.”

“Yes, understood.”

* * *

I returned to Earth for the first time in a while. However, Spartan accompanied me this time. He recently awakened a new trait called the Authority of Existence, which allowed him to follow me outside the tower.

“How’s the outside world? Is it better?”

— *Pururu*.

I entered my apartment with the satisfied Spartan. As soon as I opened the door, *tadadada*— the sound of footsteps rang out and Evandel appeared. She looked at me with a bright smile and paused when she saw Spartan on my shoulder.

“*Uwoaaah...* a big bird!” Her eyes and mouth widened to the size of ping-pong balls.

“Evandel, do you want to play with him?”

“I can?”

“Of course.”

I handed Spartan to Evandel and sat on the living room couch. A couple of yawns escaped before I turned on my smartwatch.

▷Stats: Variable stats [Strength 10.6 (+ 5.400)] [Stamina 10.135 (+ 5.865)] [Speed 14.625 (+ 1.375)] [Perception 14.925 (+ 1.075)] [Vitality 10.605 (+ 4.395)] [Magic Power 4.55]

Gift ▷[Master Sharpshooter] [High-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 3 – Proficiency EXP: 83%] ▷[Young Dwarf's Dexterity] [High-intermediate rank] [Illusion attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 5 – Proficiency EXP: 23%] ▷[Random Consolidation System] [Low-intermediate rank] [Spirit attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 3 – Proficiency EXP: 83%]

Physique (2/3) ▷[Magic Dysfunction Physique] — Energy Conversion's upper limit has increased to 16 points. ▷[Medicinal Memory Physique] — Stat-related medicines have greatly lost effectiveness because your stats have drastically increased.

“As I thought...”

My stats only went up by 0.6 points excluding the artificial stat boosts from the Upgrade Center. Thankfully, my speed and perception further increased after I used the [Stigma Crystals].

Of course, I used to worry about getting even one stat above 10 points back in Cube. I had come a long way since then. I should be near the upper ranks of high-intermediate rank heroes with reinforcements like stigma, aether, skills, and the medicinal memory physique.

Tiring—

Yoo Yeonha messaged me just as I grew bored.

[I found a summoner magician as a teacher like you wanted.] [It's the 8 star magician, Ah Hae-In.] [It was quite hard to get her, so contact me as soon as you see this.]

“Ah Hae-In...”

I looked at Evandel. “Birdy, birdy.”

— *Pururu.*

“*Play with me... please?*”

— *Pururu.*

Spartan flapped away as Evandel chased him. He turned and glared every time Evandel tried to touch him.

“Sowwy...”

I smacked Spartan’s head after seeing the dejected Evandel.

* * *

A clear sky on a beautiful spring day. I met Ah Hae-In at the underground training room with Evandel.

“I’ll arrange the best conditions available.”

As expected, the 8 star magician Ah Hae-In immediately recognized Evandel’s true identity and made an offer after seeing her command an army of spirits.

“No, that won’t do.”

She wanted to entrust Evandel to the best from the Magic Tower and Hero Association. Evandel would be placed under careful observation and management. Obviously, I rejected that.

“This child isn’t human. She needs to be dealt with more strictly.”

Ah Hae-In saw through Evandel, but nothing more.

“No, Evandel is human.”

“...”

Ah Hae-In looked at Evandel again. The little girl wore a magician's hat and cutely waved around a wand. Soon, a smile emerged on Ah Hae-In's face.

“She can also become a disaster.”

“Does she look like a disaster?”

“...”

“To me, she looks like the opposite. She'll help against the disaster that will befall humanity.”

Ah Hae-In's expression suddenly turned cold. “What do you mean by that?”

I remained silent, but she continued, “Speak. What disaster do you think will befall humanity? The public perceives that Earth is in its most prosperous time, especially with the Tower of Wish.”

Disaster would befall humanity. Honestly, an enraged Kim Suho should've already destroyed the Tower of Wish by now. However, 10 floors still remained and Kim Suho had changed. The third episode would arrive before the tower collapsed and worried me the most.

“Do you know about it, Duchess Ah Hae-In?”

“I asked first.”

Ah Hae-In sounded serious. I knew she had close ties with the association, so she should already know. I briefly met her gaze and turned towards Evandel.

“An existence that is neither human, monster, nor djinn.”

Ah Hae-In's eyebrows twitched.

"Whether it naturally resulted from evolution, mutation, or someone artificially created it... I don't know."

I continued solemnly, "However, I do know it is far craftier than humans and even more heinous than djinns."

The third enemy slightly differed from demons and djinns. I glossed over the details in the original story, so I couldn't predict the co-author's changes.

"You've heard the legend, right? About the humanoid monsters living in Central Africa."

"..."

Those words hammered the nail in the coffin and Ah Hae-In bit her lips. "Jeronimo's information network reaches that far into Africa?"

"It's Fenrir's information network."

"I see."

This great calamity would destroy the entire Middle East and a third of Europe. With Evandel's help, this international catastrophe could be greatly reduced.

"Even knowing that, you don't plan on revealing that child's existence to the association?"

"No, not yet. Not until the time comes."

"*Hmm...*" Ah Hae-In closed her eyes and pondered. *Tick— Tick— Tick*— The clock ticked dozens of times before she eventually nodded.

"Fine, but that child's talent is far greater than you think."

Ah Hae-In pointed to Evandel dancing with Hayang after training.

“You said 5 years?”

“Pardon?” *What 5 years?* Ah Hae-In continued as I tilted my head.

“In 3 years... no, 2 years will be more than enough for her to surpass me.”

“Oh, really?”

How amazing. I nodded and asked, “So, can you teach her?”

“Are you doubting my abilities?”

“No, it’s just that Evandel doesn’t use magic power.”

Evandel commanded the power of spirits, a power unique only to her.

“I know, so don’t worry.”

Ah Hae-In put up two fingers. “Two days a week. I’ll come to teach her here for 12 hours. The price will be—”

“Would you like TP or Earth’s currency? *Ah*, I can give you tower items too if you prefer.”

“*Eh?*”

Ah Hae-In seemed taken aback as I continued with a smile.

“It’s grown quite common with how famous the tower became. Players inside the tower trade with stuff outside too.”

“Right, I heard. In that case...”

Ah Hae-In took out a contract. Yoo Yeonha liked to use this black paper and probably gave it to her.

“How does 50,000 TP every 2 weeks sound?”

“That’s fine.”

“You must have a lot.”

“I have well over a thousand times that amount if you’re talking about my assets.”

Ah Hae-In narrowed her eyes at me. I simply smiled and stood up from my chair. Now, I should introduce Evandel to her new teacher.

“*Hmm?*”

However, Evandel wasn’t there. Spartan and Hayang also disappeared. Ah Hae-In spoke as I looked around.

“They just left.”

“Oh, they did?”

“You should pay more attention to your kid... *Tsk, tsk.*”

Ah Hae-In focused on writing the contract and I found Evandel’s smartphone on the ground while I waited. Smartwatches replaced smartphones in this world, but children still found the bigger device easier to use. Curious, I picked up her phone and unlocked it. A green search engine popped up with the following search history:

[england] [wat is england] [enland pincess] [England princes] [rahel] [rachell] [rachel]

“...”

I suddenly felt bitter seeing Evandel’s search history about Rachel.

“*Huu...*”

Rachel often appeared in the media as a well-known person. She even appeared on the news this morning. She grew up as England’s princess, became a top ranker in the tower, also served as a Crevon

royal guard, and seemed to be the most talented elementalist in history. Korean forums always talked about her beauty, so it would be surprising if Evandel hadn't seen her. She probably looked Rachel up every day.

"Here."

Ah Hae-In finally handed me the contract. I glanced over it and immediately signed.

"Then I'll send the 50,000 TP to Yoo Yeonha."

"Got it."

"Let me go get Evandel."

I left the training room and quickly found her. Evandel sat on a swing at the nearby playground while watching something on her smartwatch.

"Evandel?" I called her with a smile. Startled, she waved and quickly covered her smartwatch's hologram screen.

"*He, hehe.* You're here, Hajin. Hajin?"

She didn't run up to me and awkwardly covered the screen. I approached her first.

"Hajin, I..."

"It's okay."

I kneeled in front of her. She didn't know what to say as we made eye contact.

— Princess Rachel just returned from the Tower of Wish and has been garnering more attention due to her talent as an elementalist...

A news broadcast rang out from Evandel's smartwatch. I gently

embraced her.

“I promise I’ll let you meet her if you train hard and wait.”

* * *

I fell into an abyss after that day’s defeat and the conviction in my heart shattered. Humiliation filled me as I recalled how I begged him to spare my life. He appeared in my nightmares every night and I could only shudder like a rabbit in front of his cold, beast-like eyes.

The fundamental basis of my self crumbled from this trauma. A sense of helplessness swallowed me and only emptiness remained. I spent most of my time just lying in bed after that incident. I had never experienced such humiliation or defeat before. I always found excuses for my failures and reasons to gloat about victories. Before I knew it, I had grown into an insufferable loser.

I began to do what I had to after this late realization. I put in effort like my life depended on it. For the first time, I exhausted my mind and body to learn what effort meant. The days slowly grew where I felt a sense of accomplishment. My body still shuddered uncontrollably whenever I thought of that day. However, I finally obtained the chance to start over after falling off a cliff.

* * *

[2 Weeks Later, 15F – Genkelope’s Restored Vessel]

Bell, Jin Sahyuk, and Rumi waited for approval to enter a spaceship filled with players.

“Are you feeling better now?” Bell asked, but Jin Sahyuk simply snorted. Bell liked this change in attitude. Jin Sahyuk always spoke with action rather than words, but she had grown quieter and more thoughtful. This suited the future world’s strongest much better.

— Next guest.

After all, who would’ve thought Jin Sahyuk could ever wait in line?

This represented a simple, yet major change.

“It’s our turn.”

“I’ll go first.”

Rumi approached and entered the ship after less than 10 seconds. Jin Sahyuk went next. She casually walked up to the security, but something felt off. The employee who saw Jin Sahyuk flinched and quickly placed his hand under the table.

“What’s wrong?”

— Please wait a moment.

“For what?”

— Please wait a moment.

“What?”

Jin Sahyuk frowned at the strange discrimination. *Koong, koong!* Suddenly, 8 heavily armed soldiers surrounded her.

“What’s this?”

A system alert popped up.

[You have been marked as a criminal on the 15th floor. All stats have decreased by 70%.]

“What? Criminal? I, I just got here! I...”

— Capture her!

The soldiers charged before she could voice her complaints. Jin Sahyuk couldn’t resist with her reduced stats. She could only glare unwillingly as they restrained her.

“Why me? Why me!”

— You are under arrest.

“What? Why the hell am I being arrested? Hey! Let go of me!”

— You are under arrest.

“But why? I’ve never even been here before! I don’t know what’s going on, but you’re making a mistake!”

— You are under arrest.

“Y-You fuckers! Oi, Bell! Do something!”

Jin Sahyuk saw Bell talking to a man behind him in an attempt to not get involved. She found the sight familiar and naturally misunderstood.

“Bell, don’t tell me... Fuck, Bell! Is this your doing?”

— We will render you unconscious if you do not remain silent.

“Just let go of me, dammit!”

Jin Sahyuk struggled to get free, but she couldn’t do anything. They didn’t even need to restrain her with magic-restricting handcuffs.

“Bell, you son of a bitch!”

Bell looked at her and thought, *She looks just like an injured beast.*

“Bell! Bell—! Beeeell—!”

The soldiers dragged her away as she continued to yell. Bell faced her and mouthed, *It’s not me.*

“What do you mean it’s not you? Then help me!”

Bell ignored her and returned to talking to the person behind him. It would be dangerous if the same thing happened to him.

“Aaaaaaak! Why are you doing this to me?”

Jin Sahyuk struggled like crazy. The rage from being wronged surged from her heart to the point of tears.

“Why? Why me, why me, why me...”

— You are under arrest.

“Arrest my ass! Let go of me, fatass! Let go! Let gooooo!”

Soon, reinforcements arrived and dragged away the exhausted Jin Sahyuk.

“Why, at least tell me why. Please, at least let me know the reason...”

Bell whispered as she slowly disappeared, *I’ll rescue you later.*

— Next guest.

“Ah, it’s me.”

— Player confirmed.

Bell slightly worried, but he seemed fine.

“Whew, what a relief.”

He looked around in astonishment after entering the spaceship. The place looked like a residential area with burger joints, sushi restaurants, and Korean food stalls. They even had neon lights above as advertisements.

“Oh, is this that strategy guide?”

A familiar voice rang out and Bell glanced in that direction. He spotted Essence of the Strait's rankers, Chae Nayun and Kim Youngjin.

"Yep, take a look and pass it to the other guild members."

"Wow, thanks! I heard it isn't easy to get this. How did you do it?"

"I cleaned up the monsters in Area 5's basement. It was quite difficult."

"*Mmm*, then are we going to the 16th floor right away?"

"Yeah."

Bell smacked his lips at Chae Nayun, Chae Jinyoon's younger sister.

She would've made a good sacrifice too. Should I have gone with her instead?

Chae Nayun felt his gaze and turned around. They made eye contact and he faintly smiled. Then she frowned and simply turned away.

"*Haha...* how cute."

Bell smirked and went back to looking around the ship. He couldn't find the person who came in before Jin Sahyuk.

"*Ah*, where's Rumi? Geez, these girls sure like to go off on their own."

Bell simply shrugged. He wasn't the type to interfere in someone's private life and players could also revive several times.

"Well, I guess I'll visit the prison first."

Bell sighed and headed towards Jin Sahyuk's new home.

Someone dragged Rumi to a dark alleyway while Bell and Jin Sahyuk had a relatively peaceful time. The ship's guards had taken Jin Sahyuk, but a much more dangerous person took Rumi.

It's been a while, Rumi.

A cold voice rang out from the shadow that pulled her away. That existence alone stifled her.

I told you, right? That I'll kill you if I ever see you again.

"W-Why should I die?"

You betrayed Boss with Bell.

"You're right, but Boss wasn't as good of a person as you think he was."

The magic power pressing down on Rumi instantly grew stronger.

"W-W-Wait! You know about it too! The Kwang, Kwang-Oh Incident!" Rumi hurriedly shouted. Even a single death caused one to lose their skills and Rumi knew about the importance of skills.

"Boss was the one who organized that mission."

Rumi brought up a sensitive topic to survive. However, the shadow only dug deeper into her skin. Rumi knew she couldn't expect a peaceful death from the woman in front of her. She shuddered in pain as she shouted.

"He took you out to test your abilities and that's where you met the current seat of black for the first time! As a murderer and a victim!"

The magic power paused. Rumi inwardly sighed in relief thinking she had found a way out.

"That's right. I know all about it. Let me go if you don't want me to tell him. I'll revive anyways if you kill me."

Rumi tried to threaten her.

The shadow flickered in the air and a faint voice spoke.

Rumi.

“W-What?” A gut-wrenching pain engulfed her.

Who do you think I am?

“Ah, aak... W-wait...”

There's no room for negotiation.

As a shadow blade prepared to dismember the girl... *Tirring*. A sound unbecoming the situation rang out. The pain surrounding her disappeared as Rumi curiously turned around.

Chapter 226

Mystery Shuffle (1)

Tirring— A sound unbefitting the situation rang out. The pain surrounding her disappeared and Rumi curiously turned around. The shadow that suffocated her still stood there with her hair flowing like a ghost and her eyes staring into space. It looked like she just received a message. Was she typing a reply or something? The pause only lasted for a moment.

“*Kyaak!*”

The blade that stopped came back even larger and Rumi realized this woman didn’t intend on keeping her alive.

“You... You should also know... that the current seat of black... Fenrir is a time bomb. More people will dig up his past as he grows famous and your relationship with him will come to light.”

Rumi continued to persuade her rather than beg for her life.

“The day will come when you... ultimately have to decide between the former boss... and the current seat of black.”

The results would be unavoidable. Will she seek forgiveness from the seat of black by insulting the man whom she followed or will she finally kill the seat of black?

“Let me guess. Between the dead and the living, you will choose the dead again.”

The shadow didn’t reply. Rumi clenched her teeth and cursed amidst the pain and rage that sprang from imminent death.

“You will, for your boss, end up plucking the lotus...”

A blow landed on her spine as she spoke her last words. Her body immediately turned into a current and disappeared. Rumi had now died once and the barrier that enveloped them scattered. The back alley returned to silence and only a single shadow stood alone.

Boss' head strangely hurt. What she just heard unexpectedly shocked her. When did she become so weak?

“Haa...”

She sighed and turned on the messenger.

[Boss, come to Area 3 at 9. Let's have breakfast together]

The message that just arrived came from Kim Hajin. *I should've turned the notification off.* She murmured inwardly and recalled Rumi's last words. *You will, for your boss, end up plucking the lotus.* She shook her head and brushed it aside.

“There's no way...”

Such an ominous curse wouldn't come true.

“That I would betray you.”

You may betray me, but I could never betray you. She disappeared into the darkness with a whisper.

* * *

[15F, A Fancy Restaurant in Genkelope's Vessel]

“Does that mean you already purchased the 20th floor tickets, Miss Aileen?”

“You could say that. Yes, I did.”

Aileen proudly declared as she stuffed herself with dessert pudding. Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha sat in front of her with Shin Jonghak on

the side. The four met by chance today.

First, Kim Suho ran into Yoo Yeonha on his way to a local ramen restaurant. Yoo Yeonha also planned on heading to the ramen restaurant, but pretended to go to the nearby fancy restaurant instead. Kim Suho tactlessly tagged along and the pair ran into Aileen and Shin Jonghak.

“All four members of my party have their train tickets. All first class. Oh, none of us are doppelgängers, so don’t worry.”

Aileen recalled the day she fought her doppelgänger on the 20th floor. Spirit Speech didn’t work on another Spirit Speech user of the same level, so their fight turned into a brawl. The two Aileens tried to demonstrate awesome combat techniques. *Papapa!* They stretched their short limbs, but they simply fought a catfight where they pulled each other’s hair out. Aileen defeated the doppelgänger with all her effort.

“A battle with a doppelgänger... Sounds difficult.” Kim Suho carefully listened to the details.

“It’s difficult, but not impossible. The doppelgänger is less experienced with skills, so you should use them at the right moment.”

Shin Jonghak had been quiet until now and explained.

“What’s this? You’re giving him advice now, Jonghak?” Yoo Yeonha softly remarked, but he didn’t reply. He only moved his fingers swiftly as if texting someone.

“*Mmm...*”

Yoo Yeonha casually shrugged and turned away from him.

“By the way, was the 15th floor like this from the beginning? I heard it used to be a mess,” Kim Suho curiously asked Aileen.

“Yeah. Everything looked like a mess.”

Tak. Aileen finished the pudding and set her spoon down. The waiter arrived with the main dish just in time.

“This vessel is divided from Area 1 to Area 9.”

Aileen ignored the steak in front of her and continued.

“Area 1-6 have been restored to their normal functions. The alien creatures still inhabit and control Area 7-9. You’ve probably seen them. It’s hard to miss those gross-looking things.”

Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha both nodded.

“At first, those guys crawled around everywhere. Then a bunch of NPCs suddenly came and stole Area 1 from us. They also brought an AI from somewhere and changed the ship into this. Originally, I owned Area 1.”

Aileen pouted and glanced at the pudding in front of Kim Suho. He didn’t like sweets, so his pudding remained untouched.

“Aren’t you going to eat that?” Aileen had been after it for a while now and finally asked.

“Ah, no.”

Kim Suho handed Aileen the pudding. Only then did Aileen pick up her spoon again. *Squish, squish*— She placed a big spoonful in her mouth and slightly shuddered.

“This flavor is different from mine.”

“Did you receive a proper reward?”

Yoo Yeonha asked as Aileen happily murmured.

“*Hmm? Ah, I did.*” Aileen nodded and took out some kind of black card.

“This is the VIP card for the 15th floor. Anything here can be used with this card and everything is free other than a few exceptions.”

Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha widened their eyes at it. Aileen puffed out her chest triumphantly.

“I’ll pay for the food today, so don’t you worry.”

“Wow. Thank you.”

“Hurry up and come to the 20th floor. The train needs at least 100 passengers to start.”

The restaurant door suddenly opened and two men in neat suits approached their table. *Tak, tak*. They politely called a certain person’s name as everyone in the restaurant curiously watched them.

“Are you player YooYeonhaYeonha?”

“Pardon?”

They unexpectedly picked her out as she tilted her head with a fork in her mouth.

* * *

I invited Yoo Yeonha to the VIP Room in Area 3 since I promised to meet her once she arrived on the 15th floor. I also had an appointment with Athena today.

“Where are we? You must’ve made it big.”

Yoo Yeonha pouted as she entered the VIP room built just for me. I didn’t have to move a finger in this luxurious room full of convenient features. The AI did everything on its own.

“We finally meet in the tower.”

“First, take a seat. Have you eaten?”

“I got dragged out halfway.”

Yoo Yeonha grumbled and sat on a nearby chair. I stood up and headed to the kitchen.

“What are you doing?”

“You said you didn’t eat yet.” I planned on making a special ramen just for her.

“Just wait a bit.”

Dadadada—

My hands moved at an undetectable speed. She sighed and watched me remove the heads from anchovies to make a sauce.

“I see what you’re trying to make, but I already told you I don’t like that type of food.”

“Isn’t it about time you became honest?”

“Rather than that, what’s your nickname? Add me as a friend.”

Yoo Yeonha pulled up her friend list. I briefly paused after transferring the sauce to the boiling water. *My nickname, Extra7. Can I tell Yoo Yeonha?* I wondered and soon gave in.

“Extra7. Add me.”

“*Eh?* That’s you?”

It looked like she already heard of me. I glanced at her surprised face. I didn’t know how, but I could guess. I probably didn’t need to worry too much since Yoo Yeonha could keep a secret.

“You’ve heard of me? Where and how?”

“Yes, though not in detail. Nayun told me herself. I’m probably the

only one she told. She said Extra7 saved her. Your nickname is quite famous. I heard you came first in the first tutorial.”

“...”

I silently nodded. Meanwhile, the ramen finished cooking and I placed some noodles in a bowl for her. Suddenly, Yoo Yeonha asked, “Is Nayun still the one for you? You’ve been watching her from afar.”

Her voice, filled with bitterness and envy, made me pause. I recalled the past. *How did I feel about Chae Nayun?* I probably felt... affection. I was still human and lonely. Humans lived by relying on others and ceased to be human if they didn’t rely on anyone. Back then, I wanted to be human.

“I don’t know.”

I only said that much and Yoo Yeonha didn’t ask anymore.

“I have an appointment, so I’ll head out. Add me as a friend and have some ramen. Also, take this.”

I handed Yoo Yeonha the black express card that could be used in almost every facility on the 15th floor.

“*Eh?* How do you have this?”

“This ship belongs to me.”

I replied with some gusto.

“W-What? Don’t lie—”

“I’m leaving now. You can relax here for tonight.”

“Wait, hold on...”

I left the puzzled Yoo Yeonha and stepped outside. However, I only took a few steps before I discovered the administrator Athena nearby.

“Oh, Athena. Right here.”

“Greetings.”

“Yes.”

I glanced back before we got down to business. Yoo Yeonha sat alone at the table and stuffed her face with ramen. *Slurp slurp*— She gobbled everything up. It looked like she had been enduring with superhuman patience while talking to me.

“My business is simple. Barter.”

“*Huh?*”

“That’s right. I want one of the black arrows you used last time.”

“Ah, those?”

Of course, the Goddess of War would want them.

“I put a lot of effort into making them.”

I crafted them after hundreds of synthesis and setting modifications, so I didn’t plan on giving them away.

[Lv.11 Athena’s Moonlight Arrow]

“You can have this in exchange.”

I took out the *[Lv.9 Dark Ore Arrow]* the moment I laid eyes on Athena’s arrow. Items over level 10 belonged in a league of their own. They became much more powerful and... Well, now wasn’t the time to dwell on it. I still had 4 left even if I gave one away.

“Thank you. This is all I needed.”

I exchanged a dark ore arrow for Athena’s moonlight arrow and examined it thoroughly as soon as I received it. The moonlit shaft and

the arrowhead looked as if someone carved them from a meteorite. Of course, it looked more beautiful than my dark ore arrow.

“I shall have another talk with you in the future. Please stay alive.”

“Oh, I will. Thanks to this.”

I even followed Athena to see her off.

* * *

[20F, Station of the End]

— It looks like we’re approaching the end.

— Right, this place is called Station of the End.

— One year is a pretty long time.

— What will happen to the tower once we finish climbing? Will it still be here?

— I hope so. A person dear to me is here.

— He’s going out with an NPC, leader.

— Hey, NPCs are real people.

Three weeks later, a crowd of passengers waited for the train to arrive on the 20th floor platform. Desolate Moon, Essence of the Strait, Frost Sanctuary, Rothschild, Empire of Glory, and the English Royal Court Guild. Kim Suho, Yi Younghan, Kim Junwoo, Aileen, Jin Seyeon, Kim Hakpyo, etc. It looked like a couple of hundred people at a glance.

“So tense.”

I took a quick look and muttered. Most players in the top 500 had gathered here. Did I hand out the strategy guide too easily? I felt a little scared.

“Hey, doesn’t your body feel itchy?” Cheok Jungyeong asked as I glared at him.

“*Haa*. Didn’t I tell you fighting on the train will get you immediately kicked out?”

“I know. I’m aware. It’s just... itchy. It’s so itchy. I have to give it a good scratch.”

Cheok Jungyeong sulked and began to scratch his lower back. “Oh, I heard two more Chameleon Troupe members arrived. Kaita already died twice too.”

“What the hell is that Kaita up to? He’s always dying. Pathetic.”

Jain mentioned something familiar. The fight between Zurahan and Kim Suho had been slightly delayed, but the Ordinary People’s Alliance that plotted to take over Prestige finally went under 2 weeks ago.

— The train to the 21st floor will be arriving soon. Everyone, please step back.

The 403 rankers on the platform nervously formed a line and the 4 Chameleon Troupe members also came together.

— The train to the 21st floor will be arriving soon. Everyone, please form a line to board.

I designed this train to quickly end the tower arc. It could take us straight to the 26th floor, but I couldn’t afford to let my guard down since a lot had changed.

— The train is now arriving!

Chwaaa! A loud cry rang out. The train swallowed every sound as players on the platform watched the huge piece of iron storm across the tracks. It almost completely covered the sky and finally arrived on the other side. Then it released a trail of steam.

Kiik.

The train came to a stop and silence filled the station. The crowd waited for the right moment. *Tzzzzz*— The train door opened as if to meet their expectations and an NPC attendant who looked like a mannequin appeared.

— Welcome, players. Please enter the aisle marked on your ticket. Aisle 1 is for Class A. Aisle 2 through 4 is for Class B... First, Class A may board the train!

Team Chameleon Troupe belonged to Class A. We entered Aisle 1 together and I could feel the competitive glares from other players on our backs.

— Ticket has been confirmed.

The attendant checked our tickets as we moved to Class A's VIP suite. We had the privilege of keeping an entire compartment to ourselves.

“Wow. It's big.”

“The train features space expansion magic as well. There should also be things like a sports field and a club.”

“I'll definitely visit the club later.”

Jain grinned and sat on the sofa. I took a seat nearby and glanced at Boss. Just looking at her made a part of me uncomfortable. I couldn't help but stare even though she simply sat there. The synchronization probably affected me more than I thought.

“Hajin, why do you keep stealing glances like that?”

“*Huh?*”

“Boss, he keeps glancing at you. He must like you.”

“...”

Boss raised her head at me with an expressionless look. She continued to stare before saying just one thing.

“Don’t.”

“Ah, yes.”

Meanwhile, the boarding process finished and all doors slammed shut. We sat more comfortably now that we didn’t have to mingle with other players. Cheek Jungeyong lay on a bed, Jin Yohan browsed a magazine, and Jain and Boss looked through the community together.

Then suddenly...

— *Uwoah!* Oh my! We just checked and noticed a total of 403 passengers on board! That’s so many! I am truly happy as the captain. Yes, I am!

A frivolous voice rang out.

— We’ll hold a special event to commemorate this occasion: the Mystery Shuffle!

“W-What’s this?”

— Starting now, your seats will be randomly switched. Rest assured! Your name, face, and nickname will all remain hidden under the Veil of Anonymity! Oh, of course, others may remove your veil and you may remove it yourself!

What the heck is happening? I shot up like a spring.

— Please be careful! Remember the 20th floor! The doppelgängers who have taken over the original owners’ bodies will attempt to take your lives.

“What...”

— However, we too despise the doppelgängers! We only want players

as passengers! Therefore, we'll offer prizes to players based on the number of doppelgängers they defeat. The prizes are... 2 ultimate skill books and 3 unique skill books!

I wanted to say something regarding the unexpected event, but the view before my eyes suddenly changed.

— Now, all players will be summoned somewhere else between Aisle 3 and Aisle 8! The time limit for this event is 36 hours!

Chapter 227

Mystery Shuffle (2)

Team Aileen and Kids also had a compartment to themselves and carefreely enjoyed their privacy. Shin Jonghak trained with his spear in the huge reception room while Yi Yongha slept on one of the beds.

“I wonder what’s going to happen.”

Aileen only considered the train as an exciting event and not something that could determine their life or death. Only Jin Seyeon seriously thought about it and carefully studied the pamphlet that came with their Class A ticket.

“According to this pamphlet, the train will stop on each floor once. Players won’t be able to just sit and do nothing. It says they’ll need to pay an appropriate price...”

Tirring— A sudden ringing interrupted Jin Seyeon and she raised her eyebrows. Then she saw Aileen holding a plate of chocolate cake after purchasing it. Aileen awkwardly coughed when they made eye contact.

“Right, right. Oh, also, look at the size of this train. It’s huge! I just received a message that it’s full.”

“You mean... this train has other NPCs riding on it too?”

“Possibly. Also, 403 players came here. Mostly rankers who displayed their abilities in Crevon. Have you heard some djinns also teamed up with demons?”

Jin Seyeon understood what Aileen wanted to say. “Something might happen in Crevon without all the rankers.”

“Yep, exactly. So the question is, how many rankers will be disqualified on this train? Oh, you still have the calamity core, right?”

“Yes.”

Aileen’s party obtained a calamity core from killing the minotaur. Jin Seyeon used it to differentiate players from doppelgängers. The calamity core throbbed when it neared anything the tower classified as a calamity. It became quite handy on the upper floors.

“Then it’s fine. We aren’t the type who would be disqualified so easily and we aren’t attached to Crevon.”

“*Hmm...*” Jin Seyeon nodded and wondered about the doppelgängers.

“Lady Aileen, how did the fight with your doppelgänger go?”

“*Eh?*”

“I’m just wondering.”

Aileen recalled it with a fork hanging out of her mouth. The fight with her doppelgänger 3 weeks ago...

— This magic power spear will pierce your body!

Aileen shouted, but the doppelgänger fought back.

— No! That’s not going to happen! The opposite will!

Then the real Aileen struck back.

— No! It’s going to be the opposite of what you say is the opposite!

— What does that even mean, you idiot? My physical stats will now receive a 100% buff—

— No, that doesn’t make sense. I command it with my Spirit Speech. That *cannot* happen!

— You! Eat dirt!

—Yeah, no. I won't!

“An elegant and proud battle took place.”

Aileen summed it up with a single sentence. Spirit Speech users rarely fought each other because it always turned out like that.

“*Eh...* I don't believe you.”

“Why not?”

— *Uwoah!* Oh my! We just checked and noticed a total of 403 passengers on board! That's so many! I am truly happy as the captain. Yes, I am!

A cheerful voice rang out from the speaker above.

* * *

— You have been relocated to a random seat!

My body traveled through space with a strange sensation. I didn't worry too much since I could see through everyone's identities.

“Oh.”

I found myself in Aisle 8's last compartment, but it didn't seem any worse despite being farther away from the special compartment. It looked bigger than all the other modern special compartments put together.

“...”

A central hallway divided it in half with four couches on each side. Eight players found themselves transferred here after the announcement. At first, I couldn't see their faces or their figures until I focused. Then I could see them clearly with my gift, Observation and

Reading. Kim Hakpyo, Jin Seyeon, and a ranker I didn't know occupied the left half of the compartment. The right half contained three unknown rankers and...

"What's going on?"

A girl with a bob cut looked around with wide eyes. Right, Chae Nayun also teleported here and her hair looked redder than before. It seemed she dyed it since the last time I saw her.

"This event is supposed to give skill books, right? I wasn't paying attention."

"We're supposed to kill the doppelgängers, but how the hell are we supposed to tell them apart?"

"Don't they just want us to fight to our deaths?"

Each player voiced their opinion and Jin Seyeon proudly stepped up after they each took a turn.

"Um, hello, everyone. Why don't we introduce ourselves?"

I immediately shot up. Everyone's eyes fell on me as I grabbed the doorknob that led outside. *Clunk, clunk*. Unsurprisingly, the door didn't open.

— All eight individuals must agree before the door can be opened.

Staying here didn't seem like a good option, so I wanted to look for the other Chameleon Troupe members. That seemed impossible for now. Could I use the mystic key to force the door open? Even if worked, the other players would probably chase me and I wouldn't be able to beat Jin Seyeon and Chae Nayun with my physical stats.

Let's just sit until the matter is resolved since they can't recognize me anyways. I came to a decision and returned to my seat.

"You in a hurry? *Hehe*."

Kim Hakpyo snickered while Chae Nayun stared at me. She shouldn't know my true identity, but her stare pressured me nonetheless.

“Now, now. Don't go anywhere and let's talk.”

Jin Seyeon took control of the conversation and grabbed my wrist.

“Are you a man?”

I put on an act.

“What answer are you looking for?”

I didn't answer her question. Jin Seyeon smiled in satisfaction and released my wrist.

“We should focus on finding out which among us are doppelgängers no matter your name or where you come from. Please, let's sit together and talk.”

“What's sitting together going to accomplish?”

Kim Hakpyo complained and crossed his arms. I wished the Veil of Anonymity worked on me so I didn't have to see his smug face.

“I know an easy way to distinguish doppelgängers from players,” Jin Seyeon confidently declared.

Fighting her would only draw suspicion. Even doppelgängers would go along with it and figure out her plan before doing anything. As such, the eight individuals in the compartment sat in a circle. Chae Nayun coincidentally sat next to me, but I didn't mind too much. I remained calm as ever.

“So what's this easy way?” Chae Nayun asked.

“It's simple.”

Wiing— Jin Seyeon fiddled with something and pulled out a table

hidden in the ground. Then she took out eight scrolls and placed them on top.

“What’s this?”

“Scrolls?”

“Exactly.” Jin Seyeon smiled.

I quickly checked the scrolls’ information with my smartwatch and realized what Jin Seyeon intended.

“However, they’re not simply just scrolls to doppelgängers.”

“*Mmm.*”

Kim Hakpyo also figured out her plan and nodded. The five remaining individuals had no clue and waited for Jin Seyeon to explain.

“These scrolls can only be used by players.”

“*Ah!*”

Everyone understood the plan after a single sentence. It sounded rational and well thought out.

“I’ll take off my veil to gain your trust as the person who came up with this plan.”

Jin Seyeon took off her Veil of Anonymity and revealed her silky, long hair along with her dazzling beauty. Then she smiled at me.

“*Whoa*, it’s Senior Jin Seyeon...”

The surprised exclamation came from Chae Nayun.

“Now, pick up a scroll and check its description. You’ll see that it states only players can use them.”

The items they took out would be masked from others as long as players wore the Veil of Anonymity. Jin Seyeon revealed herself, so everyone could read the scrolls' item descriptions.

“She’s right. That’s exactly what the scroll says.”

“Then do you agree?”

“What’s there to argue about? Anyone who says no will be a doppelgänger.”

As expected of an Evil Society executive, Kim Hakpyo boldly tore his scroll in half.

“Listen well. You aren’t forcing me to do this. I’m doing it out of my own volition.”

He tore the scroll in half without even checking its description. I had to admit, he sounded pretty cool. *Plop!* Unfortunately, he transformed into a frog.

— *Ribbit*. W-What? *Ribbit*. The fuck is this?

Kim Hakpyo stuck out his tongue in anger after turning into a cute, green frog.

— *Ribbit*. Y-You... *Ribbit*. Say something if one of the scrolls had such an effect! *Ribbit*.

“You should’ve checked the description first.”

— *Ribbit*. Are you fucking with me... *Ribbit*.

I went next and picked an ordinary scroll to avoid any accidents.

“I’ll go next.”

Rip— I tore it in half and returned to my seat.

“I’m next.”

Chae Nayun stood up and easily finished the task.

Another ranker I didn’t know went next. Five people underwent the checkup. However, three refused to stand no matter what.

— *Ribbit*. Looks like we have our answer. *Ribbit*.

Even a frog could understand the situation. I didn’t know any of the three rankers. The compartment door could only be opened through unanimous agreement, so the doppelgängers only had one choice. Their magic power began to surge.

“Dammit!”

They all charged at the same time, but not all rankers stood on the same level. Chae Nayun and Jin Seyeon ranked in the top 30 and Kim Hakpyo also boasted a similar strength.

“What?”

For some reason, they all charged at me since I stood far behind everyone else. *Whish*— One of them swung his fist and it multiplied in the air. I didn’t have time to admire this strange skill with ample magic power behind it.

“Why me?”

“—!”

I blocked the fist with aether’s help and prepared myself for close combat. Aether took control of my body as my arms stretched and my waist bent like a machine. It didn’t take long for us to take care of the doppelgängers with the advantage in numbers and power.

“*Kuuk!*”

Jin Seyeon finished the job with her arrow.

“Are you okay?”

“Yes.”

I wasn't hurt and didn't complain either, but Chae Nayun kept staring at me.

“Can't you see that I'm not hurt? You stole my kill!” I had no choice but to curtly shout back.

“...”

Jin Seyeon's cheeks slightly puffed up.

“What.”

“No, nothing. My apologies.”

Eventually, Jin Seyeon bowed in apology and I awkwardly coughed.

“By the way, how did hero Jin Seyeon know that doppelgängers couldn't use scrolls?” Chae Nayun asked.

Jin Seyeon smiled and shook her head. “I didn't know. I've never tested it and I wouldn't be surprised if they could.”

“Eh? Then...”

“You can call it a bluff, *huhu*. I'm not sure it would've worked if the doppelgängers acted smarter and bolder.”

My admiration for Jin Seyeon only grew after hearing this. Even as the original author, I didn't know if doppelgängers could use scrolls. The situation had never come up and I never bothered to write more than necessary. Of course, I knew another clear-cut way to tell doppelgängers apart. Doppelgängers couldn't return to Earth.

“Then can we open the door now?” Kim Hakpyo asked. He had turned back into a human before I noticed.

“Sure, but let’s stick together since we don’t know what happened in the other compartments. There might still be a doppelgänger among us, but the probability is low. I’ve been watching everyone’s expressions and no one hesitated to tear their scroll in half—”

“I get it, so open the door.”

Kim Hakpyo walked up to the door as Jin Seyeon nodded.

“Does everyone agree?”

“Yes.”

The door opened and we came out of our compartment.

[Aisle 8]

The pathway connecting compartments on trains usually looked quite narrow. However, the pathway for this train resembled a lush forest far bigger than any compartment. The dirt floor made it seem as if we stepped into another world and we could even hear the sound of running water like a stream.

“Where should we go next, Jin Seyeon?”

“I’m not sure. We should figure out how to open the door to the pathway.”

“*Hmm*. Oh, *oops*, there’s a rock here.”

Kim Hakpyo kicked a rock under his foot. *Whoosh...* The tiny rock carrying his magic power drew an arc and entered Aisle 8’s ventilation window. Immediately afterwards, Kim Hakpyo switched places with the rock.

— *Hahaha!* So long, retards!

His voice rang out from the ceiling. The four of us became dumbstruck, especially me. I wondered why the charismatic villain

who shined in the latter half of the novel kept acting like that.

“...”

“What skill is that?”

“It’s called phase shift if I recall correctly. I think I know who he is. Anyways, let’s just do things our way since we don’t have that skill.”

We walked forward with Jin Seyeon in front. Unknowingly, I found myself next to Chae Nayun again. I couldn’t help but glance at her from time to time. Chae Nayun also looked at me and I quickly dodged her gaze. However, her eyes remained on me for a long time. Minutes passed in this uncomfortable silence.

“Oh, look at this flower.”

Chae Nayun suddenly squatted to the ground. Her action didn’t surprise me. I simply glanced and continued onwards. Honestly, I just wanted to run away like Kim Hakpyo.

Tak— Chae Nayun suddenly snatched my wrist and it felt like time stopped.

“What?”

“*Ah, um...*” Her lips moved slowly and this moment felt like a year.

“Do you know what flower this is?”

Thankfully, she only asked a simple question and I sighed in relief.

“Just check the item description.”

“I can’t see it.”

I furrowed my brows and looked at the flower.

[Lv.1 ???]

Did the Veil of Anonymity block out such information? I checked it with my smartwatch instead. It turned out to be a forget-me-not.

“It’s a forget-me-not.”

“Ah, so this is a forget-me-not. You’re quite knowledgeable...”

“Let me go now.”

I tried to run away since Jin Seyeon and the other ranker already left into the distance. This seemed like the perfect opportunity for me to smoothly escape with the mystic key.

“Let go.”

Chae Nayun refused to release me no matter how much strength I exerted.

“What are you doing?”

I stared at my wrist and slowly looked up. There, I saw her staring straight at me and my heart trembled. My eyes slightly blurred like a camera lens losing focus.

“W-What?”

“No, nothing.”

Soon, her grip weakened and I shook off her hand. Then a quiet voice rang out.

“I just thought you seemed like someone I knew.”

The faint voice entered my ears and shook my heart. I stood still for a moment. She continued since I became speechless.

“Are you?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, but don’t make things up.

We can't see our faces or tell our voices apart with the Veil of Anonymity, so that's a meaningless question."

I cut her down and turned back. However, her next words froze me before I could even take a step.

"Kim Hajin."

My heart turned numb the moment I heard my name and my mind blanked. I didn't even suspect whether my veil had been taken off or if she obtained some kind of authority.

A suffocating sensation simply overcame me and a whimpering voice finally burst the thick silence that only contained my beating heart.

"Did you think I wouldn't notice?"

"..."

I swallowed and tried to calm my trembling body. Then I silently turned around and faced her. She shouldn't be able to see, but still recognized me.

Soon, Chae Nayun took off her veil. The presence of a veil didn't matter to me. However, she must've felt determined to do so.

Then she glared at me full of confidence and suspicion. Her gaze pierced right through.

"It's you."

We both matured since the last time we met, but I hadn't prepared any words for our eventual reunion. No, perhaps I did, but I could only muster pitiful words now.

"How did you recognize me?"

"You think I wouldn't?" Chae Nayun strangely laughed. "I spent all these years thinking about you half the time."

Tears began to fill her eyes, but they didn't fall as if they had frozen.

"You always look at your watch whenever something happens."

So that's how she found out. I drooped my head and smiled bitterly.

"Your strange actions, manner of speech, the tiniest habits, and the way you breathe..."

The metallic sound of a sword unsheathing rang out.

"I remember them all too well."

I could see my completely expressionless, completely black reflection in her eyes. I should show myself at least. I smiled bitterly and placed a hand over my face. Then I pulled off what felt like a mask and the veil shot up into the sky.

"Hey."

I spoke.

"It's been a while."

In front of me stood Chae Nayun.

Chapter 228

Mystery Shuffle (3)

He wanted to say a lot. He should've said something, but didn't know where to start. He expected this and didn't plan on running forever. However, he never prepared any excuses.

"It's been a while."

He finally offered her a plain greeting. She wanted to pour out all her feelings, but her thoughts became jumbled. She needed time to sort them.

"You're goddamn right it's been a while."

She looked at the man she used to like. The lump of emotions in her heart, the affection she held for him, the questions, and her hatred all violently mixed. Then the icy clang of her sword split the awkward atmosphere.

She pointed her longsword at him, against the man who once told her, *A sword suits you better than a bow*. His indifferent face, engraved in her heart, now appeared at the end of her blade.

"I have... a lot of questions to ask."

She wanted to sound nonchalant, but the lump in her throat prevented her from doing so. She hated how her voice shook.

"..."

He looked her straight in the eye. He never told her a lot and couldn't. Not in the past and not now. It might seem like he changed, but he hadn't. He still felt scared and lost between two worlds.

“I’ve thought about it every night.”

She raised her sword because she knew that. Her magic power surrounded the blade and a torrent of magic power raged in every direction.

“Sure, I’m not the brightest, but I still can’t figure it out even after all these nights.”

A line of tears ran down her cheek.

“I still don’t understand.”

She didn’t say much. Thousands of sentences condensed into one and overwhelming emotions became trapped.

“So, tell me yourself in a way that I can understand.”

She held up her determination along with her sword.

“Speak.”

“...”

He understood her, but knew from his deep contemplation and mental anguish that he could only say one thing right now.

“Wait.”

This cowardly remark.

“Wait for what?”

She laughed. For a moment, she simply became dumbfounded. Life had been hard on her. She never felt alive and no longer had a reason to live. She thought about taking her own life, but decided to wait for him to tell her the truth one day.

“You’re going to run away again?”

She clenched her teeth. Chae Shinhyuk could've comforted her sadness. Her father prepared to abandon everything, even Daesung, for her sake. She could've consulted Chae Joochul when rage blinded her. Her grandfather would've found Kim Hajin and torn him apart. However, she refused all those options and endured alone. She carried everything on her shoulders: her rage, sadness, affection, and hatred. All so she could hear the truth from him someday.

"I'm not running away."

He calmly answered in his familiar voice.

"Then take your weapon out. I'll beat the truth out of you if I have to."

He took out his gun and she nodded.

"Be serious or I'll kill you."

She coldly muttered and lowered her longsword. Sssss... Immeasurable magic power blazed from her like vapor. She prepared to strike at any moment.

"You shouldn't have said what you just said."

She leaped forward and sincerely intended to kill him. The magic power in her sword viciously changed shape.

Tzzzzz...

The blade burned as it headed towards his side, but aether's barrier blocked it. The formless aether absorbed her magic power through extraction. However, she didn't have time to be surprised and continued swinging. Once, twice, thrice... Only her emotions fueled the series of reckless attacks. They couldn't be called sword techniques. She continued to slash so he wouldn't notice the tears streaming down her cheeks. Her attacks poured like rain, accompanied by explosions.

Koong, koong, koong, koong...

Suddenly, she heard a low groan and held her breath.

“...!”

She saw a man whose face distorted with pain beyond her vision blinded by tears. His body looked tattered and she realized he hadn't fired a single bullet. She blankly stared at him and her thoughts wouldn't continue. Her hands shook, but why? Was it because she hurt him? Soon, she tightened her grip again.

“You coward!”

This time, she didn't keep any distance between them. She frantically charged at the man who continued to lie to her even now.

KOOOONG!

The sword swung straight at him with immense power. He raised his arm to stop the blade. *Crack*— His arm snapped in half despite aether's defense.

“Why!”

She yelled and kicked him in the stomach. This sent him flying and the sight of him clutching his chest on the floor looked pathetic. However, he crawled back and stood in front of her again. She hated that, so she jumped at him with her sword. Their hands intertwined and so did their bodies. The ground beneath them turned into a puddle and finally...

“*Haaa...*”

She breathed heavily and looked down at him. He lay under her, worn out, and next to the sword in her hand. The fight had ended, but the aftermath still enraged her.

“You son of a bitch.”

Her voice trembled and she grabbed him hard by the collar.

“You think doing this will make me forgive you? By just letting me beat you up? You bastard...”

A thought crossed his mind as he watched her murmur full of resentment. *I can never be forgiven nor can I apologize. At least, I can spare one death for her.* He felt relieved by the thought and also disgusted at himself.

“...”

“Do you even know what happens to me when I think about you?”

Her cry continued.

“My chest feels tight and my heart hurts. I want to see you, but I can’t. I want to meet you, but I don’t. I want to trust you, but I don’t. I want to hate you, enough to kill you with my own hands, but I can’t do it. You hurt me so much that I want you by my side. Just what did you do to me...”

She picked up her sword from the ground and raised it high. Now, his heart lay at the tip of her blade. One thrust and their ill-fated relationship would end, but that fact made her hesitate. Death would be absolute on the 20th floor. *Even so, I...*

“I can kill you. I can!”

She cried as if asking him to dodge while looking down at him. Kim Hajin’s eyes fixed on her.

“—!”

A beast-like cry rang out as she thrust down.

Crack!

Silence descended after the storm of emotions. *Haa... Haa...* Her small, thin breathing filled the empty space.

“Fuck.”

She let go of her sword and collapsed. Her forehead touched his warm chest.

“There’s no way... I can kill you...”

The longsword hadn’t penetrated his heart, but the ground instead. She trembled in his arms and cried.

“You cowardly son of a bitch...”

A raspy sound emerged from her throat. The slight tremor that touched his body almost broke him and shook his heart.

* * *

Meanwhile, Jin Seyeon stood in front of the sixth door in Aisle 8. An unknown ranker accompanied her. This ranker, a man, kept glancing at her as if he had something to say. Then he finally decided to speak out when she grabbed the doorknob.

“Um, the other two disappeared.”

“Really?”

Jin Seyeon pretended she hadn’t noticed and glanced back. Her vision stretched into the distance and she saw the pair in the middle of a violent brawl. Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun both revealed themselves.

“Hmm.”

Jin Seyeon had already discovered their identities. As the Divine Archer, she could dismantle a number of the tower’s traps and kept an eye on the pair even as she walked.

“Wait a minute...”

Since she already peeked at them, she decided to do it thoroughly. She

focused magic power into her eyes that turned blue. Now, Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin reflected even more clearly on her retinae.

“*Mmm, I see.*”

She heard about Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin’s relationship from rumors.

I want to hate you, enough to kill you with my own hands, but I can’t do it. You hurt me so much that I want you by my side...

The rumors seemed wrong from the looks of it. Those emotions felt far too deep for a relationship that ended as a fling.

“...”

She quickly glanced to the side. Fortunately, the ranker only vaguely sensed what happened through the obvious clash in magic power and the sound of air being cut.

“It looks like they’re busy, so let’s move along.”

The man couldn’t listen in on them, so Jin Seyeon decided to stand down. She wanted the skill book and prioritized reuniting with Aileen.

* * *

I lay still and couldn’t tell how much time had passed. It could’ve been a moment or a very long time. I came back to my senses when I heard footsteps approaching.

“...”

What approached me like the wind soon became a shadow. The dark shadow took the shape of a human and silently stared at me covered in blood and barely breathing.

“Boss.”

She stretched her shadow before I could say anything and her shadow blade stopped just behind Chae Nayun's head on top of me. Boss looked at me with eyes filled with rage.

"Put it away," I briefly told her.

"..."

She silently gazed at me and an unexpected staring contest began. Soon, she withdrew her killing intent as I placed Chae Nayun on the ground. Chae Nayun fell asleep after crying and left me quite distressed. Boss looked at her.

"Who is this woman?"

I stared at Chae Nayun sound asleep with blood and tears on her face. Suddenly, my past mistakes came back like a sharp blade to my heart. I swallowed a sigh and took my robe off.

"3 years."

I made up my mind after seeing her today. Only 3 years remained in the original timeline. I originally planned to let her hate me until then, but now I decided otherwise. I realized too late that hating somebody required too much. Unknowingly, I had put Chae Nayun through tremendous pain. Even if we couldn't come to an understanding and return to what we were, even if it was already too late, I would try from now on, so...

"Wait just 3 years."

I bent down and placed my robe over Chae Nayun's cold body. Using stigma, I cooled her head, which felt hot after she used too much magic power. Then I adjusted her into a more comfortable position.

"Kim Hajin." Boss called me and I looked up at her.

"What happened?" she asked worriedly.

"..."

I shook my head and stood up. No one would find Chae Nayun in the last compartment of Aisle 8, so I left her there and walked away. Boss followed me in silence. She seemed to be wondering about what happened, but I felt too exhausted to explain. My body told me to lie down just like Chae Nayun instead of moving.

“That woman.”

I looked for a place to rest when Boss broke the silence.

“Is she precious to you?”

“...”

Why did she want to know that? I clutched my burning head and felt feverish. I needed to find a place to rest rather than answer a nonsensical question. Fortunately, we arrived at the next compartment and I opened the door with the mystic key. We didn’t find anyone inside, so I sat sluggishly on the couch.

“Kim Hajin.” Boss sat next to me and called me.

“Yes, what is it?”

“It’s nothing. Looks like I wasn’t being considerate. Rest well for now.”

“...”

When I saw Boss step back, slightly sullen, something inside me wavered. My heart throbbed and my entire body shook. This compulsion came from an unknown origin and nameless emotions. I forced my exhausted body to move as if it wasn’t mine and stared at her.

“Boss.”

“*Hmm?*”

“I, *um*, know.”

“Know what?”

A single sentence came out of my mouth.

“You were the one who brought me to the orphanage.”

My vision suddenly darkened and my consciousness blurred. Then I collapsed and fell forward.

Chapter 229

Tower of Wish (1)

— Isn't this Chae Nayun?

She heard a familiar voice while sleeping under a comfortable blanket. Startled, her eyes shot open.

“Uwoah!”

She saw the two familiar faces in front of her.

“What are you doing?”

“I can't believe you fell asleep here.”

Yi Yeonghan and Kim Suho looked down at her and laughed. They didn't hide their faces, so she didn't know whether the Mystery Shuffle ended or they voluntarily took off their veils.

“What are you guys doing?”

“What do you mean? The shuffle is almost over, so we're looking for our teammates.”

“Oh.”

Chae Nayun collected her breath and looked around. Nothing but desolate shrubbery and weeds surrounded her. What happened felt like a dream.

“What's up with that robe?” Yi Yeonghan pointed and asked.

Chae Nayun tilted her head.

“What robe?”

“The one on top of you.”

“What are you talking about...”

Chae Nayun looked and saw the cloth covering her. This mysterious robe felt soft as silk, yet tough as armor and light as a feather.

“*W-Whoa*, it’s a level 7 item!”

“*Eh?*”

Chae Nayun checked its item description after hearing Yi Yeonghan’s excited cry.

[Lv.7 Robe Crafted by Master Craftsman] Lv.7 Shock Absorption, Lv.6 Resizing, Lv.6 Magic Power Resistance, Lv.6 Haste Seal, Lv.5 Low Grade Magic Power Amplification

Seeing this level 7 robe reminded Chae Nayun that what happened wasn’t a dream.

“...”

She recalled a faint memory from this robe.

— Wait just 3 years.

Kim Hajin softly whispered to her groggy consciousness before a warm healing energy enveloped her.

“Hey, where did you get this? Do you want to sell it to me? Why don’t you trade it for mine?”

“Shut it.”

Chae Nayun pushed Yi Yeonghan away and stood up.

“That robe doesn’t suit a longsword user, but it’s perfect for a brawler!”

Chae Nayun glared at the blabbering Yi Yeonghan before wearing the robe.

He said to wait three years, but I’m not going to keep waiting. I’ll uncover the truth even if I have to use my family’s power. Then I’ll find you again and return this robe.

“I’m telling you, it’s perfect for a brawler! I’ll give you my entire savings. My. Entire. Savings. Oh, I also have an effective goods selector that I haven’t used. I’ll add that on top!”

“Geez, go away you leech.”

* * *

I opened my eyes to a fancy red ceiling with gold embroidery. It looked like the special compartment’s ceiling.

“You’re up?”

A husky voice woke me from my drowsiness and I turned to the side. As expected, Cheok Jungyeong stood there.

“Argh, my head.” I clutched my throbbing head and asked, “What happened?”

“What do you mean?”

Cheok Jungyeong held up a book.

[Lv.1 Ultimate Skill Acquisition Book – Energy Blast]

From the looks of it, the Mystery Shuffle had ended.

“You slept through it, weakling.”

“Oh, you got the energy blast?”

Everyone knew this skill from a certain cartoon show. It sounded simple, but couldn't be underestimated. Energy blast used energy, which included magic power and physical power. This high rank skill fully deserved to be called an ultimate skill and could display heaven-shaking power depending on the user.

“Why, you want it?”

“No, you should learn it.”

Someone like Cheok Jungyeong perfectly suited it. I couldn't imagine what kind of devastation his energy blast would cause.

“Me?”

“Yeah, it'll be amazing in your hands.”

He glanced at it and shook his head.

“It doesn't suit me.”

Then he placed it in his inventory despite his words. Soon, he might be shouting, *Energy Blast!*

“Ah.”

I recalled how I fainted. Of course, I remembered what I said to Boss. She must've felt shocked to instantly knock me out. I probably couldn't make up an excuse either and quickly raised my body.

“Where's Boss?”

“Outside.”

“Outside?”

“On the balcony.”

Cheok Jungyeong pointed towards the right corner of the special room. The special compartment featured 3 bedrooms, a living room, and a balcony.

“Mmm...”

I looked at the door with the sign that read, [*Balcony*]. Boss stood beyond that door and stared at the scenery outside. I slowly walked over. *Knock, knock*— I observed her reaction, but she didn’t move even after a long time. *Knock, knock*— I opened the door without waiting for her the second time.

“...”

Boss sat on a stool by the balcony and watched the night sky. I carefully sat next to her and looked at the same scenery. The moon hid behind the dark clouds and not a single star shone. She stared into total darkness.

“Boss.”

I called her, but she didn’t reply.

“Boss.”

I called her again.

“I’ll keep calling until you answer.”

“...”

Only then did her shoulders flinch. She asked while gazing at the sky.

“What?”

She spoke a single word, but I could sense her distress and carefully chose my words. Then I asked about something ordinary first.

“How long did I sleep for?”

“About a day.”

“*Hmm.*”

That’s pretty long. I murmured to myself and looked out once more. The scenery changed along with the moving train. The sky remained dark, but a mystical landscape unfolded below. We passed by illusory scenes that couldn’t exist on Earth. This train would climb until the 26th floor. From there, it would be Kim Suho’s turn to shine. The rest of us would probably struggle to kill even a weak underling. The upper floors existed solely for Kim Suho, the holy sword user and the true hero who followed the path of righteousness.

As I thought about the future scenarios, Boss suddenly asked while faking nonchalance.

“Do you remember what happened before you fainted?”

Her voice contained a hint of anguish and I silently nodded.

“How long have you known?”

“It’s been some time.”

“...”

Boss fell silent. It looked like she couldn’t say what she wanted, so I tried to answer the question in her heart.

“On the 20th floor, my doppelgänger told me to find the cause of my loneliness. It deeply resonated with me.”

The synchronization with Kim Chundong affected my subconscious. Of course, I didn’t plan on explaining that to Boss.

“I see.”

“Yes, and... the Kwang-Oh Incident.”

A single star appeared in the sky when I brought up that event.

“I must be its sole survivor.”

A strange sensation came over me. It didn't feel like I said those words. I stopped talking for a moment because of this sensation and stared into Boss' eyes.

“...”

I had stayed by her side for a long time now. We shared all sorts of feelings and experiences, so I understood what she might be feeling. She felt scared. Boss rarely ever seemed flustered, but she seemed scared right now.

I could guess what had happened from this tiny reaction. It fit the plot I knew as well. Boss probably killed Kim Chundong's parents. My body began to heat up as my thoughts reached that conclusion. A spark blazed inside me. However...

“No matter what Boss did in the Kwang-Oh Incident...”

These weren't my feelings. This world wasn't a novel and I wasn't just a character. I was Kim Hajin, not Kim Chundong. As such, I refused to accept those feelings.

“I won't hate Boss because of it.”

I simplified many things into one sentence. I didn't blame her for killing Kim Chundong's parents. I didn't care if that came off cold. I planned to push forward even if it seemed forced. I no longer wanted to lose the relationships I built.

“Boss must've been young back then too.”

I grabbed her small hands with both of mine. They trembled and felt cold.

“So don't feel guilty about it.”

Boss tried to pull away, but I didn't let her. I tightly squeezed her hands. Then I unleashed stigma's magic power. Sssss... My magic power softly rose and healed Boss' hands. Two streaks of stigma flowed out and erased her scars and calluses. Boss widened her eyes at me.

"I want to ask you one thing though."

I looked her in the eyes.

"What's your name?"

I demanded the greatest trust she could offer.

"...?"

Was it too sudden? Boss stood blankly in a daze. After a long time, she asked with a quivering voice.

"N-Name?"

"Yes, I'll keep it a secret from the others."

I vaguely recalled Bell saying her name. I already knew it too, but I wanted to hear it directly from her.

"T-That's so sudden..."

Boss looked at me with trembling eyes and turned towards the lone star with determination.

"Byul."

"Byul? It's a single character?"

Boss silently nodded and I smiled.

"It's a pretty name."

“No.”

Boss hesitated. Did she want to tell me her last name too? I looked back at her. *Huu*— Boss took a deep breath and quietly told me to keep this an absolute secret.

“My last name is...”

“Yes?”

I couldn’t hear well because she mumbled too softly.

“What’s your last name again?”

Boss sighed.

“It’s Yi...”

Her full name was Yi Byul. [1]

“It’s an ugly name, right?”

I would probably write, *Yi Byul grumbled*, like in a novel now that I knew her full name. Of course, I never reached this point because I stopped writing.

“No, it’s a pretty name.” I faintly smiled.

“Then, Yi Byul?”

“Don’t.”

“I’m Kim Hajin.”

Boss furrowed her brows. “Do you think I don’t know that?”

“No.” I shook my head.

“It’s just that... I don’t want you to forget.”

The dark clouds disappeared and a white moon shone on us. Under the cold moonlight, Boss’ hair looked disheveled and she had dark circles under her eyes. Just how much did she suffer in a single day? I felt sorry and formed a comb with aether.

“Let me comb your hair. It’s been a while.”

Boss nodded and entrusted herself to me. I stood behind her and gently combed her long hair. However, her body still seemed stiff as she agonized over her guilt. Suddenly, I had a mischievous thought. It might seem rude, but we were technically the same age. She could take a joke, right? I cleared my throat and whispered into her ear.

“How is it, Byul?”

To my surprise, she reacted strongly like a fish out of water. Her movements felt too powerful for a mere fish, but that’s what it looked like.

* * *

[Four Days Later, 8-3F, Crevon’s Eastern Castle Walls]

Crevon’s situation turned for the worse after most rankers left for the upper floors. The outer walls had fallen with fewer players fighting the more powerful monsters. To make matters worse, the Atalos Royal Family also suffered from internal political strife during this time. The crown prince had been poisoned and killed.

“Soldiers, line up!”

Even in such a situation, Rachel did her best as Crevon’s special army commander. She healed wounded players and soldiers with elementals, defended against large-scale attacks with barriers, and shot out sword strikes left and right. Without Rachel, monsters would’ve already reached the heart of Crevon.

“Things aren’t looking good. We’ll have to abandon the outer post.”

Ah Hae-In advised and prepared to recall her divine beast. The Black Turtle performed magnificently, but the endless waves of attacks exhausted it. If this continued, they would be defeated in a matter of time.

“...”

Rachel clenched her teeth and resented the current situation. She posted several times in the community for help after someone assassinated the crown prince. The Atalos Royal Family faced a state of emergency, but no rankers made a move despite the debt they owed to Crevon. Furthermore, even non-ranking players raced to the 20th floor after finding out about the unique and ultimate skill books.

“Commander Rachel.”

Ah Hae-In spoke again. However, Rachel shook her head.

“Our efforts would be wasted if we can’t protect this place. Monsters will reach the city and cause a massacre if we don’t receive reinforcements from the west, the east, or the royal family. At least half the eastern side will be destroyed.”

“...”

Ah Hae-In couldn’t say anything. The girl always shouldering responsibilities also tried to carry the weak’s burdens without realizing her own age. Ah Hae-In didn’t know whether to call Rachel immature or overly mature. She sighed as Rachel opened the messenger and quickly typed a message.

[Hajin, Crevon is under threat...]

“...”

However, she stopped before sending the message. She already received too much from him and didn’t want to inconvenience him any further. Rachel turned off the messenger. No, she tried to turn it off.

“Ah!”

To her dismay, she accidentally clicked the *[Send]* button instead. *I wasn't even finished writing...* The endless flood of monsters gave her no time to correct her mistake. She swiftly called her elementals and a life-and-death battle ensued. About 15 minutes later, a huge shadow descended from the sky.

“...?”

This shadow covered the entire eastern castle wall and blocked out the sun. All the soldiers including Rachel looked up.

“What is that?”

There, they saw a monstrosity.

— Genekelope's Support Battlecruiser: Operational.

A giant vessel shot up in Crevon's sky.

— Commencing airstrike on Ship Commander's command.

Artillery appeared on the ship's deck. Rachel couldn't tell if it was a friend or foe, but sighed in relief when the vessel rained fire upon the monsters. *Dudududu...* It didn't fire mere magic bullets, but cannon shells and lasers with highly concentrated magic power. The fruit of science and magic easily swept away the 8th floor monsters.

* * *

The train continued running. Other events took place after the Mystery Shuffle, but most didn't require players to participate. During this time, I stayed in the special compartment and focused on crafting Medea's dress. Before I noticed, the train had arrived on the 21st floor.

[21F, Card Kingdom]

Everything on the 21st floor's residential area required the power of

cards. I made this place as a homage to a certain cartoon where cards materialized and came to life. The train would stay here for 4 days, so I went on a quick tour.

[Pinnacle Grade Card Shop]

First, I visited the Pinnacle Grade Card Shop with Cheok Jungyeong, who itched for some excitement after staying on the train for so long.

“Do we have to buy something like this?”

The luxurious shop displayed countless cards inside. Cheok Jungyeong furrowed his brows at them.

“Isn’t it fun?”

[Players will require cards to remain on the 21st floor.] [Certain cards will provide many uses.]

I grew curious about how the co-author materialized the brief notes in my settings book and decided to make the best of my time here since the train would stay for 4 days.

“Random card box? Wow, another random box? This goddamn world.”

What Cheok Jungyeong said instantly grabbed my attention.

“Random box?”

I ran up to him with sparkling eyes.

[Grade 1 Random Card Box] [Price – 40,000 TP] [Contains 4 cards of intermediate grade or above. Players may only buy a maximum of 5 boxes!]

I found a way to gamble with my luck.

“Give me 5 of these.”

“What? Five?”

I ignored Cheok Jungyeong’s remark and paid 200,000 TP. Then I sat at a table in the shop and prepared to open them.

“Crazy, you’re crazy. You actually paid 200,000 TP for these?”

“Shut it. Don’t come crying to me about being jealous later. Now, let’s see...”

I slowly opened the boxes.

1. Yi Byul means farewell, goodbye, parting, etc. 🙏

Chapter 230

Tower of Wish (2)

Chwaaaaa... Golden beams of light shone from the random box when I opened it.

“Woah, he must’ve got something good!”

The nearby NPCs exclaimed as I examined the contents.

“...”

I froze from just the first card. On this floor, all cards ranked from 1 star (lowest) to 8-9 stars (highest). I received an 8 star for my first card.

[Bahamut’s Red Dragon] [Monster] [8 Star] Will summon the Red Dragon of Bahamut to attack your opponents. ● 7 star Attack ● 7 star Defense ● The Red Dragon can defeat any opponent whose attack and defense are lower than its own. ● May be summoned 3 times.

This card allowed me to summon the Red Dragon. I could probably throw the card in the air and the dragon would appear on the spot. It looked good at first, but didn’t seem very useful on second thought. Light attribute dragons like the Light Dragon or the Azure Dragon would come in handy, but the Red Dragon couldn’t do much in the tower arc’s latter half.

“What is it?”

Cheok Jungyeong grew curious after I looked inside without saying anything.

“I said what is it?”

I ignored him and examined the other cards. The rate must've been extremely low because I only drew 4 other 8-9 star cards with my luck. However, one of these four caught my attention.

[Card Conversion] [Active Card] [8 star] Effective Good ● You may convert a total of 10 items into cards regardless of their level and type. ● Converted items may be treated as effective goods and can materialize anytime and anywhere. ● Once an item is converted, it will remain a card forever.

This 8 star card glowed a golden color. An active card that could turn any item I owned into cards. Most importantly, the converted items would be treated as effective goods. It functioned similarly to the *[Mysterious Pouch]* from Kedrick, but I could turn up to 10 items into effective goods.

“Damn, you’re going to have all the fun by yourself?”

Cheok Jungyeong’s grumbling didn’t bother me. I took out two *[Lv.9 Dark Ore Arrows]* and the *[Lv.11 Athena’s Moonlight Arrow]* from my inventory. Then I immediately used Card Conversion on them.

[Please set your card activation gesture before you use your card.] [This unique gesture may only be set on the 21st floor! Only a player who has reached the 21st floor may activate cards!] [Please set a motion or make a short sound.]

They have something like this? I briefly thought and decided on a finger snap. *Snap*— I snapped my fingers and a strange current shot up from the card. It enveloped the 3 arrows and turned them into cards.

[Lv.9 Dark Ore Arrow (card) Effective Good] [Lv.11 Athena’s Moonlight Arrow (card) Effective Good]

“Huh, what’s that? Hey, shop owner! Give me a random box too.”

Cheok Jungyeong stepped forward with a laugh after what I did. He purchased a random box for 40000 TP while I continued to check my cards.

[Last Moonlight of the World] [Active Card] [8 star] Effective Good ○ A

fragment of moonlight from the end of the world cut off by the last knight. It contains a special effect for swords. ● Light attribute Infusion (Enhancement) ● Technique Infusion: Moonlight Slash

[Miraculous Teahouse] [Space Summoning] [8 star] Effective Good ○ A mysterious teahouse that can never be found when looking for it and only appears when one is not looking. It sells tea with miraculous effects. ● Will summon the mysterious teahouse to a place of your choice. ● May be summoned 3 times.

[Story of a Legend on the Mural] [Person] [9 star] Effective Good ● Part of a legend will manifest to assist you.

Only these four along with Card Conversion seemed useful. The rest could be categorized as trap cards, one-time weather converters, or monster summoning cards. Still, they had 6 stars on average.

“God dammit, did they scam me?”

I turned towards the cursing. Cheok Jungyeong looked at a card the size of his finger and shook in discontent. I gave all my leftover cards to him out of pity. Then I received a call on my smartwatch.

— Ship Commander, the mission has been completed. I have sent the battlecruiser to obliterate the 8th floor calamities.

“Good job.”

I felt extremely satisfied. The battlecruiser set out from the 15th floor and annihilated all the calamities thanks to the revolutionary floor teleportation technology that GenphaGo, the Genkelope’s Vessel’s AI, developed about 2 weeks ago. The development cost almost a million TP. I had to invest not only my profits from the vessel, but also some of my private assets. It proved to be worth it in the end.

“Oh, how are other things going, GenphaGo?”

— Research on starlight laser to convert light from a star into a laser beam is 50% complete.

GenphaGo (Genkelope + AlphaGo) still had a lot more to offer after developing floor teleportation. I nodded in satisfaction.

— We will need another million TP soon.

“R-Really? *Uh*, I got it.”

It would soon begin the money talk, so I quickly ended the call.

“Oi, what exactly can you do with these stupid cards?” Cheok Jungyeong asked as he gathered the cards I gave him.

“They also have dungeons and missions here. Didn’t you read the pamphlet?”

“Did you think I would?”

“...”

In the original story, I summarized the 21st floor in 3 sentences. I didn’t plan on staying long, but this place seemed quite interesting solely based on its settings. Players could enter dungeons and defeat monsters to turn them into cards. Then they could summon these monsters and adventure together. Didn’t that excite everyone’s inner child?

“There’s also a tournament.”

A nameless NPC approached us.

“Whaaaaat? A tournament? With these cards?” Cheok Jungyeong doubtfully asked.

“Yes. A tournament called the Local Fighter is held in the kingdom’s 8 provinces and the winners will participate in the grand final at the royal palace. The prize money is 100,000 TP and 1,000,000 TP for the grand final.”

The NPC came over to tempt us. Even Cheok Jungyeong widened his

eyes at the prize money.

“1,000,000 TP...”

I could participate with Spartan’s help. Spartan recently awakened another authority called teleportation and I should easily win while traveling back and forth during the competition period.

“The winner will also receive a skill book related to cards.”

The shop door opened as the NPC finished speaking and a cute, childlike voice flowed in.

“Wow, this tastes so good. I’ll make sure to buy some more before we board the train later.”

The voice belonged to Aileen with Jin Seyeon beside her. Aileen held a chicken skewer while Jin Seyeon browsed the pamphlet.

“First, we’ll need to purchase some cards here.”

“Why?”

“It looks like they’ll be useful later.”

“*Hmm... Yeah?*” *Nom, nom.* Aileen finished chewing and continued.

“Are you sure the final floor is the 30th floor?”

“*Shh.* Miss Aileen, your voice is too loud.”

“Why do I need to be quiet? There’s nothing you can do even if you know.”

So they already figured that out. I stood up from my seat.

“Let’s go, Cheok Jungyeong. We’re leaving through the back door.”

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong glared at Aileen in discontent, but reluctantly stood up too. He said just one thing after we got outside.

“Why do I want to pick on that brat whenever I see her? Just seeing that hamster girl makes me irritated.”

* * *

[Essence of the Strait, Seoul, South Korea]

Yoo Yeonha immediately went back to work after leaving the tower. Her performance became faster and more accurate than ever before thanks to her new special skill, *[Thought Circuitry]*. It only took half a day to finish what used to take 2 days. Fresh ideas also kept popping up in her head.

At times, she acted as cunning and sly as a fox. At others, she seemed as bold as a tiger. Essence of the Strait firmly consolidated its position as the number 1 guild and its subsidiary companies and affiliates like SH Agency, Essential Armory, Essential Research, Essential Pharmacy, etc. also thrived as well.

“Haaa.”

She could feel the entire world watching Essence of the Strait now. Yoo Yeonha set down the newspaper with a sigh. Several magazines and newspapers lay on her desk.

[Goguk Times' Person of the Year — Yoo Yeonha]

For starters, the biggest media outlet in the world selected her as their Person of the Year. Countless magazines featured her beautiful face on their covers.

[Gyeongcheon's Top 100 Richest People in the World]

Gyeongcheon's public reputation in economics couldn't be rivaled and they also included her in their list. Essence of the Strait's stock price

skyrocketed and Yoo Yeonha legally inherited a few of her mother's real estate. Naturally, the amount of wealth she possessed became astronomical.

[Essence of the Strait's Chief Officer Aims for World Supremacy] [Yoo Yeonha, Korea's Amazoness] [Essence of the Strait, the Most Respected Guild and Corporation in the World] [How did Essence of the Strait's Global Team Capture the Hearts of Japan and Europe?]

The media busily sucked up to her, but the article she just read belonged to another category.

[Violet Times] [Featured Article VII. Fenrir, the Lotus Killer] Not long ago, the sensational news that Fenrir killed Black Lotus became talk of the town inside and outside the tower. The wolf's ferocity with a gun delivered a huge shock to us all... (Omitted)... Fenrir, known as the tower's greatest beneficiary, is currently held in check by the media and guild cartels. No hero wants to be killed by a mere gun. They don't want to degenerate into soldiers like during WWI, WWII, the Korean War, or ordinary people. They don't want to feel threatened by a magic bullet that costs a mere 200,000 won each. However, a bullet that penetrates their hearts will not be disrupted by their status or strength. At least, Fenrir's bullet won't.

The Violet Times' information agency featured an article about Fenrir. It outlined Fenrir's strengths in a detailed, yet terrifying way and ended in a sarcastic tone that presumed heroes would continue their shameful acts in fear of Fenrir.

"Tsk."

She knew about the Violet Times' anti-guild bias, but an article like this? It would definitely start a fire if there wasn't one already. Anyone would notice it on the front cover.

"Sigh..."

Fenrir became a genuine celebrity now. Thanks to his new status, his past assassinations of djinns and the fact that he had received a djinn hunting license from certain nations like the USA became publicly disclosed. Yoo Yeonha rubbed her temple as she looked over the articles on her hologram.

[Fenrir single-handedly destroyed the Salomon Djinn Cartel.] [The ultimate death sentence... his bullets can strike even from a 10 km range. Magic barriers and any type of physical defense become useless against him.] [Fenrir's longest range has been reported to be 14 km.] [Fenrir's past achievements... the traces of a monster...]

Many articles like these became popular nowadays. Not only djinns, but even heroes feared Fenrir since many acted no differently than djinns. People assumed Fenrir would also start targeting corrupt heroes once the tower concluded.

“*Ssp.*”

Yoo Yeonha presumed the same as well. If Kim Hajin held a grudge, it would be against people rather than djinns.

Tok, tok—

A knock interrupted her train of thoughts. Yoo Yeonha immediately got rid of the newspapers and threw the energy drink she'd been saving into the trash.

“Come in.”

The whole cleanup only took 2 minutes. She tidied herself and invited the guest.

Kiik—

“Team Leader Yoo Yeonha.”

“*Hmm?*”

An unexpected guest entered. Chae Nayun faintly smiled and couldn't hide her determination. She walked in and stood in front of Yoo Yeonha.

“What's up, Nayun? I thought you were in the tower.”

“I’m here to hand this in.”

Chae Nayun presented her with an envelope that read... *Leave of Absence*.

“W-What’s this?”

“It’s exactly what it looks like. I’m taking some time off.”

“Eh? Why?”

Yoo Yeonha’s question held no ulterior motives. She simply wanted to know why, but the answer sank her heart.

“I’m going to start a serious investigation.”

“Investigation?”

“Yes, about the incident involving my brother. I feel like I’ve been trying to manage everything on my own for too long. I’m thinking about asking other family members for help as well.”

Her brain froze the moment she heard those words. Even [*Thought Circuitry*] became useless. She quickly regained her senses and reached a conclusion.

The Chae Family hid Chae Jinyoon’s body because it contained evidence that he became a devil host. They blamed djinns for the incident and neglected to perform a thorough investigation. They probably wouldn’t help in Chae Nayun’s investigation or they might blatantly deceive her. However, only Chae Nayun could discover the entire truth as the Chae Family’s only heir and the apple of Chae Joochul’s eyes. Perhaps only she could burrow deep enough into those secrets without being threatened by Chae Joochul.

“Nayun.”

Yoo Yeonha finished thinking. She would lend her the tools Chae Nayun needed. With these tools, Chae Nayun would uncover the truth by herself. The most crucial evidence would be Chae Jinyoon’s body

hidden somewhere.

“What?”

Of course, she worried about how Chae Nayun might react after learning the truth. However, she must’ve grown strong enough to make this decision. She should be able to withstand however cruel it might be.

“I want to help.”

“*Huh?* No, I’m fine on my own—”

“I’ll lend you the best informants from Essence of the Strait. You can even use magic contracts to shut them up.”

Yoo Yeonha quickly glanced over the list of names. First was...

“Kim Hosup. He’s the most valuable agent in this day and age where technology is everything.”

His annual salary alone amounted to 50 billion won. He also received other bonuses like games and anime before they came out in the market. Kim Hosup truly served as the foundation of Falling Blossom. Still, Yoo Yeonha didn’t spare a single thought before handing him over.

* * *

[The Train to the 26th Floor]

We passed the 22nd and the 23rd floors. Honestly, we didn’t even know since the 5 of us went to my waiting room instead of staying in the train compartment.

“How come Hajin’s waiting room feels so comfy?” Jain asked in a drowsy voice as she lay on my specially crafted couch.

“I put in a lot of effort to decorate and improve this place.”

I explained and turned my attention towards the finished dress.

[Lv. 13 Medea's Violet Dress]

I crafted this level 13 dress from violet silk and jewels, both of which Medea loved. This masterpiece achieved level 13 solely based on its beauty with the combined help from aether's aesthetic eye, Young Dwarf's Dexterity, and stigma's magic power.

"Wow, it looks so pretty. Giving it to that crazy woman seems like such a waste."

"Well, I'll be receiving a lot for it."

"Yeah, I never imagined she would agree to give you 40% of Prestige."

I smiled at Jain and called Spartan, who flew over and sat on my shoulder. "Take me to the VIP conference room on the 15th floor."

"See you soon, Hajin."

"Be safe."

I nodded to Jain and Boss before teleporting away.

[15F, Genkelope's Vessel]

I returned to the 15th floor with the excited Medea in front of me.

"Y-You're here? I've been waiting for you." Medea smiled and nervously approached.

"Uh, yeah. Let me show you the dress first."

I displayed the dress in the air using stigma. It looked stunning even to me. A piece of art that seemed too beautiful to wear fluttered in the air. Medea became completely bewitched.

“This, this is my dress...”

“And your side of the deal?”

“Here.”

Medea handed me a piece of paper while mesmerized. This contract specified that she would hand over 40% of Prestige to me.

[Would you like to activate the contract?]

Of course, I clicked yes. *Ssk, ssk*. I heard a strange sound and looked back. There, Medea hurriedly took off her clothes to try on the dress. She seemed completely possessed and I averted my gaze. However, I still had eyes behind my head.

“Wow...”

Medea joyfully exclaimed after she finished changing. I looked back and my heart almost stopped. Indeed, she deserved to be called the enchantress from mythology. Medea looked exceptionally beautiful in my dress. It didn't overshadow her and formed a wonderful synergy instead. Her state of existence lit up like a halo.

“How is it? Am I pretty?”

I faked nonchalance and nodded.

“I love the name more than anything. Medea's Violet Dress...”

With this, the phenomenon realm isn't far away. Medea clenched her fists in joy.

“Well then, everything's taken care of, so I'll be on my way.”

“Wait a moment. Allow me to inform you of an interesting piece of news since you've bestowed such a marvelous dress to me. I reckon you've heard that someone murdered Crevon's crown prince?”

She became even more polite than before even though I had already handed her the dress. I began to feel a bit uncomfortable. Did she also expect me to make an accessory to compliment the dress?

“Yes, I’m aware.”

“The 5th princess planned it with Lü Bu.”

“...”

It surprised me, but that made sense. Only the 5th princess Araha and the treacherous hero Lü Bu possessed enough ambition to commit such a crime.

“Why are you telling me this?”

“You seem to sympathize with NPCs.”

Medea grinned.

“I’ll take that into account, but I’m almost at the 24th floor so I can’t spare the time to deal with that. I’ll take my leave now.”

“Yes, I wish you luck. Please return safely.”

Medea saw me off like a noble as she held her dress and bowed.

Chapter 231

Tower of Wish (3)

— Plucas? Already?

A voice flowed into my groggy consciousness. My eyes shot open after hearing an unexpected name. The current time read 5:45 A.M. I lay on the couch in the train's special compartment and shared senses with Spartan to keep a close eye on anything happening inside.

— Yes, it seems he's gone through the first awakening.

— *Hmm...* so we'll finally see a devil with our own eyes. It's earlier than I thought.

Kim Hakpyo spoke with his loyal subordinate, Silasen. They mentioned something about... a devil. I bit my lips. The story's 3rd phase dealt with humanoid monsters while the advent of devils and Earth's demon realm transformation belonged to the fourth and final phase. It seemed the final phase had accelerated judging from Kim Hakpyo's remark.

— Do we have a place prepared?

— Yes, he's staying in a temple we built, but he can't leave for now. It looks like he'll need more time to overcome the world's rejective force.

Silasen replied as he typed a message in the air. I peeked at it with Spartan's eyes.

[34°51'15.4" N 128°43'50.2" E]

These coordinates most likely led to the temple.

— I see.

— What do you plan to do?

— Why ask? I'll simply follow the Lord's orders.

Kim Hakpyo leaned in his chair. Their conversation ended and I cut off my senses with Spartan.

“*Hmm...*”

I swallowed a sigh and pondered. The first devil already manifested and I knew its location. I had to kill it with the god-slaying Misteltein bullet.

However, one thing worried me. Would a single bullet be enough to kill him? The Desert Eagle became extremely powerful with all its upgrades, but the opponent was a devil and I had limited bullets. I took out the Book of Truth after thinking about it.

[The god-slaying bullet will be able to extinguish the rank 50 devil Plucas if his physical condition falls below 15%. This percentage will rise by 5% per streak of stigma spent on the bullet.]

The Book of Truth answered my question. At my full power, I would need Plucas' physical functions to fall below 35% to kill him. It would have to fall below 50% if I used overclock and converted my life force into stigma. I understood why a devil couldn't be extinguished so easily. To devils, the concept of death and being extinguished differed. A dead devil could always resurrect, but completely extinguishing its existence required a very special method or Kim Suho.

“A helper...”

I needed a helper. At first, Kim Suho and Boss came to mind. However, the devils couldn't find out about Kim Suho yet. They would undoubtedly try to kill anyone who could threaten them. I had to wait until Kim Suho grew stronger, but I couldn't ask Boss either. Her magic power attribute was darkness, the worst match against devils.

“Ah.”

One individual popped up after mulling over my options. He possessed enough power to suppress a devil alone and could also safely escape if he caught their attention. I thought of Chae Joochul.

Currently, I could communicate with him through my Truth Agency. Chae Joochul would surely express interest because of the devil that descended into Chae Jinyoon. If I could get him to move...

Tiriring— Tiriring—

The train notified its passengers that 6 P.M. had arrived and the captain's cheerful voice rang out.

— Has everyone had fun? In 9 hours, we will arrive on the 24th floor! The 24th floor will be a huge desert!

The 22nd and 23rd floors consisted of a deep ocean while the 24th floor featured a desert as large as the Sahara.

— It's full of tricky monsters like scorpions, mummies, guards, Anubis, and the Sphinx. However, it also contains amazing opportunities for players! You will receive a hefty reward if you find a desert oasis!

I stood up and stretched. Sannuri would shine on a desert floor. Most horses would be useless, but not her. I knew how to locate oases and Sannuri could easily take me there. Getting the rewards should be a piece of cake.

Kiik— My bedroom door opened and Jain walked in.

“Hi, Hajin.”

She just finished bathing and sat on the couch with slightly wet hair.

“Did you hear about the 24th floor just now?”

“Yes, it's a desert.”

“Right? I wonder what the rewards are.” Jain murmured with interest. She probably wouldn’t leave the train since she detested the heat.

“It’s probably just another skill book. Most likely an ultimate skill.”

“*Mmm...* I already have one, so I guess I don’t need to go.”

I expected that and grinned.

“You’re going, right?”

“Of course, I need to fill out my ultimate skill slot.”

The time finally came.

“Oh right, did Boss finish learning all her skills?”

“Nope. She always struggles with making decisions. You remember Phiunel, right?”

“Yeah.”

“That old man gave everything he owned to Boss, but she’s still wondering what to learn.”

“*Hmm.*” I should help her pick out some skills.

“Ah, right!” Jain clapped her hands and shot up.

“Hajin, are you going to continue your mercenary work after you leave the tower?”

“Mercenary work?”

“Yep, you got several licenses to kill, so it would be a shame to waste them.”

To be more precise, I received licenses to kill djinns. They permitted

some illegal activities while killing djinns as long as those actions seemed reasonable.

“I’m not sure.”

I only killed djinns because of requests and not out of any sense of duty or anything. It didn’t make the story progress any smoother. The djinns I killed could all be considered extras that didn’t stand in the main plot’s way. The more I thought about it...

“It doesn’t sound bad.”

Why didn’t I think about it until now? I looked at the item in my inventory.

[Lv.11 Directory]

I could achieve all sorts of wonderful things with the directory and the Book of Truth.

First, I could kill any djinn who played an important role in the future. I felt confident in killing even executive ranked djinns with a single magic bullet now.

Second, I could also kill any human who would become a hindrance in the future. For example, I could assassinate the National Assembly’s corrupt members or the Hero Association’s corrupt executives. Of course, I would accomplish this under Black Lotus’ identity. Even an ordinary child would suspect me if I used a gun.

“I’ll continue killing djinns.”

At this point, killing someone with a gun or bow didn’t bother me. I calmly murdered like a machine without any feelings.

“Why are you asking all of a sudden?”

“Hm? Oh, it’s nothing much.”

Jain's tone suddenly changed. "It's just about time the Chameleon Troupe got serious."

"Serious?"

"Yep."

A few complicated settings had been added, but the Chameleon Troupe's core mission and goal hadn't changed.

"It's time to steal Pandemonium's throne."

Jain declared our original goal.

"Pandemonium?"

"Yep. We, as humans, will rule over Pandemonium. Doesn't that sound fun?"

"Will that be possible?"

"Why not? Djinn's naturally submit to those who are stronger."

Jain muttered with a dangerous smile. Then I received a message on my smartwatch.

— Jin Sahyuk has escaped.

It came from GenphaGo.

"*Huh?* How?"

— Someone helped her. We immediately issued a warrant for her arrest, but she seemed to have escaped to the 8th floor. Should we chase after her using floor teleportation?

"No, it's fine."

Floor teleportation cost 100,000 TP each time and I already achieved my original goal.

“Just prevent her from going beyond the 15th floor.”

— Yes, understood.

Jin Sahyuk should give up on climbing the tower now since she couldn't go any further.

“Good work, GenphaGo.”

* * *

[8-3F, A Famous Restaurant In Crevon]

Jin Sahyuk ran straight to Crevon's restaurant as soon as she escaped with Bell and Rumi's help. She lost weight after being detained for so long and sucked in food like a vacuum cleaner. Steak, pork chops, fried rice, spaghetti... they all tasted like godly dishes compared to the prison porridge.

“Kuaaa.”

She leaned in her chair after finishing 13 dishes in just 20 minutes. Then she happily rubbed her stomach and slammed her fist on the table when she recalled her humiliating prison life.

“Why does that guy hate me so much?”

Bell told her she had been arrested because of Kim Hajin. She almost fainted when she found out he owned the space vessel.

“You picked a fight with him first.”

“...”

She didn't have anything to say. It happened a long time ago, but she did start it. Jin Sahyuk felt wronged and chugged a glass of water.

“So, what’s your plan now? Are you going to find Kim Hajin and fight him again?” Bell asked.

Jin Sahyuk shuddered the moment she heard that. Kim Hajin objectively stood at the top of the tower. He possessed incredible strength and the authority to order NPCs and even administrators. He could be considered a king in the tower. As such, fighting him here would be impossible.

“Not inside the tower,” Jin Sahyuk murmured in a small voice.

“So you’re going to fight him outside?” Bell asked in a teasing tone.

Jin Sahyuk glared at him. She had yet to overcome the trauma from her previous defeat outside the tower. She thought it would disappear over time, but it only grew worse recently. She often experienced nightmares and her body trembled at the mere thought of him.

“You fucker.”

“*Haha.*” Bell chuckled as she cursed.

“Once, once I grow stronger... I’ll f-fight him again, so d-don’t annoy me!” Jin Sahyuk stubbornly shouted.

She planned to work hard in Crevon to strengthen her unique trait at the Upgrade Center while Kim Hajin busily climbed the tower.

“With your current mindset, I don’t think you can beat him no matter how strong you become. Look, you’re even stuttering.”

“...” Her eyes filled with resentment towards Bell.

“Think of it as punishment for all the people you’ve killed.”

Jin Sahyuk couldn’t ignore those words.

“Shouldn’t you die soon if this is punishment for what I’ve done?”

She spat at Bell, but he only smiled.

“I told you, you’ll be the one to kill me. I raised you knowing that. My punishment is raising the person who will kill me.”

“Yeah right, like you raised me.”

“*Haha.*”

Bell laughed. Then he suddenly looked behind Jin Sahyuk and his expression stiffened. This caused Jin Sahyuk to tilt her head.

“What crap are you pulling now—”

“Kim Hajin, why are you here?”

Jin Sahyuk’s body immediately froze. Her stomach churned and cold sweat appeared on her back. She politely clasped her hands and trembled. *Haa, haa, haa...* The fear engraved in her heart rose and made it hard to breathe. Her vision blurred and her head spun.

“Bell, geez! He’s just kidding, Sahyuk. No one is behind you.”

Rumi informed her too late.

“*Uweeeek!*”

Jin Sahyuk vomited everything she just ate. Even Bell felt surprised at the sight. *Uweek, uweek, uweeeek...* Jin Sahyuk gave Bell the most ferocious glare after emptying her stomach. Bell looked amazed after seeing all the tears and snot flowing down her face.

“You son of a bitch...”

“*Uh*, sorry. I didn’t know it was this bad.”

A waiter quickly arrived to clean it, but Bell simply unleashed his magic power and burnt away Jin Sahyuk’s vomit.

“I didn’t think you would be this scared. Want me to order more food?”

“Screw off, bastard. I don’t fucking need it. You motherfucking piece of shit...”

Jin Sahyuk spat out all the curse words she knew as Bell listened through it all with a smile. He suddenly raised a finger when Jin Sahyuk felt appeased.

“*Shhh!*”

“*Shh*, my ass! Try that again and I’ll fucking kill you.”

“Alright, alright. I promise I won’t do it again.”

He wanted to pinky promise, but kept that to himself since his finger would likely get chopped off.

“Fucker, bastard, son of a bitch, you crazy motherfucker.”

Jin Sahyuk crossed her arms and grumbled. It looked more like sobbing and Bell sighed as he watched her.

“Don’t get angry or scared from now on. Just lay low and continue to grow. I promised, right? My gift will become yours.”

I’ll give my gift to you. Bell demonstrated his gift and said those words to entice Jin Sahyuk. She decided to follow him for this reason.

“Just wait.”

He could only pass on his gift with one method.

“Until you can kill me.”

Clang— The restaurant door opened and a new customer walked in. Bell looked up with a smile, but his expression quickly turned cold.

“...”

“*Hah*, you think I’d fall for that again—”

Bell quickly covered her mouth. However, it seemed too late as he frowned. Rumi’s expression also darkened beside him. Sahyuk finally understood the situation. *It’s real this time. Not even Bell would pull the same trick twice in a row.* He even began to activate mass teleport and his serious attitude caused her to stiffen.

“Sahyuk.”

“...”

She faintly nodded at his serious tone. Bell looked into her eyes and continued.

“I’m kidding this time too.”

“...”

“*Pft.*”

Rumi burst out laughing and hammered the last nail in the coffin. Steam began to rise from Jin Sahyuk’s pale face.

“You two pieces of shit!”

Jin Sahyuk leaped forward like a savage beast.

* * *

[24F, Desert]

The train stopped on the 24th floor at 3 P.M. Over a hundred players remained on the train since it would remain there for a week. Jain, Boss, Cheok Jungyeong, and Jin Yohan all returned to Earth. Meanwhile, I set out to explore the desert floor.

“Let’s go.”

— *Hiing.*

I rode on Sannuri for the first time in a while. Then I took out the Book of Truth after galloping through the field of sand.

“Let’s see...”

I wanted to ask a simple question: *Is there an oasis within 10 km of my location?*

[No oasis could be found within 10 km.]

“Hmm, let’s keep going Nuri.”

— *Hiing.*

I just repeated the same thing after that. I stopped every 10 km to ask the Book of Truth and continued. After about 50 kilometers...

[An oasis has been found within 10 km of your location.] [Location...]

“There we go.”

I only spent 1.5 streaks of stigma to find an oasis with my luck. I planned on heading over when I suddenly felt several presences behind me. They felt familiar as well.

“...”

I turned around and spotted a man wearing a turban. I recognized his face and silhouette. My novel’s main character, Kim Suho, finally appeared again.

“Eh?” Kim Suho widened his eyes at me. Then he cheerfully waved.

“Hajin!”

He ran towards me while shouting as I hopped down from Sannuri. It took him less than a minute to reach me and he bashfully smiled.

“It’s been so long, Hajin.”

“Yeah.”

Perfect timing since I had something to give him too.

“Suho, I have a present for you.”

“Hajin, this is for you.”

He also had the same thought and took something out from his pocket. We momentarily paused and looked at each other. Then we laughed and I handed him my present first.

“Take this.”

“What is it?”

“A card that’s perfect for you.”

“Ah, you bought cards on the 21st floor too?”

Kim Suho accepted it without much thought, but his eyebrows twitched when he saw it.

“8, 8 star? H-Hajin, this is an 8 star card. I think you gave me the wrong one.”

“No, that’s correct. It’s for a sword. Plus, it has a light attribute, so it’s practically made for you.”

I placed my hand out.

“Now give me yours. You have a card for me too, right?”

“Huh? Oh, um, yeah but...”

Kim Suho hid the card behind his back as I asked with a faint smile.

“What are you doing?”

“Uh, it’s just... there’s too big of a difference with what you gave me...”

“It’s fine, so let me see it.”

He took a few steps back when I reached forward. He seemed extremely embarrassed from his flushed face.

“It’s fine.”

“...”

“Don’t be embarrassed and give it here.”

I’m not embarrassed. I’m just sorry. Kim Suho murmured as he handed me his card.

[Echo of Silence] [Active Card] [6 star] ○ Will apply the following effects on sharpshooting weapons. ● Silent Shot: Your weapon will not produce any sounds upon firing. ● Silence: The target’s magic power will become partially sealed.

“H-How is it?” Kim Suho nervously asked and I smiled.

“Great. It’s perfect for me.”

His tense face finally loosened. *Jiing*— A beam of light descended from the sky.

“What?”

Kim Suho and I quickly raised our weapons at the unexpected teleportation skill. However, we simply tilted our heads at the person

who appeared.

“Senior Seyeon?” Kim Suho muttered dumbfoundedly.

“Hi.”

Jin Seyeon briefly greeted him before turning towards me. Then she stared at me like I secretly hid something. After a brief moment, she held out her hand.

“Hello, Fenrir.”

“Ah, yes.”

“I’m your fan.”

“Excuse me?”

Her words surprised me. *My fan?* Jin Seyeon smiled and showed me her nickname and the community group she joined.

[JinSeyeon’sArrow] – Fenrir Club Member #3

“Fenrir Club? What’s this?”

“It’s like a fan club. A stylish, unique gunman has captured my heart.”

I felt a strange sense of incongruity from her words. What she told me consisted of half-truths and half-lies, but I couldn’t discern them. I hid my suspicions and casually asked.

“Who’s the #1 fan?”

“Ah, it’s a player by the name of CaptainBritain. Do you know who that is?”

“...” Obviously, I knew and awkwardly coughed.

Chapter 232

Individual Motion (1)

“Why are you here?” Kim Suho asked after they exchanged greetings.

“Because I saw you,” Jin Seyeon briefly replied.

“*Huh?*”

“I saw you, so I came.”

She turned towards me again. I nervously smiled and felt a bit uncomfortable.

“*Haha...*”

I found it hard to believe she was my fan, especially since I used the same excuse before. I knew about Jin Seyeon’s good nature, so it didn’t hurt to trust her.

“Are the two of you looking for an oasis?” she suddenly asked.

“Yes.”

“*Eh? Ah*, that’s right.”

Kim Suho appeared slightly flustered when Jin Seyeon spoke politely.

“*Mmm*. Then may I accompany you?”

“*Uh...*” I hesitated since I knew exactly where to find them. I didn’t mind splitting the reward with Kim Suho, but hesitated about sharing it with Jin Seyeon.

“I don’t need the reward. I simply wish to help out as a fan.”

Jin Seyeon added as if she read my mind.

“Ah, then, if that’s alright with you...”

I had no problems with that. I nodded and hopped on Sannuri. “Let’s go find the oasis.”

— *Hiing.*

“Follow me.”

I ran ahead with Sannuri and the two of them followed. It took us about 30 minutes to reach the oasis. I took a few detours on purpose while pretending to look around.

[Congratulations! You are the first to discover an oasis. The reward has been doubled!]

A giant pool of water sat in the center of the desert. It represented the origin of life here and supported many plants and animals that occasionally stopped by. We stood in front of it, so it definitely wasn’t a mirage.

[50000 TP has been awarded to Extra7 and two other players.]

“Eh? I also received 50000 TP.”

We immediately received the rewards and Jin Seyeon took out 5 bills worth 10000 TP each.

“No, that’s okay. Please keep them. The real reward is probably something else.”

I had a hunch that it couldn’t just be TP. An oasis in the middle of nowhere definitely felt suspicious. I also believed in my luck.

“Hajin, where are you going?”

“Hold on.”

I approached the oasis and placed my hand in the water. It felt cool, but I didn’t have the time to enjoy it. I activated *[Lv.8 Synthesis]*, which neared the max level of 10. Then I slowly absorbed it as the surface splattered and its volume dwindled. However, my spirit power ran out after I reduced it in half, so I added stigma’s magic power. Synthesis became much more efficient and aggressive.

“Woah...”

“Wow. You’re amazing, Fenrir. *Clap clap clap.*”

Jin Seyeon’s cheer sounded quite scripted. I compressed every drop of the water into the size of a soccer ball.

“Found it.”

An altar stood at the bottom of the oasis and a treasure chest sat on top. I approached without any hesitation. *Click*— I inserted the mystic key and turned it 180 degrees. The chest easily opened with a book and armor inside.

[Lv. 1 Ultimate Skill Acquisition Book – Complete Understanding of Spirit Power] [Lv.11 Imhotep’s Leather Armor]

* * *

[Busan, South Korea — Haeundae]

Meanwhile, Chae Nayun purchased a vacation home in Busan with the money she’d been saving along with her guild salary. She chose Busan for no particular reason because she kept suffering from headaches in Seoul. A change in environment might help, but that turned out to be wishful thinking. Even in Busan, she rarely had the time to enjoy the scenery or look after herself.

— Here is the related information.

“...”

She regularly had video calls with the diligent informants Yoo Yeonha prepared. They sent her several reports a day and she became completely occupied trying to make sense of them.

“Is this information related to that incident?”

— Yes.

Chae Nayun could see the informant’s face, but the informant couldn’t see her. She went over the reports that Kim Hosup sent.

“...”

Chae Nayun carefully examined them with every cell and neuron in her brain. She tried to make sense of the thick and complicated report, but always said the same thing in the end.

“Summarize it.”

— Yes.

The informant continued as if he expected this.

— We’ve found many suspicious details surrounding Chae Jinyoon’s murder. It’s suspicious that so many suspicious points exist...

Someone had murdered Chae Joochul’s grandson. Such a case should’ve already been resolved. However, someone quietly called it off after it caused an initial stir.

— Several conspiracy theories exist about this case.

“Conspiracy theories?”

— Yes.

Chae Nayun didn’t know because she stopped looking at the internet after that day. To be more precise, she completely cut herself off from society. After all, she immediately went away to Baekdu Mountain

after her 2nd year at Cube.

“Explain.”

— Investigators detected a demonic energy storm of high density at the murder site. A witness also confirmed the huge energy.

It broke her heart to imagine what her brother went through. He must’ve felt scared. Chae Nayun forced herself to listen. It felt gut-wrenching, but she continued.

“Right.”

She found out that much by herself, but nothing beyond that. Strangely enough, her father remained silent and even scolded her whenever she wanted to investigate the incident.

— As you know, demonic energy shares a similarity with magic power in that they both contain something called a signature. We can learn how many people were at the scene by analyzing the demonic energy at the site.

Chae Nayun also learned about this at Cube. Something about how magic power functioned like fingerprints.

— According to investigators, they only found one demonic energy signature at the scene. Nonetheless, the prosecutors concluded that a djinn group kidnapped and murdered Chae Jinyoon. Two theories explain why.

The informant slowly continued so even Chae Nayun could understand.

— The first theory: djinns murdered Chae Jinyoon. Chae Joochul officially announced this to the public, but one question remains. Djinns prefer to operate in groups, so why did they only detect one demonic energy signature?

“No, that’s wrong. It couldn’t have been a djinn group.”

Chae Nayun interrupted the informant. A djinn might've helped, but Kim Hajin certainly wasn't one. He would've given off a djinn's unpleasant aura and she would've noticed with her exceptional instincts.

“Cross that out and give me the next theory.”

— The next theory sounds even more bizarre.

“What is it? Tell me.”

One of the two theories became invalid, so the remaining one should be closer to the truth. However...

— Chae Jinyoon became a djinn. That's the theory.

Chae Nayun's heart sank the moment she heard those words.

— The theory states that Chae Jinyoon became a djinn and the association intervened to dispose of him.

Chae Nayun didn't say anything. She stopped thinking as if a plug had been pulled.

— An operation on this scale would've required several djinns. However, they only detected one demonic energy signature at the scene. Also, no signs of demonic energy could be found at the hospital where they kidnapped Chae Jinyoon.

“Don't—”

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth and interrupted. Countless words lingered in her mouth and she suppressed all the curses filled with rage.

— Pardon?

“Don't say things like that.”

She shouldn't get angry or blame the informant. He didn't even know her identity. Chae Nayun sighed.

"That's impossible, so look at things from a different angle. For example, a combined organization of humans and djinns? Something like that."

— Yes, understood.

"Okay. Good work. As for your performance-based bonus..."

Chae Nayun put in quite the effort to secure a limited edition copy of ReOrient Nox, a game released in 1992. She only managed to secure this artifact after using all her connections and paying 1.5 billion won. She sent the game data over to the informant.

"Here it is."

— *Huk!* This is... the famous Reorient Nox-chan.

"Continue your good work."

— Arigato! I'll do my best!

The call ended with the informant gasping in surprise.

"Haaa..."

Everything became silent as Chae Nayun sighed and buried herself in a chair. She couldn't properly speak from the shock.

"Why would anyone on the internet come up with such bullshit?"

That person deserves to be sued. How could anyone even imagine that my brother became a djinn? He was the most righteous in the world. Smarter, cooler, better looking, and stronger than me...

"Ha, that shit ruined my mood."

Chae Nayun turned on her computer to play an MMORPG called Leaf Story to prevent herself from growing depressed. *Pa! Pa!* However, she turned it off after only 15 minutes. Most games felt boring now after the Tower of Wish. She had more fun hunting monsters, collecting items, and leveling up in the tower. She managed to slowly live again thanks to that fun.

“Mnnn...”

Chae Nayun stretched in her seat and noticed the slip of paper on her desk. *Invitation Letter to the Love Room.*

“Hmm.”

This ticket could summon any player on Earth or in the tower. She had brought it out with her after turning it into an effective good.

“I guess it’s useless now.”

Something felt fishy about Extra7, but he used to be her teacher and also saved her life. She wanted to sincerely thank him if they ever ran into each other.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll have the chance to use it in the future.”

Chae Nayun muttered and placed the letter inside her drawer.

[1:36 A.M.]

It grew quite late as she lay in a huge bed, but her mind wouldn’t settle. *Chae Jinyoon became a djinn...* It sounded just as ridiculous when she thought about it again.

“...”

However, if that was true... in a one in a million chance that her brother became a djinn... not willingly, of course, but if someone had forcefully coerced him with his life on the line... Then maybe what Kim Hajin did was...

“No way.”

It always felt more convincing to assume Kim Hajin only pretended to have killed her brother. Kim Hajin couldn't create something like a demonic energy storm.

“Damn it.”

She muttered and shook her head. Then she picked up the bottle of sleeping pills next to her bed. *Tak, tak, tak*— She emptied it into her mouth. This amount would kill an ordinary person, but barely put a superhuman like her to sleep.

“Haaa...”

She sighed and lay in bed again. Soon, the familiar sense of drowsiness crept in.

* * *

[26F, *True Demon Realm*]

The train passed through the 21F Card Kingdom, 22F Deep Sea Abyss, 23F Crescent Moon Sea, 24F Dream-seeking Desert, 25F Bridge to the End, and finally reached its destination.

— This is the destination, [*True Demon Realm*]. Our train does not operate beyond this point.

Only 73 of the 403 rankers remained. The tower's final chapter would begin from here on out. This place became a top-ranker-only zone, so to speak.

— Please look to your right. That is the Demon Realm Tower where the demon king resides.

The captain sounded much more serious than usual, so I turned to the right as instructed. A dark fog covered the ground and the tower's silhouette stood beyond. *A tower inside a tower.*

The 26th, 27th, 28th, and 29th floors all connected with the 30th floor as the last. At the tower's peak, Kim Suho would have to decide with the final administrator.

— Ordinary attacks do not work on true demons. Only the light attribute will injure them.

I checked the Desert Eagle's attributes.

[Ice attribute 6%] [Light attribute 4%] [Darkness attribute 2%] [Fire attribute 1%]

Light attribute 4%. This meant the damage done by 25 bullets equaled 1 bullet. On a side note, I acquired the ice attribute after killing the doppelgänger with my Desert Eagle. From now on, Kim Suho would have to take the lead. I could only assist. Of course, I also had a secret weapon.

[Lv.11 Athena's Moonlight Arrow] ○ Lv.11 Light attribute Destructive Power ○ Lv.11 Refraction of Moonlight: This arrow will multiply when it is reflected under moonlight. ○ Lv.11 Armor Penetration ○ Lv.11 From Dark Moon to Crescent Moon: The amount of magic power condensed in the arrow will be amplified.

I should be able to defeat true demons with this too, but I never got the chance to add *[Remote Control]* to it like my dark ore arrows. Sure enough, I needed a whopping 1500 SP to add that option. That didn't surprise me considering the arrow's high level and incredible power. However, I shouldn't postpone it. I might miss the right timing if I waited any longer. I sighed and turned on my smartwatch.

[Lv.1 Remote Control] [1500 SP will be used. Would you like to save?]

My luck got to work as I clicked save.

[Lv.1 Remote Control is increasing...] [You have achieved Lv.4 Remote Control. Congratulations!]

“Mmm.”

I felt satisfied now. The special compartment door opened and Jain and Boss appeared.

“*Phew*. That certainly took a while. How many months did we spend here?”

Jain mumbled and sat next to me. Boss leered at her in discontent.

“Oh, Hajin. Is it true the 30th floor is the last? We only have 5 floors left?”

“Yes, but things will get challenging from here on out. You heard the captain, right?”

“Yep, it’s pretty disappointing. Why does everyone who doesn’t have the light attribute have to suffer? Is the tower favoring good guys or what?”

Jain smiled despite her grumbling.

“You don’t look very disappointed.”

“Well, no.”

“You aren’t? Then why did you decide to climb the tower?”

“*Hm?* Oh, because it looked fun. I would’ve quit halfway if it wasn’t.”

Jain smirked and Boss also sat next to me. Suddenly, Boss swung her hair.

“My hair is a mess.”

Boss muttered to herself as I thought about the Tower of Wish. As Jain said, the Tower of Wish felt fun. Players could explore a fantasy world and everyone could earn rewards based on effort, unlike other towers.

“My hair feels like a lion’s.”

“...?”

“I can’t possibly go out looking like this.”

Boss bounced her hair towards me again. The smell of her shampoo snapped me back to my senses.

“Do you want me to brush your hair?”

“*Hmm*. If you want to.”

“Okay, okay.”

I jumped to my feet and began brushing her hair. She softly sighed and lay on the sofa as I moved the aether comb. Boss genuinely enjoyed it.

“She’s so cute... Oh right, Hajin.” Jain handed me some documents.

“What are these?” I asked while brushing Boss’ hair.

“You told me you planned on hunting djinns, so I made a list of possible targets. They’re all at least team leaders and the prices on their heads are huge.”

I received the documents with one hand. As expected, the list only contained notorious executives of djinn groups.

“How did you manage to put this together?”

“I made it inside the tower. So many people here would do anything for TP, probably because they can revive even after dying.”

“Ah... Okay, thanks.” I placed the documents in my inventory.

“I’ll get rid of everyone on this list within a month.”

“That list contains 200 djinns.”

“Then I’ll make it two months.”

A thought crossed my mind as I continued to brush Boss’ hair. Hunting djinns meant I would gain their attention. Not only would I expose myself to danger, but also my family. I only had two family members in this world, Evandel and Hayang.

“*Hmm...*”

I needed to move them to a safe place before a full-scale hunt. I couldn’t rely on the association or the magic tower. It had to be a place where Evandel felt safe and comfortable. Someone suddenly popped into my head like electricity.

The person Evandel wanted to meet most, Rachel.

If possible, I wanted to tell Rachel about Evandel too. I would have to tell her someday even if Rachel didn’t want to know. How would she feel about a witch who looked just like her?

“All done.”

I tended Boss’ hair to perfection. She hesitated as if wanting more, but soon got up. I turned on the messenger and pulled up my message log with [*CaptainBritain*].

I still worried, but I already promised Evandel. Even now, she should be training hard for the day her wish would come true.

Me: Rachel.

I had to make a decision now. I sent Rachel a message and she soon replied.

CaptainBritain: Yes?

“*Huuu...*”

I took a deep breath and thought about what to say. Ultimately, I

decided to be straightforward. *In for a penny, in for a pound.*

Me: Let's meet on Earth next week.

CaptainBritain: Eh? Oh, I'm sorry. I can't. Crevon is in a dire situation right now. It's worse than the Imjin War.

“She even knows about the Imjin War?”

Several countries required Korean history as a subject these days. It became more of a common sense topic after Korea became a world power. Many also considered the Korean War one of the most important wars in history.

Me: It'll be quick.

I typed a response, but sent another one since it didn't seem like enough.

Me: I heard you're Fenrir's number 1 fan.

Chapter 233

Individual Motion (2)

Me: I heard you're Fenrir's #1 fan.

She took 5 minutes to reply after that.

CaptainBritain: What do you mean? Lol??

I could tell how nervous she felt from her text and smiled.

Me: I heard it from the Divine Archer. I'm sure you only said it to get closer to her.

I could imagine how it all went down. Rachel likely couldn't say anything to Jin Seyeon when they first met. She probably only stared out of admiration. Then she finally worked up the courage to ask Jin Seyeon for her nickname before they split. Rachel always sent long text messages despite not being able to say anything in person.

CaptainBritain: You met hero Jin Seyeon?

Me: Yes, she told me in person.

It must've shocked her since she stopped replying. I called Spartan while I waited. I needed him to go on a mission while I returned to Earth.

"Spartan."

— *Pururu.*

"You can see the handsome guy I'm thinking of, right?"

I pictured Kim Suho in my mind. Silky brown hair, clear eyes as deep as the ocean, and well-defined facial features. His appearance simply looked overwhelming.

“His name is Kim Suho. Keep an eye on him.”

— *Pururu.*

Spartan seemed reluctant, but nodded nonetheless. He matured a bit and acted more obediently now.

“Good boy. Oh, right.”

I went into the auction house just in case.

[Auction House]

My auction house grade reached the highest tier thanks to all the used items I sold (CaptainBritain was my #1 customer). However, I rarely bought items since I could simply craft them. That said...

[Search: Transparent Cape] [A total of two items have been found.]

I couldn't perform enchantments. Adding my desired magical effects to items took too much time among other things. As such, I had to buy enchanted items.

[Lv.6 Transparent Cape] [Current Bid – 11,000 TP] [Buy Now – 35,000 TP] [Time until auction ends – 3:13:23]

I clicked to buy now since I had more than enough money inside and outside the tower.

[You have purchased the Lv.6 Transparent Cape]

With my dexterity, it only took 10 minutes with a pair of scissors to make it fit Spartan. He looked quite cute with his new cape.

“Escape immediately if you're in danger, okay?”

— *Pururu.*

“Good boy.”

Next, I glanced at my messenger. Rachel still hadn’t replied, so I looked for another item in the auction house.

[Search: Special Skill Acquisition Book – Enchant] [A total of zero items have been found.]

“Geez, when is this going to appear?”

I couldn’t tell if it was rare or if someone had already bought it. This skill perfectly complemented my overgeared concept.

“Should I try rolling more dice?”

[Random Dice], the bonus skill I obtained from the black ticket, had now grown to level 6. Nowadays, I didn’t expect much from the daily dice I rolled since I didn’t lack any items at the latter half of the tower.

“Well, it doesn’t hurt to try. Please give me enchant.”

I took out 4 dice from my inventory and rolled them while thinking about the enchant skill. All four dice became skill books. Of course, the chance of receiving enchant would be incredibly low.

“*Huh?*”

I tilted my head at one of the skill books.

[Lv.3 Special Skill Acquisition Book – Four Colored Enchant]

“It worked?”

Its name sounded even better than the normal enchant.

“I just had to roll my dice? Why am I so dumb?”

[Lv.3 Four Colored Enchant] ○ 1. Reinforced Magic Infusion: You will enchant magical effects more effectively. ○ Lv.2 Four Colored Attributes: Up to 4 attributes possessed by the user may be infused into an item.

I used the skill book right away. Suddenly, the train began to slow.

— We have arrived on the 26th floor. Everyone, please be prepared.

The captain's voice rang out as I received a message.

CaptainBritain: Let's meet next week...

She sounded out of energy for some reason.

* * *

[26F, True Demon Realm]

Kim Suho got off the train as thick fog and violet earth greeted him.

"An unimaginable monster lurks here."

Kim Suho read the sign at the train station out loud.

"Hey, are you going to keep climbing?"

Yi Yeonghan asked while trembling from next to him.

"The Fermun siblings left and even Chae Nayun went back home, so why do you insist on continuing?"

The Fermuns had some family problems and left on the 24th floor saying they would return soon. They most likely left to fight the monsters currently in Italy.

"I have to keep going."

"Why? It's not like the tower will disappear if you wait. It's fine to

take some time and get stronger.”

Yi Yeonghan seemed afraid of going any further.

“Well... it’s just that...”

Kim Suho stared at the Demon King’s Tower in the distance without the slightest hint of hesitation.

“I feel like I have to climb it.”

He felt a strong urge whenever he looked at it. Perhaps it contained the reason why he came to Earth.

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“What’d you say?”

“Oi!”

A familiar voice called out to them. It turned out to be Aileen, the Human Dragon.

“You’re alone, right? Wanna come with us?”

“Um, hello? Can’t you see I’m right here?”

Slightly offended, Yi Yeonghan pointed at himself. However, Aileen only looked at Kim Suho.

“I saw you, but I didn’t think you’d climb any further for some reason.”

“No, I will.”

Yi Yeonghan grabbed Kim Suho’s arm. He wouldn’t fear anything if he

could be a part of Aileen's party. Kim Suho snickered to himself.

"I'm going with Suho. We're a set."

"Well, sure. So, are you coming with us?"

Kim Suho almost nodded when he saw Shin Jonghak glaring at him from the side.

"Ah, he's okay with it too."

Aileen pointed at Shin Jonghak and shrugged. Like she said, Shin Jonghak didn't oppose the idea. This confused Yi Yeonghan. *Shin Jonghak didn't complain about forming a party with Kim Suho? Did he get eaten by his doppelgänger?*

"Then I'd love to."

Kim Suho nodded and a system alert popped up.

[Aileen and Kids have invited you to the party.] [Would you like to accept?]

Kim Suho clicked yes and the two became party members with Jin Seyeon, Shin Jonghak, Aileen, and Yi Yongha.

"Good choice. As I thought, you know when to grab a rope. I heard you have a full light attribute."

"Yes, that's right."

"Hehehe, I like it. Kid, have you thought about joining the Temple of Justice?"

Aileen happily laughed when she heard about Kim Suho's 100% light attribute magic power.

"No, that's..."

Koong, koong, koong. A giant walked out of the train with oppressive footsteps. Aileen naturally turned towards him and furrowed her brows.

“It’s him.”

Those two words carried many meanings. Most rankers wouldn’t dare to touch this man. However, Aileen walked over to this steel giant. Cheok Jungyeong also noticed her bold approach.

“Oi.” Aileen stood in front of the man at least 60 cm taller than her.

“What do you want?”

His deep voice rang out. Aileen found it hard to look up at him, so she lifted herself with magic power. She rose to eye level with Cheok Jungyeong while standing on a fluffy cloud. He simply stared at her.

“What, you want me to headbutt you? Your skull and brain will explode at the same time.”

“Shut it. Tell me where Black Lotus is.”

Cheok Jungyeong frowned. “Black Lotus?”

“That’s right. Did you think I was interested in you?”

“Why are you asking me about him?”

“*Hah?* Do you think I’m stupid? You two belong to the same group, so hurry up and tell me before I use Spirit Speech.”

What an unreasonable woman. Did her brain stop maturing in exchange for Spirit Speech?

Cheok Jungyeong sighed and thought about it. “You’ll be able to meet him if you keep climbing the tower.”

“What?”

Aileen, Jin Seyeon, Kim Suho, and the rest all seemed interested in what he just said.

“Right, since he’s always watching all of you.”

“Us?”

“Is that a warning?”

Jin Seyeon interrupted them. It didn’t sound like a bluff. With Black Lotus’ abilities, his arrows could strike their necks at any time.

“No, that guy... I don’t know why, but he wants you lot to clear the tower.”

“Pardon?”

“What does that mean? Explain.”

“*Hmph*, stop bothering me and screw off. Especially you, damned brat.”

Cheok Jungyeong glared at Aileen.

“Brat?” Aileen’s greatest complex had to do with her height. Magic power blazed above her head, but Cheok Jungyeong only grinned and clenched his fists.

“Lady Aileen, please calm down.”

“Players have no reason to fight at this point.”

Jin Seyeon and Kim Suho stepped in front of her. Even then, Aileen continued to glare at Cheok Jungyeong for a long time before cutely snorting.

“*Hmph*, I know. Guys like him probably can’t scratch a hair on demons because they lived such dirty lives. I suggest you return to Earth if you don’t want to die.”

“Haha.”

Aileen’s honest criticism applied to most players, but Cheok Jungyeong immediately proved it false. He condensed a ball of magic power in his palm. *Guoooo*— A blue energy ball resonated in the air. Other attributes mixed with it, but its main attribute appeared to be light.

“What does this look like?”

“The heck is that?”

“Don’t get over your head, kid.”

Cheok Jungyeong put away his energy blast. Then he walked past Aileen’s party and left the train station. *Tak, tak...* He walked into the 26th floor’s forest by himself while receiving attention from numerous rankers. His back exuded heroism and confidence.

“Ah, right!”

Cheok Jungyeong suddenly shouted. His voice rang out like thunder as he turned to look at Aileen’s party one last time. He felt like he said too much about Black Lotus.

“You have to defeat me first if you want to find Black Lotus.”

“What?”

Aileen’s party interpreted his words differently. To them, his words meant even an oppressive brute like him obeyed Black Lotus. They already knew black represented the strongest color in the Chameleon Troupe. Cheok Jungyeong disappeared into the forest while Aileen’s group worried about Black Lotus keeping an eye on them.

“We should go too. Don’t worry about it.”

“Yes.”

Aileen's party stepped towards the 26th floor and took a different path than Cheok Jungyeong.

* * *

[Earth, Evandel's Underground Training Center]

I went to the underground training center as soon as I returned. Ah Hae-In paused their lesson and walked up to me. I couldn't help but ask.

"How is it?"

"She's already at the level of a 6-7 star summoning magician."

"Oh, really?"

"Yes, but that's only in summoning magic. The number of summons she can handle is only a bit less than me."

"..."

That meant Evandel could compare to a 6-7 star in terms of technique, but a 7-8 star in terms of quantity.

"That's amazing."

"It's beyond amazing. It's extraordinary, especially that wolf and tiger."

A wolf, the boss of canines, and a tiger, the boss of felines. The black-maned Fenrir acted aloof like a solitary samurai and the golden great tiger seemed imposing like the sovereign of a battlefield.

"Those two are growing stronger along with Evandel. They're at high-intermediate rank for now, but it's only a matter of time before they reach high rank."

"I see."

“I couldn’t tell back then, but it looks like you raised her well.”

“*Cough.*”

Evandel and I spent a long time together, but I didn’t think I raised her well. In my mind, her natural potential and the high class items I gave her increased her growth rate.

Ah Hae-In rubbed her chin.

“She looks like someone no matter how much I look at her.”

“Like who?”

“Rachel. I met her not too long ago.”

I smiled. Like Ah Hae-In said, they definitely looked alike. It wouldn’t be wrong to call her a miniature version of Rachel. The younger Evandel looked cuter while Rachel looked more pretty than cute.

“Evandel?”

She lay on the floor with Fenrir’s tail as a pillow, but immediately shot up when she heard me.

“*Un!* Hajin, I trained really hard! Really, really hard!

She ran into my embrace.

“I know, I heard. So I was thinking...”

I whispered into her ear. I still felt hesitant, but had to do the right thing as her guardian.

— Let’s go meet Rachel.

Evandel froze. She finally spoke a single word after a while.

“...Really?”

I nodded. Still, she looked at me with wide eyes without being able to express her feelings.

“Really, really?”

“Of course. I told you, right? I’d let you meet her if you trained hard.”

“Really, really, really?”

“Yes, but in exchange...”

I held up my index finger.

“Promise me one thing.”

* * *

[England, Merseyside]

I arrived in England with Evandel and Hayang. We toured around for a day and I taught Evandel about England’s knight culture. She ran around all excited until 11 at night.

“Evandel, are you going to sleep now?”

We returned to our hotel after an entire day of fun.

“...”

“Evandel.”

She fell asleep with Hayang in her arms. Now I had to do my job. I took out the list of djinn executives that Jain gave me. One of them lived here in Merseyside.

[England, Merseyside – Crook Levin]

Crook Levin led the Slaughtering Annihilation, a djinn group specializing in human trafficking and cannibalism. I asked the Book of Truth for his current location.

[53°32'35.5" N 3°05'34.8" W]

After receiving the coordinates, I opened the hotel window and jumped out. The height from the 15th floor didn't affect me at all. *Tak*. I lightly landed and took out the *[Dwarven Supercar]*, which I had converted into a card. I snapped my fingers and it materialized out of thin air. The huge vehicle stood out, but I also enchanted it with a magical effect.

"Convert."

I muttered and the snowmobile began to restructure itself into a motorcycle. I added this function using SP like how the Desert Eagle could change forms. Then I hopped on and activated the next enchantment.

"Dark travel."

I made this enchantment from mana stones and the essence of darkness I extracted from dark ores. My body and the golden motorcycle melted into the darkness. Our forms grew translucent like a fog as though we had become part of the darkness itself.

I stepped on the accelerator. *Chwaaa...* The motorcycle drove through the night and I reached Crook Levin's location in just 5 minutes. I arrived on the outskirts of Merseyside, at the basement of a suspicious building. Crook Levin and Slaughtering Annihilation carried out their human trafficking here.

— This guy looks delicious. Save him for later.

I transformed the Desert Eagle into a sniper rifle. I only needed a single bullet for him since no obstacles could hinder me. It didn't matter that they operated underground. I only needed to pull the trigger.

"..."

I wasn't in any danger of being found out. My gun no longer produced any sounds when firing. I pulled the trigger and the bullet shot forward in silence.

— No, no, that guy is fucking useless. Just kill...

He never finished his sentence. I didn't stop there. I shot every djinn with Crook Levin. Bullets rained from the sky and phased through the ground. My attacks defied the laws of physics and killed all of them underground before they could even react. Soon, the building's basement became empty since djinns didn't leave behind any corpses.

* * *

I visited the city with Evandel the next day. We planned on meeting Rachel at 6, so I wanted to play with her before to lessen her nerves. I planned a course that included the amusement park we couldn't go to yesterday, a 3-star Michelin restaurant, Big Ben, Buckingham Palace... We had fun touring and finally stopped at our final destination, the British Museum.

"Uwoaah!"

I didn't know Evandel liked museums so much. She ran around excitedly as I smiled and followed. I checked the time at 5:45. Only 15 minutes left until the promised time. Evandel and Rachel would soon meet in this museum.

"Huuu..."

My heart pounded the more I thought about it. I felt nervous and grabbed Evandel's hand. She also squeezed my hand with a shy smile. Then...

"Hajin?"

Someone called my name and time seemed to stop. Evandel and I both froze. I took a deep breath to calm myself. The voice that tickled my ears and that familiar perfume undoubtedly belonged to her. I just had to act natural... natural...

I slowly turned around. As expected, Rachel stood in front of us.

“Hello, Rachel.”

“Yes, it’s been a while.”

She looked at me.

“So, what did you want to talk about?”

It took her a moment to realize I held onto someone else’s hand. Her eyes naturally fell on the child next to me, who looked just like her. The child also looked up at Rachel with beautiful eyes that carried a hint of fear, but also excitement and happiness. Evandel hoped for something as they stared at each other.

Chapter 234

Individual Motion (3)

[Tower of Wish 26F, True Demon Realm]

Team Aileen and Kids found themselves lost in the *[Forest of Bewitchment]*, one of the demon realm's regions. A week had passed since they first set out on their journey, but they still remained miles away from the *[Demon King's Tower]* in the distance.

"I'll admit... I'm exhausted."

Even Aileen grew tired. Every demon they ran into felt like a boss monster. They just fought for an entire day after a pack of demons appeared.

"It certainly is difficult that only light attribute attacks work."

Jin Seyeon wiped the sweat from her forehead. They won against the 13 demons, but Shin Jonghak and Yi Yeonghan realized they couldn't overcome the limits of their attributes and returned to the *[21F – Card Kingdom]* to purchase light attribute weapons and enchant cards.

"You aren't so bad."

Only 4 members remained as Aileen looked at Kim Suho. During their last battle, Aileen contributed 50% while Kim Suho contributed 30%.

"My attribute is just suitable for fighting demons."

"It's not only matter of suitability. With your abilities, you'll be promoted to high rank in no time. No, you're already on that level. Don't you think you could probably win against that self-proclaimed master rank archer over there?"

Kim Suho slightly smiled.

“No, you’re too kind.”

“*Cough*. Anyways, Lady Aileen, where do you think Black Lotus is?”

Jin Seyeon finally decided to ask the question she had been wondering for a while now. Cheok Jungyeong said Black Lotus always kept an eye on them. However, Black Lotus hadn’t helped or attacked them yet.

“I don’t know. He’s probably watching us from somewhere.”

Aileen looked at the sky without thinking. Suddenly, she spotted an eagle flying across the demon realm. *Wow, an eagle. So eagles live in a place like this too?* Aileen continued to watch in amazement when a sudden realization struck her.

“*Huh?*”

The other members looked at the sky too after her strange reaction.

“What’s the matter?”

“Isn’t he kinda weird?”

“*Um...*”

“Look, over there.”

Jin Seyeon and Kim Suho focused on the eagle. Soon, they realized what Aileen meant. The eagle wore a strange cloak that looked man-made. Kim Suho spoke first.

“A pet bird? Doesn’t it look like he wants us to follow him?”

“You think so too?”

Kieeek— The eagle cried out as if he agreed with them.

“Look at that cloak he’s wearing. It looks better than mine... *Hmm?* Wait a minute.”

A thought crossed Aileen’s mind and she whispered in a daze.

“Does Black Lotus own a pet bird?”

“I haven’t heard any rumors like that, but that bird sure does look like he belongs to someone. It also looks like he’s wearing armor beneath that cloak. A well-made black armor.”

Jin Seyeon observed and replied to Aileen.

Aileen looked at the eagle and bit her nails.

“Black... so that means...”

“Yes, I think you’re correct, Lady Aileen.”

Jin Seyeon continued with a stern expression.

“Black Lotus is calling us.”

Everyone fell silent and blankly looked at each other. Then they nodded and began chasing the eagle.

* * *

“Am I dreaming?”

Rachel finally managed to say. She felt so surprised she suddenly spoke in English. I could also deduce one more thing from her vacant look: Rachel hadn’t forgotten about Evandel.

This wasn’t their first time meeting. Their first encounter happened a long time ago during the final week of our freshman year at Cube. Evandel still resembled an almond and suddenly hatched during the exam. She clung to Rachel right after and the first thing Evandel said back then was... *Mommy*.

“You’re not dreaming.”

I told her and signaled Evandel.

“Uuuuu...”

Evandel had been waiting forever for this moment. She stepped forward and probably summoned the most courage in her entire 4-5 years of life.

“H-He, Hello...”

Evandel placed her hands on her stomach and bowed. Rachel blinked a few times at her before turning towards me.

“Hajin, Hajin?”

“Yes?”

I tried to remain calm, but the regret flooded in. What could Rachel possibly be thinking when faced with a child who looked like her? Did I act too selfishly under the pretext of caring for Evandel without any consideration for Rachel’s feelings? However, what Rachel said next shocked me so much I forgot about all these concerns.

“Did you come back from the future?”

“Pardon?”

I became speechless and began feeling slightly guilty. I did know the future, but not anymore. From here on out, a future I didn’t know would unfold...

“Future?”

“Am I wrong? T-Then where did this child come from?”

Rachel grew all flushed as she pointed at Evandel, who continued to introduce herself.

“My name... is... Evandel...”

She recited the lines she had practiced dozens of times. I made Evandel promise one thing before we came here: to approach Rachel slowly so Rachel wouldn't feel pressured.

“*Huh?* Oh, *um...* H-Hello.”

Rachel also bowed to Evandel. Her eyes shook as though an earthquake had occurred. Evandel continued introducing herself.

“My name is, is, Evandel.”

“*Ah, um, yeah...*”

“Evandel... I'm Evandel... My friend is Yun Haeyeon. My kitty is Hayang...”

She repeated the same lines in a panic. Rachel took turns looking at Evandel and me, unsure of what to do.

“I'm Evandel, I'm...”

I should definitely tidy things up here.

“*Uh*, the thing is—”

“Princess?”

Rachel's bodyguard suddenly appeared. The tall Caucasian man bent forward and whispered in her ears.

“Yes?”

— Last night...

He muttered in English. The two seemed to calm down thanks to the bodyguard, but Evandel began to glare at him standing next to Rachel. Her show of jealousy looked quite cute.

We arrived at Buckingham Palace 20 minutes later. The royal family palace appeared just as beautiful and elegant as all the pictures and films.

“Well then.”

Rachel led us to the reception room with no one else inside. She glanced at Evandel beside me before continuing on. *Sparkle, sparkle*—Evandel looked at her with adorable eyes. Rachel couldn’t help but slightly smile. That seemed like a good sign.

“*Cough*. So the pet seed you had back then in Cube became...”

“Yes, that seed is all grown up now.”

I introduced Evandel, not as a witch, but a fairy. A witch could only be called a witch if she was raised to be one, but who could possibly call the current Evandel a witch?

“She’s absolutely not from the future.”

“...”

Rachel went silent for a moment and her face turned red as a tomato. I had no idea what she thought. Even her ears turned red. *Cough*. Rachel cleared her throat and continued.

“Right, but honestly... I find it hard to believe. How can a fairy hatch from a seed?”

I scratched my neck. It’s not that I didn’t understand her, but as Sherlock Holmes once said: *When you have eliminated the impossible, whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth.*

“There’s no other explanation.”

“No, rather than a fairy born from a seed, it’s more probable that you,

from the future... the future..."

It seemed the future theory totally hooked her. However, she couldn't finish her sentence because it sounded too absurd. I tried to direct her away from the sci-fi.

"Come on, what you're saying makes even less sense. If Evandel is from the future, then there's no doubt you're her mother, but what about the father? Who's the father?"

"Ah, Hajin, can I call you daddy now?"

"Huh?"

We both froze at Evandel's innocent remark. Only vacant stillness and a heavy silence followed. Suddenly, Rachel narrowed her eyes at me with a doubtful look. I shook my head in denial, but her cheeks flushed red again.

"No, this is... Anyways, I'm telling you the truth."

Rachel stared at me for a long time before turning to Evandel.

"You said your name was Evandel?"

Evandel had been waiting for this one question.

"Yes!"

Rachel gently smiled at her.

"Nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you too. I wanted to meet you for a long time."

She certainly kept the promise she made to me about keeping her distance and slowly approaching Rachel. She seemed all grown up now and I suddenly became emotional.

“Umm... I see. Hold on a minute.”

Rachel turned on her smartwatch and began typing on the hologram keyboard. Soon, my watch vibrated.

[I have a lot of questions, but I'll let it slide for now.]

I guess she wanted to communicate through the messenger to avoid accidentally hurting Evandel's feelings.

[Is it true you brought her here because she wanted to see me?]

[Yes, but that's not everything. Evandel's talent could save not only England, but the entire continent in the future.]

I calmly replied and Rachel's eyebrows twitched.

[My child is?]

[Your child?]

[Sorry, I mean Evandel is?]

“Hajin, what are you doing?”

“Oh, sorry. Something just came up.”

I patted Evandel on the head and typed back.

[Yes, even magician Ah Hae-In admitted Evandel would surpass her in 2-3 years. She's a summoner fairy with a never-before-seen talent.]

Evandel's creations would play a huge role in the story's third phase just around the corner. They would save hundreds, thousands, or maybe even hundreds of thousands.

“Hajin?”

“Oh, by the way, things have gotten better for your guild, right?”

I began talking, so Evandel wouldn't grow suspicious.

“Yes, everything is going well.”

The English Royal Court guild seemed to be on the rise these days thanks to the Tower of Wish. They sold TP for won, a key currency used on Earth.

Of course, half of the guild's profits went straight to England's state coffers that currently faced an economic crisis. However, Rachel invested the other half back into the Tower of Wish. She purchased more entrance tickets to increase their guild members inside.

“We were short on won and in debt just 3 years ago, but things have settled down now.”

“Mmm.”

I felt sort of weird. Originally, it should've been the dollar and not won that caused a problem.

“Oh right.”

Something crossed Rachel's mind and she texted me again.

[The djinn massacre last night. Was that you?]

I nodded and texted back.

[Yes. From now on, I plan to mop up djinns instead of monsters.]

[Isn't that too dangerous? Especially Slaughtering Annihilation. They're basically a beehive. That's why we couldn't do anything...]

“I can deal with whatever comes my way. I'm not too worried, except for this girl.”

I placed a hand on Evandel's head as Rachel looked at her and they both smiled at each other.

"I wanted to ask if you could allow her to stay here for 2-3 months."

I patted Evandel's head. As I said before, the Royal Palace served as an impenetrable fortress against djinns. It contained a myriad of magic and also possessed a certain authority.

"That's fine with me, but I'm not sure how this child would feel..."

"I'm okay with it!"

Evandel energetically replied. However, her expression turned into a frown upon realizing something.

"Oh, but then I won't get to see Haeyeon..."

"You said Haeyeon was your friend?"

Rachel kindly asked as Evandel nodded.

"Yes... but... I don't have to see her!"

She chose Rachel over her friend. *Poor Haeyeon.*

"Don't worry. We can also invite your friend here."

"Ah, r-really?"

"Of course."

I watched the mother and daughter happily chat and turned on my smartwatch. Then I skimmed over a few articles on Fenrir. Rachel and Evandel had already left the reception room by the time I accessed *[Violet Banquet]*.

"Did they go for a walk?"

I sat alone and looked at the *[Truth Agency]*. Of the numerous requests, the one from Chae Joochul stood out the most.

[●NOTIFICATION● Daehyun's Chae Joochul is awaiting your reply.]

Chae Joochul tasked me with a mission: to deliver any information regarding the existence and location of the humanoid monster. He probably planned to capture it, dissect it, and use it for research.

“Let’s see.”

Right now, I intended on offering him something different. Kim Hakpyo had mentioned the coordinates for the devil, Plucas.

[Reply from the Truth Agency] [We lack information about the humanoid monster. However, we confirmed the existence of an unidentified being from a conversation between two djinns. We are not certain it has any connections to the humanoid monster, but the djinns described it as being neither monster nor human. The location of this being is as follows...]

I attached Plucas’ location along with a sentence to provoke Chae Joochul.

[P.S. The djinns referred to that being as a devil. The devil is currently locked inside a temple and cannot escape.]

* * *

A picturesque house in perfect harmony with nature sat halfway up on Kumgang Mountain. It matched an immortal, someone who had also reached an otherworldly state of harmony with nature. Chae Joochul, the only immortal in East Asia, particularly liked this house. Even now, he became completely engrossed in Kumgang Mountain’s scenery and elegance.

[Rampaging Fenrir: The Massacre of Slaughtering Annihilation...]

Chae Joochul breezed through the Violet Times indifferently: the Tower of Wish, the humanoid monster, and Fenrir. All this sensational news only appeared ash gray to him.

“Chairman, the Truth Agency has replied.”

His secretary suddenly appeared and Chae Joochul quietly placed the newspaper down.

The Truth Agency.

Nobody knew them 5 years ago, but their name became synonymous with truth now. They hardly replied, but when they did, they always told the absolute truth. The Truth Agency had established authority over several conglomerates.

No courtesy, no reply.

Most complied with this rule, which could come off as arrogant. Even the head of Youngsun, the rank 7 conglomerate in the world, personally wrote his letter of request with poor typing skills and wrinkled hands in hopes of receiving a reply quicker.

Interestingly, such requests actually received faster replies. After the news spread, many old folks went as far as sending handwritten letters. Those at 80 years old personally grinded ink sticks and wrote letters with brushes.

“And the information?”

“It’s very detailed, but slightly different from what we expected.”

“Different how?”

The secretary began to summarize the Truth Agency’s reply.

“They didn’t find a humanoid monster, but an existence called a devil.”

“Devil?”

This word slightly aroused Chae Joochul’s curiosity. Was he simply curious or under the influence of an instinctual desire for vengeance

because of his grandson? Chae Joochul couldn't tell. He could no longer recall if he ever loved his family. He once self-deprecatingly referred to his condition as a dementia of the senses, but no longer felt regret or sadness about it. His condition still seemed hundreds of times more graceful than losing all power and falling so low as to become a legend of the past like all the other Nine Stars.

“A devil...”

Chae Joochul muttered and looked at his secretary, who knew exactly what he would ask and handed him a copy of the Truth Agency's reply. Chae Joochul studied the coordinates on the paper.

[34°51'15.4" N 128°43'50.2" E]

Whish... An icy breeze came through the window and ruffled Chae Joochul's hair and beard ever so slightly. He raised his head and looked at the scenery outside. His deep gaze contained the vast mountain and an unforeseen passion emerged within him. He didn't show any signs of excitement, but the mountains seemed to be whispering something. The devil was calling for the immortal. Chae Joochul felt stimulated for the first time in a long time.

* * *

Several djinns began carrying out illegal activities near a port in England where containers from Korea arrived.

“We've finished the cleanup.”

The djinn group, Bandits of Despair, just murdered every security guard in the dockside area.

“A-108, B-103, C-73, and D-63.”

Team leader Jeffrey pointed at 4 containers addressed to the Royal Family guild from Essential Armory.

“We'll only take these four.”

The djinns moved in sync at Jeffrey's command. First, they smashed open the sealed doors and checked the weapons inside.

"I heard Fenrir was hunting djinns recently, but nothing's happened so far. Well, we are different from those savages at Slaughtering Annihilation."

The vice team leader, Autumn, spoke. Jeffrey watched the scene without answering.

"Everyone's talking about Fenrir in the djinn community. It's so stupid, leader."

"A-108 is finished."

Fenrir's indiscriminate attacks on djinns had gone on for a week now. The entire djinn community cursed him and sent hateful messages. This phenomenon resulted from rage and fear.

"He probably can't even last a punch from leader. Nothing to be scared of."

"B-103 is finished."

Autumn, glued to Jeffrey, kept running his mouth as if to cast off his fear. He wouldn't have participated in this mission if it wasn't for Jeffrey and would've been whining by now without him.

"Oh, by the way, leader. Is it true you beat the crap out of a high-intermediate rank hero? You're amazing."

He believed Jeffrey could overpower Fenrir. Even the famous Wicked tried to scout Jeffrey.

"Humans are such weaklings..."

Autumn's chatter continued as the container doors exploded one by one.

“Those Slaughtering Annihilation guys deserved a good beating. I’m ashamed to call myself a djinn because of them. How can they fall so low as to eat human... flesh...?”

A small change occurred at the dockside and only darkness remained.

Chapter 235

Third Phase (1)

I stood at a harbor with a salty smell in the early morning. Fierce screams and magic power clashed here just 5 minutes ago, but now it grew quiet.

“Haaa...”

I took a deep breath to calm the spirit power coursing through my body.

The ocean wave brushed against the harbor and the cool wind caressed me. Soon, my beating heart slowed and I opened my eyes.

No one remained in the empty harbor after I killed the dozens of djinns.

“It deserves to be called an ultimate skill, that’s for sure.”

I muttered in surprise and checked the ultimate skill’s description again.

[Lv.2 Ultimate Skill – Complete Understanding of Spirit Power] ○ 1. Limit Break: Upon activation, all skills will become level 11 for 5 minutes. ○ 2. Ultimate Peak: Upon activation, the efficiency and realm of your spirit power will reach its peak for 5 minutes. ○ 3. Passive Purification: Will purify your spirit power as time passes. Cooldown: 3 days

Like my unique skill, my ultimate skill was an advanced self-buffing skill known as an avatar type. Fortunately, its side effects felt far less intense than my unique skill. I became flawless in both offense and defense after activating it. It gave me an unlimited amount of spirit power and left no holes in my defense since Lv.11 *[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]* could absorb every attack. My offense became equally overpowered. With a strengthened *[Algorithm]*, the

destructive power of my bullets increased exponentially and the spirit power also reinforced aether's functions.

I didn't fuse spirit power with magic power like most players. This ultimate skill especially benefitted me since I relied on skills and aether. I didn't even come up with it either. My luck must've had something to do with it again.

Wiing—

My smartwatch vibrated with a video call from Yoo Yeonha.

— Hello?

Her face popped up on the hologram screen when I picked up.

“Yo, it's been a while. What's up?”

— Where are you? It's kinda dark.

“Me? I'm at a harbor.”

I raised my smartwatch and showed her the scenery.

“I just stopped some djinns from robbing Essential Armory's cargo.”

— Really?

“Yep, do you know Jeffrey?”

— Yes, I do. The association has a bounty for him. Isn't he a brown rank djinn?

The Hero Association assigned ranks to djinns as well. A brown rank djinn's bounty should be worth around 1-2 billion won. Brown ranks usually equaled high-intermediate rank, grade 3-4 heroes in strength. That aside, I found it surprising Yoo Yeonha knew him. After all, hundreds of brown rank djinns existed.

— What about Jeffrey?

Yoo Yeonha's expression turned serious after I smiled without answering.

— J-Jeffrey is there too?

I shook my head.

“Not anymore.”

— You killed him?

“Yep.”

—...

Yoo Yeonha stared at me with a dumbstruck expression. I scratched the back of my head and changed the topic.

“So, why'd you call?”

— Oh right.

Yoo Yeonha nodded.

— It's about what you asked before. About the humanoid monster.

“Oh, did you hear something?”

Information about the humanoid monster couldn't easily be found even with the Book of Truth, so I asked Yoo Yeonha to look into rumors.

— Yes, it seems something similar has been found in Pandemonium.

Yoo Yeonha sent me a picture with a hard-to-identify silhouette. However, anyone could tell it didn't belong to a human with its tall

height and thin body.

“Is this a picture or a video?”

— It’s a paused video.

“Play it.”

The video resumed with something running on the ground. Even the Thousand-Mile Eyes couldn’t capture its speed.

“Can you slow it down?”

— This is already 0.01x speed.

“...0.01x?”

— Yes.

That served as enough of a clue for me. Only one monster could casually display such speed. Kurukuru, a humanoid monster that resembled a praying mantis. It had glowing scythes for front legs and a pair of lightning-speed wings. It looked more like an insect than a human, but undoubtedly possessed intelligence. One couldn’t look down on it just because it looked like an insect.

Its wings could exhibit hypersonic speed and its front legs could sever any physical matter. No one could match Kurukuru in this world when it came to assassination and speed. Frankly speaking, he could be called the third phase’s middle boss.

— This footage came from yesterday. This creature supposedly killed dozens of djinns in Pandemonium before moving south.

“Thanks.”

— I’m also wondering about something.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly turned serious and rested her chin on her hands.

“What are you doing?”

— Do you think humanoid monsters exist?

“*Huh?* Oh, well, I’m sure we’re hearing about them because they do.”

I felt more surprised about Kurukuru being in Pandemonium. *Did it appear first because of its speed?*

— No, that’s not what I meant. I think the creature from the video might be a new type of djinn.

“It’s not that, so don’t worry.”

— No, it’s dangerous to rule out the possibility. Think about it. As you go up the Tower of Wish, demons begin to look more non-human. We might be seeing something similar. Our response should change depending on whether we’re facing djinns or monsters...

I yawned as I listened to Yoo Yeonha’s theory. Smart people felt tiresome sometimes. They didn’t believe things easily and tried to extrapolate other possibilities from the smallest details.

— What do you think?

“You’re definitely wrong.”

I firmly answered. Yoo Yeonha pouted, but I knew for a fact. Later, djinns and humans would join hands to defeat humanoid monsters, so they couldn’t be a new type of djinn.

“I’m right.”

— That’s what you always say.

Yoo Yeonha didn’t seem like she would give up any time soon. Luckily, I could persuade her.

“Did you forget I used to be rank 1 in theory?”

— Ah.

Winning a Nobel Prize will be a piece of cake if Kim Hajin remains in academia.

She recalled the words of their Cube professors and went quiet.

“You might not know something I know, but there’s no way I don’t know what you know.”

— Then you should’ve looked into it yourself.

Yoo Yeonha crossed her arms and grumbled.

“Just don’t argue with me if I say I’m sure about something. I wouldn’t say anything harmful to my partner, would I?”

—...

Yoo Yeonha silently stared at me before nodding.

— Fine. I’m hanging up now. I have work to do.

She hung up just like that. I sent her a message while smirking.

[Continue looking into this matter. I’m trusting you.]

She quickly replied.

[I will, but don’t trust me too much. I’m not a kind or trustworthy person.]

Haha. Is she sulking? Maybe I should make her a set of pajamas later. I thought to myself when my smartwatch suddenly rang again.

[★Ready★] [Chameleon Troupe, gather!] [Let’s devour Pandemonium♡]

Jain alerted the Chameleon Troupe that their wish to conquer Pandemonium would soon begin.

[Busan – Chae Nayun’s Mansion]

Recently, Chae Nayun lived a life buried under documents. She never read even in Cube, but now she tried her best to understand all sorts of complicated texts and realized something. What seemed impossible became possible if she put enough effort. She felt like she had grown smarter after all this reading.

— The case files will be sent through Violet Banquet’s secure system.

“Okay.”

However, that feeling only briefly lasted. Every time she felt like she understood something, a new piece of information arrived and complicated the matter.

— This case file contains key information regarding the incident.

Kim Hosup managed to hack a grade 1 confidential document labeled the Chae Jinyoon Case File. He spent an entire month hiding his tracks to obtain his reward, ReOrient Nox.

“Y-Yeah, good job.”

Chae Nayun accessed her Violet Banquet account, the only platform that couldn’t be hacked. From there, she received the case file that Kim Hosup sent.

“Huuu. I guess I’m not sleeping tonight either.”

Chae Nayun muttered as she looked at the document.

[Chae Jinyoon Case File]

Her heart pounded as she laid eyes on it. To think she asked someone to hack the association’s database. The past her could never have imagined such a thing. She never had someone like Kim Hosup in the

past, but her father also would've found out and immediately stopped her.

“...”

[Download complete.]

She couldn't help but feel afraid of the document. *Will I see oppa's corpse? Am I going to see the detailed report of what happened that day? Will I be fine after that?*

“No.”

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth. *In for a penny, in for a pound.* She would take the risks even if this opened Pandora's box. It had to be done no matter how painful the results.

“Huu.”

She took a breath to collect herself and slowly opened the file.

“Hmm?”

Her determination disappeared as she checked it. Only tiny black letters filled the white pages. She had never read such complicated jargon before and expected a summarized report like in the movies. The actual case file left her dumbstruck.

“...”

It took a moment to snap out of her stupor. Then she slowly turned the 239 pages for a picture. Page 1... 33... 48... 63... 129... Finally, she came across the picture on page 169. It showed Chae Jinyoon's corpse.

“Ah...”

Her heart dropped when she saw it. Tears and curses surged from within. Chae Jinyoon's corpse didn't even have a face. Nothing existed

above the neck. She finally realized why her father and grandfather refused to show her the corpse. Chae Nayun bit her lips and felt an insurmountable rage rising from the depths of her heart. She clenched her fist until they bled. *Why? Why did it have to be so cruel?*

“Eh?”

However, she felt something off. A strange feeling flickered in her while looking at the picture.

“This...”

Her intuition told her this corpse didn’t belong to Chae Jinyoon. It couldn’t be Chae Jinyoon. It looked too different and unfamiliar. She examined it closely to confirm her suspicions.

“Wait.”

Soon, she discovered the source of her strange feeling. This corpse didn’t have something that should be there if it really did belong to Chae Jinyoon.

About 15 years ago, Chae Jinyoon suffered an injury while protecting her from a sudden monster attack. While Chae Nayun cried and apologized, Chae Jinyoon said his injury would only leave behind a scar of honor. However, this corpse didn’t have that scar.

— Is something wrong? If the information isn’t right, then...

Chae Nayun hung up. She couldn’t listen to anyone else right now. Her heart wildly beat and a piercing headache struck her.

“This...”

Chae Nayun murmured as she stared at the picture.

“This isn’t oppa.”

She could determine that much. Someone had switched the corpse.

[Central Asia, Pandemonium]

This lawless zone had no rules or regulations. Only djinns who gave up being human inhabited this wilderness. The Chameleon Troupe arrived in this place imposingly. Other than Cheok Jungyeong, who busily explored the tower, every member showed up.

“...”

Boss stood in front of all the members. However, she didn't say anything. Jain would explain the plan. Boss only set the mood.

“It's nice to see you all.”

Boss spoke and I looked at her hand. She wore a ring on her left pinky.

“*Cough.*”

She felt my gaze and hid her left hand.

“Today, we will take the first step to achieve our goal.”

Boss began her speech.

“We will settle the humiliation we suffered for dozens of years. Pandemonium will be ours and the victims' screams will become a requiem for the previous boss. We will regain what once belonged to us!”

I didn't know, but the previous boss played a huge role in Pandemonium's creation. Satan's Servants seemed to have stolen control after his death.

“Everyone, thank you for believing in me and following me until now.”

Boss finished her speech. She didn't say much, but she had a certain charm for grabbing the masses' attention. The other members looked at Boss with touched expressions.

"Now, I'll brief all of you on the plan." Jain stepped out and continued.

"As you all know, the de facto leader of Pandemonium is Satan's Servants. After the former boss' death, they held onto Pandemonium's sovereignty."

Jain's voice resounded.

"However, djinns will be djinns in the end. They don't like anyone sitting on their heads, so I have made some preparations. Like I always say, war is 90% planning and 10% execution. Pandemonium's djinns should be happily killing each other right now."

Sparking fire, leaking information, spreading rumors, persuading, betraying, etc. With her gift, Jain already finished all the necessary preparations.

"Back to the main point. Our goal today is Pandemonium's eastern region."

Satan's Servants broadly divided Pandemonium into four cardinal regions. Furthermore, they placed djinn groups that swore loyalty to them in charge of each region. These groups further split their territory to those who swore loyalty to them. As a result, Satan's Servants' influence became especially weak in the eastern region.

"We will take over a quarter of Pandemonium in one day."

Jain announced as if the Chameleon Troupe had already won. She never started a fight that couldn't be won. Instead, she always won first and then started the fight. These simple tactics gave Jain confidence in all her decisions.

Everything went according to Jain's plan.

— We notified the djinn groups that agreed to cooperate with us. Silver, turquoise, and green will join Dark Moon Society, which holds influence in the eastern region, to destroy the djinn group, Proclamation of Darkness.

The war began with the help of Dark Moon Society. It seemed they fully defected to Chameleon Troupe's side over the past several years after the incident with me.

Seat of silver, Kaita. Seat of turquoise, Setryn. Seat of green, Jin Yohan.

The above three joined Dark Moon Society to demolish the groups that favored Satan's Servants.

— Violet, indigo, and blue should create a scene in the west while the plan is in motion in the east. You only have to catch their attention.

Seat of violet, Droon. Seat of indigo, Yoo Kyunghwan. Seat of blue, Khalifa.

The above three began a huge attack with djinns we hired beforehand. They destroyed pubs, brothels, casinos, and other huge sources of income. Then subordinates of Satan's Servants arrived to suppress them. Droon, Yoo Kyunghwan, and Khalifa perfectly caught the attention of Pandemonium's upper echelon.

— It's only a matter of time before they find out what we're up to. Satan's Servants rule this place, so they'll find out we're after the eastern region. That's when Boss and black will come out.

Boss and I would snipe the djinns. I shot down the djinns flooding to the eastern region with my arrows. [*Temujin's Bow Blessed by Horus*] and the [*Lv.11 Athena's Moonlight Arrow*] perfectly countered djinns. A white flame engulfed them until they scattered into dust as soon as the arrow touched even a single hair.

— We should take care of this in half a day. No, we have to finish it during that time. The eastern djinns hold lots of grudges against

Satan's Servants. They think the western region is favored.

Jain set the time limit to half a day. As she said, the fight reached its climax around that time.

— Black's role is the most important. Executive djinns are surprisingly scared for their lives. They'll be too scared to come out if you shoot them from their blind spots, so start powerfully.

Executive djinns refused to appear and the eastern region's ordinary djinns happily joined us to rebel. Of course, Dark Moon Society led them.

— We won't have much else to do if all goes according to plan. We'll have won the fight before it even begins. Satan's Servants will have no choice but to give up the eastern region no matter how powerful they are.

Time passed and the sun began to set. We started at dawn and it now came to a close.

"Well done."

Boss stared at me under the sunset. Her bitterness and resentment seemed to have lessened after we completed a part of our goal today.

"You too, Boss."

It deeply moved me as well. [*The Chameleon Troupe conquered a part of Pandemonium.*] It felt like just yesterday that I wrote this sentence in my novel. Now, I personally participated in this historical battle. Of course, we had only accomplished one-fourth.

Suddenly...

"...?"

The world slowed as bullet time had activated on its own. My senses captured the movement of the wind and I could see something crawling out of the ground. *Crunch!* Dirt and pebbles shot up as a

strange creature rose.

— *Kurururu, kurururu.*

A bipedal insect emerged. *Kurururu, kurururu.* I didn't know why it appeared now, but the creature growled its name and shot towards Boss. It left behind a clear afterimage and transformed into a beam of light. A sonic boom erupted from behind it.

Kwaaaa...

Boss stared at me as the creature charged forward and I couldn't react either. The 2 meter insect traveled faster than a ballistic missile. In the blink of an eye, Kurukuru arrived in front of Boss and raised its scythe-like front leg.

Kiiiik...

The chilling sound of Kurukuru's scythe piercing Boss' heart rang out. Kurukuru moved fast even in bullet time and Boss couldn't react. No one could react to it. I designed its blade so it couldn't be avoided.

An alert popped up in front of me.

[Kurukuru – A humanoid monster that can reach hypersonic speed for 3 seconds by drawing out its internal energy to the limits.] [Settings Change – Its strength has been modified to 9.2/10 as a boss-level assassin in the third phase.] [Settings Change – Kurukuru's intelligence has been increased and it can make deals with humans and djinns.]

I stared at the settings changes and used time reversal before Boss' body split apart any further.

The time that passed reversed like the speed of light.

Boss returned from the dead, Kurukuru hadn't arrived from underground, and the sunlight still warmly shone on us. I returned to the past by 3 minutes. Immediately, I looked to the side.

“Boss.”

“Hmm?”

Thankfully, she still stood next to me. However, my heart beat like crazy and my breathing refused to calm.

“What’s wrong?”

I grabbed her wrist.

“W-What? K-Kim Hajin? Why are you grabbing my h-hand—”

Boss spoke in a fluster, but we had to get away as soon as possible.

Chapter 236

The First Death

I grabbed Boss' wrist.

"W-What? K-Kim Hajin? Why are you grabbing my h-hand—"

Boss seemed flustered, but I didn't care. We needed to escape now.

I jumped to a nearby roof with her.

"Kim Hajin!"

Boss shook my hand off after our flawless landing. She looked more shy than angry.

"You should at least explain."

"Boss, transform."

"What?"

We didn't have much time left. I urged her to use her Yaksha transformation.

"Hurry!"

The difference before and after her transformation was huge. Her physical strength doubled at least and her magic power more than tripled. Not even Kurukuru could take Boss out with a single attack in her transformed state.

"..."

Boss tilted her head, but complied nonetheless. Her eyes turned red and the shadow armor around her thickened. Only a minute had passed.

Rumble...

However, I suddenly felt a huge vibration from the ground. Soon, bullet time activated again. Did aether's transcendent senses somehow feel how the flow of time had changed? It happened much earlier than before and I seemed to have underestimated Kurukuru.

Kwaaaaa!

Something shot up from beneath the building and pierced through the center as it leaped up. It severed the steel frames, destroyed the stairwells, passed through dozens of floors, and instantly reached the rooftop.

Debris flew in the air, but floated without scattering. Only Kurukuru freely moved in this world where time stopped.

However, the circumstances had changed this time. Boss, in her Yaksha state, could read its movements. She unleashed her magic power to obstruct Kurukuru and crush the insect charging at her.

“...?”

Kurukuru's movements seemed off this time. It attacked to the left towards me instead of Boss. It had switched its target in a split moment.

Fear struck me and I quickly tried to use my ultimate skill, but Kurukuru's scythe reached me before I could even bring out any spirit power.

This looks bad.

Aether formed a barrier in front of me. However, Kurukuru's scythe simply phased through it. Its glowing scythe only aimed at the physical body. This lethal weapon, combined with its lightning speed,

couldn't be avoided or stopped.

Crack—

Soon, its blade pierced my heart. Time flowed slowly, but the pain arrived fast. I felt it even in the most remote corners of my body. I fell back and my consciousness began to fade. The sounds of the world drifted away as I collapsed with open eyes.

The last thing I saw was Boss aiming her magic power at Kurukuru.

* * *

[England — Buckingham Palace]

Meanwhile, Rachel looked at the child on her lap. *Zzzzz...*

Just where did this child come from? She thought to herself as she stared at Evandel sound asleep.

Kim Hajin said Evandel came from a seed and also explained why she looked like Rachel. She perceived Rachel as her mother because she had been fed Rachel's blood as a seed.

Of course, Rachel found it difficult to believe. She also resented the fact that he only revealed this child to her now after 4 years.

"Unnn..."

None of that mattered anymore. Rachel felt calm and could set aside any responsibilities or burdens with this child next to her. Just looking at her brought a sense of affection that emerged from deep within Rachel's heart. This feeling must be happiness.

Rachel smiled and stroked Evandel's forehead. The child's soft skin, golden hair, pretty eyelashes, and sparkling blue eyes... everything about her felt lovely to Rachel.

"People will think she's your daughter."

Rachel raised her head towards the familiar voice. Ah Hae-In smiled and continued.

“Then is the father Kim Hajin?”

“*Cough.*”

Rachel couldn't answer. That would be the case if she had to pick a mother and father, but she didn't want to go that far. Maybe she could take their current relationship a bit further. Ah Hae-In cut off her excessive thinking.

“I assume you've heard from Kim Hajin.”

“Yes, I heard you were in charge of Evandel's training.”

She felt surprised when she first heard about it from Kim Hajin, but it only felt natural after she witnessed Evandel's talent. Rachel caressed Evandel's cheek.

“Please, don't be too harsh on her.”

“*Huhu.* Harsh? You don't know how devious that child can be.”

“Pardon?”

“She's probably wide awake right now. She's pretending to be asleep so she can stay by your side as long as possible.”

Rachel lowered her gaze towards Evandel. Next to Evandel's tightly shut eyes, a stream of cold sweat fell from her temple.

“...”

Rachel pretended not to notice and raised her head.

“You see? She's awake.”

“No, she's sound asleep.”

Rachel shook her head as Ah Hae-In narrowed her eyes.

“You’re becoming more like a child yourself.”

Haaa... Ah Hae-In’s sigh lengthened. Rachel stroked Evandel’s head and looked at the clock. She would have to go to work soon at eight.

“Going to work?”

“Yes.”

Rachel chose to travel between Crevon and Earth every day to be with Evandel. Monsters and calamities usually appeared at late hours, so she stayed in Crevon from 8 P.M. to 8 A.M.

“How’s the situation in Crevon?”

“It’s not much better.”

Rachel sighed. She worried just as much about Crevon as she did about Evandel. The ordeal would only be over after they defeated all 9 calamities and shut the calamity door.

“No, actually, things did improve a bit.”

They did experience one positive change.

“Is it about the new knight you mentioned before?”

“Yes.”

Rachel nodded. A new player recently joined the royal knights.

“She specializes in large-scale warfare.”

Rachel smiled at the thought of her new junior who seemed to be twice as strong as any other knight in the order.

“She would’ve easily become a ranker if she continued climbing the tower. I’m thankful for her.”

Becoming Crevon’s knight held several advantages, but also disadvantages as well. The royal family had them sign a contract with this specific clause: *I will not abandon Crevon to climb the tower.*

“Mmm, and what did you say her name was?”

Ah Hae-In asked and Rachel lightly replied.

“It’s Shin Jahyuk.”

* * *

[8-3F Crevon, Atalos Royal Palace]

“Ah-choo!”

Jin Sahyuk sneezed while drinking her tea. *Is someone talking about me?* She wiped her nose and picked up her teacup.

“So it’s true Kim Hajin attacked Pandemonium?”

“Yes, that’s the rumor, Knight Shin Jahyuk. The news is completely fresh, only 3 hours old.”

Bell answered sarcastically, but Jin Sahyuk kept her cool. Sarcasm and teasing barely bothered her anymore after suffering all that shame and humiliation. Letting her pride go was hard at first, but easy the second time.

“Sahyuk, how’s your TP situation?”

“I’m almost there.”

She currently had a total of 100,000 TP. Just a little more and she could finally enhance her unique trait.

“You’re not gonna learn any skills?”

“I can’t keep my ultimate or unique skill since I died once already.”

Jin Sahyuk also thought skills other than ultimate and unique skills seemed boring, so she didn’t learn any.

“*Mmm*. That’s true. You and Rumi each died once.”

Bell nodded and drank his tea.

“Wow, this tastes good.”

The royal family’s Lv. 5 black tea tasted surprisingly sweet.

“I’m gonna take some of these with me. *Huh?*”

Bell suddenly felt a strange sensation like an electric jolt through his body. It didn’t come from his intuition, but his [*Basic Skill – Tracking*]. His expression immediately turned serious.

“What?” Jin Sahyuk asked with a teacup in her hand.

“Sahyuk.”

When she heard his solemn voice, she immediately thought, *This bastard is trying to fool me again.*

“Don’t you dare...”

Jin Sahyuk began, but still glanced back. Of course, Kim Hajin hadn’t appeared. She also checked the windows to be certain, but everything remained the same. Her face distorted into a devilish look.

“Didn’t I tell you not to pull any tricks on me?”

“You still have that bead I gave you last time, right?”

However, Bell still sounded serious. Only then did Jin Sahyuk realize he wasn't joking. She crossed her arms and asked.

"What bead?"

"That thing I gave you before."

"What, the cat bell?"

"Yeah, that."

[Lv.6 Cat Bell]

This item allowed its owner to monitor a target's physical state no matter their location. The bell would glow blue if her target, Kim Hajin, showed up. It would also glow red if the target's condition became dire. Bell got this whopping Lv.6 item for her so she could sleep in peace.

"Yeah, what about it?"

"Take it out."

Jin Sayhuk frowned, but did as he said. The bell, originally transparent, had turned black. Bell realized what happened the moment he saw it. It bewildered him at the same time. He hadn't expected this at all. *Why, why so suddenly?*

"What the heck. It's all black now. What does that mean?"

It hadn't turned red or blue. Bell replied to Jin Sayhuk in a daze.

"I think... Kim Hajin just died."

"Wha, what?"

Jin Sahyuk felt even more surprised. Her fingers around the teacup loosened and the cup spun in circles as it fell to the floor. *Clang*— The fragments and the tea inside splattered all over the carpet, but both of

them couldn't care less.

“Wha— What the hell are you talking about?”

Jin Sahyuk glared at him and continued.

“Why, why would that son of a bitch die?”

She found it impossible. Someone strong enough to finish her with one punch had died? That didn't make any sense. If he died, Jin Sahyuk believed it would be by her hands. So how?

“Are you messing with me again?”

“No, I'm telling the truth this time. Look, the bell turned black.”

“Wha— explain so it makes sense. W-Why is that bastard suddenly dead?”

Jin Sahyuk shouted, but Bell didn't answer. He hadn't expected this either. Kim Hajin didn't look like the type to die so easily.

“Fuck!”

Jin Sahyuk swore as she opened the player shop and quickly purchased an *[Earth Return Ticket]*. Did he really die? If so, then who killed him? Which bastard killed her sworn enemy? Jin Sahyuk tore the ticket in a hurry to find out.

* * *

[Essence of the Strait, Chief Strategic Officer]

Yoo Yeonha worked as usual on a peaceful afternoon when she suddenly received a video call.

— It's not oppa.

Chae Nayun immediately said when she picked up the call. Yoo

Yeonha's heart sank when she heard those words.

"Sorry?"

However, she quickly regained her calm. Chae Nayun progressed much faster than Yoo Yeonha had expected. Naturally, Chae Nayun would recognize (or not recognize) her brother.

"What are you talking ab..."

— I saw the case file. The corpse in the picture wasn't oppa. Someone replaced his body.

"No way."

— It's true. Trust me. I'm confident.

Yoo Yeonha widened her eyes to appear surprised, but already knew all this. Kim Joongho, the forensic pathologist in charge of the case, had replaced Chae Jinyoon's body. Chae Shinhyuk had ordered him to cremate Chae Jinyoon's body, but he kept it hidden instead.

— The forensic pathologist in charge of this case was someone named Kim Joongho, but I can't figure out his location.

Yoo Yeonha had tried locating Kim Joongho too, but he went completely off the radar after the case. The informants she sent after him had all been annihilated by Chae Joochul.

"Really?"

— Yeah, he disappeared after my brother's case. Even Kim Hosup couldn't find him, so I plan on looking for him myself.

Even Chae Joochul wouldn't be so heartless as to kill his only granddaughter. Perhaps only Chae Nayun could find this pathologist.

"Can you do it?"

— Yeah, his last known location is somewhere near the Himalayas. I think he's hiding in the mountains. I already purchased a portal ticket.

“...”

— Once I leave, I probably won't be in touch for a while. I called to tell you that. *Huhu*.

Chae Nayun smiled bravely on the screen, but seeing her friend like that only gave Yoo Yeonha a heavy heart.

— *Ah*, it's my turn. I gotta go. Bye.

Chae Nayun hung up before Yoo Yeonha could say anything. She could only see the portal to India through the screen.

“*Haaa...*”

Yoo Yeonha deeply sighed and stared at the blank screen.

* * *

[Pandemonium, Eastern Region]

A brief brawl took place in front of the sunset. It only lasted a minute or so. The battle of speed ended and Boss stood in a daze with an insect arm in her hand. She appeared victorious, but the arm didn't feel like a trophy. She managed to sever one of its arms, but couldn't finish it off.

“...”

She turned towards the crumbling building. The setting sun's glow had already faded and a man lay on the road in darkness. However, he could no longer be considered alive. Everything from his shoulders to his pelvis had been cut in half, including his heart. He had undoubtedly turned into a corpse.

“...”

However, she couldn't give up hope. She couldn't accept that he became like that. That he had died. It all happened in an instant and everything still felt like a dream.

She walked with faltering steps. Her legs didn't move as she intended. She almost fell multiple times, but finally managed to arrive in front of him.

Reality looked even crueler up close. His body had been split in half and the blood had already drained from his body. She looked at him in a daze and collapsed.

Nothing came to mind. Only her hand moved on its own. Her left hand with the ring he gave her touched his forehead.

His skin felt cold, so cold. This absolute coldness scared her. Her fear transformed into a pain that tore her heart apart.

“Ah...”

She trembled in agony. *Is the past repeating itself? Losing someone only to realize he was... precious to me?*

Suddenly, her vision blurred. Only then did she realize the tears streaming down her face.

Chapter 237

Third Phase (2)

Boss wiped her eyes as the coldness spread through her fingertips. She became confused at her tears and could still see Kim Hajin beyond her hands. He had already died, but it didn't feel real because it happened so quickly. However, she knew it had actually happened because she experienced this feeling before when the previous boss died.

“...”

Suddenly, regret overcame her.

It didn't have to be today. It could've been tomorrow or the day after, but I insisted on today. I pulled Kim Hajin into the Chameleon Troupe and thought of him as nothing but a tool to avenge the previous boss. Is this my punishment?

Something inside her crumbled. The emotions she held back finally burst. She could no longer hold back the torrent. She buried her face in his cold chest as dried blood touched her forehead. Scenes that couldn't return flashed before her.

Times Kim Hajin joked with me, his affectionate combing, the words he said as he gave me a ring, the days his intellect and maturity calmed me... He protected me, but I couldn't protect him. I, his boss, couldn't do anything to help him.

She closed her eyes and cried in a pitch-black world, trembling without a sound.

“Mmm.”

A strange voice rang out in her distress.

“Boss?”

A familiar voice that could no longer be heard. *Kim Hajin called me in my hallucination.*

“Move over, Boss.”

The auditory hallucination grew clearer and sounded too real.

“I said move over.”

Boss raised her head after hearing his voice again. Kim Hajin stood there with a straight face. He even slightly grinned.

“What...”

Was I dreaming? Was this all a dream? If not, how much of it was real? Did I dream that Kim Hajin had died?

Something even more unbelievable occurred. Golden light began to shine from Kim Hajin’s body. Boss took a step back and watched intently.

Something impossible happened. The two severed halves of his body came back together, his broken bones and torn flesh healed, and the drained blood re-entered his veins. Boss doubted her eyes even though she witnessed it firsthand.

“Sigh... what a shame to use up a life here. Are you okay, Boss?”

The resurrected Kim Hajin smiled at Boss. She stood in a daze as the insect arm dangled in her right hand.

“...!”

Soon, she tossed away that insect arm and jumped into his embrace. She hadn’t done so on purpose. Her body moved on its own. She tightly embraced Kim Hajin and clearly felt his existence in her arms. His beating heart told her he had returned.

[Central Africa, Underground]

Humanity lost Central Africa to monsters a long time ago. They couldn't survive the harsh environment and abandoned most of Africa. Then monsters took their place. The law of the jungle where the strong devoured the weak prevailed. The continent that once contained dozens of countries returned to wilderness.

"So you lost."

However, human language could be heard in this land with no humans. The one speaking only looked human. His name was Orden. He called himself the monster king and founded a country of monsters in subterranean Africa. The vast underground city spread far like an ant tunnel and grew into a giant colony. Orden had reigned as king for a long time. Monsters formed a hierarchy under his rule and they birthed new monsters through numerous research and experiments. Humans called them humanoid monsters, but Orden called themselves neo-humanity.

— *Kururu, kuru...*

A strange-looking insect muttered dejectedly in front of the sovereign on a throne. The insect resembling a human kneeled like a knight serving his lord.

"You lost your right arm."

The king's gaze fell on the insect's right arm and it flinched in shame. It had lost the Scythe of Light bequeathed to him by the monster king. The scythe couldn't easily be made and couldn't be recovered anymore.

"Do not worry, Kurukuru."

The king stood from his throne and approached Kurukuru. His footsteps, infused with magic power, resonated with the atmosphere. Kurukuru didn't know what to do.

Soon, the king placed his hand on Kurukuru's severed arm. The insect humanoid felt slight pain and gratitude for it. A new arm sprung from where the king touched him. Like before, the arm resembled a sharp scythe. It looked different from the Scythe of Light, but shone with a fierce, metallic luster.

"This is the best metal that can be found underground. It can't be compared to the Scythe of Light, but it should withstand human magic power."

— *Kuru, kuru.*

The subject expressed its gratitude for the king's benevolence. Orden faintly smiled and returned to his throne. The subject, still kneeling, didn't dare look at the king's back.

"Now, let's hear your story."

The king's voice rang out imposingly.

"Kurukuru, who did you lose to and how?"

The subject felt great shame at being unable to complete the king's order and recited what happened 5 minutes ago.

* * *

The Pandemonium invasion successfully concluded. Cheok Jungyeong's return played a huge role. No one knew what he had been up to inside the tower, but he had grown even stronger and decimated the remaining djinns in the eastern region.

The quick-footed giant possessed instincts surpassing a savage beast. Cheok Jungyeong truly resembled a monster from the depths of hell with his ultimate skill, energy blast.

"Haaa..."

The Chameleon Troupe arrived at a hideout the Dark Moon Society had prepared. However, I didn't have time to rejoice at all. The fact

that Kurukuru appeared meant the next great calamity would happen soon. As expected, the third phase ended up coinciding with the Tower of Wish.

Something else felt uncomfortable. I turned to the side and spotted Boss staring intently at me.

“Boss, you can go now. Please leave.”

“...”

She acted like this ever since our fight with Kurukuru. Boss forced me to lay in bed and refused to leave.

“Do you have something to say?”

“...”

She didn't reply to any of my questions and only continued staring.

“Fine, fine.”

I scratched my neck and lay back down. Only then did Boss sigh in relief.

I raised my upper body again and her worried expression also returned.

“...”

Then I began a staring contest with Boss.

“...”

“...”

We stared at each other for 5 minutes in silence. Finally, Boss opened her mouth.

“I’m sorry. I should’ve protected you as your boss, but you ended up protecting me instead.”

For the record, I told her about my unique skill that included the 3 minute time reversal and resurrection.

○ *Body Reversal: Will activate when your physical body dies. Your physical body returns to its state 10 minutes before your death. (1/2 uses left).*

Body reversal, the Clock Hand of Fate’s third ability, activated when my physical body died and returned it to 10 minutes before my death. I told Boss because she wouldn’t let me alone otherwise, but she continued to stay anyway.

“I’m fine, Boss.”

“I’m not fine.”

“Don’t worry about what happened too much. We ended up getting this too.”

I held up Kurukuru’s right arm that Boss gave me. The Scythe of Light reflected the moonlight from the window.

“What use is that?”

“What do you mean? This is an amazing weapon.”

It looked a bit gross at the moment, but it could compare to most mythical grade weapons once I cleaned it and made a new weapon out of it.

“Do you want to use it?”

“...”

Boss shook her head. *Tiriring*— I received a message from Jain.

[I think it's because of what happened in the past. Boss will be fine tomorrow. She might even kick her blanket tonight in regret.] [Ah, don't forget to film her.]

Film her? That sounded like a great idea. I raised my smartwatch. *Tiring*— Boss immediately flinched.

“W-What are you doing?”

“Filming you. I won't stop until you leave. You know what to do if you want to keep your dignity as the boss.”

Boss fell into thought before jumping up.

“Good.”

“Tell me if anything happens.”

She finally left. I could still see her guarding the door outside with my eyes, but Jain appeared and dragged her away. I sighed as they went away.

“Huuu...”

Now I could relax in peace. I lay back down and checked *[Violet Banquet]*.

[You have received a reply from Daehyun's Chae Joochul.]

Four days ago, Chae Joochul notified the Truth Agency that he would hunt the devil known as Plucas. Naturally, I sent a drone to Plucas' temple to observe the situation. However, that didn't concern me at the moment.

“You're dead.”

Kurukuru, you son of a bitch. How dare you kill me? I'll send this world's most tenacious and powerful enemy after you. I began to furiously type.

Whish—

The wind suddenly blew as I completed my sentence. It didn't feel that strange except I had kept the windows closed.

"...?"

I raised my head and felt surprised.

"What?"

There, I saw an unexpected guest by the windowsill. Deep navy hair and eyes flickering with dangerous magic power. Jin Sahyuk clicked her tongue at me.

"That surprised me. Why are you here?"

"I heard you died, but you're alive and well."

"What did you say?"

I frowned. *How did she find out that I died?*

"Did you come to get beaten up again?"

I didn't want to fight her in my current state, but I kept up the façade.

"No, no, I'm not here to fight. Some piece of shit idiot said you died, so I just came to see... see you. You know him, right? Bell, t-that son of a bitch lied to me."

Thankfully, I scared her off. She pretended to be fine, but couldn't even meet my eyes.

"We can fight if you want."

"I, I told you I'm, I'm not here to fight."

“Stop stuttering.”

“I just wanted to sp... spit on your corpse if you did...”

I smirked. Right, this Jin Sahyuk felt more familiar. I suddenly recalled an episode from the original novel where Jin Sahyuk cooperated with Kim Suho to defeat a devil while saying she would be the one to kill Kim Suho.

“It’s true. I did die. I just came back to life afterward.”

“You what?”

“It’s my skill.”

Jin Sahyuk’s face contorted. *What kind of overpowered skill is that?* She grumbled and glanced at my body.

“There’s someone who can kill you?”

I didn’t answer her and suddenly had a strange thought.

Did the co-author leave her as the final boss or did he change her into a neutral character that could be persuaded?

This felt like an important question. Even Kurukuru had grown stronger. Jin Sahyuk could become an ally as powerful as Kim Suho if enemies stronger than Kurukuru could appear at any time. I asked her to find out.

“Hey, why do you live?”

“What? Are you picking a fight with me?”

Jin Sahyuk looked at me dumbfoundedly, but flinched and turned away again. I simply grinned.

“People have their own reasons for living. I’m asking what’s yours.”

“I didn’t come to hear bullshit. I’m leaving.”

“Already?”

“I confirmed you’re still alive. It’s great to know you can revive. That means I can kill you multiple times.”

Jin Sahyuk tried to run away. However, I extended aether and grabbed her wrist. I felt like I wouldn’t have another chance if I let her go. Jin Sahyuk would continue to avoid me and a huge fight would surely break out if we met again in the future. This time, I asked in more detail.

“Do you want to return home?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk paused, but didn’t answer. I had no choice but to throw more bait.

“To Plerion?”

Immediately, she stiffened. Her body froze and her magic power turned cold. Jin Sahyuk creaked her head towards me. Shock and suspicion filled her eyes.

“D-Don’t tell me... you’re a transmigrator too?”

I smiled and shook my head.

“No.”

“Don’t fuck with me!”

Jin Sahyuk suddenly yelled. *Damn, what if Boss hears you and rushes over?*

“Answer me! How do you know the royal family’s name?”

“We can talk about that later when we have the chance.”

“You humiliated me this much knowing that?”

Jin Sahyuk’s tone changed. She approached and grabbed me by the collar.

“Explain!”

“You might die if you don’t let go right now.”

Five seconds until Boss arrived. I raised my hand and counted down with my fingers. *Five, four, three, two...* However, I seemed to have touched a nerve with the royal family’s name and Jin Sahyuk refused to back down.

When I finally finished counting...

— *Purururu!*

Spartan’s signal suddenly rang in my ears. That meant something had occurred on the 27th floor.

“Explain...”

This woman kept shouting in my face, but I ran out of time. Spartan forcefully summoned me back into the tower.

Chapter 238

Third Phase (3)

[27F - Demon King's Tower, 1F]

Space warped and I found myself in a different world. The transfer felt sudden and intense. I shot into the sky and fell straight to the ground. Nausea kicked in, but I didn't feel much pain. Soon, I regained my composure and opened my eyes.

"I'm inside the tower."

I could tell from my clothes. The robe I wore in the tower replaced the pajamas on Earth.

Kuuu...

Suddenly, I heard a groan from behind. I glanced back to find Jin Sahyuk and grasped the situation. Spartan's unstable summon must've dragged her along and she became a cushion under me.

"Cough."

I let her be and stood up. We had arrived in some sort of dark cave. *Where am I?* I thought until I heard Spartan's cry.

Purururu—

Spartan flew over and landed on my shoulder.

"What happened for you to call me so urgently?"

— Purururu, Purururu.

Spartan only rubbed his head against me without answering. *Seriously, what happened?* He usually acted so cold.

“What, what is it?”

— *Purururu, Purururu.*

“Okay, okay, explain. You have to explain first.”

Spartan rubbed me two more times before sharing his vision. What happened to Aileen’s party unfolded before my eyes. I watched everything from beginning to end.

“They’re locked up in jail?”

— *Pururu.*

Spartan nodded. Aileen’s party lost to some demons and had been imprisoned. The witch who served as one of the demon king’s closest advisers devised a plan. Spartan tried to contact me, but suddenly lost connection. He could only think of one reason why that happened. His owner had died.

He wanted to deny it, but no other explanation existed. Spartan cried in sorrow until all his tears dried up. However, Spartan realized his connection came back after crying his eyes out and brought me here as soon as he noticed.

“Were you that sad?”

— *Pururu...*

Our eyes met after I learned the entire story. I could feel Spartan’s emotions and his sparkling eyes looked especially adorable today. I hugged Spartan for the first time. He hugged me back with his wings too.

Our touching reunion would’ve lasted longer except...

“You.”

A woman with disheveled hair staggered up. Jin Sahyuk finally regained her senses.

“Ah, but why did you bring her here?”

— *Pururu.*

I pulled her in by mistake and ended up using too much magic power.

Spartan replied.

“The royal family’s name... how do you know it?”

Jin Sahyuk was still obsessed over Plerion.

“Ah, that bastard Kim Suho must’ve told you. That low life.”

I watched Jin Sahyuk mutter to herself when...

— *Wiing.*

My smartwatch vibrated and I glanced at the screen.

[Problem – Jin Sahyuk possesses both pride and dignity as a member of the royal family. However, her actions and mindset in the original story felt too carefree and immature.]

[Settings Change – As a defense mechanism, Jin Sahyuk sealed away her pride as royalty. One might say she has a split personality.]

Did I mention Plerion too early? A trivial change had occurred. I sighed and looked at Jin Sahyuk.

“I didn’t learn it from Kim Suho.”

“What? Then how doth thee knoweth thy name?”

She even began speaking like royalty. I shrugged and answered.

“I told you, I’ll fill you in on the details later.”

The Plerion Royal Family once ruled the continent, but tragically fell. Its 9 year old prince (I mean princess) had to endure much hardships when demons invaded their kingdom. They had no choice but to seek refuge in a different world on Earth.

Of course, the final boss’ backstory contained more than that. I put more effort into making her than Kim Suho, but the results didn’t live up to my expectations.

“Just wait and don’t forget. I know what you don’t know.”

I kept this a secret from her until now because I thought it might be useful as a psychological attack. After all, weakening a villain with words proved to be a famous cliché.

“You—”

She would probably call me impudent next. I abruptly approached her and stared into her eyes with our noses almost touching. Jin Sahyuk almost shouted at the top of her lungs, but suddenly fell silent.

“...”

I kept staring without a word. I didn’t even need to intimidate her. I simply stood there and Jin Sahyuk grew afraid on her own. Her eyes blinked, her lips quivered, and she dropped her gaze.

“A-Answer now. Right now...”

She managed to finish despite the fear.

“Spartan, can you send her back now?”

I ignored her and looked at Spartan. He nodded and flapped his wings.

— *Pururu.*

“No, no! Wait a second, Kim Hajin! Were you the advisor? Or maybe the prophet...”

“See you later. Take your time thinking, okay?”

Something sucked away Jin Sahyuk’s body and Spartan forcefully transported her back.

— *Pururu...*

I handed the Orb of Regeneration to Spartan, who suffered from using his authority too much.

“Should I not have told her?”

I began to regret after sending Jin Sahyuk back. I might’ve spoken too rashly.

“Oh well...”

I had stopped writing during the fourth phase. Soon, the story would enter the unknown. Jin Sahyuk’s past would surface anyways towards the end.

I felt frustrated thinking about the end. What would happen to me once everything concluded? The existence called Kim Hajin, who intruded into this world...

I looked at my smartwatch.

▷??? — *Will unlock after the main story ends.*

One clause remained unknown. My last hope of returning to Earth, but did I still consider it hope?

— *Purururu.*

Spartan clung to my shoulder and interrupted my gloomy thoughts.

I snapped out of my daze and took out my bow.

[Temujin's Bow Blessed by Horus]

I used *[Card Conversion]* to turn it into an effective good and brought it along. It should serve me well in the Demon King's Tower. I also took out Black Lotus' entire wardrobe: an assassin-like robe, a mask, and red contact lenses.

"Mm, mm. Ah, ah."

The mask's voice alteration worked flawlessly. After that, I concentrated magic power into my eyes. My field of vision stretched and I could see the entire 27th floor.

— Damn it. This is so annoying.

I discovered Aileen first. She sat inside a room that looked somewhat like a prison. Steel bars surrounded her in every direction, but the room featured a bed, a sink, and even a shower.

"Ah."

The demons locked them up in the Colosseum. A society of demons existed within the Demon King's Tower and their king invented the Colosseum as a sport to entertain them.

— Dammit. I can't even run away because of the others.

Aileen aimlessly wandered in the gladiator room while muttering to herself. Then I took a peek at the others.

— I'll be putting other members in danger if I escape. First, I'll figure out how to contact them.

Jin Seyeon carefully planned her next move.

— I need a way, a way to escape with everyone...

Kim Suho seemed to be contemplating.

— *Ah*, I miss my wife.

Yi Yongha simply lamented about something else entirely.

They delayed their escape because they all worried about each other. However, they shouldn't have assumed they could break out so easily.

"Things could've been worse."

Fortunately, I recalled the Colosseum episode fairly well. I even knew how to clear it.

Then I thought about Boss. She probably worried sick that I disappeared, but Spartan couldn't use teleportation anymore. I would have to find my way back to the Demon King's Tower if I left with a ticket.

"Spartan?"

I took out a slip of paper and wrote a short message.

[Boss, I'll be in the Tower of Wish for a while. No worries.]

"Just send this note to where I came from. You can do it, right?"

— *Pururu.*

Spartan nodded energetically.

* * *

[Cheongdam-dong, Gangnam — Seoul, South Korea]

Yoo Yeonha built a mansion for herself in the middle of Gangnam.

This 230 square meter building stood 4 stories high and contributed to her independence plan. Yoo Yeonha felt happy about finally having a place of her own.

“Excuse me, please be careful with that furniture?”

“Yes!”

She had hired movers to transport her belongings. Of course, it would’ve been faster to move them using spells or skills, but she would rather spend the extra money than risk her valuables being discolored.

“Especially that bed over there. Please be extra careful with that bed.”

“*Haha*, leave it to us.”

“Don’t laugh and be serious. Can’t you tell I’m being serious?”

“*Ah*, yes, I understand.”

They transported the tightly-wrapped bed up from the ladder truck below. Yoo Yeonha kept biting her lips out of anxiety that they might drop it.

“All finished!”

“*Phew...*”

Fortunately, the bed arrived safe and sound. She went down to the second floor to confirm it in the bedroom. The third floor served as her living space and the second floor would be an office designed just for her.

“*Huhunhuhuhunn.*”

Yoo Yeonha hummed to herself at her desk. The chair from Kim Hajin blissfully surrounded her. She had used it for a long time now, but it only felt better every day and became her third most treasured

possession. As a side note, her bed came in second and her guild placed first.

Tirring—

Happiness enveloped her when her phone suddenly rang. It came from ♥Dad♥. Yoo Yeonha smiled and picked it up.

“Hello.”

— Hey, sweetie.

It sounded like her father had drunk a few drinks with his friends. Yoo Yeonha usually hated that, but decided to let it go for today.

— You know daddy’s promotion ceremony is in three days, right?

In three days, Yoo Jinwoong would leave his mark in history and become a master rank hero.

“Of course, I remember. You don’t even need to ask.”

— You have to come. If you don’t, I’m going to run out in the middle of the ceremony.

“Of course, I’ll be there.”

— Okay. I trust you, daughter. You know I’m super proud of you, right? Ah, hey, hey. No, you don’t get to talk to my daughter. Go away!

She suddenly heard other voices from the other side. Yoo Yeonha asked them to take care of her father and hung up.

“Huhuhum...”

Everything went well recently. Yoo Yeonha felt pleased and looked around the silent office. The room felt a little lonely, but it would feel just right with her secretaries. Maybe she could get a pet.

Tzzzt—

She pondered over the two wonderful choices when a call suddenly came from one of her informants.

— Master, this is urgent. Just now, we spotted the humanoid monster from before in Pandemonium.

Kim Hajin had wanted information about this. Yoo Yeonha sat up and cleared her throat.

“Is this from a witness or do you have physical evidence?”

— I have physical evidence. We managed to record a short clip of the monster with our nearby drones.

“Mmm.”

Yoo Yeonha nodded in satisfaction. Dispatching hundreds of stealth drones in Pandemonium paid off.

— A wave of magic power damaged the recording halfway, but the important part remains intact. I'll send it over now.

“Okay.”

The call ended and she received the video file. Yoo Yeonha took out a can of Coke from the refrigerator and played the video. *Pssh—* She opened the can and prepared to take a sip.

“...?”

However, the video had already ended.

“That's it?”

The video only lasted 3 seconds. She took a sip of the Coke and played it again.

“Just what is...”

The drone sensed abnormal vibrations and zoomed in on a rooftop. There, an event the naked eye couldn't capture took place.

An unknown being shot up like a rocket through the building and destroyed it along the way. Then the being pierced someone's heart on the roof. The video immediately ended after a blast of magic power struck the drone.

“*Hmm...*”

As expected of an elite informant, she also received a second clip 1000 times slower than the first. She played the second video and began her in-depth analysis. Even then she could barely catch a glimpse of the being. *Just how fast is he?*

“*Huh?*”

Yoo Yeonha initially focused on the humanoid monster, but her gaze soon shifted elsewhere. She no longer looked at the humanoid monster, but at the person whose body had been split in half by the monster.

“Wait, wait a minute.”

She felt a sense of incongruity and quickly rewound the clip. The nameless victim wore a hood, but the wind blew it off when the monster approached. That face looked extremely familiar.

“This...”

She found it impossible and rewound the clip once again. Then she stopped the moment it revealed his face and zoomed in.

“*Ah...*”

She couldn't say anything. Her hand began shaking over the mouse.

This... this can't be true. Why is he in Pandemonium? Did he think he could defeat the humanoid monster by himself? Or was he chasing after the Chameleon Troupe and accidentally ended up in Pandemonium? Whatever the reason, this is...

Yoo Yeonha wrapped her hands around her head and replayed the clip. She concentrated on that exact moment.

“This... man...”

A feeble voice came out from her mouth as she rewatched the scene in a daze. The results remained the same no matter how many times she rewound the clip and upgraded the video quality. Worse, it only became clearer. She could never forget that person's face and name.

“It's... Kim Hajin.”

At this point, she couldn't do anything anymore. Her hands violently shook as she picked up her smartwatch and called Kim Hajin.

[The recipient cannot be reached at this moment...]

The cruel dial tone confirmed his absence. Yoo Yeonha called again.

[The recipient cannot be reached at this moment...]

And again.

[The recipient cannot be reached at this moment...]

She continued.

[The recipient cannot be reached at this moment...]

The indifferent voice from the dial tone resounded throughout her empty office. Yoo Yeonha kept calling over and over.

“Sigh...”

She had been trapped in this cell for 3 days. *How did this happen?* Jin Seyeon sat on the bed and recounted the events over the past few days.

It all started with Black Lotus’ pet bird. It successfully led them to the Demon King’s Tower. Then they stopped Aileen from trying to enter right away and took a break for the next 3 days. They rested well and recharged with potions, scrolls, and useful cards. The party wanted Yi Yeonghan and Shin Jonghak to rejoin them, but neither felt ready yet so they decided to enter the Demon King’s Tower by themselves.

At first, they thought everything would go smoothly. However, they soon fell into a trap that forcefully disbanded their party and couldn’t contact each other. Some sort of magic probably caused it.

Jin Seyeon believed in her comrades even though she became stranded. She believed they would regroup if she continued to climb. However, a witch appeared with hundreds of demons and showed her a crystal ball. It reflected an image of Yi Yongha locked in a cell.

Jin Seyeon had no choice but to comply after they threatened to kill her comrade. Yi Yongha would always brag about his kids to them. Those kids certainly didn’t deserve to lose their father.

“Haa... I shouldn’t act rashly.”

Jin Seyeon took a deep breath. She already checked everyone’s status. They would surely meet again if they stayed alive.

— Human Jin Seyeon, it’s time.

A heavy voice descended from above. Jin Seyeon sighed as a demon guard appeared in front of her cell.

“Follow me.”

The one-eyed guard undressed Jin Seyeon with his eye. The way he touched her as he dragged her out felt even more horrendous.

She barely managed to refrain from shooting an arrow at him.

“You better not be lying about releasing me once I achieve 10 victories.”

“Don’t worry. We’ll certainly keep our word. We will release you if you achieve 10 victories.”

“You’ll be the first one I kill once I get out of here.”

“Do as you wish, if you can.”

The one-eyed guard smirked. *I’ll release you after 10 wins.*

They probably did plan on releasing her, but everyone had different definitions of release.

Jin Seyeon followed the guard and arrived at the Colosseum’s right entrance. The guard spoke from behind the door that led to the arena.

“Your opponent is a newcomer who just arrived yesterday.”

“Newcomer? You mean he’s a human?”

“You’ll see.”

“*Hmm...* I do have an idea of who he might be.”

Jin Seyeon recalled the huge man, Cheok Jungyeong.

— Your patience will be awarded! Now, let the banquet of death begin!

The door opened with a fiendish yell and a deafening roar flooded in from the other side.

Jin Seyeon entered the arena with a frown. The handcuffs around her wrist came off and the guard handed her a bow.

She looked at her opponent on the other side.

“...?”

However, she soon tilted her head. The silhouette approaching didn't match her expectations.

“That man...”

He looked slender rather than big and wore a black robe embroidered with a golden lotus. He also wore a black mask and held a black bow. He clearly didn't intend on concealing his identity.

“Don't tell me...”

Jin Seyeon's eyes widened.

She knew this man all too well. The strongest archer in the Tower of Wish, the Chameleon Troupe's current seat of black, and perhaps who she wanted to meet most. Black Lotus had finally appeared in front of her.

Chapter 239

Black Lotus (1)

The Colosseum filled with excitement and madness as Jin Seyeon stared at the man in front of her. Her eyes couldn't see through his disguise. Black Lotus' mask somehow deflected her gift.

— The victor shall survive and the loser shall die! Enjoy the humans' fight to the death!

A demon voice loudly announced.

Jin Seyeon raised the [*Lv.7 Munjong's Bow*], an artifact she obtained while climbing the tower. She aimed the bow at Black Lotus, a Chameleon Troupe member deeply involved in her parents' deaths. She couldn't let go of her resentment and an ember of hatred sparked inside her once again.

— Fight!

However, her resentment became a trifling matter compared to her comrades' lives.

— Fight, human gladiators!

Jin Seyeon regained her composure as her opponent also raised his bow. They didn't have the leisure to talk things out. Magic power condensed around the Divine Archer's bowstring and Black Lotus also nocked an arrow.

Jin Seyeon worried they wouldn't be able to satisfy the demons' expectations. The audience cheered, but a battle between sharpshooters didn't look exciting. A single arrow always determined the fight.

Sharpshooters couldn't attack if they only dodged and couldn't dodge if they only attacked. As such, battles between sharpshooters usually ended with one attack that contained all their magic power. They didn't use any fancy maneuvers or clash against each other like in comics.

Two arrows would make contact in a split second and one would crumble. The remaining arrow would simply crush its target.

Kiiik—

Jin Seyeon pulled her bowstring and compressed her magic power. Her magic arrow caused a fierce wind that sucked in all the noise from the Colosseum.

As she prepared to fire inside her raging storm of magic power...

— Don't think about winning.

A clear voice rang in her head.

“...?”

Jin Seyeon's eyes widened.

Black Lotus just used mental transmission, a technique to deliver thoughts to someone else's mind. Most heroes couldn't perform this feat with magic power. However, Black Lotus' mental transmission felt flawless. His message didn't contain the slightest noise and smoothly rang out. Jin Seyeon had never experienced such a clean mental transmission.

— Don't fire if you want to save your comrades.

Black Lotus continued. He already knew about their situation.

Jin Seyeon's hands briefly shook, but she quickly focused again.

To believe or not believe. Jin Seyeon didn't ask such a question. She

wouldn't gamble with Black Lotus using the lives of her comrades.

— Don't you want to save them?

Jin Seyeon tried to cut off Black Lotus' mental transmission, but she couldn't. *What kind of a monster is he?* She inwardly laughed and felt the overwhelming difference in power.

— I will say this one last time. Don't fire if you want to save your comrades.

Black Lotus' words echoed in her mind. Even so, Jin Seyeon continued to perfect her magic arrow. A brilliant light shone from her bow.

— Is that a light attribute arrow?

A dry, emotionless voice resounded in her head.

— A foolish choice.

With a sneer, Black Lotus also unleashed his magic power. It came together like water and formed something like a harpoon.

— It would have been better to use a null attribute.

“Stop talking!”

I will not let myself be shaken by you! Jin Seyeon shouted and released her bowstring.

Pzzzzt...

White sparks crackled as her arrow flew. The current of light set the ground ablaze and melted the air. As the arrow captivated everyone's attention...

“Eh?”

Jin Seyeon finally understood what Black Lotus meant.

Light couldn't lose to darkness. Fire couldn't incinerate it and no frost could freeze it. It could only be devoured by a greater light.

Jin Seyeon saw a brilliant torrent of light clash against her arrow. She couldn't help but laugh. *Is this how a firefly felt in front of the sun?*

Black Lotus' arrow also contained a light attribute. The white harpoon he shot extinguished her arrow.

“Haaa...”

Her arrow crumbled and Black Lotus' arrow continued flying towards her. Jin Seyeon clearly witnessed her defeat.

Soon, Black Lotus' arrow exploded in front of her. It swept her away and she tumbled multiple times on the ground. However, she didn't feel much pain as though her body had undergone anesthesia. Was this because of his light attribute attack?

— Don't worry. You won't die.

Black Lotus' voice rang out once again as her consciousness faded.

— You'll only fall asleep for a moment.

Tak, tak. His footsteps sounded in her groggy mind.

“It's far from true death.”

This time, he spoke out loud.

“Sleep tight.”

Jin Seyeon fainted after hearing those words.

* * *

“Whew.”

I sighed after confirming that Jin Seyeon closed her eyes. I used 4 streaks of stigma at once and even applied a complex property like suspended animation. My body felt sore all over.

“At least I won.”

With this, I proved my theory that not even Jin Seyeon’s magic arrow could defeat Athena’s Lv.11 Moonlight Arrow. The results became obvious once she used a light attribute arrow.

“Great fight, human dog.”

The demon guard walked up to me. The three-eyed guard patted my back as he praised me.

“Congrats on your first victory. Is there anything you want?”

I glanced at the demon. His black, white, and red eyes all curved into a smile. I wondered which one to look at and pointed to Jin Seyeon’s body.

“This corpse.”

“Hm?”

“Give me this corpse.”

“The corpse?”

I nodded. A hint of suspicion surfaced on his face. He looked between me and Jin Seyeon while radiating demonic energy.

Crack— A black blade pierced Jin Seyeon’s stomach.

“...”

However, she didn’t react at all since I placed her in a state of suspended animation with stigma’s magic power.

“I can’t give you the corpse. All corpses have to be carried to the morgue.”

“Then let me carry her there.”

“*Hmm... fine.*”

The prison guard didn’t say no. I picked Jin Seyeon up and placed her on my shoulder.

— *Kueeek!*

— *Kuhahaha!* Amazing! That was great!

The fight ended rather quickly, but the demons seemed to enjoy it.

I could understand why they felt so thrilled. Two sources of light, that could be fatal to them, had clashed. By human standards, it would’ve seemed like a bloody brawl.

— I’ll remember your name! I’ll come to see you again next time!

— *Uhahaha!* Fun, that was fun!

I left the Colosseum while following the prison guard and arrived at the underground morgue.

“*Huhu...*”

The prison guard looked at me with a lustful smile.

“I’ll let you borrow the corpse for only one day.”

“What?”

I felt like I understood what he implied. What humans considered unacceptable only seemed like a normal fetish to them.

“You can leave now.”

“Alright, alright, I’ll leave. Take your time.”

I held myself back from frowning in disgust. He seemed to be acting considerate and even locked the door on his way out. Well, I should thank him for that.

“...”

I quickly took out a potion after glancing through the door to check that he had left. Then I poured it on Jin Seyeon’s injury. *Tzzzt*— White vapor rose as her wound closed.

“HOT!”

An unbearable heat spread from my wrist. I glanced down and saw my smartwatch on fire.

“W-W-What!”

I tried to put it out, but a sharp pain immediately struck my upper arm. It felt like swirling an iron nail inside your body.

“Shit, this...”

This pain felt familiar by now. Soon, a series of messages popped up.

[A streak of stigma will be added.] [It will become easier to use stigma.] [You may now use Settings Intervention and Information Reading without a medium.] [You may now...]

The good news arrived at the wrong time and place.

“Uhuuuak!”

The pain in my upper arm traveled to my brain. An unexpected cry came from my mouth and I could no longer bear the pain. I collapsed while holding onto my arm.

The Chameleon Troupe temporarily used a building as their main base.

“Our little Boss. Was it that hard? Your skin’s gotten all dry.”

Jain acted cute while holding Boss’ cheeks. Boss simply glared at her.

“I have many ways of killing you, Jain.”

The coldness in her voice caused a jolt of electricity to run down Jain’s back. She quickly let go and coughed.

“It wasn’t that hard.”

Boss bashfully added. Of course, she worried despite her words. Kim Hajin had suddenly disappeared while lying in bed and a strange woman had replaced him.

“Right? I had it hard. I almost died trying to stop you.”

Jain stopped Boss from blasting magic power because she recognized that woman. Then the woman got up and quickly ran away. Boss prepared to destroy the entire world to find out what happened until they discovered Kim Hajin’s letter.

“Hajin always knows what he’s doing, so don’t worry too much about him. Instead, we should focus on getting revenge. We can’t let the insect who killed Hajin live, right?”

Boss nodded at Jain’s words.

“Of course.”

“Oh right, is Hajin okay? I heard dying in the tower caused some pretty significant side effects.”

“...”

Boss didn't reply. Kim Hajin didn't mention anything about his death. It seemed like he didn't want to think about it. Boss concluded that after staying with Kim Hajin for a long time. He didn't like recalling painful things and hated talking about his feelings. No, he acted like it wasn't allowed. Boss blamed herself because of what she did in the past. He would have no choice but to hate her if he dug up the past.

"Who's worried about who?"

Jain's cold words interrupted Boss' thoughts.

"Snap out of it, Boss. You've gotten strange lately."

"*Cough.*" Boss cleared her throat.

"What information do we have on that insect? It was incredibly strong."

"Droon is collecting more information, but there isn't much. Oh right! Didn't you say you got its arm?"

"Yeah."

"Perfect. We can form a curse with part of its body."

Boss' eyes widened. She hadn't thought about that, but it sounded like a good idea.

"That sounds good."

"Right?"

Boss clapped her hands and recalled the suspicious woman she met 2 days ago.

"By the way, what happened to that girl?"

"*Mmm*, girl?"

“The one who barged into the building last time.”

“Ah, her?”

Jain did her best to hide information about Jin Sahyuk since Bell said that girl would kill him one day. Bell never lied. Jain didn't want Boss to get hurt, so she preferred that Jin Sahyuk kill Bell.

“I just chased her off. She and Hajin have a bad relationship.”

“Bad relationship?”

“Yep, Hajin had already killed her twice.”

“Kim Hajin did?”

How evil must she be if such a kind kid killed her twice? Boss thought to herself and suddenly stiffened. Seeing this, Jain also stared at her.

Gulp.

Jain swallowed hard.

“...”

“W-What? What is it?”

Jain asked after Boss went silent for a long time. However, Boss only shook her head.

“No, it's nothing. That can't be it.”

“No, tell me.”

Boss glanced at Jain. “S-She can't be his ex, right?”

Ex... Ex-girlfriend. Jain laughed in vain when she heard this.

“I, I told you it’s nothing. I’ve been reading too many novels recently,” Boss quickly retorted.

“*Eh? Ah*, no. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had one. That girl might’ve been his ex.”

Jain liked to tease her and began to support Boss’ romantic theory.

* * *

[27F, Colosseum’s Morgue]

“*Huup!*”

Jin Seyeon opened her eyes and gasped for breath. A sharp pain struck her and she trembled. Her stomach felt especially painful.

“*Auuu...*”

“You’re up?”

A feeble voice rang out. Jin Seyeon turned to the side with a pale face. However, she couldn’t see the voice’s owner. The surrounding scenery came into view. The smell of alcohol entered her nose, rows of wooden coffins lined the wall, and a faint smell of death filled the air.

“This is?”

“A morgue.”

A deep voice rang out and Jin Seyeon trembled again. She quickly got up, but soon collapsed. Then she focused her strength and stood while leaning against the wall.

“Are you acting?”

The man sneered looking at her move like a stringless puppet. Jin Seyeon glared at him as cold sweat flowed down her forehead.

“You...”

“Don’t you want to save your comrades?”

Black Lotus said as he approached her. “Why didn’t you listen to me? I told you to put your bow down.”

“...”

Black Lotus stood in front of her. Jin Seyeon didn’t answer and only continued glaring. She tried to see through his mask, but it didn’t work.

The man grinned.

[Lv.10 Hassan-i Sabbah’s Assassin Mask] ○ Lv.9 Dark Travel ○ Lv.9 Stealth ○ Lv.9 Disguise

This artifact had historic ties with the renowned assassin, Hassan-i Sabbah. Not even the Divine Archer could see through it. I simply overgeared myself. Phiunel had gifted it to Boss, but I took it as always saying it suited me more.

“You won’t be able to see anything no matter how hard you try.”

“...”

It hurt Jin Seyeon’s pride, but she knew Black Lotus had saved her. At the very least, she should thank him for not taking her life. She wanted to ask about the Kwang-Oh Incident, but couldn’t worsen the situation.

“Will you really save my comrades?”

“If you cooperate.”

“Can I ask why you’re willing to help us?” Jin Seyeon carefully asked.

Black Lotus glared at her, but she didn’t flinch from his flickering red

eyes. *A lot of talk for someone who lost.* Black Lotus murmured and sighed.

“The demon king is searching for a challenger.”

Black Lotus explained and Jin Seyeon’s eyes widened.

“A challenger? What do you mean?” Jin Seyeon felt surprised.

“The demon king is someone who seeks to die, but he desires an honorable death.”

Kim Hajin reiterated the setting he wrote. The plotline of how Kim Suho would defeat the demon king and conquer the Tower of Wish unfolded in his head.

“How do you know all this?”

His vague explanation piqued Jin Seyeon’s curiosity. She asked for more details, but Black Lotus only looked at her as if she asked a dumb question. Then she understood what he meant.

“Don’t tell me... You’ve already been to the 29th floor?”

Black Lotus nodded.

“*Haaa...*”

Jin Seyeon’s jaw dropped. All her thoughts paused: the burning pain in her body, her complicated feelings about the Chameleon Troupe, and her worries about her comrades.

Just how strong must he be to climb the tower so quickly?

She stared at him with suspicion and admiration.

Chapter 240

Black Lotus (2)

I offered to help Jin Seyeon in saving her comrades and handed her a bamboo scroll.

“...?”

She tilted her head at the bamboo scroll, so I briefly explained.

“I have 5 scrolls linked to each other. Write something on one of them with magic power and it will show up on the others as well.”

Jin Seyeon’s eyes subtly sparkled at me.

“How did you bring these in?”

The demons took away every item except for apparel and equipment when players first entered the Colosseum. Players also couldn’t use the community and other system services once they entered the Demon King’s Tower, so we should come up with a way to communicate first.

“I made them.”

“Pardon?”

My special skill, *[Four Colored Enchant]*, could easily make such scrolls with stigma’s magic power.

“Your comrades should be able to recognize your magic power. You shall explain our plan to them.”

Magic power worked like fingerprints. Jin Seyeon would write the messages and it wouldn’t be hard to convince them once they recognized her magic power.

“We’ll need to deliver the scrolls to the others first.”

“Don’t worry about that.”

I handed the scrolls to Spartan beneath my robe. He quickly delivered them to Aileen, Kim Suho, and Yi Yongha.

“I knew it. That bird belonged to you.”

“No need for chitchat. Write your message.”

“Your eagle looks very handsome.”

Spartan put on a stern expression at the compliment and I pushed him under my robe.

* * *

[Seoul — Hero Association’s Tower]

A large crowd had gathered in front of the Hero Association, the international organization in charge of appointing and managing heroes all over the world.

The crowd attending today’s event looked quite impressive. It consisted of famous heroes and celebrities whose faces alone could serve as their IDs, association authorities, conglomerate heads, guild leaders, etc. Of course, not all came to congratulate, a master rank promotion ceremony brought them all together.

“Haaa...”

It had been 4 years since the last master rank promotion ceremony. Essence of the Strait’s leader would be promoted today. Their guild undoubtedly held the most influence these days. However, Yoo Yeonha didn’t rejoice at the fact that her father’s wish would come true today.

“...”

She continued to stare at her smartwatch without getting out of her limousine. She hadn't heard from Kim Hajin for a week now and the video captured by the drone couldn't be any clearer.

She watched the footage hundreds of times already and had no choice but to accept the truth. *The humanoid monster Kim Hajin had been chasing, that monster had...* She dared not finish her thought and clenched her teeth.

“Why...”

...did he go alone? She told him millions of times not to bear everything alone.

Yoo Yeonha clenched her fists and played the video on her smartwatch again. She saw another robed person besides Kim Hajin in the corner of the screen. However, Yoo Yeonha couldn't discern their gender because of the hood. She couldn't figure anything out regarding this mysterious person.

“Ah...”

None of that mattered anymore. Yoo Yeonha somberly sighed.

Tirring—

Her smartwatch suddenly rang. She received the call without even checking it.

“Hell-, Hello?”

— *Ah*, Yeonha.

The voice on the other side belonged to Chae Nayun.

— It's me, Chae Nayun. How have you been?

Chae Nayun's cheerful voice felt like blades. Yoo Yeonha couldn't say anything. Chae Nayun spoke first since she didn't reply.

— I heard your dad's being promoted to master rank. The news even reached the Himalayas.

“You're still in the Himalayas?”

Yoo Yeonha forced her tears back. Her voice miserably choked.

— Yep, I was actually climbing just a few moments ago, but now I'm in a town.

Chae Nayun sounded so innocent. Yoo Yeonha wanted to imitate her cheerfulness, but tears already filled her eyes.

“So, how's the work going?”

— I'm taking my time. One of the townspeople told me he'd seen him, so I think it won't take too long.

Yoo Yeonha felt like she needed to stop Chae Nayun. Even if she uncovered the truth, nothing would change with Kim Hajin dead. The belated truth would only crush Chae Nayun for good this time.

“Nayun.”

— Oh, I've gotten much stronger by the way. The Himalayas feel just as good as Baekdu Mountain. Tons of monsters live here too.

Chae Nayun continued about how much stronger she became, how rapidly her magic power increased, how she felt satisfied whenever she reached new heights, and how the Himalayas gave her an immeasurable boost.

Tok, tok—

Someone knocked on the limousine's window.

— Oh, right. The promotion ceremony must be starting. Sorry, I took up so much of your time. I'll call you later!

Chae Nayun ended the call first. Yoo Yeonha never got a chance to say what she wanted.

Kim Hajin had died.

She couldn't force Chae Nayun to accept a truth that she couldn't swallow.

Tok, tok—

The knocking continued and Yoo Yeonha opened the window halfway. A staff member who looked like a bodyguard stood there.

"You'll need to pull out if you don't have an invitation. Ah, I'm so sorry!"

The staff recognized Yoo Yeonha and bowed. She closed the window without answering and exchanged glances with her driver. The limousine smoothly entered the association's parking lot.

Yoo Yeonha got off and walked to the association's front yard. She attracted a lot of attention, but no one approached her except for a few associates. After all, half of the people gathered here were enemies.

"Good evening."

She spotted an ally among this swarm of enemies. SH Agency's Park Soohyuk approached her. SH Agency had recently renewed their contract with Essence of the Strait after proving their competence and emerging as a respectable conglomerate.

"It's been a while. I hope all is well."

Yoo Yeonha greeted him like normal. Park Soohyuk happily received her, but his next words stabbed her heart.

"Oh right, how's Hajin doing?"

“...”

Yoo Yeonha froze.

“We stayed in touch until about a month ago, but I can’t seem to reach him anymore. Is he still inside the tower?”

Yoo Yeonha stood still as she watched Park Soohyuk. She had already gone back to the tower to make sure. She sent a fair number of messages to Extra7, but didn’t receive a single reply.

“He’s so busy I never get to see him. You know, several years ago, he was the one who initially...?”

Park Soohyuk moved on to talk about how heartless Kim Hajin was for not keeping in touch, but stopped when he felt something off. Yoo Yeonha had trailed far behind him.

“Leader?”

Yoo Yeonha only smiled when he called.

“Right.”

She could only say one word. Then she noticed a familiar face approaching. Shin Jonghak glanced at Park Soohyuk and stood in front of Yoo Yeonha.

“Congratulations.”

Shin Jonghak never showed up when she needed him.

“Yeah. Long time no see. I heard you were hanging out with the big shots in the tower, but why did you come so early? Did they kick you out?” Yoo Yeonha sharply replied out of subconscious resentment.

“...”

His eyebrows wriggled as he glared at her, but he soon shook his

head.

“I’m just taking a break. Is Chae Nayun here yet?”

Even now, he only had eyes for Chae Nayun. Yoo Yeonha clenched her fists.

“Nayun’s not coming.”

Then she walked past Shin Jonghak.

“Hey, where are you...”

She heard Shin Jonghak behind her, but chose to ignore him. Yoo Yeonha kept walking past everyone, past all the flowers and fallen leaves in the garden, and finally arrived in front of her father’s waiting room.

“Ah, you’re here.”

The guard at the entrance recognized Yoo Yeonha. She simply nodded and he opened the door. Then she approached the nervous Yoo Jinwoong.

“Dad.”

“Oh, oh, sweetie!”

Yoo Jinwoong walked over with a smile and gave her a big hug. Yoo Yeonha closed the door behind her.

“Yeonha, thank you. I can’t stop thinking that you’re my good luck charm.”

Boundless love for her filled his voice. She burst into tears when she felt it and could no longer suppress her sorrow. Yoo Yeonha cried out of gratitude, but also resentment towards her father.

“Y-Yeonha?”

Yoo Jinwoong couldn't describe his confusion. As her father, he could tell these weren't tears of joy. Yoo Yeonha had never cried even in the most serious situations.

"Yeonha, what's wrong? Yeon, Yeonha?"

Yoo Yeonha continued crying and trembling. Everything she had been holding back finally exploded. The stress that ate away at her overflowed. Yoo Jinwoong felt heartbroken as his daughter cried in his arms.

"Yeonha, Yeonha. Please calm down. Please. I can't help unless you tell me what's wrong..."

Yoo Jinwoong's voice faded in her ears as she pounded her father's chest with her fists.

Father, did you know you should've apologized to someone? She swallowed those words and reproached her father. She resented his past wrongdoings.

Everything became meaningless with Kim Hajin's death. This fact made her cry even harder.

* * *

[27F, The Colosseum]

Kim Suho received a letter from Jin Seyeon. He found a bamboo scroll on his bed after exercising and it contained Jin Seyeon's magic power engraved on it.

[You should lose on purpose if you confront Black Lotus. That way we'll be able to reunite and escape from the Colosseum. Send me a message if you have any doubts.]

He found it hard to believe, but Jin Seyeon's magic power proved its authenticity. Kim Suho wrote back.

[Is this real? I only heard that senior lost.]

[Black Lotus helped me. We formed a temporary alliance...]

A reply quickly came back.

It seemed like they had no choice but to cooperate with Black Lotus. Even the handwriting looked like Jin Seyeon's.

— Now, the battle will soon begin! The challenger this time is dwarf Aileen with 3 consecutive victories!

Kim Suho waited for Aileen's voice.

— Hey, who are you calling a dwarf? I told you to change that nickname!

As expected, Aileen's sharp yell shook the surroundings. Kim Suho smiled, but a worry suddenly crossed his mind.

— Dwarf Aileen will face Black Archer, who is also on a winning streak!

Did Aileen receive the bamboo scroll? No, did she even notice the bamboo scroll that suddenly appeared?

...

“God, this is ridiculous. I told you to change that nickname! Why won't you listen to me? *Hm?* Do you wanna die?”

Aileen nagged the guard as they walked to the arena. The demon guard, shaped like a snowman, only scratched the back of his neck.

“You forced me to say it...”

“Don't make an excuse.”

“It's not an excuse...”

“I said don't.”

Aileen's Spirit Speech shut him up.

"Change it next time. No matter what, or else."

Their relationship felt somewhat reversed, but it couldn't be helped. After all, Aileen guaranteed ticket sales in only 4 days.

"Anyways." Aileen thought about her next opponent, Black Archer.

"Black Archer..."

She didn't have time to think about his identity. Soon, they arrived at the arena and Aileen received her weapon. It couldn't exactly be called a weapon. This bracelet helped circulate magic power in her body.

— Today's battle will be another round of human vs human, a feisty and bloody one! Enjoy your time!

The host shouted as the doors opened. Aileen valiantly entered with her small steps.

"*Huh?*"

She finally looked at the man across from her. He wore a black robe embroidered with a lotus symbol and a black mask covered his face. He also held a black bow in his hand. Her opponent's appearance looked too familiar. All the pieces connected and her eyes widened.

"You're... Black Lotus!"

Aileen pointed at him and yelled. Her hair stood on ends, but she soon regained her composure. She would need all the calm in the world for this fight.

— Begin the duel and fight for your lives!

Neither of them moved as they studied each other. About 3 minutes passed and the bored spectators jeered at them. Aileen finally used

Spirit Speech.

“Hey you, take off your hood first.”

Aileen felt curious about his face more than anything. Her Spirit Speech came out from her mouth and reached Black Lotus. However, Black Lotus didn't even flinch.

“What?”

Aileen felt confused. *Why didn't anything happen? Did he just resist my Spirit Speech? No, I would've sensed something if that was the case.* Aileen tilted her head and used Spirit Speech again.

“I said, take your hood off!”

Black Lotus still didn't comply and Kim Hajin also harbored the same curiosity as Aileen.

Why doesn't Spirit Speech work on me?

* * *

[Temple of Plucas — 34°51'15.4" N 128°43'50.2" E]

Several stone towers stood tall amidst the scarlet darkness. Blood and bones covered the ground. The blood's redness and the bone's whiteness stretched and formed a strange pattern.

“Lord, far too many wander around here. We'll need to move you to a different temple.”

A devil resided here in this temple that had been specifically prepared for it. The djinn bowed to the devil who sat on a throne.

“There is... no need...”

The devil looked like a young man and a voice flowed out from his mouth.

“Let them... come...”

His voice sounded similar to boiling iron or burning fire inside a brazier.

“I want to meet... a worthy... human...”

It felt something other than curiosity. The devil held a human head in his hand. The human still seemed alive even after being separated from his body. He had degenerated into a toy for the devil who prolonged his life. However, all that would end today.

Crack.

The devil tightened his grip around the head. It exploded and became flaccid, devoid of any form. However, the human remained alive. The devil Plucas did not intend on granting him a quick and easy death.

Plucas loved violence and sadism. He represented the grim reaper and desired more agony to ease his insatiable thirst for evil.

“Send me... more... humans...”

“Your wish is my command, oh gracious devil.”

The djinn committed himself to the devil’s order.

The barrier isolating the island somewhere in the southern sea lifted. The djinn could now hear human voices.

— The barrier around the island is gone!

The Immortal had planted several eyes and ears near the island. He saw and heard everything they reported.

“They will be... the first...”

The devil took in those serving the Immortal.

Chapter 241

Black Lotus (3)

A long silence filled the tense atmosphere. Both of them couldn't comprehend the current situation.

“What.”

Aileen let out a dumbfounded voice. This time, she didn't use any Spirit Speech.

“...”

Kim Hajin only stared at her. Spirit Speech didn't work on him. He didn't know why at first, but soon came up with a plausible explanation.

Spirit Speech might only influence those who exist in this world. However, he didn't belong here and the stigma on his arm served as proof.

“Dammit!”

Aileen grew irritated as Kim Hajin sighed. He already figured she hadn't seen the scroll by now.

“Guuu...”

Aileen released her magic power into the air. Her hair stood like a Super Saiyan as she prepared to blast away Spirit Speech.

“Take your hood off!”

Her huge yell echoed throughout the arena. An unbelievable amount of magic power came out of Aileen's small mouth and the massive

sound waves enveloped Kim Hajin. However, the results remained the same.

Black Lotus didn't even flinch as his robe slightly swayed. The spectators watching fell victim to her Spirit Speech instead. Everyone who wore hoods took them off.

“ ... ”

Aileen's expression became ferocious as ever. She always acted somewhat playful, but turned completely serious this time. She realized she could never get him to take off his hood with Spirit Speech.

“I have no idea what's going on.”

She boosted herself into the air with magic power.

“But that doesn't matter.”

She inevitably developed a habit of talking to herself from using words as weapons.

“The wind all around you will force your hood off.”

Strong winds began to blow in the previously calm arena. *WHOOSH!* The whirlwinds blew like blades towards Black Lotus.

“*Hmm?*”

However, Black Lotus formed a special circular barrier around himself that sucked away all the wind.

“What the hell is that?”

Another incomprehensible phenomenon had occurred. *He has way too many strange techniques.*

— Did you not see the bamboo scroll?

A clear mental transmission resounded in Aileen's mind, interrupting her train of thought. Aileen frowned.

"Bamboo scroll? What are you talking about?"

Another voice, full of noise, crept in.

— It's me... Aileen... Jin Se... yeon...

Aileen widened her eyes at the familiar voice and familiar magic power. This message came from Jin Seyeon.

"W-What? Are you Jin Seyeon?"

— Yes...

Aileen's face lit up with joy.

I knew she was alive. The guard told me she died, but I didn't believe him. She's overrated, but not a master rank for nothing!

"Where are you right now?"

— Black Lotus... taught me... mental... transmission...

Indeed, a master rank hero possessed spectacular talent. It only took Jin Seyeon 2 days to use mental transmission, though still imperfectly. Of course, Black Lotus helped her and made it possible.

"No, I asked where you are?"

Jin Seyeon ignored Aileen's question and told her what she needed to know.

— Accept... Black Lotus'...arrow...

"What?"

Aileen looked at Black Lotus in confusion and his voice flowed into her ears again.

— I saved Jin Seyeon.

“What the heck are these two saying all of sudden?”

Kim Hajin sent another message to Aileen, who simply tilted her head.

— I hope to save you as well at Jin Seyeon’s request.

* * *

I repeated the same procedure for the next 3 weeks and successfully rescued every member of Aileen’s party from the Colosseum.

“I guess the saying that it’s darkest under the lamp is true.”

Team Aileen and Kids gathered in the hideout I made beneath the morgue.

“This hideout feels very comfortable.”

Yi Yongha expressed his awe while observing the well-decorated hideout. I sat on a stone chair and looked at my last opponent, Kim Suho. He lightly nodded when our eyes met and already thanked me, but I never replied.

“*Cough.*”

Kim Suho awkwardly scratched his cheek. He had killed Kaita, a Chameleon Troupe member, three times already.

— Thank... you.

I heard a voice in my ear. Of course, it came from Jin Seyeon.

I glanced at her and wondered why she kept using mental transmission when she could just speak out loud. After all, we sat right

next to each other.

— We... killed you once... before...

For the record, I taught her how to use mental transmission. Stigma could be used in lots of ways now. I infused stigma with the mental transmission technique and transferred it to Jin Seyeon. She naturally learned how to use it quite fast.

— However... I have something... I want to... ask you...

“*Haa, haa.*”

Jin Seyeon continued even as she panted.

— You’re a Chameleon Troupe member... This happened a long time ago, but... about the Kwang-Oh Incident...

I looked at Jin Seyeon in surprise. I hadn’t expected to hear those words from her.

— Do you know about...

“Hey, Lotus.”

Aileen suddenly interrupted us. She approached in short, quick steps with her arms crossed. *What’s she going to say this time?* I looked at the short figure.

“Thanks.”

Aileen’s words totally shocked me.

“You’re all on the association’s blacklist, but I’ll let you go once if I run into you on Earth.”

She shyly muttered and turned away in embarrassment. I stood from my seat without replying.

“It’s time to escape.”

Everybody shifted their attention to me.

— Escape, you mean...

“You don’t have to talk through mental transmission.”

I tried to stop Jin Seyeon. She nodded and sent another mental transmission.

— I... understand...

“Won’t you have 10 victories soon?”

I shook my head at Aileen’s remark.

“Only death awaits after the 10th victory. Demons are not as generous as you think.”

I began digging a hole. Stigma’s magic power easily penetrated the soil and the four of them followed.

We continued until the hole grew about 5 meters deep. Then I made a left turn with our escape about 30 kilometers ahead.

“Hey, move over. It’s my turn.”

We took turns digging over the long distance. I went first, Aileen second, Yi Yongha third, and Jin Seyeon and Kim Suho went last. After 30 minutes, we finally arrived at the right spot.

“This is enough.”

I grabbed the digging Kim Suho and took over. Then I dug diagonally until a slope appeared in front of us. We could see a ray of light at the end.

“Ah, there it is!”

Aileen shouted as we left the tunnel.

[28F – Demon Metropolis]

We arrived at the demon city after escaping the Colosseum. It felt strange that the 28th floor resided outside the 27th floor, but I originally wrote the setting that way. Only the pickiest readers pointed it out with one floor remaining in the tower.

“*Huh*, that’s...”

“What the heck...”

The party stared at the city in a daze. The demon city looked completely different than a human city. The buildings contained eyes and they breathed like living things.

“It’s quite grotesque.”

This would be a good representation of hell if it existed. Everyone briefly froze in front of such a fiendish scenery. I took advantage of their distraction and whispered.

“Spartan, take me to Earth.”

Spartan quickly responded and the demon city before me suddenly disappeared. I returned to the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout in Pandemonium.

My disappearance would surely surprise them, but we would meet again soon enough. However, I would meet them as Kim Hajin and not Black Lotus.

* * *

[The Himalayan Mountains]

The oxygen concentration is extremely low with a high magic power density. Climbers must breathe carefully on the Himalayan Mountains and

beware of stronger-than-average monsters. A mysterious inn exists somewhere in these mountains...

Such an urban legend circulated on the Internet. Chae Nayun didn't plan on uncovering the truth about this legend, but she came across an inn by chance while wandering through a blizzard.

[Himalayan Daybreak]

The mysterious inn sat on a cliff halfway up the mountain. She had confirmed the legend.

“Then, the guests here are all skilled heroes?”

Chae Nayun entered without hesitation and sat at the counter. She struck up a conversation with the owner.

“I wouldn't know. I never asked.”

The owner briefly answered. He was an old man with long white hair and a beard. The magic power in his blue eyes indicated his former occupation.

“*Hmm*, how many people are currently staying here?”

“Seven.”

“Oh...”

The number of guests surprised her even more than the inn's location in the middle of rugged mountains. Chae Nayun took a sip of the beer.

“*Kyah*, how much did you say a glass of beer cost?”

“100000 won.”

“*Mmm...*”

This expensive drink felt worth it. Perhaps it also contained magic

power.

“It tastes so fresh. Is it because it’s from the Himalayas?”

“No, it’s imported from Korea.”

“...”

“You know what they say, anything from Korea tastes good. I never would’ve imagined such a saying in my twenties.”

Chae Nayun looked inside the glass of beer. Indeed, it looked too murky to contain any magic power. However, the price didn’t feel too bad considering their location.

“By the way, why did you build an inn here?”

“...”

The owner didn’t answer and she noticed the three streaks of scars on his cheek. She stared at them in silence until the owner chuckled.

“Just ask if you have something you want to know.”

“Ah... *Cough.*”

Chae Nayun asked straightforwardly, “Have you seen a man? *Um*, he looks like this.”

Chae Nayun took out multiple photos of Kim Joongho. The first one showed his usual appearance and the rest had disheveled hair, a beard, and other possible changes photoshopped to his face.

“...”

The owner carefully studied them.

“I don’t know. I might have seen him somewhere.”

He answered ambiguously and glanced at the sword on Chae Nayun's back.

"Are you a swordswoman?"

"Pardon? Oh, yes."

"I think I've seen this man. I believe he introduced himself as a forensic pathologist."

The owner smiled and held up a photo.

Chae Nayun's eyes widened at his remark.

"Then where did he go? Did he stay here?"

She jumped to her feet and looked the owner in the eyes. However, she finally noticed his huge stature when she stood up. His shoulders seemed as wide as a mountain and his physique appeared unmatched even by the strongest men.

"Do you want to know?"

"Yes, I have to know."

Even so, Chae Nayun continued without being intimidated.

"It's good that you're here. I was beginning to get bored."

The owner gave her a huge grin.

"I'll tell you if you win against me."

"Excuse me?"

"You said you were a swordswoman."

His words felt a bit sudden, but Chae Nayun also began to smile. Her

smile soon turned into a sneer.

“Well, I’m actually a fairly strong hero.”

“Every guest here is.”

“Don’t blame me if you get hurt.”

“Of course.”

Chae Nayun nodded. He looked pretty strong, but this old man had to be well over 70. Not to mention, she’d learned a lot while climbing the Himalayas.

“Well then, why don’t we introduce ourselves first? I’m Chae Nayun, a hero under Essence of the Strait. That’s the current number 1 guild in the world.”

“Chae Nayun?”

A strange glimmer appeared in the owner’s eyes. He seemed more interested in her name than anything else.

“Yes.”

“Are you... Chae Joochul’s granddaughter?”

“*Huh?* How did you know? Do you know my grandfather?”

Chae Nayun tilted her head. The owner chuckled in content.

“I never imagined I would run into Chae Joochul’s granddaughter here.”

He muttered while reminiscing.

“In any case, it’s nice to meet you. My name is...”

He could just say so if he's acquainted with grandfather. Chae Nayun silently grumbled as the owner continued.

“Heynckes.”

“Pardon?”

Chae Nayun became dazed when he revealed his name.

Heynckes.

She had heard that name before. Any hero would know that name. Even textbooks mentioned him and numerous biographies recorded his achievements in detail. Heynckes left an everlasting footprint in the history of heroes.

“You mean you’re... Steel Spirit Heynckes?”

The Lord of Steel, Kryne Heynckes. A member of the magnificent Nine Stars.

“So that name is still around.”

Heynckes chuckled and shook his head.

“Don’t call me that. I’m nothing more than an old man now that I’ve lost my gift.”

* * *

[Plucas’ Temple]

The devil Plucas captured a human watching his temple. He extended his arm from where he sat and dragged the human by the hair towards him.

The captured human jumped back like a frog the moment he laid eyes on the devil. The devil tore the man’s head off, removed his guts, and drew the Star of David with it.

Plucas could feel his powers returning from human blood after feasting on their torment.

— Lord Plucas, I have spotted an intruder.

A voice resounded in the devil's ears. It belonged to a djinn whom Plucas appointed as his butler. He sat on his throne and listened to the servant.

— I'll have to call reinforcements...

The butler's words abruptly stopped. Plucas looked into the distance and spotted an old man who soon disappeared.

The temple grew more silent as time passed. Soon, the faint sound of footsteps approached from a distance.

“Is it... another... human...”

Plucas said to the figure in the distance. Another voice echoed from the cave walls.

“Truly a filthy place.”

The voice sounded clear, but dry.

“Did you... find me...”

Plucas muttered. The human showed himself instead of answering. His footsteps seemed relaxed and his attire looked neat. His pure white suit and fedora suited him quite well.

“I came because you called me.”

The human looked straight at the devil. His appearance reflected in the devil's crimson eyes. The old man's state of existence couldn't be measured and the devil's heart pounded for a moment.

“Who... are you...”

The devil looked at the old man with glowing azure eyes.

“I am the owner of Daehyun and the head of the Chae Family.”

He answered dryly. Then he tapped the ground with his cane.
KOOONG! Waves of magic power undulated in every direction.

“And also the employer of the humans you murdered.”

The man called the Immortal seemed fearless even in the face of a true devil.

“My family name is Changdo and I am called Joochul.”

Chapter 242

Sudden Change (1)

A sharp killing intent filled the crimson temple. It mixed with demonic energy and formed demonic flames.

“Foolish... human...”

The devil Plucas rebuked Chae Joochul’s arrival. However, Chae Joochul simply remained silent. He didn’t feel any strong emotions facing an existence known as a devil. If anything, Chae Joochul felt disappointed. Seeing this, Plucas became angry.

“You.”

The devil released demonic energy while sitting on his throne. His demonic energy formed a hand and shot forward. This attack contained a terrifying amount of demonic energy, but Chae Joochul only raised his cane to block it.

The cane’s magic power clashed with the devil’s demonic energy, sending energy currents crackling in every direction. The devil continued to move his demonic energy hand. It stretched towards Chae Joochul’s arm, but suddenly appeared by his head. Then it tried to grab his neck, but suddenly appeared by his leg next. Plucas’ demonic energy hand warped through space and attacked in every direction.

Chae Joochul calmly and thoroughly responded. He blocked the devil’s attacks and read the pattern of movements. He didn’t need to cast any barriers or use qi reinforcement. He simply blocked every attack with just his cane.

The battle entered a stalemate since the devil’s single hand couldn’t threaten Chae Joochul. Even so, the devil remained seated as Chae Joochul carefully studied the throne. Did the devil think he could fight

while sitting or did he have no other choice?

“...”

The devil knew this as well and remained silent. His expression never changed. The human body that Plucas took over showed neither sorrow nor frustration.

Kwaaa...

The devil shot a huge blast of demonic energy, but Chae Joochul formed a barrier and received it head-on. Then the Immortal instantly gathered the magic power he needed and blasted it forward.

However, the wave of magic power didn't reach Plucas. The devil formed a spherical dome with demonic energy to protect his body.

Tzzzzt...

Chae Joochul concentrated magic power into his cane. The cane absorbed a terrifying amount of magic power before he instantly released it.

BOOM!

A beam of magic power shot towards Plucas. However, the devil scattered it with a single wave of his hand.

Neither the devil nor the Immortal let out a single groan or pant during this battle. The devil's hand suddenly multiplied under the heavy silence. Several hands shot out from behind the throne and the devil conjured a scythe in his hand like a god of death.

Chae Joochul immediately felt he wouldn't survive a single slash from this weapon and released his magic power to the fullest.

Guooo...

The Immortal's brilliant magic power rose in the devil's temple. It

glistened like water droplets, burned like flames, wavered like the wind, and formed floating rocks.

“...”

The devil remained silent as the Immortal's light brightened the surroundings. Chae Joochul's magic power with the properties of the four elements swallowed everything. Only the Immortal could form this type of large-scale restricted field. Chae Joochul stood in this domain with the power of nature and struck his cane on the ground.

KOONG!

Immediately, his magic power exploded. A huge torrent of fire, earth, wind, and water swept the temple and stormed towards Plucas, who put out a hand.

KWAAAAAA...

Demonic energy hands charged towards Chae Joochul while obstructing his path of escape. Chae Joochul calmly weighed his options in a split second. Left, right, and behind would all lead to death, so only one answer remained.

KOONG!

Chae Joochul kicked off the ground towards the devil. Several hands chased him from every direction, but only a tiny fraction came from the front. However, a black scythe swung from this direction. Chae Joochul had to choose in the air. Of course, the outcome had already been determined.

The Immortal no longer possessed any emotions to obstruct him. He didn't hesitate to sacrifice his flesh to deliver a blow. As a result, he avoided the devil's clutches and arrived in front of Plucas.

An enormous amount of magic power condensed in his fist. The magic power of the four elements blazed towards the devil. Chae Joochul's blood boiled and his sense of time slowed.

“For you...”

Chae Joochul muttered as he thrust his fist. The boundless magic power around his hand approached the devil’s stomach.

CRACK!

The violent magic power shattered the devil’s demonic energy and surrounded its body.

Plucas’ eyes widened as Chae Joochul directly stared into them.

“...”

Chae Joochul’s eyes looked as emotionless as ever. The devil also stared at him with similar eyes. They resembled each other, but their situations vastly differed.

“A human with no heart.”

Plucas muttered his judgment of Chae Joochul. The devil stared deep into Chae Joochul’s eyes, devoid of emotions like a machine.

Then Chae Joochul slightly smiled. He didn’t understand the meaning behind it himself, but this smile soon disappeared and Chae Joochul emotionlessly continued what he said before.

“Because you have not stayed on this planet for long...”

Chae Joochul placed his hand on the devil’s head.

“And because you were too arrogant to heed this one’s words...”

He grabbed the horns protruding from the devil’s head.

“You seem to not know the age-old saying, *Humans are scarier than ghosts.*”

Crack, crack... Chae Joochul broke the devil’s horn off. Even so, the

devil seemed full of leisure. The Immortal infused more magic power into the devil's body.

"Truly pitiful."

Chae Joochul's magic power turned into ice and fire that clashed inside the devil's body.

"Arrogant human."

The devil could feel the two contradicting elements inside his body. He knew this would be the end.

KWANG!

The opposing magic power exploded and tore the devil's limbs apart. The devil's human body no longer remained.

The temple turned silent and the demonic energy gradually disappeared. Only the smell of blood tickled Chae Joochul's nose, but he didn't mind. He stared at the devil's horn in his hand. It emitted a large amount of demonic energy and could be used in many ways, politically and technologically.

"...?"

He felt a pain in his side where the devil's scythe slashed him. Chae Joochul infused magic power into it, but it didn't heal as expected. His instincts told him it wouldn't naturally heal for the rest of his life.

"Hmm."

Chae Joochul looked at the devil once more. Its corpse flew all over the temple, but Chae Joochul burned each piece with his magic power. Not even a devil could return with its head destroyed and limbs torn apart.

Step, step. Chae Joochul left the temple with a hand over his wound. He remained expressionless even as he lost blood. To enjoy longevity, he had sponsored a child with the authority of healing. If he visited

her, she should be able to heal even the most fatal wound.

...

The sound of footsteps became distant and Plucas remained dead. However, as time passed and Chae Joochul's presence completely disappeared...

Plucas, hanging onto his consciousness, opened one eye. The devil's eye stuck to the sole of his incarnation's foot. Most of his body had turned to ash, but the devil blinked and began to restore himself.

A devil couldn't be killed so easily once they successfully descended. Humans from countless worlds lost to devils and had their homes transformed into demon realms because of this very reason. Plucas had remained calm even in the face of death and now slowly resurrected himself.

Then...

"That old man just said humans are scarier than ghosts."

A frivolous voice rang out. The devil's eye shot open and turned towards the voice.

Its bloodshot eyes captured a dark figure. The man who soon appeared looked down at him.

— You are...

"I think the same way."

Click. The devil heard an ominous sound. His heart hadn't regenerated yet, but he clearly felt it sink.

"Just think of me as a ghost. One that devours existences like you."

Cold steel touched the devil's eye. A fierce current flowed from the empty muzzle.

— N... No...

Plucas finally lost his composure. He felt the god-slaying energy inside the muzzle.

— Y-You, h-human, listen to me...

The devil instinctively knew his annihilation of existence would soon arrive.

“Don’t be scared.”

The man placed his finger on the trigger and grinned.

“It’ll be over in the blink of an eye.”

— No! No!

The devil desperately cried out, but the man pulled the trigger.

Koong!

Plucas died without a trace and scattered into the air.

The man placed the metal that annihilated the devil back into his pocket. Soon, a bird of prey landed on his shoulder.

Then he leisurely spoke.

“Let’s head to the 28th floor.”

Countless messages filled his vision.

[You have gained 300 SP from killing a devil!] [2 Devil Annihilation – You have accomplished an amazing achievement!] [You have obtained an authority after annihilating 2 devils.] [Master Sharpshooter has been promoted to grade 2! Grade 1 is now within arm’s reach!] [Killing Plucas has...]

[28F – Demon Metropolis]

Aileen's party walked through the mud. The demon realm didn't suit humans. Its black soil stuck to their shoes like a sticky gel and the air with dense demonic energy hurt their throats whenever they breathed.

The party wandered for a long time without the system's help. They couldn't return to Earth and had to go through the Colosseum if they wanted to leave. That meant they would have no way of returning once they left.

"So you think that's the place?"

They found something resembling a giant castle after endless walking. Historically, kings or those of similar status inhabited castles. The demon king who desired a challenge should be in that castle.

"I believe so," Jin Seyeon replied.

"By the way, he said we had to clear it, right? Where did he go?"

Aileen grumbled. She expected Black Lotus to be their pathfinder, but he disappeared when they became distracted. How he disappeared dumbfounded them. They didn't even feel any magic power. Black Lotus simply vanished like he never existed.

"We should thank him for helping us escape the Colosseum."

Jin Seyeon said as she stared at the castle in the distance. She even obtained a new technique thanks to Black Lotus, so she let him off the hook for the Chameleon Troupe's past deed. After all, he wasn't a member yet when the Kwang-Oh Incident occurred.

"Senior Jin Seyeon is right. Asking for more would be like asking your savior to pay for your meals." Kim Suho nodded and agreed with her.

"Yeah, make me the bad guy."

“That’s not what we meant. For now, let’s keep moving. We don’t have time to rest.”

Aileen pouted, but listened to Jin Seyeon anyways. The party re-entered the forest.

“Proceed as slowly and stealthily as possible.”

Naturally, Jin Seyeon served as their pathfinder. The demon city contained streets that led to certain destinations, but they couldn’t choose such an open path. Jin Seyeon chose a roundabout way through the forest.

“*Argh*, these things keep touching me.”

Thorny vines wiggled and demonic trees with eyes constantly spat magic power or dropped bugs on them. Aileen grew annoyed and released her magic power to use Spirit Speech.

“Try not to use Spirit Speech as much as possible. Magic power is too noticeable.”

“What?” Aileen furrowed her brows when Jin Seyeon stopped her.

“Who do you think I am?” She shot back and cleared her throat to use Spirit Speech.

“My magic power will not leave behind any trace.”

Her Spirit Speech activated and Aileen’s magic power became traceless.

“Oh... Amazing, Lady Aileen.”

“*Huhum*, this is simple. I’m not like you. Oh right, didn’t you get demolished by Black Lotus in an archery battle?”

This time, not even Jin Seyeon could ignore Aileen’s taunting.

“Your Spirit Speech didn’t work on Black Lotus either.”

“What? Who did you hear that from?”

“I saw it myself. Plus, I lost because of an attribute disadvantage. Black Lotus said it himself. We would’ve been equal if I used a null attribute instead.”

“*Hmph*, I would’ve crushed him too if I properly fought. It’s because I tried to make him take his hood off...”

Kim Suho had a completely different thought about Black Lotus’ identity as those two bickered.

Strange. It’s strange no matter how much I think about it.

He felt a sense of incongruity with Black Lotus. It felt more like a sense of familiarity if he had to describe it. Black Lotus felt familiar and the feeling grew clearer as they spent more time together.

I must’ve met Black Lotus somewhere...

“Ah!”

He suddenly felt a chill as he pondered.

Could it be?

What if Black Lotus also came from the Otherworld? Kim Suho recalled the last time he met Jin Sahyuk. Back then, she acted like she knew Black Lotus and said, *There’s someone I want to kill more than you.*

Right, she did say that if he recalled correctly.

The pieces of the puzzle fit if my theory is correct. It explains why, even with his strength, he only revealed his identity after entering the Tower of Wish. He also helped me even though I killed his comrade multiple times...

Kim Suho’s expression turned serious as his thoughts stretched like

countless branches.

“Suho? Hey, Kim Suho?” Jin Seyeon shook his shoulder.

“Y-Yes?”

“What are you thinking about?”

“N-Nothing.”

He obviously lied as Jin Seyeon stared at him. She felt like she knew what he might be thinking.

“Did you recall something about Black Lotus?” Jin Seyeon asked. She held a grudge against the Chameleon Troupe, so Kim Suho couldn’t pretend to be oblivious.

“...”

Kim Suho stared into the Divine Archer’s eyes, which shone beautifully as always. However, he couldn’t reveal his secret so easily, not even to the most trustworthy person.

“It’s nothing, really... Anyways, for now...”

Kim Suho smiled and shook his head. Then he took out Misteltein. The time for battle had arrived.

“Let’s take care of these guys first.”

Countless monsters popped out from the bushes around them. These monsters looked completely different from what they knew and seemed extraordinary.

* * *

[Seoul, Korea, Essence of the Strait’s Hospital]

Essence of the Strait acquired this hospital two years ago. It used to be

called Samhan College Hospital and didn't stand out in particular like the college in its name.

Yoo Yeonha acquired Samhan College as well as part of an investment effort. The number of talents they had would determine the guild's future, so she wanted to directly raise non-hero talents.

Yoo Yeonha had asked Kim Hajin what he thought before acquiring the hospital and college. She had enough funds with the guild's money, but wanted to rope Kim Hajin in if possible. His overwhelming academic results would come in handy at the college.

Kim Hajin casually accepted her request and invested most of his money. He became the number one individual investor and Yoo Yeonha could feel how much he trusted her.

Essence of the Strait acquired Samhan College with Kim Hajin's investment and changed its name to Essential College. No one cared about the name change since the college only had a brief history. In fact, their new name brought them even greater fame and recognition.

"Haaa..."

Yoo Yeonha sighed as she thought about Kim Hajin in the hospital he helped create. She took a leave from work and became hospitalized as soon as Yoo Jinwoong's master rank promotion ceremony ended. She simply couldn't work in this state.

— Breaking news, a devil has supposedly descended on Earth. It is being widely reported all over the globe. We know devils tempt humans from the mental realm to create djinns. However, they have never shown themselves in the physical world until now.

Only a news anchor's voice resounded in the empty VIP room.

— Chae Joochul the Immortal stated in a recent press conference that he killed the devil and presented the devil's horn as proof. Experts do not doubt his words from the horn's enormous amount of demonic energy and the Immortal's reputation.

The world grew noisy as Chae Joochul killed a devil. Aileen and Kim

Suho also almost reached the tower's peak. The Chameleon Troupe took over a quarter of Pandemonium and humanoid monsters appeared.

Yoo Yeonha looked at these reports with empty eyes. None of them mentioned Kim Hajin. He just quietly left this world.

“*Hic*, why do you always do things alone?”

Yoo Yeonha wiped her tears and turned on her smartwatch. She checked the hundreds of messages she sent him and read the last message she received.

[By the way, you're still investing in weapons and defense research, right?]

Rather than a message, it sounded more like a reminder that he often sent. He would always nag her to invest in national defense and weaponry.

— Issues regarding national defense have come to the forefront of public debate with the appearance of a devil and humanoid monsters. Essential Armory, Essential Dynamics, and other Essence of the Strait subsidiaries focused on weapon development and defense research have seen a huge boost in their stock values...

Did he expect this to happen as well?

“He really is incredibly smart.”

The word exceptional couldn't begin to describe him. She only achieved her current success thanks to Kim Hajin by her side.

Tok, tok—

Two knocks rang out as Yoo Yeonha began to tear up again.

“Come in.”

The door opened. As expected, Yoo Jinwoong came to visit. He no

longer wore a suit and looked like a normal father now.

“Dad.”

“Yeonha, are you feeling better?”

Yoo Jinwoong stepped in and sat beside her bed. Her father looked worn out from worrying about her.

“What exactly happened? Did someone do something horrible?”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t answer her father’s trembling voice.

“T-Tell me what happened so daddy can help.”

Yoo Yeonha knew hating her father wouldn’t change anything. No one could resolve this issue.

“Dad.”

“Y-Yeah, I’m here. Feel free to talk.”

Even so, Yoo Yeonha couldn’t restrain herself anymore. She mustered great courage to say the next few words.

“Do you remember the Kwang-Oh Incident?”

Yoo Jinwoong’s face stiffened. Yoo Yeonha felt pain in her heart like she had become her father’s enemy.

“You do, right?”

She clutched her chest and could no longer bear it.

“Yeonha.”

She regretted it after learning about Kim Hajin’s death. She would regret it for the rest of her life. If only she trusted him more, if she

told him the truth, repented, and stayed with him...

“That was your doing, Dad.”

Then he would still be alive.

“Yeonha, what are you...”

“Do you remember the baby born that day in the Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter? I read your diary.”

The baby who appeared in the diary. The one her father left alive because he thought about her.

“That baby...”

She had already lost him, but that didn’t mean she would hide the truth forever. Reason and logic always guided her. However, she wanted to be true to her feelings just this once.

“...became someone precious to me...”

She quietly sobbed and muttered.

“...But he died.”

Her cries struck her father’s heart like a cold nail. Yoo Jinwoong was completely shocked.

Chapter 243

Sudden Change (2)

[8F – Atalos Royal Court, Knight Commander's Mansion]

Jin Sahyuk lay in bed late at night in her Crevon mansion awarded to her by the Royal Family. This grand mansion came with 7 attendants and a luxurious interior. Furthermore, it featured expensive appliances and facilities such as a crystal ball TV, a natural hot spring, a magic engineering room, a training room, and more. The lavish stable also housed the renowned horse, Ataly, also bestowed to her by the Royal Family.

“Hmm.”

Jin Sahyuk wondered how she came to be treated like this. She initially became a Crevon knight for the money and gained several subordinates after killing monsters. The Royal Family appointed these soldiers under her. Then she vented her pent-up anger on them while calling it training. After a while, Princess Araha visited her and praised her leadership. Soon, they offered her a high-ranking position among the Royal Knights.

She planned to decline at first, but accepted when they also included TP. She continued to do what she did and suddenly became a knight commander.

Crevon felt comfortable, so she stayed for a long time. Their monarchy suited her more than the strange political system called democracy that Korea seemed to applaud. She used to be a royal, but it still felt good to be admired as a capable knight.

“I’ll make sure to discipline the others later.”

Jin Sahyuk muttered to herself out of boredom. She planned to present the knights with their best boot camp experience in a long

time.

What should I do until then?

“Yaaawn.”

She pulled up the community.

[How do you become a Crevon knight?]

— I’m not interested in climbing the tower. I just wanna become a Crevon knight.

— An office job in Prestige isn’t too bad either. If you aren’t a hero, it’s best to head to Prestige and acquire a few skill books. Be careful of newbie hunters.

— The Chief Royal Knight in Crevon is a monster called Shin Jahyuk. She’s really strict, so she probably won’t accept just anyone.

The community grew more active as the number of players increased to 300,000. The media declared tower addiction as a social issue, but Jin Sahyuk blamed them for making their society that way. She didn’t believe in democracy and thought it would naturally fail.

Her personal homepage on the community functioned like social media on Earth.

“Is there anything fun to do? Oh, right.”

She randomly looked around other homepages when a thought suddenly crossed her mind. Then she typed a nickname into the search bar.

[Search — Boss] [Search results will be enhanced by your grade 1 player rank.] [Accessing the homepage of player Boss...]

It immediately directed her to a basic, seemingly neglected homepage.

[Boss' Homepage]

“This woman.”

Bell had told her about the Chameleon Troupe's boss. Jin Sahyuk decided to spy on Kim Hajin's movements through that woman she met the other day. She carefully looked around even though Boss' page appeared unused. Soon, she discovered a strange article.

“What the heck is this?”

[Novel Reading List] *Martial World, Legend of the Martial God, Royal Secret Inspector...*

This woman either assumed no one would visit her homepage or didn't know others could see it. Boss had shamelessly written a series of book reviews. She started with martial arts and fantasy novels, then modern fantasy and drama novels, and ultimately settled on romance novels.

— *Only for You, The Secret of the Boss, Our Vows...*

Jin Sahyuk turned off the system and couldn't bear to look at such shameful titles.

“This woman is the boss?”

She felt astounded, but also recalled Boss' overwhelming strength. Her incredible flow of magic and her shadow's unrivaled destructive power. Honestly, Jin Sahyuk's hair had stood on ends. She wanted to learn from Boss if she could.

“So she makes up for her mental deficit with physical strength...”

— No. Byul was always perfect. She never let her guard down even with such unbelievable strength and compensated for her occasional clumsiness with meticulousness.

A voice suddenly flowed into Jin Sahyuk's ears. She looked up in surprise, but found nothing.

— However, Kim Hajin broke her.

“You piece of shit. Do you have your skill on me again?”

Bell recently learned all sorts of strange skills. Tracking, forced transmission, summoning, etc. The victim of these skills would find them all quite bothersome.

— Yeah, but I didn't have a choice.

“Bullshit. Take it off.”

— Hey, I'm doing this for you. What if Kim Hajin suddenly barges in?

“...”

Her shoulders slightly trembled when she heard that name.

Do you want to return to your homeland? To Plerion?

She recalled what Kim Hajin said that day. He mentioned Plerion and claimed to know something she didn't.

“Hey, about Kim Hajin.”

Jin Sahyuk spent a lot of time thinking about him. After much anguish, she formed a theory. However, this theory sounded almost impossible.

— Yeah, what about him?

“I know this can't be true, but maybe, just maybe...”

The more ridiculous the hypothesis, the more one wanted to say it out loud.

“Maybe he used to be one of my servants.”

— A servant?

“Yeah, the fact that he knows about the royal family means he’s also from my old world.”

— *Pfft.* Yeah, there must’ve been a lot of servants who wanted to kill you because of your personality.

Despite Bell’s mocking remark, Jin Sahyuk recalled a certain servant’s name that had been buried deep inside her subconsciousness.

Kindspring. That name resembled a warm spring.

“*Argh!*”

She felt a sharp pain in her head. This side effect came from the partial sealing of her memories about the royal family. A fragment rebounded within her consciousness.

I swear by my name to serve Your Highness forever.

This memory occurred a long time ago on an unusually cold day. His voice reached her ears and they met eyes even though he knelt. For the first time, a servant had pledged loyalty to her.

Kindspring, I too receive you as my servant forever.

The young princess greeted her first servant with manners that hadn’t been refined yet.

— I told you, it’s more likely that Kim Suho told him. Don’t worry about it too much, but I am curious. What kind of servant was he?

Bell’s voice interrupted her recollection.

“Why should I tell you? Get rid of this skill now if you still want your head on your shoulders.”

Jin Sahyuk sharply responded. Bell sensed a change in the atmosphere and chose to withdraw his skill without further comments.

— Okay, I'll leave now. Take care.

He disappeared and Jin Sahyuk became completely alone.

“...”

She looked outside the window in heavy silence. Her old servant's name, engraved in her heart, approached like a blade. Her theory had to be impossible.

Kindspring was already an adult when she was just five. He assisted her as a swordsman and didn't use a gun or a bow. Furthermore, he wouldn't have tried to kill her so viciously if he used to serve her. However, Jin Sahyuk soon recalled how the loyal Kindspring met his end.

She could only blame herself as a temperamental princess full of ambition. She chose to abandon her most loyal servant to recruit a stronger knight.

“If... If that really is the case...”

Age didn't matter much at this point. Hadn't she (a princess) and Kim Suho (the lowly varlet of the knights) already come back to life through reincarnation?

“What do you think?”

Jin Sahyuk asked the princess reflected in the window as she tried to recall her old servant's face. However, she shook her head before the princess could reply.

“Something must be wrong with my head.”

“Haaa...”

Jin Sahyuk deeply sighed and closed her eyes. She could see the snowy northern winds outside the royal castle window. The castle's warmth and its scent piled up like snow in her heart.

A long time had passed, yet the memories remained fresh. Suddenly, she felt a weight on her eyelids and opened them. Her vision had turned blurry and the former princess realized she had been crying.

* * *

[28F, Demon Metropolis]

I returned to the 28th floor. First, I needed to organize my rewards.

[You have gained 300 SP from killing a devil!] [2 Devil Annihilation – You have accomplished an amazing achievement!] [You have obtained an authority from annihilating 2 devils.]

[Authority: Devil Hunter] ▷You may acquire this authority for 5000 SP after annihilating 2 devils. — Abyssal Monster: Will allow you to use [Partial Devilization] for a short period. — Crime and Punishment: Will allow you to hunt evil existences more easily. Will also allow you to instantly dispose of up to 6 evil existences every 72 hours (their state of existence cannot be too high).

[Master Sharpshooter has been promoted to grade 2! Grade 1 is now within arm's reach!] [The SP required for the authority, Devil Hunter, has decreased by 50% after killing Plucas. In addition, you will receive a special bonus when you acquire the authority.]

All of these messages popped up after I killed Plucas. *[Devil Hunter]* and *[Grade 2 Master Sharpshooter]* undeniably stood out the most.

“Devil Hunter...”

It originally cost 5000 SP, but I only needed 2,500 SP after the 50% discount. Authorities functioned like higher ranked gifts.

[Would you like to spend 2500 SP and acquire the authority, Devil Hunter?]

This could be a double-edged sword, but I had no reason to decline. I could always delete it if it turned out unprofitable.

[Yes] [Acquiring the authority, Devil Hunter...]

I didn't feel any different after acquiring it since this authority didn't improve any physical stats.

"Partial devilization..."

I used it on my right arm to find out.

BOOONG—

Magic power gushed from stigma. My arm thickened and my fingernails became sharp. It didn't take long for my blue magic power to turn black. Then my arm took on a shape similar to Plucas' hand.

"So this is how divine power absorption works."

I quickly understood the mechanism behind it. It resembled how Misteltein absorbed evil existences and now I could absorb them into my own body too.

"Huuu..."

This could come in handy someday. No, I could start using it right away. My enhanced arm didn't mean I suddenly had to engage in hand-to-hand combat. Shooting arrows or bullets with this devilized arm would produce even more destructive power.

"Hmm."

I stood up after I got the basics down. Now I should test it in an actual battle. I looked into the distance and discovered Aileen's team.

They would soon reach the Demon King's Castle and Kim Suho would challenge him repeatedly. Despite the numerous defeats, Kim Suho would never give up and eventually crush the king through an extraordinary awakening.

The demon king kept engaging with Kim Suho without killing him

because—

— KWAAANG!

A loud boom came from their party's location. The demon king's servants must be attacking.

— This lump of light will burn all of you alive!

The time had come for Fenrir to make a cool entrance. There wouldn't be much left when I got there, but I could still leave an impression. *[Crime and Punishment]* should easily defeat 6 demons.

I ran towards the forest with my gun.

* * *

[Himalayan Daybreak]

CLANG! Two swords clashed with a heavy sound. At a glance, the individuals seemed equal in strength from the fierce magic power and sparks of flame. However, this marked the end of their duel. Chae Nayun managed to return the first 19 attacks, but the 20th violently threw her back.

“Ahhhhhh...”

She rolled down the snowy slope and got back on her feet right away. However, she wouldn't be able to continue in her current condition.

“You lost 100 out of 100 times. At this rate, you won't be able to get what you want.”

Heynckes smirked at her. Chae Nayun trembled in pain, but still smiled.

“Can't you see the gap is decreasing?”

“Really? I don't see it.”

Heynckes shook his head at her sly remark.

“You just wait. I’ll win in 2 weeks.”

The Nine Star and the high-intermediate rank hero had made a certain agreement: Chae Nayun would try her best and Heynckes would only use one hand without any magic power.

The Lord of Steel still toyed with her under these unfair conditions. Things had improved a bit, but the difference between them might as well have been between a newborn and a grown adult.

“That clause about you not using magic power is weird. Your body doesn’t require magic power in the first place. You should give yourself a different penalty.”

“*Haha*. Your head would’ve split by now if I used magic power. Be quiet and let’s head in.”

“...”

Heynckes still treated her like a child, which bothered her. Anyone would consider a duel with one of the Nine Stars valuable experience, but Chae Nayun prioritized finding Kim Joongho. She didn’t have any time to waste.

“Oh, right. Your grandfather caused quite a stir.”

Heynckes looked back at her as he grabbed the doorknob.

“A stir? My grandfather did?”

“Yes, I heard he killed a devil.”

“Devil?”

“Correct, a devil.”

Kiik— Heynckes opened the door and Chae Nayun quickly followed

him inside.

“What does that mean?”

“Well, it means he literally killed a devil. Are you dense?”

“Yeah, I’m pretty dumb. Anyways, what do you mean by devil?”

Heynckes trudged towards the counter without answering.

“Hello, old man?”

“You know, like Satan. It seems a real devil appeared.”

“Pardon?”

Chae Nayun froze while trying to process this inconceivable idea.

“The man you’re looking for, Kim Joongho, also said he possessed a devil.”

The name Kim Joongho popped up unexpectedly. Chae Nayun widened her eyes and ran towards the counter where Heynckes stood.

“What, what do you mean? Old man, tell me more!”

Heynckes looked at the flustered Chae Nayun and calmly continued.

“I thought he had gone mad. He looked mad, sounded mad, but kept insisting he owned a devil’s corpse.”

Heynckes stroked his chin as if reminiscing.

“Maybe he wasn’t completely mad.”

Then he took out a copy of the Violet Times, but Chae Nayun quickly snatched it from him.

Chapter 244

Sudden Change (3)

Chae Nayun snatched the newspaper out of Heynckes' hands.

[Immortal Exterminates Devil]

The headline mentioned that her grandfather killed a devil. Chae Nayun only found out now since she lived away from the internet. Her eyes widened and she stuffed the contents into her head.

[Djinns have finally summoned the root of evil. The devil Plucas descended on Earth through a human host.] [Chae Joochul submitted Plucas' horn as evidence and is currently treating his injuries from the battle at the association's hospital.] [The Hero Association issued a sanction against Pandemonium and various djinn groups...]

She found the news hard to believe. Chae Nayun looked at Heynckes as she tightly held the newspaper.

“W-What does this mean? A devil?”

“Hm? You didn't know?”

Heynckes found Chae Nayun's reaction strange.

“Of course not. How would I?”

“Then what do you think now that you know?”

“Eh? Mm... That my grandfather is amazing? Well, I'm surprised that something like a devil exists.”

“Hmm.” Heynckes crossed his arms and rubbed his chin. Then he whispered to himself, “Is she acting dumb or actually stupid...”

“Old man, I can hear you.”

Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes at him as he shrugged.

“*Haha*, at least you have sharp ears.”

“What am I supposed to think?”

“Didn’t I tell you before?”

Chae Nayun had stayed in Heynckes’ inn for a month. Naturally, she told him everything and also mentioned the theory that Chae Jinyoon might’ve been a djinn even though she strongly denied it. She needed to find Kim Joongho for advice.

“What do you mean? You never mentioned anything about a devil.” Chae Nayun innocently asked. Her eyes burned with a desire to know.

“*Haa...*”

Heynckes found it hard to believe Chae Nayun couldn’t even recall what he previously said. He simply closed his mouth when he realized it might be inevitable. The theory that Chae Jinyoon might’ve been a djinn didn’t exist in her head. It didn’t have to do with her intelligence. She subconsciously rejected it.

“Kim Joongho said he had a devil’s corpse.”

Heynckes explained as Chae Nayun nodded with a serious face.

“Yes, and my grandfather killed a devil.”

“...”

Chae Nayun murmured as if she knew something, but her thoughts wouldn’t continue past Chae Joochul. She refused to connect the dots between Kim Joongho’s devil corpse and Chae Jinyoon. Heynckes couldn’t help but feel a bit bad.

“You can think about the rest yourself. The sun is setting soon, so you’ll have all the time to think.”

“*Huh?* What’s that?”

Heynckes poured some beer into a mug and handed it to Chae Nayun, hoping it would serve as fuel for thinking.

“Ah, thank you. I was just getting thirsty.”

“Also, we’ll be changing the rules starting tomorrow.”

Heynckes raised his index finger while she gulped down the beer.

“One good strike. That’ll be enough.”

The Lord of Steel, Kryne Heynckes, had walked the path of swordsmanship for 60 years. That amounted to 21,900 days or 525,600 hours. Two generations had passed during this time and a tiny country in East Asia rose into a superpower.

Even as his surroundings changed, Heynckes only ever suffered one defeat in his entire life. The fact that he made defeating him the condition for Chae Nayun’s victory meant he never had any intentions of telling her about Kim Joongho’s whereabouts. He would never disclose a client’s information as an innkeeper.

“Even you should be capable of doing that much.”

However, the circumstances had changed. He couldn’t just gloss over Kim Joongho’s words now that a devil had appeared.

“Don’t regret it.”

Chae Nayun stared at him before taking out a cigarette from her pocket. She smoked out of habit now, but Heynckes didn’t like smoking.

“No smoking inside the inn. Do it outside if you have to.”

“Oh, okay. Just so you know, this is how I refill my magic power.”

“What?”

Chae Nayun snickered and explained about the trait she obtained from the Tower of Wish. *[Hard to Kill]* gave her the strange ability to convert toxic substances into magic power.

“The Tower of Wish has something like that? What an interesting place.”

“Why don’t you go in? I’m sure you’ll become a rising star in no time.”

“No, I’ll be 90 if I blink a few times. Why would I go inside a tower?”

“Don’t be like that. Look, I got this longsword from the tower.”

Chae Nayun proudly showed Heynckes her *[Lv.6 Jack Churchill’s Claymore]*. Then she recalled another effective good in her possession.

[Invitation Letter to the Love Room]

She reached into her pocket and took it out to make sure she didn’t lose it. Thankfully, the letter hadn’t disappeared.

“What’s that?”

“Oh, this?”

“Yeah.”

“Mmm... how do I explain this...”

Chae Nayun brought it with her so she could one day meet the friend she made in a game. She left the tower without ever meeting him, but always believed they would eventually meet.

“It’s a talisman.”

“Talisman?”

“Yep.”

She placed the letter away with a big grin.

“It’ll protect me from death at least once.”

* * *

[Seoul, Korea – Yoo Yeonha’s Mansion]

Yoo Jinwoong told Yoo Yeonha about the Kwang-Oh Incident after her teary confession. The perpetrator finally revealed the truth she wanted to avoid. Yoo Yeonha hadn’t slept for 2 days. After she woke up, her exhausted body recovered to its peak condition and she returned home with Yoo Jinwoong.

“I’m sorry, Yeonha.”

The father and daughter sat facing each other in the mansion’s living room. Yoo Jinwoong apologized once again to his daughter. His past deed had come around like a boomerang and struck his daughter’s heart. Her pain also hurt him too.

The fact that he couldn’t do anything pained him even more. They couldn’t go against Chae Joochul yet no matter how powerful Essence of the Strait grew. Chae Joochul’s influence became unrivaled now as the Devil Slayer. No one would dare ask him to atone for his sins. Whoever did so would face grave consequences no matter their background.

“You don’t have to apologize to me. You know this too, Dad.”

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled. They couldn’t turn back time anymore. Still, she would never give up. She planned to make Chae Joochul pay for his sins no matter how long it took.

“Here.”

“...?”

To achieve this goal, Yoo Yeonha handed a small USB to her father. Yoo Jinwoong tilted his head as he received it.

“It’s what uncle found about Chae Jinyoon’s murder.”

This USB contained the results of Yoo Jinhyuk’s investigation and the truth that Chae Joochul wanted to hide.

“Uncle? You mean Yoo Jinhyuk?”

He felt slightly shocked to hear his little brother’s name.

“Yeah.”

“*Mmm...* Then I know about it too. He said he saw a tattoo, right?”

“No.”

Yoo Yeonha shook her head. Yoo Jinhyuk also found out about Kim Hajin’s tattoo, but that was only the tip of the iceberg.

“Uncle found something much bigger. He didn’t say anything because he feared Chae Joochul would kill him.”

Chae Jinyoon’s corpse had mutated. Thick demonic energy greater than any djinn engulfed his body and his right arm had entirely deviled. For this reason, Chae Shinhyuk ordered Kim Joongho to hide the corpse from Chae Nayun.

Yoo Jinhyuk knew many secrets.

“Dad, Chae Joochul revealed that he killed a devil. After seeing that, I became certain again.”

Yoo Jinwoong plugged the USB into his smartwatch. A holographic window popped up and he quickly read it. Soon, his eyes shot open.

“Chae Jinyoon became the incarnation of a devil.”

“...”

Yoo Jinwoong stared at her in shock. Next, Yoo Yeonha told him exactly what Kim Hajin had told her in the past. A great evil known as a devil’s seed had been placed in Chae Jinyoon’s heart and couldn’t be removed.

“Then...”

Yoo Jinwoong muttered in a daze.

“Right, he knew about all this and killed Chae Jinyoon himself.”

“...”

Yoo Jinwoong had experienced many things in life as Essence of the Strait’s leader. Even if he wasn’t a genius, he believed his experiences had made him more intelligent. Even so, he didn’t dare accept what his daughter just told him.

“Yeonha, even Chae Joochul said he had a hard time dealing with a devil. How can a man, who was only a cadet at the time...”

“That’s because the devil inside Chae Jinyoon hadn’t fully awakened. Plus, that person was a lot stronger than you think.”

“Ho...”

Yoo Jinwoong could tell his daughter didn’t just simply trust this man. He recalled how she referred to him as precious. He knew Yoo Yeonha didn’t easily trust people. *What kind of feelings did they share to have such a relationship? For how long?*

As a father, Yoo Jinwoong couldn’t help but feel a bit jealous. However, he quickly chided himself and shook off those thoughts. Then he voiced the question in his head.

“Then why didn’t he reveal the truth to anyone? Ah...”

Yoo Jinwoong closed his mouth at the stupid question.

“Right.”

The devil’s seed inside Chae Jinyoon couldn’t be proven. No one had even heard of a devil’s seed before. Even if he had evidence, Chae Joochul wouldn’t have accepted that his grandson became a devil. Chae Joochul also possessed enough power to turn truth into falsehood.

“Still, I find it hard to believe that a single high schooler...”

“I agree. I don’t think he did it alone. Jeronimo probably helped him.”

Hearing this, Yoo Jinwoong quickly nodded. He recalled Kim Hajin’s nickname, which spread far and wide across the world.

“Jeronimo’s... Fenrir.”

“Exactly.”

The world’s strongest mercenary group that stopped a national catastrophe with only twenty or so members. Their estimated level of influence equaled the Vast Expanse. It would be entirely possible with Jeronimo’s help.

“This is all I know.”

“I see.” Yoo Yeonha stood up.

“You can go now, Dad. I’m tired. I’m going to sleep.”

“Yeonha, why don’t you stay with me for today—”

“I’ll tell Mom.”

“...”

Yoo Jinwoong reluctantly got up too. He didn't fear his wife, but he understood his current position. He didn't want to leave his daughter, but could only be thankful that she didn't already hate him.

"I'll head out now. I'll do my best, so don't bear everything alone—"

"Stay put, Dad. Chae Joochul's influence is unrivaled nowadays. I'm worried."

"I will."

Yoo Jinwoong warmly smiled.

"See you."

He left as Yoo Yeonha stared at his back for a long time.

"Haa..."

She sighed and paced around the living room alone. Darkness blanketed the world outside. It had grown silent as if even time had stopped. Yoo Yeonha thought about Kim Hajin for a long time in this frightening silence.

Kim Hajin knew that Chae Jinyoon would become a devil, but something still didn't make sense. How did he know that Chae Jinyoon carried a devil's seed without any evidence?

"He returned from the future. That's the only way."

She finally concluded what she always hesitated to admit.

Kim Hajin had been a regressor just like Shin Myungchul.

"Haa..."

She slowly walked to her bedroom. A large bed sat in the corner and she blankly stared at it. Then she slowly approached and buried herself in its embrace.

The bed he gifted her still felt comfortable. He didn't exist anymore, but his bed remained. Yoo Yeonha carefully sniffed it. The scent that once filled the bed had grown faint. Her own scent had erased it. Saddened by this, Yoo Yeonha covered her face. She noticed all sorts of hints now that she thought about it.

He knew what food I liked. We probably had a close relationship before he went back in time. It makes sense that he knew my favorite food. What kind of a person was I? What relationship did we have? How did I end up telling him my most embarrassing secret?

Yoo Yeonha wanted to cast away her sorrow with such worries. However, her heart only grew heavier the more she thought about him. She cried in her bed and the tears wouldn't stop. Her regrets felt especially painful. She continued to cry as if the sky had fallen and trembled in agony until she fell asleep from exhaustion.

* * *

[28F – Forest to the Demon King's Castle]

A strange group of demons attacked Aileen's party. Some didn't die until their core had been destroyed and some could physically attack while looking like fog or mist. Others continued to move and attack even after being killed.

"Aaak, when is this going to end?"

Aileen angrily shouted after an hour-long struggle against an endless flood of monsters. They managed to kill 46 out of 53 demons, but the remaining 7 became quite tricky.

"Haa... So annoying." Aileen went all out on the frontlines and felt exhausted.

"Are you okay, Suho?" Jin Seyeon asked.

"Yes, I'm okay."

Kim Suho busily slashed what couldn't be physically touched and

should be exhausted by now, but remained completely fine. Jin Seyeon felt like she knew why. Every time he cut down a demon, the holy sword in his hands absorbed its power. This seemed to infinitely recycle his power.

“Those guys will probably be a bit tricky.”

Kim Suho pointed his sword at the 6 remaining demons. The demon king’s authority blessed these high rank demons. Authorities existed above the realm of gifts, so Kim Suho’s Sword Saint abilities didn’t work on them. He had to face them with pure swordsmanship.

— You humans are stronger than we thought.

— But we’re bored now. No more playing around.

“Of course, that doesn’t mean I think I’ll lose.”

Kim Suho smiled and began to gather magic power for his ultimate skill. He used Misteltein as a catalyst for this secret technique that could topple even a mountain. However, starlight flashed from the sky before his golden magic power could take shape.

Chwaaaa...

Streaks of light fell like shooting stars.

“W-What?”

“...?”

“Wow...”

Kim Suho canceled his ultimate skill while Jin Seyeon and Aileen looked at the beautiful scene in a daze. Yi Yongha took out a camera and began taking pictures. The demons only stared with disdain.

Soon, the shooting stars touched the ground. The starlights obviously targeted the demons. However, they stood in place without much

thought and felt confident in withstanding these attacks.

— *Hah?*

Then a short death throe escaped one demon's mouth. Kim Hajin's authority, [*Crime and Punishment*], turned ordinary magic bullets into light attribute bullets with 4.5 streaks of stigma. They pierced the 6 demons and directly burned their souls.

"What?"

The shooting stars closed the curtains to a long play and the forest grew silent. Kim Suho finally shouted as everyone stood in a daze.

"Hajin!"

Aileen, Jin Seyeon, and Yi Yongha all turned around. A man in a black robe stood on top of a tall demon tree. He lightly jumped down and walked over with a smile. His steps felt full of confidence.

"Hello."

Other than Kim Suho, everyone else felt shocked by the strength of Kim Hajin/Fenrir's bullets.

"Y-You... How...?"

Kim Hajin simply smiled at Aileen, who pointed at him in shock. Meanwhile, Kim Suho skipped over and grabbed his shoulder.

"Ah, I knew it was you. How did you get through the Colosseum?"

"Colosseum? I don't know. I've never been there. I just sneaked my way here."

Kim Suho completely fell for Kim Hajin's innocent lie.

"Ah, that makes sense since you're good at hiding. It's great to see you, Hajin."

Kim Hajin looked over at Aileen after sharing a warm hug with Kim Suho.

“I came because of all the noise. You’re all going to the Demon King’s Castle, right?”

“*Huh?* Oh, yeah.” Aileen nodded.

“Then let’s go together,” Kim Hajin added.

“*Huu.*” Aileen sighed and suddenly plopped on the ground.

“I don’t know. We’re all exhausted. I’m going to go home for a while. I have magic power exhaustion.”

“Don’t worry about that.” Kim Hajin took out a card with a confident smile.

“What’s that?”

This time, Jin Seyeon showed some interest. She stealthily walked up and stared at the card in his hand.

“It’s an 8 star card I got from the Card Kingdom.”

“W-What? 8, 8 stars?”

“R-Really?”

Aileen and Jin Seyeon’s eyes widened. They only obtained a 5 star card at best after spending tons of money.

“Yep, this will wash away all your exhaustion.”

Kim Hajin shook the card.

[Miraculous Teahouse] [Space Summoning] [8 star] Effective Good ○ A mysterious teahouse that can never be found. The tea it sells contains miraculous effects. ● Will summon the mysterious teahouse to a place of

your choice. ● May be summoned 3 times.

Kim Hajin snapped his fingers with the 8 star card in his hand.

Snap!

Golden light instantly shot out and a small teahouse appeared in the demon realm's forest.

Chapter 245

The End of the Tower (1)

The teahouse appeared on our right after I activated the 8 star card. Everyone stared at the tiny colorful bricks in surprise.

“Wha, what’s that?”

Aileen’s eyes became even rounder.

“It’s called the Miraculous Teahouse and it’s the best place to recover from fatigue.”

I glanced at Kim Suho and Jin Seyeon, who seemed equally surprised. Yi Yongha kept taking pictures of the teahouse as if he’d become a photoholic. Jin Seyeon came back to her senses first.

“Fenrir, is it okay for you to use an 8 star card? We’re thankful, but... I presume an 8 star card is quite valuable.”

“Huh? Ah...”

I guess she felt concerned because cards became the most popular items on the auction house. Moreover, players always bragged in the community about their 6 star and 7 star cards. Something like an 8 star card never even appeared there.

“It’s fine. When else would I use it if not now?”

I didn’t consider this card such a common item either, but I could use it up to 3 times. We couldn’t recover our stamina here unless we used it.

“Everyone, don’t just stand there. Let’s get moving. Hey, let’s go.”

I tapped Kim Suho's shoulder.

"*Huh?* Oh, right." He nodded and we went to the teahouse together.

"...8 stars."

"Seyeon, do you remember how much 7 star cards sold for?"

"I don't, but I do know they cost a fortune."

"I don't mean to brag, but Hajin gave me an 8 star card as a gift before." Kim Suho suddenly interrupted Yi Yongha and Jin Seyeon's conversation.

"You sure do sound like you're bragging."

The trio happily chatted as they followed me. However, Aileen moved oddly slow. Something felt wrong, so I carefully studied her before snatching her wrist.

"*Hiek!* Y-You scared me! What?"

The sudden physical contact surprised her.

"You wanna die? Do you?"

Aileen tried to shake off my hand, but I stubbornly rolled up her sleeve. She couldn't resist because of what lay underneath. A black bruise ran across her thin, pale forearm. It looked like demonic energy poisoning when demonic energy festered over time in a wound.

"What is this bruise, Lady Aileen?"

"When did you get hurt?"

The trio each reacted differently. Jin Seyeon shouted and examined the bruise, Yi Yongha worryingly took pictures of it, and Kim Suho took out some medicinal herbs.

“Ugh, this is so embarrassing...”

Aileen shook off my hand with her bruise uncovered. Faint tears began to gather in her eyes.

“It just happened. You know, the one that uses poison? Even Spirit Speech doesn’t work on this. I think it’s a curse or something.”

This curse probably came from a demon blessed by the demon king’s authority. Authorities ranked higher than gifts, so she couldn’t possibly do anything. Spirit Speech, though powerful, remained in the realm of gifts.

“You don’t need to be embarrassed. It just shows you tried your best to protect everyone. *Ah*, we don’t need those herbs.”

I stopped Kim Suho from mashing the herbs into a paste.

“We can do the detoxification inside the teahouse.”

I pulled the doorknob. *Clang*— The door opened with a familiar chime and I immediately felt a cool breeze.

“Everyone, this way.”

The interior appeared much bigger than its outside appearance. It featured immaculate decorations and grass swayed on the floor. A huge tree stood in the middle and I could also hear a stream running in the distance. It felt as if we stepped right into the heart of nature.

“*Woah*. What is this place?”

Aileen entered last and seemed to have forgotten all about her pain and embarrassment.

“As expected of an 8 star card...”

“Where did you get this card, Hajin?”

“I’m pretty lucky.”

I simply smiled at Kim Suho’s question and wrapped up the conversation. Then we approached the counter. The shop owner dozed off in a chair. This person had long hair and soft, fair skin with big eyes and long eyelashes. The owner appeared to be a woman, but could also be a man with cherry lips and a sharp nose. No, members of their race could pass as both men and women. Either way, they resembled everyone’s ideal beauty.

“Elf? Hey, isn’t this person an elf?”

Aileen exclaimed in surprise. Indeed, the shop owner had an elf’s pointed ears. We all stared in awe when the elf finally woke up.

“Ah, customers have come?”

The elf smiled. His or her enchanting voice lingered in my ears. For a moment, I hallucinated that the world suddenly lit up. Everyone here probably experienced the same.

I made elves androgynous in my setting. They emphasized inner qualities rather than outward appearance when falling in love and decided their sex based on their partner’s preference.

“You’re customers, correct?”

“What? Ah, yes. We’re customers.”

I never imagined the shop owner would be an elf. I managed to stay calm and asked, “Here, *cough*, what kind of teas do you have?”

“We have a lot. Look over there.”

The elf pointed at the menu hanging on the wall.

[Turquoise Wind] [Green Sweetness] [Mother Nature’s Vitality] [Sad Engagement...]

“How much is the tea for detoxifying demonic energy?”

“I don’t accept money. Instead...”

The elf suddenly paused and looked at the tiny Aileen next to me. It seemed the elf detected an aura of demonic energy on her.

“*Mm*. I see she’s under a curse.”

“*Ah*, yes.”

“Is she a dwarf?”

Aileen, who looked around the shop while humming, suddenly put on a menacing expression. Her face turned red as a tomato. Then she lowered her head and began to tremble in anger.

“You...”

Suddenly, Aileen grew taller by tiptoeing.

“What did you say?”

“Oh, you aren’t? I’m sorry. Your small body just contained so much magic power. It’s a characteristic of dwarves.”

“Wha, what? A characteristic of dwarves? You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you? Hey, let go. Let me go...”

Jin Seyeon intervened before Aileen could cause a scene. Aileen flailed her short arms and legs with all her strength, but none of it seemed to work.

“Seriously, a dwarf? You keep calling me a dwarf. You must be soooo happy you’re tall and pretty. Good for you!”

“Lady Aileen, please calm down.”

“How can I be calm? She just called me a dwarf!”

A tiny fuss began, but the elf turned towards Kim Suho. He also curiously looked at the elf.

“Beautiful.” The elf spoke.

“Pardon?”

The elf probably meant Kim Suho’s inner qualities. He thanked the elf in a daze and nodded.

“I’ll offer the first tea free of charge since one of you is in dire need of detoxification.”

“Thank you.”

The elf began to brew the tea. I watched their hands to see if I could learn the recipe using Dwarf’s Dexterity and the thousand-mile eyes.

“Ho...”

Just one tea contained too many ingredients. I counted at least 179 ingredients and that didn’t include the elf’s magic power. Perhaps I could imitate the flow of magic power with stigma, but it would be impossible to gather all those ingredients.

“All done.”

The elf offered Aileen a cup of tea. However, Aileen still seemed sullen and glared at the elf before snatching the tea.

“This better be good...”

Sniff sniff. The dwarf smelled the tea and all her anger and irritation instantly disappeared. Then the dwarf sipped it as if she had been placed under a spell.

“Wow...”

The elf’s tea had enchanted the dwarf. I coughed and looked at the elf.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

“Our meeting seems to be fated. Will you enlighten me with your name?”

I struck a pose and placed my hand on the table while running my fingers through my hair like a model.

“...”

The elf didn’t reply. My efforts didn’t seem very effective, so I turned to the right. In my opinion, the right side of my face looked more handsome than my left.

“...”

The elf still didn’t respond, so I finally resorted to my special melancholic gaze. The elf finally showed a reaction.

“What are you doing?”

“*Ah, haha. Hahahaha.* It’s nothing.”

I scratched my neck with nervous laughter. I thought we might be able to receive an extra tea or two, but it seems I wasn’t good enough. Well, not that it mattered.

“Do you have any wood?” I asked the elf.

“Wood?”

“Yes.”

I already knew what elves liked. They loved trees and possessed the ability to breathe life into them. Elves especially loved cute wooden dolls.

“I’m great at making wooden dolls.”

* * *

We spent 3 days at the teahouse. Aileen loved it more than anyone else. The word dwarf angered her from time to time, but she fell in love with the cakes the elf made.

“Today is the last day for business.”

However, we had to say farewell now. The elf looked at us with a sad expression.

I felt disappointed I never got to fully utilize my medicinal memory physique. Still, I learned how to brew almost every kind of elven tea. I should be able to recreate them on Earth with the right ingredients.

“Thank you for everything you’ve done.”

Jin Seyeon bowed. Yi Yongha and Aileen also pitched in a few comments of appreciation while Kim Suho handed the elf a letter he worked hard to write.

“Thanks for everything.”

“Oh, Suho...”

The elf seemed quite touched by his letter. Kim Suho certainly looked like the main character as I watched them.

“And this is from me.”

Tears gathered in the elf’s eyes, who seemed to be on the verge of declaring their sex as female. I handed over my last wooden doll, a cute puppy. The elf happily infused it with magic power and the doll began to walk.

“Thank you.”

“Please take care.”

“I’ll take one last picture to commemorate this memory.”

“Bye. Thanks for the cake and the chocolate. I’ll enjoy them.”

Jin Seyeon, Kim Suho, Yi Yongha, and Aileen all said their goodbyes.

“Yes, goodbye. I had a lot of fun these past 3 days.”

The warm-hearted elf saw us off with teary eyes. *Kwaaaaa...* The teahouse began to shake as we stepped outside. We returned to the demon realm’s gloomy scenery and the teahouse had already disappeared when I looked back.

“You all rested well, right?”

Everyone seemed a bit forlorn. Starting now, we couldn’t spare any time to feel lonely.

“Let’s get started. Everyone, get ready.”

* * *

[Vladivostok, Russia — Evil Society’s Headquarters]

One gloomy day, a strange being visited Evil Society’s headquarters. The being introduced himself as a messenger, though he clearly looked like a monster.

“...”

Kim Hakpyo rose to the top of Evil Society after the Tower of Wish and greeted the monster. Its appearance resembled a human, except hair covered its body and its head resembled a wolf. This monster could be called a werewolf.

“You’re the messenger?”

— Yes.

A strange sound like scratching metal came from the monster's throat. Kim Hakpyo didn't wish to ever hear it again. He asked with a frown.

"I see. So what's your business here?"

This werewolf undoubtedly belonged to those famous humanoid monsters. It felt quite bothersome to deal with them, but Kim Hakpyo couldn't just brush them aside considering Pandemonium's situation. *I should at least listen to what they have to say.*

— Our king, Orden, demands your loyalty.

"...?"

Kim Hakpyo froze at the insolent remark.

"What? Did I hear that right? Say it again. Lo, loyalty?"

— Yes, that is correct.

Kim Hakpyo remained silent and the werewolf simply stared at him. Quite a bit of time passed in complete silence. Suddenly, loud laughter escaped from Kim Hakpyo's mouth. His laughter shook the earth.

"*Uhahahaha!*"

The king's envoy took this laughter as a positive response. The werewolf continued with a faint smile.

— Our king shall rule the world, but he is benevolent enough to share portions of it with the djinns...

"You son of a bitch!"

Kim Hakpyo let out an explosive roar. This time, it bore magic power and shook the werewolf's skull.

“You mad beasts! You never fully grew your brains?”

Kim Hakpyo shouted and slammed his fists. *KWAAANG!* A thunderous roar filled the air and magic power spread out in a huge shockwave.

“Bastard, who do you think you’re talking rubbish to?”

Kim Hakpyo grabbed the confused werewolf’s shoulder. *Chwaaak...* He tore the wolf’s arm off before it could say anything. With his other hand, he grabbed the wolf’s head and slammed it to the ground.

“You little piece of shit! Who do you think I am? What king? King?”

Kim Hakpyo repeatedly stomped on the werewolf’s head to release his fury. *Puk— Puk— Puk—!* His trampling continued at a regular interval. The werewolf remained on the floor, barely breathing.

“*Haaaaa...*”

Kim Hakpyo sighed and knelt on one knee. Then he grabbed the werewolf’s head and pulled him up to make eye contact.

“Listen to me well, wolf.”

Kim Hakpyo’s eyes sharply glared at him. His scarlet eyes, characteristic of djinns, stared right into the werewolf’s yellow eyes.

“I do not know nor am I interested in knowing your king, but...”

Kim Hakpyo opened his mouth wide and a thick fog of demonic energy flowed out to encompass his entire body. He transformed into something much more horrendous than a monster and showed off his perfect devilization.

— Tell him I’ll bite his head off if I ever catch sight of him.

The djinn’s voice boiled with rage and demonic energy.

We finally arrived at the Demon King's Castle after traveling for 3 days. Huge walls surrounded it and gave off a gloomy vibe. It also gave off the characteristic aura of someone strong.

"First, I think it would be best to travel underground into the castle."

We hid behind a nearby bush and began our strategic meeting. Of course, I led the meeting since only I knew about the castle's structure and blind spots.

"How are we going to infiltrate the castle from underground?"

Nom nom. Aileen asked as she chomped on chocolate.

"The eastern wall and the northern wall each have a crack that leads inside."

"*Nyam.* And how do you know that?"

"My eyesight is exceptionally good. You know how a satellite sees, right?"

Aileen nodded.

"I can see the entire castle that way. My field of vision isn't just horizontal, but also vertical. It's easy to spot a gap if you're looking from above."

"*Ah...* Is that part of your gift or is it a skill?"

"Well, let's say it's part of my gift."

I faintly smiled as Jin Seyeon stepped up.

"Well then, we should divide into teams since there's 5 of us. One team of 2 and another of 3."

“Yes, good idea.”

I agreed. We would increase our chances of getting caught if all of us moved together and it would also be more difficult to find an escape route.

“Then Hajin and I will...”

“*Huh?* Hajin has to go with me.”

Opinions conflicted regarding the teams. It seemed both Jin Seyeon and Kim Suho wanted to pair up with me.

“Suho? What’s wrong?” Jin Seyeon tilted her head at him.

“You’ve never opposed me until now...”

“Well, it’s just having 2 sharpshooters on one team doesn’t make sense.”

“No, Hajin might as well be considered a close range fighter. Remember what he said last time? Guns are better for close quarter combat.”

“That’s true, but Hajin and I work better in terms of teamwork. After all, you’ve only met him a few times.”

“Shouldn’t we consider efficiency first? What do you think would happen if 2 sharpshooters form a team? They’ll never get caught, right? Since we’re both sharpshooters who excel in secretly traveling...”

A full-scale quarrel broke out. To my surprise, it continued for 5 minutes, 10 minutes, then 15 minutes...

Kim Suho aside, why is Jin Seyeon so persistent?

A thought suddenly crossed my mind.

Jin Seyeon had asked me about the Kwang-Oh Incident when I disguised as Black Lotus. In that case, Jin Seyeon also...?

“That’s enough. You, come with me.”

Aileen pulled me by the sleeve and could no longer listen to them.

“*Eh?* Why must you step in, Lady Aileen?”

“She’s right. You don’t suit him.”

“Oh, whatever. Shut up before I use Spirit Speech.”

Aileen seized me by force and we finally decided on the teams. Team 1 consisted of Aileen and me. Team 2 consisted of Kim Suho, Jin Seyeon, and Yi Yongha. This turned out to be the most balanced combination.

“We finished forming teams now. Kim Hajin, tell us the plan.”

“*Ah*, of course. The plan goes like this: the castle has a total of 2 secret cracks. One in the east and the other in the north. We’ll use these openings to...”

* * *

After our briefing, Aileen and I entered the castle through the opening in the north. Even the smallest footsteps could prove lethal, so we remained silent. The demonic energy grew thicker the further we advanced. Then I suddenly heard a small groan from her.

“Aileen, is something wrong?”

“*Ah*, it’s just... that bruise from earlier. Wait a sec. This will be better.”

She made a mask using Spirit Speech and wore it to avoid breathing in more demonic energy.

“I’m all set. Let’s go.”

Her solution would only temporarily work, but we had no other choice. We continued even in this darkness. However, we both knew the enemy would show up the moment we let our guard down.

Tzzzt...

That moment finally came. Sparks went off as we looked up at the big chandelier hanging from the ceiling. A thin ray of light could be seen above it.

“It’s the enemy, right?”

“Yes, it’s probably the middle boss.”

Aileen couldn’t see in the dark, but I could. The demon castle’s middle boss stood on top of the chandelier.

— A pleasure to meet you all...

The boss’ slimy voice felt like being licked by a snake. The development so far resembled a cliché. The party split into two and the protagonist would fight the true boss while his comrades battled the middle boss.

That’s true, but...

I glanced at Aileen next to me. She seemed strangely distressed and her expression didn’t look too good.

— My name is Kain, the affectionate puppeteer who has been waiting for you to arrive...

The voice introduced himself.

Thud, thud.

I suddenly heard loud footsteps, but not with my own perception. This

sensation came from what Spartan shared with me. I smiled since I didn't have to worry anymore.

— *Oi*, you sure this is the right way?

The strongest warrior in all of Goryeo and a soldier of fortune who swept the country with a single sword. Cheok Jungyeong left an everlasting impression on Korean history and currently approached us.

Chapter 246

The End of the Tower (2)

My novel's settings grew vaguer the further it progressed, but Kain the Puppeteer remained especially ambiguous. I described him with keywords like *[puppeteer]*, *[slimy]*, *[emotionless]*, and *[cruel]*. I didn't write anything else since he held no importance. Kim Suho easily cut him down in the original story, but we should be careful since the co-author changed several things.

— Meetings are always beautiful. A meeting like ours is especially so.

Kain's soliloquy continued. Listening to his slimy voice felt like being licked.

"What is that crazy guy saying..."

Aileen frowned as she activated her skill. *Wooong...* A blue aura rose from the ground and seeped into her body. She used a special skill called *[Magic Power Amplification]*.

"Uk!"

However, Aileen suddenly clenched her heart and knelt on the ground.

"Ai! I'm fine."

She got up before I could say anything.

"Huu..."

Cold sweat formed on her forehead, but she didn't show any signs of exhaustion and glared at Kain dancing on the chandelier.

— Dance like a puppet while smiling.

Kain's voice echoed towards us. Then Aileen pointed at him.

“You, come down.”

Magic power seeped into her words.

“Ordering him with Spirit Speech won't work too well.”

I stopped her since I knew it would be useless. The demon king's authority protected these middle bosses. Enough magic power could overcome it, but that would only be a waste.

“Fine.”

Aileen's Spirit Speech would be more than enough even without ordering others around. She released her magic power into the air and formed a spear.

“This spear will pierce your heart.”

The spear shot forward and couldn't be dodged since Spirit Speech determined an absolute result. It pierced Kain's heart, but what should've been an easy attack caused Aileen some pain.

“*Uk...* Become light.”

She continued while groaning. The spear piercing Kain's heart exploded into light and the chandelier fell along with him. His body scattered into dust without touching the ground.

“W-What, was he just a small fry?”

The battle seemingly ended and Aileen furrowed her brows. However, I shook my head.

“No, he's probably—”

Organ music flowed from the darkness as if he waited for me to speak. This prelude signaled the battle's continuation.

— Sing with the flowers... a silent song...

Kain's voice rang out as a sinister organ played. He sounded like multiple voices singing in a choir.

— Humans are dirty, but they possess one beautiful thing...

Tick.

Suddenly, everything became silent and Aileen flinched as a bright spotlight lit the room.

— Slaughtering, dismembering... a flower birthed from death...

Hundreds of Kain appeared before us. His real body couldn't be distinguished from these clones. Kain created these puppets using his heart, so each puppet contained his real self.

— Let there be blood!

The puppets shot out a wave of red magic power. Aileen stood in front and confidently shouted.

“You can't pierce my barrier!”

She formed a barrier around us and blocked their attack. However, the puppets began to charge with weapons. It seemed impossible for any of them to pierce Aileen's barrier, but we wouldn't win if we just defended.

I glanced at Aileen.

“*Uk...*”

She struggled to keep up the barrier. Her curse had been healed, but the scar it left must be reacting to the demon king's demonic energy.

That meant Aileen couldn't advance any further.

"Hold on a bit."

I took out the Desert Eagle. Kain didn't suit me even though I specialized in fighting mobs because I couldn't kill him with my limited stigma. I could easily kill 6 demons with [*Crime and Punishment*], but Kain's puppets could all be considered individual demons. My authority had little use with hundreds of them.

"Let's go."

I transformed my gun into an assault rifle. I didn't worry since I just had to buy enough time until Cheok Jungyeong arrived. I had about a thousand bullets, which should be more than enough.

I began to fire from inside Aileen's barrier. My barrage flew towards each puppet's vital points and destroyed their joints. I emptied a magazine in less than a second as they fell to the ground.

The puppets tried to dodge, but none of my bullets missed. I only shot by instinct with grade 2 Master Sharpshooter's godly accuracy.

Thwack!

A puppet jumped on Aileen's barrier. Its body began to bulk up to self-destruct.

"A storm will push you away!"

Aileen quickly muttered. This sent the self-detonating puppet flying as it exploded with a huge boom. We avoided most of the damage, but it still weakened the barrier.

"Do a better job, so they can't do that."

"Okay."

I activated bullet time and focused on the closest puppets. Then I fully

utilized Reinforced Bullet, the new subordinate gift I received when Master Sharpshooter became grade 2. This gift provided each bullet with enough power to push back the puppets that resisted.

— What a beautiful flow. Tragedy strikes heavier the more one desperately struggles...

I attacked while Aileen defended. However, she grew more exhausted as time passed.

“Haa, haa.”

Her breathing grew rough and the barrier thinned out. Fortunately, we held on long enough as I whispered to her.

“You can rest now.”

“Don’t say strange things. I’m perfectly fine.”

As soon as she said that, a puppet arm flew towards the barrier and exploded.

BOOM!

The ground shook, but the barrier remained. Still, the shock struck her and she knelt in pain.

“You don’t look fine.”

“I can still go on. Run while I maintain this barrier. I’ll cover you.”

“Oh...”

I felt touched, but didn’t plan on retreating. Kain began to arrogantly mutter.

— What I want is a banquet of death. It isn’t bad for a dwarf and a human to die together...

He mistook her for a dwarf too.

“T-That son of a bitch.”

Aileen reacted sensitively to that word. I silently took off my coat and placed it over her trembling shoulders.

“What’s this?”

“Just rest.”

I placed my hand on Aileen’s head.

“Eh?”

“I’ll finish the rest.”

“Are you crazy? Whose head do you think you’re touch... *huh...*?”

I released stigma’s magic power into her body.

“Ah... hey, what did you do... I’m getting... sleepy...”

The barrier protecting us disappeared, but I didn’t need it anymore since the world’s most reliable ally finally arrived.

“Oi.”

A deep voice rang out from behind me. I picked Aileen up and took a step back as Cheok Jungyeong appeared with a frown.

“Why are you with that brat?”

“It just turned out this way. The enemy is in front. You can see him, right?”

“Yeah, there sure are a lot though.”

His displeasure from seeing Aileen only briefly lasted. Soon, a big grin emerged on his face. He simply felt happy to fight again and his opponent's strength made him excited.

— A new actor joins the fray.

“What’s up with those guys? They all look the same.”

Cheok Jungyeong asked as he cracked his knuckles.

“This guy’s a puppeteer. Oh, and a psychopath.”

“Oh.”

I didn’t need to give Cheok Jungyeong any detailed explanations. He nodded and began to stretch.

“So I just have to slaughter them all?”

“Yeah.”

Crack, crack. Kain’s voice echoed as Cheok Jungyeong finished stretching.

— I am the art-loving maestro...

“Oh yeah?”

Cheok Jungyeong activated *[Secret March]* and his steel-like body became even tougher.

“That’s great.”

He activated yet another skill.

[Infinite Magic]

A unique skill that gave its user an infinite supply of magic power.

Cheok Jungyeong would become completely unrestrained after activating this skill.

“I’m the same.”

Guooo... A blue aura erupted from Cheok Jungyeong’s body.

— I found the actor who can become a part of...

He shot forward like a beast before Kain could finish with a terrifying ball of energy concentrated in his hand.

“—!”

Cheok Jungyeong jumped into the sea of puppets with a roar. They immediately counterattacked, but they only struck the air.

— Shoot.

Kain’s flustered voice rang out.

“Kuhahaha!”

Cheok Jungyeong’s laughter resounded. He jammed his energy blast into the ground and caused an earth-shaking rumble. *BOOM!*

“Haa...”

Blasts of energy shot up like volcanic eruptions and destroyed the puppets. I stared at the scene of destruction in a daze. A cloud of dust rose and hindered my normal field of vision. However, I chased Cheok Jungyeong with my thousand-mile eyes. He continued smashing one puppet after another with his bare hands and left no gap in his movements. Once caught, no puppet could survive.

“Geez...”

His overwhelming battle prowess surprised me. Cheok Jungyeong had grown several times stronger than in the original story.

“—!”

He roared once again amidst the rising torrent of magic power. I caught sight of his burning eyes and a chill ran down my back.

* * *

[8F, Crevon – Knight Hall]

Jin Sahyuk found herself in the middle of a boring meeting in Crevon. As Knight Commander, she had to determine how to lead the knight order. Of course, she only showed up to appear dignifying. The other staff members took care of the important tasks.

“Then the royal court can increase welfare for the knights and their families in exchange for increasing the number of knights on patrol.”

Jin Sahyuk shot up from her seat as the discussion ended.

“Okay, that’s the end of the meeting.”

“Yes, Knight Commander. *Ah*, we still have to talk about the 9th floor.”

“We can do that later. No, actually, just record your discussion with a crystal ball. I’ll look over it when I can.”

Jin Sahyuk shooed the staff members away. She felt especially sleepy today. Perhaps because she just finished the 7th floor’s unique trait reinforcement surgery.

“Yes, take care, Knight Commander!”

“*Yaaawn...*”

Jin Sahyuk left the meeting room and walked down the stairs to visit the stable. Her beloved steed, Ataly, happily neighed.

“Knight Commander Shin Jahyuk?”

A silvery voice rang out when she prepared to hop onto her trusted steed. Jin Sahyuk turned around.

“Rachel?”

Rachel gently smiled at Jin Sahyuk. She acted like a real noble, tender and well-mannered, so Jin Sahyuk decided to give her some time.

“What’s up?”

“Ah, I wanted to give you something.”

“You? To me?”

“Yes.”

Jin Sahyuk tilted her head as Rachel handed her a bracelet and leather jacket.

“What are these?”

She didn’t care much about the bracelet, but she liked the black leather jacket. Jin Sahyuk glanced at Rachel and tried it on.

“Thanks, but why?”

Rachel replied without much thought.

“It’s just a memento to celebrate you joining Club Fenrir.”

“Huh?”

“It has a wolf symbol on the back.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk became speechless. Fans of Kim Hajin got together and formed Club Fenrir.

“If you continue to work hard...”

Rachel glanced around for a moment before whispering.

“I can let you meet him. He owes me a small favor.”

Jin Sahyuk felt taken aback, but Rachel only smiled.

First, a previous event had to be explained. *Kim Hajin is Kindspring*. To resolve her suspicion, Jin Sahyuk secretly asked Rachel about Kim Hajin.

At first, Rachel answered her without much thought. Kim Hajin became famous as Fenrir and the Lotus Killer, so someone wanting to know about him didn't seem surprising. However, she grew suspicious once Jin Sahyuk kept asking. Eventually, Jin Sahyuk gave the following excuse.

“I, I'm also Fenrir's fan.”

She could only come up with that excuse and still couldn't think of a better one.

Jin Sahyuk awkwardly smiled at the current situation.

“Uh, yeah. Thanks.”

“Do your best!”

Rachel smiled and gave Jin Sahyuk a fighting pose. Jin Sahyuk only stared at her dumbfoundedly before nodding.

“Yeah, I will.”

“Great. I'll keep my promise too.”

“Uh, yeah...”

For some reason, Rachel began smiling more. Of course, it didn't

bother Jin Sahyuk. She held a good impression of Rachel, who never showed displeasure at her rude behavior and even gave up the Knight Commander seat to her.

“Okay. Then I’ll be returning to Earth now.”

“Uh, yeah. Take care.”

Rachel went back to Earth after a short goodbye.

Whish—

The wind blew and Jin Sahyuk stood alone with the bracelet in her hand. The simple bracelet also featured the symbol of a black wolf on it.

“Fan my ass...”

She almost chucked it away.

“Sigh...”

However, she placed it in her inventory instead. Jin Sahyuk didn’t know why. She just did as she felt.

* * *

[28F – Demon King’s Castle]

Aileen slowly opened her eyes. Did she go to heaven or hell? She wanted to know the answer to that question first.

“...?”

Her body moved well for someone dead. The intense pain that bothered her had disappeared as well.

“What’s going on?”

“Ah, you woke up?”

“Huh?”

Aileen widened her eyes at Kim Hajin staring at her from the side.

Why is he here? Oh right, I fought the puppet guy with him.

She recalled her temporarily lost memories.

“Where are we?” Aileen carefully asked. They seemed to be in an enclosed space like a tent. It felt comfortable and safe... Did they return to the Colosseum?

“It’s a level 8 tent. We used it last time, remember?”

“Ah!”

Kim Hajin prepared this tent knowing they would have to sleep outside starting from the 27th floor. The tent featured an air-purifying function, so Aileen should recover somewhat after resting here for 8 hours.

“Mmm...”

She rubbed her eyes in a daze and stretched a few times. Then Aileen raised her upper body.

“What happened?”

“You fainted, so I—”

“No, not that. I mean the crazy 8th grade syndrome guy.”

“Ah...” Kim Hajin grinned. “Look outside.”

“Outside?” Aileen crawled over and pushed aside the tent’s entrance.

“...”

Her mind immediately blanked. She couldn't comprehend the scene in front of her. It looked like a natural disaster swept through or a stampede with thousands of monsters.

“W-What the...”

The ground had cracked all over and broken puppets littered everywhere.

“I told you to rest easy, didn't I?”

Kim Hajin approached and handed her a pot that gave off a tantalizing smell.

“Eat.”

“What is it?”

“Porridge.”

“...”

Aileen pondered while looking at him. *I wasn't in my best condition, but that puppet guy wasn't weak. Honestly, he was incredibly strong. Kim Hajin did all this with just a gun? I thought this last time, but this guy... is super strong...*

Kim Hajin picked up the porridge to feed the shocked Aileen.

“Ah, what are you doing? I don't want it...”

Aileen said no, but her body said otherwise. Her eyes widened the moment she tasted the porridge and she began to salivate even more.

“It's good, right?”

“Uh... yeah, a bit.”

Aileen nodded and Kim Hajin brightly smiled.

“I’m glad.”

Aileen’s heart skipped a beat when she saw his smile. She looked up at Kim Hajin with a slightly dazed expression.

“Here.”

He gave her another spoonful and Aileen carefully opened her mouth to the warm, aromatic porridge.

Nom, nom...

Her face turned slightly flushed as she nibbled. Kim Hajin’s cooking tasted that good.

* * *

[28F – Heart of the Demon King’s Castle]

Kim Suho’s party finally reached the center of the castle after killing monsters in a maze. Honestly, they didn’t struggle that much. Only ordinary monsters occasionally appeared, so they quickly advanced. Something challenging should occur soon. They proceeded with such a thought.

“Someone’s there, Suho.” Jin Seyeon pointed at a beautiful woman in front of a huge door.

“It’s the witch,” Kim Suho replied. The same woman who tricked them into entering the Colosseum.

— You’ve finally arrived.

The witch’s voice rang out. Kim Suho and the others stopped to hear her out.

— I am here to test whether you have the qualifications to challenge

the king.

Everyone knew what this meant.

— Now, follow me.

Kiik. The huge door opened and the witch led them through.

Chapter 247

The End of the Tower (3)

The witch disappeared through the door, but they didn't just mindlessly wander in after her. Instead, they exchanged glances and didn't easily trust the witch.

"What are the chances this is a trap?" Jin Seyeon asked, but Kim Suho and Yi Yongha didn't reply. They didn't have a choice at this point.

— Don't worry.

The witch spoke again.

— Our king loves challenges. He wholeheartedly welcomes worthy challengers. Once I confirm your qualifications, the king will gladly show himself and accept your challenge with the tower's existence at stake.

The witch didn't seem to be lying, but they remained somewhat suspicious. Jin Seyeon stepped forward and asked, "How can we trust demons?"

— I shall ask you the same. How can you trust humans?

"What?"

— We can be as righteous, cowardly, evil, and honorable. Of course, I understand you're prejudiced against us since you've experienced the Colosseum's madness.

The witch's words flowed smoothly like a stream.

— The Colosseum only serves as one such ordeal to measure your capabilities. We're more impartial than you might think.

Objections immediately popped up in Jin Seyeon's mind. *You can't just try to kill someone and claim it was only a test. Also, it's hard to believe demons are as diverse as humans...*

Still, she knew they had no choice but to follow the witch. Otherwise, they wouldn't be able to proceed to the next step.

"What should we do?" Kim Suho asked. The trio looked at each other and hesitantly nodded.

"Black Lotus returned without dying. He wouldn't have said what he said if this was a trap, right?"

Jin Seyeon's reasoning convinced them.

"Then..."

"Let's go."

They increased the magic power around their bodies and surrounded themselves with all kinds of barriers to prepare for the worst. Then they slowly approached the door.

Their heavy footsteps echoed off the walls as they courageously marched through. The witch's voice blew past them like a bleak wind.

"I welcome you, challengers who have come this far."

The other side looked distinctly different. A wide, circular lobby greeted them with numerous demons standing shoulder to shoulder at the far end. Each demon gave off an overwhelming presence as they stared at the trio.

"Is this a trap?"

Jin Seyeon bit her lips.

"No, they're here to test you. We originally had 5, excluding me, but one of them couldn't be controlled. Only 4 remain. It's good the

numbers match.”

They had 10 if one included the monsters led by one of the demons. Unless the witch couldn't count or intentionally mocked them with this. Jin Seyeon's gaze suddenly sharpened.

“What are you...”

“Ah, the other one has already arrived.”

The witch shifted her gaze past them and smiled. They also turned around.

“...?”

A man none of them expected to see stood there. He had a gigantic physique with well-developed muscles that placed him in the same category as monsters and his steps exuded an aura of arrogance.

“Long time no see.”

Every part of his body could act as a lethal weapon. Cheok Jungyeong looked down at them and smiled.

“You, why are you here?” Jin Seyeon asked.

An honest reply would require Cheok Jungyeong to reveal Kim Hajin's orders. Therefore, he chose not to answer.

“That's none of your business, archer.”

He simply felt embarrassed. These days, he never challenged Kim Hajin's decisions and always complied with his requests. *[Energy Blast]*, *[Secret March]*, and all his equipment... They came from obeying Kim Hajin.

“Cough.”

Cheok Jungyeong stepped forward onto the battlefield.

Meanwhile, I looked after Aileen and watched the scene from afar.

“Aileen, how are you feeling?”

Around 12 hours had passed since Aileen began recuperating. Patient Aileen seemed to be feeling better since her sassiness returned.

“*Mm*. I feel a lot better, but... I think I still, maybe, have a bit of a fever?”

That sounded like both a question and an assertion. She spoke in quite a unique manner. I simply stared at her, but Aileen couldn't stand the silence.

“W-What I'm saying is, I'll be fine if I have something to eat.”

“*Ah*, something to eat?”

I nodded since I had so much food I didn't need to make any. I took out a Lv.5 luxurious chocolate bar and handed it to her.

“This is...”

“It's grade 1 chocolate.”

Aileen cautiously took it like a stray cat. She even sniffed the wrapper first before tearing it open and taking a bite. *Nom, nom*— I waited for her to finish before speaking.

“Go back once you finish eating that.”

“Whaaat?” Aileen slightly trembled after enjoying the chocolate.

“W-What? You want me to leave?”

“Yes.”

Aileen frowned at me. “Why should I?”

“You won’t be able to fight in a place full of demonic energy.”

While Aileen slept, I thought about why only she suffered when everyone else seemed fine. The problem had to do with her skill.

“I’m fine now. Can’t you see?”

Aileen began to stretch. *One, two. One, two.* I stopped her halfway.

“You may be fine now, but the situation will change once demonic energy surrounds you. You shouldn’t use [*Magic Power Amplification*] so hastily.”

I kindly explained to the naïve player who thought her skill had been all-powerful. Magic power amplification absorbed and refined the air around its user into magic power. Naturally, absorbing air filled with demonic energy would be dangerous in her current state.

“W-What? Are you saying I’ll never get better?” Aileen asked while trying to conceal her fear.

“No, you’ll get better if you rest in places like Baekdu Mountain or Kumgang Mountain.”

“Ah...” She quickly regained her calm and sighed in relief.

“*Phew.*”

I wondered about her age looking at her. She didn’t seem to be in her thirties. Aileen became a hero at such a young age that she never learned any worldly customs or social manners, but still...

“So you’ll go back?”

“Well, I don’t have a choice, but... *ow.*”

Ouch, ow, agh. For whatever reason, she kept feigning pain.

“I, I feel dizzy...”

“Excuse me?”

“I need, I need sugar...”

I watched her dumbfoundedly as she pretended to stagger.

“It’s my anemia... so dizzy... need chocolate...”

I ran out of high-quality desserts, so I couldn’t give her any even if I wanted to.

“...”

I simply stared in silence until she suddenly recovered from her anemia. Then she coughed and seriously spoke.

“You’ll be like this too once you’re my age.”

“Pft.”

I guess I have no choice if she’s willing to go that far. I took out a random dice and rolled it while thinking about desserts. It luckily transformed into a set of chocolates for Aileen.

“Woah!”

Her eyes widened when she saw them.

* * *

[Himalayan Mountain Range, Gym Behind The Inn]

Clang—

Swoosh—

Metallic sounds rang from the gym behind the inn. A fierce duel between teacher and student currently took place.

“—!”

Chae Nayun swung her sword with a spirited shout. It blazed with azure magic power and the aura around her could shatter bones to dust. Her sword skills looked textbook perfect. The magic power around her longsword soared like a waterfall and rushed towards her opponent, an old man who would soon turn 90. Ordinary people would be astonished and accuse her of elder abuse.

Ssss...

However, this old man didn't easily yield. He twisted his body and evaded her blade. The longsword boasted great reach, but also a long delay between attacks. Therefore, he planned to evade and counterattack during that gap. However...

“...?”

Another sword made from azure magic power shot up from behind her. Chae Nayun invented this flying sword skill with her past experience as an archer. Heynckes' intuition told him he couldn't simply block this attack. He mistakenly assumed Chae Nayun wouldn't have any tricks up her sleeve because of her denseness. Things wouldn't have turned out this way if he paid attention to the flow of magic power in the atmosphere.

At any rate, it's impossible to block in this position...

Dozens of magic blades rushed towards Heynckes' vital points according to Chae Nayun's will. However, the Lord of Steel didn't give up and forcefully brandished his sword. His gift activated and resonated with his Steel Blade.

KWAAANG!

The Nine Star's Steel Spirit stopped Chae Nayun's secret technique. Every single one of Chae Nayun's magic swords bounced off Heynckes' Steel Blade. Then heavy silence descended in the gym.

“...”

“...”

No human could display such skills barehanded. His Steel Blade moved by itself and blocked every attack. Heynckes had lost since he failed to keep his word. Chae Nayun spoke in a serious tone.

“One good blow. I won.”

“You’re right. I also lost some of my precious lifespan thanks to you.”

Heynckes sounded like he blamed her, but wore a smile on his face. Chae Nayun only respectfully nodded.

“Old man, I... learned a lot from you, in many ways.”

Her words contained many meanings.

“I’m glad.”

“Yeah.”

She recently realized the true meaning behind Heynckes’ words. Kim Joongho, who took Chae Jinyoon’s body, insisted he owned a devil’s corpse. Those two facts could be easily pieced together, but she found it hard to believe the woven truth.

“Follow me.” Heynckes entered the inn as Chae Nayun trailed behind.

“A promise is a promise. I’m an honorable man.”

Heynckes said as he handed Chae Nayun an old compass. Her eyes widened.

“This is?”

“It’s a compass that bears my will.”

Nine Star Heynckes could fill items with his life and imbue them with his Will of Steel. He also referred to them as his comrades and called them clever and dependable. Heynckes had received countless help from his comrades. The Steel Blade kept him from defeat and the Steel Shield protected him from attacks. The Steel Pin embedded in his back and waist helped him achieve immunity against all kinds of magic. His Steel Heart gave him an indomitable will. Heynckes could only become a member of the Nine Stars thanks to all his comrades.

“He’s a friend of mine who helped me trace many villains in the old days. He’s seen Kim Joongho before, so he’ll gladly tell you where to find him.”

“...”

Chae Nayun understood the steel magic power embedded in this old compass. Heynckes entrusted her with a friend whom he spent half his life with.

“He’s rather precious, so be sure to return him.”

“Thank you.”

She bowed full of appreciation. Then she immediately turned around. She didn’t need to pack since she came barehanded.

“Chae Nayun.”

“...?”

However, when she grabbed the doorknob...

“Don’t turn away from the truth when you find it.”

A voice as solemn as steel stopped her.

“Accept what you witness with your own eyes and heart. Don’t give up. That’s the only way you’ll become stronger.”

His advice perfectly suited his nickname, Steel Spirit. Chae Nayun nodded with her back still facing him.

“Yes, I’ll keep that in mind.”

She opened the door and stepped into the snowy field. Chae Nayun decided to leave one last message before leaving the inn for good. She sent it to her friend, Yoo Yeonha.

[I’m about to find Kim Joongho. I’ll bring him with me to see you.]

The message successfully went through because of the clear weather. Once again, she thanked Heynckes for installing wifi.

* * *

For 3 hours, Chae Nayun walked on the rugged road according to the compass. She almost fell down a cliff hidden by snow and a notorious Himalayan mountain tyrant also ambushed her. She nearly became a snowman when a blizzard surrounded her. Still, Chae Nayun walked tenaciously and arrived at her destination.

“Ha, I don’t even know what to say.”

A wave of blank amazement struck her. Indeed, no one would ever find this spot. This cave covered in snow sat halfway down a cliff.

“Huup!”

Chae Nayun formed a rope out of magic power and jumped down the cliff into the cave.

Tududu...

She advanced through the snow and spotted a faint light from somewhere deep within the cave. With her perfect eyesight, she spotted Kim Joongho or someone who could be Kim Joongho. This person lay on the floor next to the light.

“...!”

Her heart violently pounded and she couldn't hold back any longer. This story had tormented her for too long. The damned tragedy that entirely changed her life and values. She frantically ran towards the end.

* * *

[28F – Demon King's Castle]

Everyone caught their breath after the test concluded. The qualification test began 3 hours ago and simply took the form of one-on-one fights. Cheok Jungyeong went up against a demonic summoner who controlled mystic monsters. Kim Suho fought a warrior who wielded a double-edged axe. Jin Seyeon and Yi Yongha faced twin magicians together. The winners finally emerged after a 3 hour brawl.

The humans all won and the demons either died or passed out. Of course, Kim Suho and others also suffered and could barely breathe.

“Piece of cake.”

Only Cheok Jungyeong boasted. However, he also appeared completely beat up. He fought 2 demons in a row and his skill's side effects felt worse than expected.

“Everyone, congratulations. The king has acknowledged you as worthy challengers.”

The witch announced and the team wondered whether they should be happy or sad.

“Kuhahaha! Good!”

The witch ignored Cheok Jungyeong's loud laughter and continued.

“The king does not appreciate a fight with one against many. He longs for a just, impartial duel against one.”

Cheok Jungyeong smiled in approval. The demon king's taste suited his own.

"Therefore, I shall rank you accordingly and determine the order. You may only challenge the king when the player before you loses."

I'm definitely first. Cheok Jungyeong thought to himself. He already defeated 2 demons: Kain the Puppeteer and Klemo the Summoner. His contribution should be unrivaled compared to the others. However, the witch spoke a completely different name.

"Player MasterHolySword."

"What?"

"Kim Suho, you're first."

Cheok Jungyeong immediately rebelled. No, he tried to rebel, but his senses suddenly disappeared. He could only wriggle in dark emptiness.

"Now, the castle gates will close."

The witch's voice echoed in his head and...

"Huaa!"

Kim Suho opened his eyes with a cry. A mysterious scenery surrounded him.

"This is where you will stay."

The witch quietly reappeared and explained.

"Huh? Stay?"

The witch nonchalantly nodded at his remark.

"Yes, the demon king is away at a banquet. However, I cannot allow a challenger to lose their sense of urgency."

The witch looked at him and continued.

“I shall provide you with an opponent to practice against. Choose any opponent you’d like, but you must decide now.”

Kim Suho slightly frowned at the sudden task.

“I didn’t anticipate something like this...”

“You must answer now.”

The witch coldly pressed and Kim Suho began to contemplate. Jin Seyeon, Aileen, Shin Jonghak, Cheok Jungyeong, Kim Junwoo... dozens of names popped up in his mind, but he finally chose...

“Black Lotus... No, wait.”

He immediately shook his head. Black Lotus had already withdrawn from his match against the demon king. *More importantly, I don’t think I’ll even be able to talk to him.* His next choice only felt natural.

“Kim Hajin. I choose Hajin.”

Chapter 248

The End of the Tower (4)

The Demon King's Castle locked shut after Kim Suho became the first challenger. All the players inside forcefully teleported to the 21st floor. This should've been the case for me as well.

"So you chose me? As your practice partner?"

Instead, a mysterious flow of magic power captured me and brought me here. Kim Suho stood next to me with a bashful smile and explained, "Yeah, you were the only one I could think of."

His blind faith dumbfounded me. He could've summoned Shin Jonghak, Kim Junwoo, or even Cheok Jungyeong, who I purposefully sent to help them. I wasn't exactly the best choice for a practice partner. Kim Chundong might've been a swordsman, but not me.

"Okay, well..."

He couldn't take back his choice. Fortunately, I'd been wanting to chat with him. I could also help him in other ways like enhancing his equipment to entirely new levels with my four colored enchant skill and Dwarf's Dexterity.

"I understand, but..."

I decided to look around first before that. The demon king's residence looked similar to an average medieval castle, except a variety of magical equipment filled the guest room.

"Hey, isn't that a crystal ball?"

I managed to dig out a rather valuable treasure. This crystal ball appeared much bigger than most desk globes.

“Crystal ball?”

“Yeah, come here.”

I pulled him towards the crystal ball as it reflected a view of the 21st floor.

— What did you say, you ogre!

— *Haha*, wanna get beat up by an ogre?

Cheok Jungyeong and Aileen confronted each other in the Card Kingdom.

— *Aaak*, I can't take this anymore. You're dead.

Aileen's face turned tomato red as she fumed at Cheok Jungyeong.

— You think I'm gonna end up dead? You little dwarf...

— Shut up, you brainless moron!

Cheok Jungyeong's mouth closed as a huge current of magic power blazed around Aileen. He concentrated magic power around his body too. The fight of the century would unfold for no particular reason.

“They're suddenly fighting.” Kim Suho seemed slightly shocked.

“Yeah.”

Watching others fight always felt entertaining, but I wanted him to see something else.

“We should be able to see other floors with this crystal ball.”

I operated it with ease since Tomer's office contained a similar one. I switched between floors like switching TV channels. Eventually, we settled on the 3rd floor, Prestige.

“Oh, the 3rd floor is showing up.”

“The 3rd floor?” Kim Suho widened his eyes at the crystal ball.

— Oi, Railro, how was work today?

— Same as always. Enough to handle.

Prestige improved drastically with a sun. In the past, residents needed citizenship to live humanely. Now, every single NPC enjoyed being a citizen. Orphans and famine disappeared as crops and livestock prospered over the purified land. The interactions between players and NPCs improved as well.

— Excuse me, how much is this?

A player asked the store owner NPC about a potion's price.

— It's 50 TP.

— Mister, how far have you gone in the tower?

The shop owner's child suddenly clung to the player. Despite the trouble, the player answered with a smile.

— I'm still new, so I've only been to the 5th floor.

— Wow! And, and, how was it? The 5th floor?

— The 5th floor is... scary. It has many dungeons.

I wanted Kim Suho to see the 3rd floor, but the feelings overwhelmed me instead. These changes resulted from the fruits of my labor. I changed Prestige with my TP and efforts along with the help of famous NPCs like Henry and Kiri.

“Wow. Prestige has changed a lot.”

Kim Suho placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Right, so...”

I slightly twisted my body to shake off his hand. Then I proceeded to ask him what I wanted to know for a long time now.

“What do you think?”

“*Hm?* About what?”

“You know, about this tower in general.”

Kim Suho smiled at my words. “I don’t know. Nothing, really.”

His voice sounded melancholic. I could feel the longing and regret buried in it. Right now, Kim Suho probably thought about his homeland. After all, towers must’ve existed there as well.

“Only one floor left. You really feel nothing?”

I asked again as he pondered.

“*Mmm...* Honestly, I felt quite angry when I first arrived in Prestige. Sad, too. People were dying on the streets, but no one seemed to care because they weren’t citizens.”

Kim Suho spoke his mind for the first time.

“The same thing happened on the 8th floor. The royals tried to conceal the calamities from their citizens under the pretext of containing social panic. A lot of people died as a result.”

I listened to him in silence. Kim Suho continued on about the 16th floor, how demons had completely taken over, the people living under the demons’ rule, their deaths, the players who treated NPCs as mere tools...

“Then do you think the tower should disappear?”

I finally touched upon the sensitive topic.

“...”

Kim Suho remained silent for a long time. The crystal ball showed Henry and Kiri.

— Good work, everyone!

— We’re done for the day!

Henry and Kiri quickly became the most famous NPCs in Prestige, widely beloved by players and residents.

— Business was especially hard today, so we threw in a little bonus.

Kim Suho looked at the two kids. They were still young and small, but already giants in a sense. They helped lead Prestige with intelligence and righteousness. A smile bloomed across Kim Suho’s face.

“No.” He shook his head.

“That’s not what I want. Many people are happily living in the tower. The world within the tower should be maintained. These people aren’t just NPCs, but humans like you and me.”

“...”

I felt relieved. Kim Suho wouldn’t go back on his word. Things had changed from the original story where he destroyed the tower. Now, he would gladly protect it. Hope and life had replaced despair and death.

Tap, tap—

I tapped him on the shoulder and turned off the crystal ball.

“Enough with the chit-chat. Let’s start training now.”

“Are we sparring?”

“No, not sparring. Training.”

Those two things widely differed. I would be his opponent in a spar, but his instructor in a training session.

“Before we start...” I examined his gear first. The armor he wore beneath his white coat shocked me.

“Are you seriously still wearing that?”

I made this armor for Kim Suho a long time ago and gave it to him as a present to celebrate his entrance into the tower. He still used that old armor as his main protection.

“Ah, well, this is the best armor I own. Changing it would’ve been a waste of TP.”

Kim Suho scratched his neck in embarrassment and I felt a slight sting in my heart. Well, he probably didn’t have the time or resources considering Creator’s Sacred Grace went down harder than it did in the original story. He probably spent all his TP to help his guild members.

“No worries.”

It didn’t matter. I planned to gear him up from head to toe.

“First of all, your current equipment sucks.”

“What? That came out of the blue.”

“It’s true.”

I had a rough idea of the demon king’s main attributes. I could always find the answers to questions I didn’t know using the Book of Truth. With this knowledge, I would make him a set of equipment specially designed against the demon king. Surely the demon king wouldn’t fight naked either. He would be wearing good armor as well.

“First, take off all your clothes.”

Kim Suho flinched. “W-Why? What are you gonna do?”

He threw me a strange look and stepped back. A bed covered in red silk just so happened to be behind him. I narrowed my eyes like a halibut.

“Stop with the weird joke. I’m just going to dismantle your equipment and reforge them.”

My dismantle technique already grew to Lv.10. If I added *[Random Dice]* to it, I should be able to secure some good materials.

“Dismantle?”

“Yep. Wouldn’t it also be better to train without heavy armor? Ah, look. You can put on that robe over there.”

I pointed to a robe hanging on the wall in the corner.

The embarrassed Kim Suho followed my instructions. He even tried to take his briefs off, but I stopped him. I didn’t need his underwear.

Kim Suho wore only a robe over his briefs, but looked like a Greek royal. A single robe brought out his alluring and decadent charms.

“Well then, we’ll start the training now.”

However, his charms wouldn’t seduce the demon king.

“Here. This is your practice partner.”

I took out a card to fulfill my role as his trainer for the next 2 weeks.

[Bahamut’s Red Dragon] [Monster] [8 Star] ○ Will summon the Red Dragon of Bahamut to attack your opponents. ● 7 star Attack ● 7 star Defense ● The Red Dragon can defeat any opponent with lower attack and defense than its own. ● May be summoned 3 times.

Like the *[Miraculous Teahouse]*, I also purchased this 8 star card from the Card Kingdom on the 21st floor. I never imagined using it this way.

“What’s that?”

Kim Suho innocently asked as I replied.

“Your practice partner. You’ll fight this guy to the death while I make your equipment.”

Today marked the start of my Kim Suho Attribute Enhancement Project.

* * *

[A Cave in the Himalayas]

Chae Nayun quietly stared at Kim Joongho asleep in bed. Hair completely covered his face, but her intuition told her this was definitely Kim Joongho.

She pondered while looking at him. *What should I do? What should I ask or demand?*

However, Kim Joongho opened his eyes before she could decide. Chae Nayun flinched and took a step back.

“...!”

His startled gaze also landed on her. He clearly looked afraid and despair suddenly descended on his face.

“Hell- Hello.”

Chae Nayun tried to sound calm. Kim Joongho’s fear receded at her flustered voice. He seemed to recognize her.

“I’m Chae Nayun. We’ve met before... if I recall correctly.”

They brushed past each other in the past at her mother's funeral and also at her brother's funeral.

“...”

Kim Joongho stared at her in silence. Chae Nayun looked into his hopeless eyes and shook her head.

“I, I'm not here to hurt you.”

“...”

“It's just, I found something strange about your report...”

“Haaa.” Kim Joongho heavily sighed and raised his upper body.

“How did you find me?”

He spoke in a husky whisper. His voice served as evidence to all the suffering he had endured.

“I... used this.”

Chae Nayun carefully took out Heynckes' compass. Kim Joongho looked back and forth between her and the compass. It proved she had earned Heynckes' respect, so he pulled himself out of bed with another sigh.

“At least let me serve you some tea. Please make yourself comfortable.”

Kim Joongho pointed at the table and chair beside the bed. She obediently sat on the chair and spotted a copy of the Violet Times on the table. The front-page headline read: [*Chae Joochul Murders Devil*]. Chae Nayun's heart faintly trembled.

“Please wait.”

Kim Joongho disappeared somewhere deep within the cave and

returned with a kettle of barley tea and two cups. Steam rose from the warm tea as he poured it. Chae Nayun sat still while staring at the tea. The warm steam scattered near her nose and Kim Joongho finally spoke.

“Are you here to retrieve Chae Jinyoon’s body?”

“Pardon?”

Old thoughts suddenly filled Chae Nayun’s mind again.

Kim Joongho said he owned a devil’s corpse. Kim Joongho switched Chae Jinyoon’s body and vanished.

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth and fists. Kim Joongho only stared at her.

“So you already have an idea as to what happened.”

Chae Nayun stopped breathing at his sudden remark. Her heart violently beat and her face flushed, but she forced herself to stay calm. She needed to keep the promise she made to Heynckes and herself. Chae Nayun looked straight into Kim Joongho’s eyes.

“Have you been keeping my brother’s body?”

She barely managed to ask. Kim Joongho nodded.

“Yes, that’s why I ran away and came here.”

Tears formed in her eyes. Chae Nayun wiped them while pretending to run a hand through her hair. She just needed to confirm one more thing. She needed physical evidence to accept the unacceptable truth. She needed to see her brother with her own eyes.

“Can you... show me... the... the...”

She couldn’t possibly form that sentence. Kim Joongho looked at her and replied, “I can show you. The fact that you came all the way here

shows your determination. However...”

Kim Joongho stopped and the sound of Chae Nayun’s heavy breathing filled the cave. His eyes appeared sympathetic. Right now, she looked unstable even to him.

“Can you bear it?”

Still, Chae Nayun nodded without hesitation.

“Yes. S-Show me.”

She needed to know. What was the truth and what was the lie?

“Now... I want to know.”

* * *

“Mmm...”

I earnestly examined Kim Suho in his new clothes two weeks later at the Demon King’s Castle. The garments I made with utmost effort shone in the presence of their perfect owner.

“Hmm...”

The white leather armor sparkled underneath the beige coat. The gaiters protected his calves in harmony with his new shoes. On top of that, I gave him the old gear and artifacts I stole from Phiunel. The clothes he currently wore basically amounted to a small business.

“Good.”

I nodded in satisfaction.

“Go like this.”

“Hey, isn’t this a bit too much?”

“Shut it.”

I casually dismissed his objection. On a side note, he had finally defeated Bahamut’s Red Dragon three days ago. The dragon required him to use his ultimate skill.

“I’ve done so much, so you have to win. Never give up.”

“Of course.”

Today would be my last day to help him. Kim Suho’s challenge would probably last a long time. It took him about a month to win in the original story, but things had changed. Of course, Kim Suho grew stronger and possessed better equipment, but the same would also apply to the demon king.

“Hajin, thank you so much. You’re always helping me.”

Kim Suho extended his hand with a cheesy expression.

“You remember what I told you before, right? You should treat me well if you’re grateful.”

I smiled and shook his hand. I had no idea how the future would unfold, but I knew one thing: Kim Suho wouldn’t make the same decision. The Tower of Wish wouldn’t perish and would continue to exist in harmony with the world.

“Hey, I think we still have about half a day left.”

Let’s not obsess over a fight that hasn’t started. I pointed to the crystal ball.

“Do you want to look around?”

“Sure.”

Kim Suho nodded with a big smile. His eyes formed perfect arches and his mouth opened just right. These two factors formed a flawless

smile.

“Let’s start on the 2nd floor.”

I turned on the crystal ball and browsed through each floor.

The 2F, the Floor of Beginnings, contained newbie hunters and players who just entered for the first time with big dreams.

The 3F, the first residential area, showed NPCs and players working together to create a better city.

The 7F, the Game Center, displayed gamblers and rankers who came to enjoy their vacation. Kim Suho spotted Jin Sahyuk in front of a slot machine and slightly frowned.

The 13F notoriously punished players who fell asleep with nightmares. Even now, countless players shed tears.

The 15F, Genkelope’s Vessel became a futuristic metropolis. The vessel served as the most popular strategic point for mid-level players.

We saw lots of things together with the crystal ball. Our eyes reflected various people going about their lives in the tower.

“Hajin.” Kim Suho suddenly called my name.

“*Hmm?*”

I turned to face him. He stared at the crystal ball with a faint smile.

“You know...”

His voice sounded solemn and his smile soon disappeared from nervousness.

“I want to tell you something before I leave.”

He also turned to face me and our eyes met. For a while, we sat in

silence.

The silence lasted for some time.

It seemed Kim Suho needed time to piece his words together, so I waited. For the main character to take this long meant his words would be extremely important.

Kim Suho finally spoke when I forgot how long I waited.

“Would you believe me if I said I’m from a different world?”

He unexpectedly confessed about that.

* * *

[Seoul, South Korea]

It currently rained in Seoul as if a hole had been punched through the sky. Yoo Yeonha stared outside her window and picked up her smartwatch.

*[Nayun, I think you should stop.] [Nayun?] [Nayun, are you busy?]
[Nayun, please reply.]*

Yoo Yeonha sent a series of messages to Chae Nayun after her last message about Kim Joongho. However, Chae Nayun hadn’t replied. That probably meant she hadn’t found him yet. Or worse, maybe she already did. Maybe she already learned the truth and now agonized in pain.

“Haa...”

Yoo Yeonha regretted everything. Even if Chae Nayun learned the truth, the person she needed to exchange apologies with no longer remained. She would only suffer more. Yoo Yeonha covered her face and cried. Just how did their story come to this? She felt like everything was her fault. That made everything more miserable and painful. The rain outside seemed as if the entire world cried with her.

— *Dingdong*

The doorbell suddenly rang. Yoo Yeonha didn't move. She couldn't afford to entertain guests at the moment.

— *Dingdong, dingdong, dingdong.*

The doorbell kept ringing, so she pulled herself out of bed and fixed her hair.

“Who is it at this hour...”

Yoo Yeonha headed to the living room slightly irritated and looked at the intercom. She planned to call the security guard and kick out whoever rung the bell.

“*Huh?*”

However, she froze when she laid eyes on the intercom. A woman without an umbrella stood at her mansion's front gate completely soaked. The woman looked shabby, but Yoo Yeonha knew her all too well.

Chae Nayun had returned.

Chapter 249

The End of the Tower (5)

— Nayun, your father feared you would find out about Jinyoon's secret. That's why he hid the corpse from you.

Kim Joongho showed the corpse to Chae Nayun. He kept it in an ice coffin, which he explained was a magical artifact for preserving dead bodies. The corpse didn't have a head, but Chae Nayun could tell it was her brother.

She clutched her chest while looking at the corpse and trembled.

— A great evil had already engulfed Jinyoon. His right arm serves as proof.

Kim Joongho pointed to the entirely black right arm. The demonic energy in his right arm hadn't subsided even after death and continued to ominously pulse in the ice coffin.

—...

Chae Nayun became speechless. Chae Jinyoon, her beloved older brother, had turned into a devil? Who would believe such a ridiculous story? She couldn't bear the truth. Her head hurt as if someone pounded it with a hammer.

Kim Joongho waited a long time for her to calm down.

— Then, what, what happened?

Chae Nayun finally mustered the courage to ask after crying. Kim Joongho wondered if she could handle it.

— Tell me.

However, her voice carried a strong determination. She plowed through the harsh mountain range, defeated vicious monsters, and even persuaded the Nine Star with the heart of steel to arrive at this place. All to discover the truth.

— Understood.

Kim Joongho nodded. He felt like he shouldn't hide anything from this girl who had now become an adult.

— I don't know who killed Jinyoon, but that person must've known Jinyoon's body contained a devil. After all, he needed to prepare an appropriate weapon to kill a devil.

Chae Nayun listened to Kim Joongho in a daze as his clear voice rang in her ears.

— And... Jinyoon must've accepted his death as well.

However, Chae Nayun couldn't accept this. She glared at him and shouted.

— H-How do you know that?

Oppa promised to be by my side forever. He swore he would never leave. It was thanks to him that I could live on after Mom died...

— H-How could anyone...

Chae Nayun asked while crying.

—...

Kim Joongho didn't say anything. He sympathized with Chae Nayun as a father who lost his beloved wife and daughter and as a forensic pathologist who took pride in his work. Kim Joongho pointed at Chae Jinyoon's right shoulder.

— There's a saying that the dead don't talk. That's false. A corpse has

more stories to tell than you think.

Chae Nayun's eyes also fell on Chae Jinyoon's body. The muscles in the shoulder connecting to the devilized right arm had completely died.

— His shoulder blade broke and the muscles there became thoroughly destroyed. This injury resulted from Chae Jinyoon's will, his attempt to stop his right arm from moving.

Kim Joongho solemnly continued.

— I can only imagine the great willpower Jinyoon must've exerted. He didn't yield to the evil and resisted until the very end. That's what this means.

Chae Nayun's knees buckled and she fell to the ground. She reached out to Chae Jinyoon's corpse while crying, but the ice coffin prevented her from touching him. The coldness of the ice only made her cry louder.

— This also shows that whoever killed Jinyoon greatly hesitated. As I said before, I don't know who killed him. However, Jinyoon wouldn't have received such an injury if the killer didn't hesitate.

With that, Kim Joongho placed a jacket over Chae Nayun. He hid on this mountain because of Chae Joochul, but he didn't hate Chae Joochul's granddaughter.

— Chae Jinyoon and the person who killed him. I suspect they both equally suffered.

Chae Nayun cried while holding Chae Jinyoon in her arms. Her tears fell on the coffin and froze there. Her regrets, resentments, and sorrows all came together to form an ice crystal.

* * *

“Nayun, Nayun! Are you okay?”

Yoo Yeonha quickly ran to her mansion's front entrance. Chae Nayun stood under the pouring rain as Yoo Yeonha tried to take her in.

"Did, did you already know?"

However, Chae Nayun didn't move an inch. She asked while glaring at Yoo Yeonha with wet, disheveled hair that blocked her eyes. Yoo Yeonha felt shocked, but quickly regained her composure and grabbed Chae Nayun's wrist.

"First, come in."

"No." Chae Nayun snatched her hand away.

"I'm asking you, Yeonha... if you already knew."

"..."

Chae Nayun's trembling voice touched her heart. Yoo Yeonha stared at her with downcast eyes and saw Chae Nayun's tears flowing along with the rain.

"Yeah."

Yoo Yeonha nodded. She wanted to pretend she didn't know. Many excuses popped up in her head, but she cast them all aside. She didn't want to make the same mistake she did with Kim Hajin. She wanted to acknowledge the truth and not make any excuses anymore.

"If you did, then why didn't you say anything?"

"Nayun."

Chae Nayun's body violently trembled as Yoo Yeonha formed an umbrella with her magic power. Then Chae Nayun buried her face in Yoo Yeonha's chest.

"Why didn't you tell me? Why? I, I feel like I'm going to die right now..."

“Nayun.”

Yoo Yeonha patted her back and continued, “I’m sorry... I’ll... explain everything...”

Yoo Yeonha would tell her everything since Nayun mustered the courage to seek the truth. The fact that Kim Hajin was a regressor, the full account of the Kwang-Oh Incident, and how that person died.

“So first... come inside.”

Yoo Yeonha gently led her inside the mansion.

* * *

In a faraway world on a different plane than Earth...

The Akatrina continent housed 9 nations: 4 kingdoms, 2 principalities, and 3 island states. Kim Suho was born on the outskirts of the Plerion Kingdom, the most powerful nation among them. No, perhaps he came from another country. His exact origins remained unknown because his parents abandoned him as a child.

His unknown parents left him at a remote temple in the Plerion Kingdom. He grew up healthy and happy in this poor, rural temple. Then he awakened his Sword Saint gift under the kind and affectionate teachings of the temple priests. He learned the continent’s basic swordsmanship when he turned 4 years old. When he turned 5, he single-handedly defeated 3 kobolds who sneaked into the temple.

The priests didn’t want such a gifted child to rot in a rural temple, so they gathered what little money they had and sent him to the kingdom’s capital. With their help, the child became an apprentice knight to the Royal Knights at the age of 6. However, the child’s story ended there as life on the Akatrina continent became extinct 4 years later.

“Ah...”

Kim Suho opened his eyes with nostalgia. It seemed he fell asleep after

sending Kim Hajin off. He hadn't dreamt of his homeland in a long time. The happy childhood he spent in the temple and the marvelous royal palace flashed before his eyes.

"Huuu..."

He naturally sighed after telling Kim Hajin about his past today. The world he used to live in, the calamity known as demon realm transformation that descended on his world, the death he faced at only 11 years old, and waking up as Kim Suho in a world called Earth.

Kim Hajin believed in all this, which could easily be construed as mere fantasy.

"Should I not have told him?"

Kim Suho felt refreshed, but also regretful. He never planned on living his life without telling anyone, but he wanted to be a good son to his current parents. The original Kim Suho died at a young age and his current soul took over this body. Of course, his parents didn't know this, but Kim Suho felt grateful for their love.

He clenched his fists and looked at the ceiling. *Demon realm transformation*. The tragedy caused by this calamity resurfaced on the white ceiling.

The demon realm transformation began in the continent's central region. It corrupted the soil, killed the livestock, and polluted the water to prevent humans from living. Demons didn't even need to participate. Five of the nine nations fell from unprecedented famine and the remaining four waged war against each other for food. The continent experienced the bloodiest and longest war in its history, one that quickened its fall by at least 50 years.

"You're awake."

A cold voice woke him. Kim Suho turned around and saw the witch.

"Is the demon king here?" he asked her.

The witch silently nodded. Kim Suho raised his body and infused magic power into the equipment Kim Hajin made him. It resonated with his magic power and stuck to his body. Even the witch looked surprised at his new battle equipment.

“Follow me.”

“Yes.”

Kim Suho followed her into the hallway. He began asking questions while they walked the long path.

“I want to ask something.”

“Go ahead,” the witch immediately replied.

“Have you heard of demon realm transformation?”

“It’s the phenomenon in which human territory transforms into the demon realm. The king’s demon realm transformation extends to the 16th floor. He plans on expanding this range if no worthy challengers appear.”

“Then I guess I have to win.”

The witch didn’t react to Kim Suho’s bold remark.

“*Cough*, I want to ask another question.”

“Go ahead.”

The witch narrowed her eyes while Kim Suho continued looking forward.

“Will the demon realm transformation... happen on Earth?”

“Yes.”

The witch replied in a monotonous voice. She made it sound like the

most natural thing. Kim Suho clenched his teeth even though he expected such an answer. After all, towers and dungeons always foreshadowed the demon realm transformation. His home world, Akatrina, experienced the same fate. Kim Suho calmly nodded.

“I see.”

“...”

The witch glanced at him and asked, “Do you plan on stopping it?”

Kim Suho burst into laughter at her question with such an obvious answer.

“Of course.”

This answer didn’t come from an arrogant sense of duty that only he could prevent the world’s demise. He simply wanted to protect the people precious to him, the world he grew up in, and the feelings he held dear. He hoped this beautiful blue world wouldn’t turn out like his old home and would risk his life to protect it.

“...”

The witch didn’t respond. Her steps soon stopped as they arrived in front of a huge door.

Kim Suho stood a step behind her as she turned around and stared at the hero. The hero also returned her gaze.

“You may enter. I will see how long you last.”

“Okay. Look forward to it.”

Kim Suho smiled and the witch stared at him for a long time before nodding.

For the record, the witch fell in love with Kim Suho in the original novel that Kim Hajin wrote.

[Central Asia – Chameleon Troupe’s Base]

Meanwhile, I returned to the Chameleon Troupe’s base of operations. This place looked scarier than I recalled. Of course, a fancy building in Pandemonium only made it a target, so the hideout remained deep underground.

“This place has 5 floors underground?”

“Yep, this is your room. How’s the interior decoration?”

Jain asked with a smile. We currently resided in a room called the Black Residence. Simply put, it served as Black Lotus’ office.

“It’s great. Should I bring the goblin tablet from the cave?”

“No, leave the goblins there. We’ll use that cave as our secondary base.”

“Okay.”

Kiik— The door opened and I spotted a pair of eyes peeking at us. The round, black eyes obviously belonged to Boss.

“...”

She stared at me while hiding. Then she began rolling her eyes as if searching for me. I smirked and walked over. Then I yanked open the door.

“Ah!”

Boss jumped in surprise. She blinked and coughed before nonchalantly entering. I felt happy to see her after a long time.

“It’s been a while, Boss.”

“Yes, you went away for quite a while.”

“I had something to do in the tower.”

“You only left a letter.”

I smiled at the grumbling Boss.

“Come sit.”

I didn’t know the specific purpose of this room, but it had chairs and a desk. I led Boss to take a seat. Boss spotted Jain and kicked her chair.

“Jain, why are you here alone without telling me?”

“You said not to wake you up when you’re sleeping.”

“...”

Boss and I sat next to each other without talking. She awkwardly scooted to the side because we hadn’t seen each other in a while. I initiated the conversation to resolve our awkwardness.

“How are things going recently?”

“What do you mean?”

“About the humanoid monsters.”

“*Mm*, that—“

“*Ah*, that?”

Boss tried to say something, but Jain interrupted.

“It’s a mess. Looks like they sent envoys to most djinn groups including Evil Society and Satan’s Servants.”

“Mmm.”

So far, nothing new had occurred. The monster king Orden wished to conquer all of Earth, so he sent envoys to both humans and djinns. Of course, humans couldn't possibly accept Orden's offer.

“Also, Hajin.” Boss looked at me.

“Yes?”

“Your revenge is underway.”

“Revenge... Ah, him?”

“Yeah, that insect bastard.”

Boss muttered in a voice full of rage. Honestly, I worried about Kurukuru as well. He simply became too powerful.

“Don't push yourself too much.”

I shook my head. Kurukuru would be a tough opponent even for Boss. Not many people could easily take him on.

“It's better for Boss to stay safe rather than taking revenge on that guy.”

I gently smiled at Boss without much thought since I hadn't seen her in a while.

“Y-Yeah, o-okay.”

However, Boss' eyes began to shake and her white skin became slightly flushed. Her overreaction made me think...

“Don't worry about it too much, Hajin.” Jain interrupted my thoughts.

“We put a curse on him.”

“A curse?”

“Yep, remember the arm Boss got from him?”

“Ah...”

I recalled Kurukuru’s right arm. *Or was it his left arm?* In any case, I planned on turning it into a weapon.

“He’s probably dying as we speak. At the very least, he won’t be as fast as before.”

“*Mmm*, that’s good to know.”

Still, the threat Orden posed hadn’t decreased. Unlike normal monsters, Orden didn’t try to solve everything with force. His intelligence and overwhelming wealth served as powerful weapons. He possessed all the resources in Africa and could arguably be considered the wealthiest individual in the world. He would later use this to obstruct governments, corporations, and heroes.

“Oh, I need to go somewhere now.”

I slowly got up. I just returned to Earth, so I had a lot to do. Out of habit, I looked at my left wrist. However, my smartwatch had disappeared.

“Oh right.”

My smartwatch burned up when I obtained the fifth streak of stigma. It feels weird not having it on me.

“Where are you going? You just came back.” Boss pouted and pulled my sleeve.

“Oh, I have work to do.”

I didn’t have time to waste. If Orden sent envoys, a few corrupt politicians should’ve taken his bait. I began to put on Black Lotus’

outfit when Boss asked again.

“Work?”

“Yes, work.”

I planned to find out who betrayed humanity with the Book of Truth and execute them. I should start with the politicians in Korea who accepted Orden’s bribes. If left alone, I didn’t know what they would do to Kim Suho who would soon clear the tower or Yoo Yeonha who led Essence of the Strait.

Then Evandel would finally shine after I took out the trash.

Before that... I should visit Yoo Yeonha for a new smartwatch.

I planned my next course of action.

“I’m going too.”

Boss also stood up.

“You stay here, Boss.”

“No, who knows when that mantis will show up again.”

“...”

“Damned mantis. I’ll kill you for sure if you appear again...” Boss seriously murmured.

I looked at Boss’ expression and thought it over.

Well, it wouldn’t hurt to be with Boss.

“Sure. Feel free.”

I didn’t mind if she tagged along.

Chapter 250

A New Beginning (1)

Yoo Yeonha tried to speak with Chae Nayun. However, Chae Nayun didn't have the strength to maintain consciousness. When Yoo Yeonha placed a hand on Chae Nayun's forehead, she felt an unbearable heat.

Chae Nayun insisted on hearing her out, but Yoo Yeonha forced her into bed and gave her some medicine. Soon, she fell asleep in Kim Hajin's handmade bed.

Yoo Yeonha thought about how to explain everything as Chae Nayun slept. Her thought circuitry skill worked to its fullest. However, she couldn't find a solution to this convoluted web of relationships. She could only solve it by directly breaking through.

Moonlight entered from the window. It shone like a jewel and Yoo Yeonha rubbed her eyes at the mystical scene. Her fingers felt wet.

I thought my tear glands had dried up. I guess I still have some tears left to shed. Yoo Yeonha sighed as she brushed her hair up.

"Haaa..."

She sat next to Chae Nayun and organized everything she wanted to say in her head.

Time slowly passed. The moonlight brightened before dimming. The sky turned darker, then brighter. The sound of rain echoed in the silent room.

It finally stopped raining around dawn. The world sparkled as if the rain swept away every speck of dust. Around then, Yoo Yeonha felt a gaze on her. She turned from the scenery outside and found Chae Nayun staring at her in bed.

“Stay down.”

Yoo Yeonha gently told her.

Of course, Chae Nayun couldn't simply rest. She raised her upper body. Was it because of the bed or Chae Nayun's unique physique? She recovered quite fast and looked much better than before.

“Are you okay?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

Chae Nayun silently nodded.

“Tell me everything you know. I can take it. I can accept it. What you know, what I don't know, and how things became like this.”

Her voice carried a strong determination. However, Yoo Yeonha couldn't simply believe her. Not because she normally couldn't trust people, but because Chae Nayun didn't know a lot of things. She didn't know about the Kwang-Oh Incident or that their families killed Kim Hajin's parents. If she knew, would she be able to endure it?

“Can you really handle it?” Yoo Yeonha worriedly asked.

Chae Nayun returned a confident smile.

“Who do you think I am? I'm serious right now. I might hit you if you don't tell me.”

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled at Chae Nayun's half-joking words. With that, she carefully began to speak.

“Did the corpse... have any evidence?”

“Yeah... it did.”

Chae Nayun replied with some difficulty. Chae Jinyoon's right arm had fully transformed into a devil's.

“I see.”

Yoo Yeonha nodded. She could talk about the next thing then. Before that, she needed time to prepare her heart.

“Huu...” Yoo Yeonha took a deep breath before looking at Chae Nayun.

“Why didn’t you tell me before?” Chae Nayun asked her. Yoo Yeonha began to explain why Kim Hajin killed Chae Jinyoon and how she found out.

“That person told me not to.”

“That person? Kim Hajin did?”

“Yeah, that’s what he said. You couldn’t have handled the truth at the time. He didn’t want you to break down, so he endured it alone.”

— Don’t tell Chae Nayun. Regardless of the reason, I killed Chae Jinyoon.

Yoo Yeonha recalled Kim Hajin saying those words with a sad smile.

“I couldn’t have handled the truth?”

Chae Nayun clenched her teeth. *I’m the one who decides whether I can accept the truth or not. How can you decide for me?* She scoffed at the idea.

Meanwhile, Yoo Yeonha continued, “Yeah, that’s what that person thought. He could handle it and you couldn’t.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke with certainty. He had the courage to be hated and this courage came from his knowledge of the future.

“Because he was a regressor.”

“A what?”

Chae Nayun furrowed her brows. Yoo Yeonha expected such a

reaction, so she began to explain. Everything would be hard to believe, but it made sense in the end. Suddenly switching from a sword to a gun, saving Chae Nayun, Rachel, and even herself from djinns. Coaxing Chae Nayun to switch to a sword, knowing that Chae Jinyoon carried a devil's seed, figuring out how to kill the devil inside Chae Jinyoon... Every sacrifice he made couldn't be explained if he hadn't regressed.

"In the timeline he came from, you must've broken down because Chae Jinyoon became a devil. That's why he hid the truth from you and killed Chae Jinyoon alone."

Yoo Yeonha grabbed her hands. However, Chae Nayun fiercely shook her off.

"Y-You, do you think that, that... makes sense?"

Chae Nayun couldn't believe it. Even though many miracles occurred, going back in time sounded like the most improbable one. On the other hand, the image of Kim Hajin appeared in her mind. The way he always seemed confident planted a seed of doubt in her heart.

"I-It doesn't make sense. How can he be a..."

Chae Nayun couldn't finish her sentence.

Yoo Yeonha slowly got up. Then she took out a diary from her desk drawer.

"Nayun, you need to know something else too."

Yoo Yeonha sat next to Chae Nayun with the diary. She had to reveal the truth now, but tears began to fall from her eyes. She didn't know why.

"Have you heard of the Kwang-Oh Incident?"

The story went back even further in time. Chae Nayun nodded. She had heard about the tragedy where dozens of civilians and ten heroes died. Yoo Yeonha spoke about it in more detail. The government

declared that monsters had caused it, but someone else planned it.

“Kim Hajin was the sole survivor of the Kwang-Oh Incident.”

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened. She never knew anything about Kim Hajin’s past.

“And this...”

Yoo Yeonha quietly handed her the diary. She had asked to take it from Yoo Jinwoong. The truth of that day only remained in this diary. Chae Nayun stared at it in a daze and took it with two hands. Then she slowly opened it.

“...”

Her hands stopped after flipping to a certain page just as Yoo Yeonha had done when she first read it. Chae Nayun continued reading in complete silence. Soon, her hands began to tremble.

“What... what does this...”

Chae Nayun blankly raised her head. Her eyes had turned red from all the tears she shed.

“Haaa...”

Yoo Yeonha somberly sighed. She braced herself once more and revealed the main instigators of the Kwang-Oh Incident.

“The people who ordered the death of Kim Hajin’s parents were Chae Joochul... and Yoo Jinwoong.”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t try to cover up her father’s sin. She honestly confessed and looked into Chae Nayun’s flickering eyes.

Chae Nayun must be feeling the same emotions she once felt. Yoo Yeonha hoped she wouldn’t break and continued.

“Your grandfather and my father.”

* * *

[Korea – Seoul]

I returned to Seoul late at night, but the bright lights made it seem like day. This nightless city on a tiny peninsula in East Asia had become a global superpower. I looked at my creation in awe.

The magic-powered streetlights lit up the roads. Restaurants and bars bustled with people. A monster attack would be the last thing on their minds.

“I hear Seoul’s population is 20 million now.”

Boss enjoyed the night scenery from next to me. The wind felt fiercer than usual as we stood on a high-rise building.

“Nowadays, people are moving to Gyeonggi-do because of Essence of the Strait’s new barrier.”

Their number one research facility, Essential Dynamics, recently announced a revolutionary technology. They officially called it essence barrier. It looked formless, but could detect monsters with sensors and form a barrier. The essence barrier could even strike down monsters under low-intermediate rank, grade 7. It became much more advanced than in the original story. I should thank Yoo Yeonha for following my advice.

They installed this barrier on a hill near Seoul for testing. Then they quickly expanded to every city in Korea after proving its effectiveness.

“I’ve heard of it. It made headlines in the Violet Times as well. Other countries are dying to get their hands on it.”

“Yeah.”

They usually sold military technology to contractors after giving them a sample, but Essential Dynamics didn’t do that this time. China,

Japan, Europe, America, and every other country practically begged Essential Dynamics to choose them next.

“Monster attacks have become more common, so it can't be helped.”

The entire world could endure the future calamity with Essence of the Strait's revolutionary invention. For the record, Violet Banquet users already knew about this information. Violet Banquet began to sell something called the recent hot issue magazine because of the tower. Each issue covered most of the major incidents on Earth, so players could easily catch up.

“*Mmm*, it's good that I listened to you before.” Boss suddenly mentioned something strange.

“Come again?” I tilted my head. *What did I tell her?*

“You told me to buy Essence of the Strait stocks.”

“*Ah...*”

I smiled. Essence of the Strait's stock became unparalleled. It grew miles ahead of any other guild and its subsidiaries could all be considered unicorns in the business world. If I recalled correctly, 15 out of the top 50 businesses should be Essence of the Strait subsidiaries.

Yoo Yeonha began to go by that nickname because of this, Queen of Seoul. The title perfectly suited her. Essence of the Strait's defense technology would cover all of Seoul in a year and Yoo Yeonha would reign supreme as its empress.

“Now that you mention it, the stocks I own must be worth well over 3 trillion won.”

“What? 3... trillion?”

“Yeah, that's about 2.5 billion dollars.”

Boss looked utterly shocked.

“Ah, that’s just my assets on Earth. Including the tower, it should be... 10 trillion won?”

“W-What?”

Boss’ eyes widened again. It sounded like an astronomical figure, but I didn’t exaggerate. I owned a good amount of Essence of the Strait and its subsidiaries. I also owned half of Prestige inside the tower and the entire Genkelope Vessel. Of course, I didn’t focus on business, so I couldn’t compare to the richest on Earth.

“I’m thinking about liquifying my assets now.”

The value of the Korean won had grown more important than ever. I should start building my funds.

“You should sell some of your stocks too. It should continue increasing, but it’s important to have cash on hand.”

“I, I see.” Boss still seemed shocked and kept murmuring, *10 trillion, 10 trillion...*

Then a man appeared in the penthouse I had been staring at for a while now.

“He’s here.”

Boss’ expression also stiffened. I told her what we came to do today.

“Boss, you can see him, right? That’s Yoon Younghwa, a fourth-term member of the National Assembly.”

Yoon Younghwa could be considered cancer to society. That’s how I wrote him. I made him as corrupt as possible in my novel. He constantly hindered Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha while betraying his country.

“He accepted bribes from Orden, so we’ll kill him today.”

Orden gifted Yoon Younghwa amazing presents like blood diamonds, Tower of Wish entrance tickets, and mana-infused gold. According to the Book of Truth, he received well over 5 billion won in value.

“So it’s partly revenge against that mantis bastard.”

“Excuse me? Oh... *uh*, yeah.”

I didn’t think that far, but it’s true dying last time angered me. Plus, complicated thoughts constantly bothered me for a week after reviving. I wondered if I was still me after coming back to life.

“Why don’t you wait a bit? No one knows much about humanoid monsters and Orden right now.”

“Orden is the type to work in the shadows. We’re doing this to drag him to the surface.”

I grabbed my bow, but dozens of monsters unexpectedly ambushed us on the roof. The hyena monsters didn’t give off any presence.

“—!”

Boss stepped out and swept through them. Her shadow blade mercilessly dismembered them in her Yaksha state. I figured they belonged with Orden’s humanoid monsters judging from their human-like cries.

— *Kuak!*

— *Keuk!*

We easily killed them, but a problem occurred.

“Ah, shoot.”

Yoon Younghwa had disappeared. He probably teleported away with a magic scroll while the humanoid monsters distracted us. Rather than that, I didn’t think he would already have monster guards.

“Are you okay, Hajin?”

“Yes.”

I underestimated Orden and ended up losing my target, but I still had the Clock Hand of Fate.

I activated my unique skill and the world began to wind back. The monsters' dismembered limbs reattached and Yoon Younghwa appeared again in the penthouse. Boss and I moved until we stood in the same spot 3 minutes prior.

“So it's partly revenge against that mantis bastard.”

I immediately picked up my bow and nocked 5 *[Dark Ore Arrows]*. Then I infused stigma's magic power into aether to search for my targets.

“*Hmm.*”

Aether detected at least 200 monsters. The fact that so many monsters could fit in such a small space surprised me.

“Boss, that building is a fortress.”

“*Hmm?*”

Transparent magic power formed a barrier around the building and monsters patrolled in the dark for any danger. For some reason, these monsters didn't reveal a shred of presence.

“Boss, step aside a bit.”

I infused 3.5 streaks of stigma into the 5 arrows. My arm heated up to a painful degree, but I could endure this much thanks to my increased physical stats.

Guoooo...

The bow began to glow white and the dark ore arrows resonated with magic power. I planned to slaughter all of them with these 5 arrows.

The arrows shot forward like lightning bolts as I released the bowstring. The supersonic arrows quietly killed all the monsters. In the dark sky, my arrows moved like they possessed a mind of their own.

Everything only took 3 seconds and an arrow also pierced Yoon Younghwa's waist. He didn't realize someone had attacked him for a long time.

"Hmm."

I planned to kill Yoon Younghwa, but decided not to after considering Boss' words. I didn't need to kill him right now.

— *Kuaaaak!*

Yoon Younghwa writhed in pain. His lower body should be paralyzed after I pierced his waist.

"You aren't killing him?" Boss asked.

"Yes, I think it'll be better if I kill him later."

I decided to leave him alive as a warning from Black Lotus to Orden himself and all who might side with him.

— Wh... what happened?

— I don't know, sir! Magic power suddenly...

— Wait, these are... monsters? They're all dead! Why are there so many?

Heroes, who felt my magic power, began to arrive. They discovered the monster corpses and spotted Yoon Younghwa inside. No, Yoon Younghwa saw them first.

— *Ah, hey! Fuck! Over here! I'm dying! Help me first!*

As expected, he didn't die so easily as a congressman who used to be a hero.

"Spartan."

I summoned Spartan.

— *Pururu.*

He quietly flew over and landed on my shoulder. I entrusted him with a single task.

"Reveal all the evidence Yoon Younghwa has in his home."

Spartan nodded and quickly infiltrated the penthouse. He found the safe containing the bribes and threw them on the floor.

— *Kwang!*

The penthouse door burst open. Heroes who heard Yoon Younghwa entered his room.

— What's this?

— *Ah, wait. Isn't that a blood diamond?*

Treasures of unknown origin littered the room. For the record, rare items like blood diamonds all required registration numbers. Of course, a blood diamond from a bribe wouldn't have such a thing.

"*Huuu...*"

My head slightly ached, but the real pain had yet to arrive.

"*Huu, huu...*"

I took deep breaths and started counting down. 30, 29, 28...

“Let’s go back, Hajin.”

“Yes, Boss...”

Koong! Time reversal’s side effect struck me after the 3 minute mark passed. My heart violently pounded in my chest. I staggered and fell, but Boss caught me before I hit the ground.

“Hajin! W-What’s wrong?”

“Ah, it’s fine... It’s just a little side effect.”

A flash of light flared up in the night sky, but it didn’t pose any danger.

“...!”

Boss quickly unleashed her magic power and formed a barrier around us. This flare would occur more frequently from now on to signal the battle between Kim Suho and the demon king.

“Argh, Boss. Carry me back. I’m sleepy...”

I ended up using 4 streaks of stigma and time reversal. That turned out to be too much in one go. I closed my eyes while leaning on Boss as she gently stroked my back.

“Yeah, rest well.”

Boss released her magic power. She achieved a superspeed movement with various skills from the tower.

The next day, congressman Yoon Younghwa’s corruption and Black Lotus’ attack appeared in the headlines.

Chapter 251

A New Beginning (2)

[Central Africa, Orden's Underground Kingdom]

Monsters inhabited a dark kingdom in Central Africa. Here, the monster king Orden received his servant's report.

— Is that so?

— I have no excuses, Your Highness.

The king appeared calm, unlike his servant. He even seemed to be enjoying the situation.

— We dispatched monsters to protect Yoon Younghwa, but they were not enough.

— Do not worry. Who could have known that this Black Lotus would interfere with our work? We only need to prepare better guards next time.

The king gestured with his hand and a bipedal rabbit emerged from the darkness behind his throne. The monster possessed a man's body, but a rabbit's head.

— Gato, it is finally time for you to act.

The rabbit called Gato nodded without a word. He was Orden's second masterpiece. A humanoid monster who might be slower than Kurukuru, but no less powerful.

— Protect our allies and crush Black Lotus.

Gato's eyes glowed red at the king's command. His eyes thirsted for

blood and death. He disappeared like the wind after bowing.

— I apologize again, Your Highness.

The monster servant watched this scene and bowed low in front of Orden, who simply gave his next order.

— We need to put aside the carrot and use the stick. Lead the monsters of Africa to the north. I shall present humanity with their first calamity.

— Yes, Your Highness!

— You may leave now.

The servant disappeared without ever showing his back. Orden slowly closed his eyes. The disaster that his servants would cause unfolded before him. It would only be the beginning.

* * *

— You must remain resolute, Your Highness.

This memory came from a distant past. My old servant urged me to decide in a world where the four seasons had vanished and only winter remained. I looked at him from my throne.

— You must punish the treacherous Kindspring.

The old servant took advantage of my silence and continued. Other servants concurred and their voices resonated.

— Kindspring is a petty man without any sense of priority. He failed to consider the greater cause due to personal feelings.

Thinking back now, Kindspring always remained loyal. He kept his integrity and morals even as the continent's future hung in the balance. He believed a noble knight should be punished for plundering the people. However, that knight turned out to be a sword

master, an important asset in the war.

— Raylen only wishes for Kindspring to be punished. He is a knight who pledged allegiance to the royal family. Please desert the traitor and embrace your loyal servant, Your Highness.

I was only thirteen at the time. Despite my tender age, I acted as queen and not a young princess. I carried the responsibility of my kingdom to control the war.

I recalled my very first servant's face. His pledge of everlasting loyalty and my acceptance of it clashed in my mind.

— Your Highness, please punish the treacherous Kindspring.

I thought I didn't have a choice, but was that the case? Did I have no choice but to abandon my most loyal servant?

No, that wasn't true.

As the queen, didn't I wish to abandon him? Didn't I secretly consider him useless because he never managed to become strong?

— I understand. I shall deprive Kindspring of all rights as of today. Lock him up immediately.

“...!”

Jin Sahyuk woke up in bed, no longer queen of Plerion. The breath she held finally broke out. She gasped for air and grabbed her chest. Her heart violently beat. For a while, she caught her breath before raising her upper body.

“Haa...”

Another dream of the past. Did her seal over her memories weaken? Maybe that damned Kim Hajin just shook her up. The memories buried beneath her consciousness leaked like sand.

“Damn it.”

Sweat covered her body and she threw away her bothersome pajamas. Then she injected magic power into her head. Only after she finished tightening her memory seal did she crawl out of bed.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk changed into her uniform in the early morning and looked at herself in the mirror. She saw a certain woman resembling the princess. At the same time, she looked nothing like that princess. This strange sense of disharmony overwhelmed her.

“This is all because of that little shit, Kim Hajin.”

Her confusion turned into anger. Jin Sahyuk cursed out loud at the thought of him. Just thinking about him made her want to puke. Once again, she pledged to end his life with her own hands.

She stepped out towards the beautiful garden. Soon, a horde of knights approached her from the distance.

“We humbly greet you, Commander Shin Jahyuk!”

The knights all wore the *[Lv.7 Atalos Platinum Armor]*. Princess Araha’s guard, Rachel, also stood among them. Rachel smiled at Jin Sahyuk.

“Good morning.”

“What’s the princess’ knight doing here?”

Jin Sahyuk replied rather gruffly. Rachel didn’t seem offended and spoke in a small voice.

“Um, Fenrir will be coming to the castle.”

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk frowned. *By Fenrir, she must mean Kim Hajin. What does that have to do with me? Does she seriously still think I'm his fan?*

“Would you like to come along? You could if you want.”

“N-no, it's okay.”

Jin Sahyuk shook her head. She had no reason to meet him and didn't want to either. Definitely not because he threatened her to never appear before him again. It's just that... she didn't want to see him.

“I don't have time. I'll be leaving to conquer the 9th floor soon.”

Rachel seemed slightly sad. “Then would you like me to deliver a message to him on your behalf?”

“A message?”

Even Jin Sahyuk couldn't decline this offer.

Message...

Jin Sahyuk looked at Rachel. “Ask him if he's ever heard of Kindsp... no, Prios.”

“Prios?”

“Yeah.”

Mentioning Kindspring seemed too obvious. Instead, she chose a name that anyone blessed by Plerion would know. Prios was her father's name.

“Ah, wait. No, not that...”

On second thought, that didn't seem like a very good choice either. She couldn't narrow down the suspects if she used a name everyone knew.

Is there a name only a handful of people would recognize? Suddenly, she flinched while contemplating. I met Kindspring as a child and he knew all my secrets. That means...

“Puharen.”

“Puharen, you say?”

“Yeah.” Jin Sahyuk calmly nodded.

“Oh, so you were here.”

A cheerful voice called them. Jin Sahyuk and Rachel turned towards the Duchess of the West, Tomer.

“Long time no see, Knight Commander. You too, Rachel.”

“...”

“Yes, it’s nice to see you.”

Jin Sahyuk looked at Tomer with discontent while Rachel gave her the usual benevolent smile. At first, Rachel felt surprised to see Tomer. The Cube alumna unexpectedly showed up and introduced herself as the Duchess of the West. Tomer’s explanation easily cleared Rachel’s confusion. Soon, the two became quite close. After all, Tomer was the first to tell Rachel that Kim Hajin liked her during their Cube years.

Tomer scanned the knights.

“Everyone knows we’re going to the 9th floor tomorrow?”

“Yes, of course!”

The knights all replied. Jin Sahyuk didn’t like that they seemed to favor Tomer more than her. Tomer simply smiled at Jin Sahyuk.

“Well then, I’ll be leaving now. I’m scheduled to meet with someone.”

Rachel informed them and disappeared with a return ticket.

A competitive atmosphere filled the space between Tomer and Jin Sahyuk.

* * *

I left Korea and arrived in England. Of course, I didn't come here for vacation, but to meet Evandel.

“Invitation?”

“Yes, anyone who isn't a royal needs an invitation to enter.”

A knight stopped me when I tried to enter Buckingham Palace. England was one of the few countries that still acknowledged the knight profession. Knights worked like heroes, but they required swords and pledged allegiance to the Royal Family.

“I don't have anything like that. Excuse me for a second.”

I recalled entering the palace without any restrictions in the past as Fenrir. Well, I hadn't paid a visit in some time because of the tower. They probably forgot me.

I took out two ID cards from my pocket. One confirmed my identity as Jeronimo Mercenary's Fenrir and the other as Technical Adviser to Essential Dynamics.

“Here you go.”

“...”

The knight received my cards.

[Essential Dynamics Technical Adviser – Hajin Kim]

His eyes widened at the cards.

“Ah, I also contacted Rachel beforehand. You can ask her.”

I sent a note to Evandel through spartan, who should’ve delivered it to Rachel. *Gulp*— The knight swallowed his saliva and carefully asked.

“By Rachel, do you mean...?”

“You know, the Princess.”

The knight made a call right away. It lasted about 3 seconds before the knight politely bowed and stepped aside.

“Sir, I apologize for not recognizing you!”

“No, it’s okay. Your Korean pronunciation is great. How long have you spoken Korean?”

“I’ve been learning at a Korean school since I was three.”

“Ah... So they have something like that.”

Korea has English schools too.

I patted the knight on the shoulder and entered Buckingham Palace. I assumed it would be filled with servants and maids, but it looked mostly empty to my surprise. *Tadadada*— Instead, I heard someone running towards me. I turned to the side with a big smile. Of course, Evandel arrived to welcome me.

“Hajin!”

I picked her up. She felt as light as a feather and I rubbed my cheek against hers.

“I missed you.”

“Sorry, I came a bit late.”

I walked over to the reception room with Evandel in my arms.

Surprisingly, the reception room contained a crowd of guests. Not only Ah Hae-In and Hayang, but Yun Seung-Ah and Haeyeon also visited. I approached them slightly confused.

“Oh, Hajin. Hi!”

“Hello.”

Yun Seung-Ah and Ah Hae-In greeted me respectively. I nodded and sat in an empty chair.

“Um, I understand why Ah Hae-In is here, but why is Yun Seung-Ah...?”

I tilted my head as Yun Seung-Ah scratched her neck in slight embarrassment.

“Ah, just because I couldn’t sleep. Suho is fighting the demon king on the 30th floor.”

“Ah, right.”

These days, news spread that Kim Suho would complete the Tower of Wish. His journey lasted roughly 3 years. To be more precise, it took 2 and a half years. The media only talked about Kim Suho at the moment. People even betted whether or not he would defeat the demon king.

The current excitement over Kim Suho felt similar to the World Cup from my original Earth. He stood at the center of global attention right now.

“Our stock prices shot up and investments also resumed thanks to him. All I can do is pray.”

Yun Seung-Ah bitterly smiled.

“Hajin, Hajin, you smell nice!”

Evandel began sniffing me. The door slid open and a woman I hadn't seen in a long time appeared. Rachel approached with a big smile.

"You came?"

"I did. It's been a while."

I stood up and we exchanged greetings. Then we enjoyed some tea in the reception room while discussing Evandel. Ah Hae-In informed me of Evandel's achievements. In terms of quantity, Evandel had already reached Ah Hae-In's level. In terms of quality, she would soon compare to a 7 star.

We complimented Evandel and she squirmed with joy.

"Ah, right. Hajin, do you know Knight Commander Shin Jahyuk by any chance?"

Rachel asked as if the question suddenly popped up in her head.

"Shin Jahyuk? I do know her. Why?"

Jin Sahyuk went by that alias. I saw her with my own eyes recently.

"Ah, it's nothing. She said she's your fan."

"My fan?"

I never heard of such a ridiculous thing. Rachel continued while I remained speechless.

"She wanted me to ask you something."

"What is it?"

"She asked if you knew Puharen?"

Everything made sense after I heard that question. I nodded and tried to suppress my laughter. Jin Sahyuk wanted to know something

through Rachel.

“So do you know this Puharen?”

“*Huh? Um.*”

I began to think. *This must be some kind of test...*

“I don’t know. I think I’ve heard that name in a movie. If I recall correctly, he was an incarcerated royal.”

As the original writer, I knew everything about Jin Sahyuk’s backstory. How she acted as the princess, what she did to become queen, and how she met her end.

Puharen used to be a royal family member until Jin Sahyuk imprisoned her. However, Puharen carried a devil’s seed and simply banishing her only resulted in Jin Sahyuk’s fall.

Honestly, Plerion would have fallen even without Puharen. [*Plerion was destined to fall the day Jin Sahyuk became its ruler.*] After all, I made that an official setting. A kingdom ruled by a young queen easily influenced by her vassals. It obviously wouldn’t end well. Rachel tilted her head and asked, “Incarcerated royalty?”

“Yes, you should just tell her that, but it’s nothing important.”

I quickly changed the topic. “Didn’t you say you wanted to install an essence barrier?”

I brought up the essence barrier. Foreign countries recently sent multiple envoys to Korea for this.

“Yes... not only that, but other defensive technologies as well.”

Rachel looked grim. It seemed England didn’t have much of a prospect for securing these defensive technologies.

“We’re trying our best, but our connections don’t extend far. China

and the US have been very aggressive. The order will be China, the US, Japan, Germany... We'll probably come in fifth at best."

"Is that so?"

"Yes, but that's okay. We have a few interests in the Tower of Wish to use for negotiations."

Rachel said in a sullen voice.

The English Royal Court's investments in the Tower of Wish should be much more valuable than a mere barrier. However, she couldn't simply ignore the complaints and anxiety of her people. Monster attacks recently skyrocketed, so she only had a few options.

"No, you probably don't need to go that far."

I confidently smiled. Essence of Strait already possessed enough facilities to manufacture an ample amount of essence barriers. Yoo Yeonha simply played hard to get to attract more lobbyists.

"Don't worry."

England definitely needed an essence barrier.

"I'll..."

I prepared to exercise my right as Essence of Strait's technical adviser when the door burst open. *Thud*— Men in suits suddenly flooded in.

"D-Dad?"

"Pardon? Dad?"

"I, I mean, Father..."

Even Rachel's father personally arrived. Amidst our confusion, the men in suits politely introduce themselves. The group included the minister and vice-minister of foreign affairs, members of the House of

Lords, etc. They all spoke to me and I soon realized their intentions.

“As representatives of this nation, we would like to welcome Sir Hajin Kim, the technical adviser to Essence of the Strait. We have a sincere favor to ask of you. Currently, the citizens of England suffer from the greatest surge of monster attacks in history. The number of low rank monsters has increased dramatically in urban areas and...”

As expected, they wanted me to help secure an essence barrier for England.

“Excuse me, Hajin? What’s happening?”

Essential Dynamics Technical Adviser. Rachel, Ah Hae-In, and Yoon Seung-Ah all didn’t know about my position. The trio looked at me in a daze as I bashfully smiled.

* * *

[4 hours later, Seoul, South Korea – Yoo Yeonha’s Mansion]

Last night’s events unfolded in my head once more.

— Dead? What do you mean?

Chae Nayun miserable screamed, but I couldn’t answer.

— D-Dead, so suddenly? He can’t be dead. He can’t be dead! It doesn’t, it doesn’t make any sense! He’s strong, really really strong!

I showed her the video. A being moving at an undetectable speed definitely slashed Kim Hajin in half. His eyes lost all signs of life and faded into an ash-gray color. He undoubtedly died.

— This can’t, this can’t be. How can this be Kim Hajin, how...

That’s when Chae Nayun completely lost it. She tore her hair out, bawled like a child, pounded the floor with her fists, and agonized over his futile death.

— *Ah, aaah!* Why, why, why... Why...!

Chae Nayun regretted everything she had ever done in the face of his death.

“I shouldn’t have been so mean the last time we met. This wouldn’t have happened if I was smarter. Please, please, please...”

She wailed in despair.

Watching Chae Nayun in pain, I... I...

“Hey, wake up.”

No, wait. That’s not right.

“Uuu...”

Yoo Yeonha frowned from a nightmare. She lightly twitched as she continued to wander in it.

“Wake up.”

However, Kim Hajin didn’t intend on letting her suffer. He lightly tapped Yoo Yeonha’s forehead. She shook her head and seemed to be having another nightmare. With no other choice, Kim Hajin infused his magic power into Yoo Yeonha’s head.

“Haaaauuu...”

Yoo Yeonha strangely moaned. Stigma helped release her from the nightmare and she finally opened her eyes. Then she stared at the empty space above.

“You’re finally up.” Kim Hajin smiled.

“...?”

Yoo Yeonha turned to the side and faced him.

“Huh?”

She blurted out in a daze. Kim Hajin appeared in front of her. The sunlight shone on Kim Hajin, who had already died. *This must be a dream too.*

“It’s not like you to fall asleep during the day.”

Kim Hajin seemed too real and Yoo Yeonha couldn’t say a word.

“Ah—”

Suddenly, her eyes rolled back and she lost consciousness. She lacked the mental strength to deal with this situation.

Chapter 252

A New Beginning (3)

Yoo Yeonha lost consciousness after she saw Kim Hajin. Of course, he had no idea why and infused stigma's magic power into her head again. She woke up, saw him, and fell unconscious once more. Then Kim Hajin infused stigma's magic power into her like before.

After repeating this about 5 times.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha finally woke up. She still had a dazed expression, but no longer fainted when she saw him. *I should be able to talk to her now.* Kim Hajin thought to himself.

“What's up with you?”

“...”

However, Yoo Yeonha remained silent. She simply stared at him with watery eyes.

“Hello?”

She froze for a while before charging into Kim Hajin's embrace.

“Ah, hey. What are you doing?”

Her arms squeezed him and she buried her face in his chest. Her hug felt powerful enough to save the world.

“I'm sorry, I'm sorry...”

She apologized while Kim Hajin stood flustered. She thought she was still dreaming and imagined him out of guilt.

“Calm down. What are you even apologizing for?”

“I... I...”

Yoo Yeonha wanted to confess everything even in her dream. She couldn't be forgiven anymore, but still wanted to tell him everything. That's exactly what she did. She told him what she hid, how much it pained her, and how much she regretted it.

“Sorry, it's all my fault...” Yoo Yeonha spoke as she sniffled.

“You can leave now. I'll remember you for the rest of my life.”

“...”

Kim Hajin blankly stared at her. He still couldn't understand this comedic situation, so he watched her make a fool out of herself for 2-3 minutes. Then... *Chap*— He lightly slapped her cheek.

“Ow, what the heck?”

Yoo Yeonha spat out a few words after being slapped. It seemed she hadn't gone completely insane yet.

“What are you doing?”

“Eh?”

“I said, what are you doing?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha finally realized something felt off. She remained motionless as if computing all the possible solutions to a problem. *CHAP!* She slapped herself with enough strength to shake the room. Her eyebrows twitched from the pain.

“Auuu, it hurts...”

“I don’t know what’s going on, but I’m not dead.” Kim Hajin spoke after seeing her reaction.

“...”

“Thanks for letting me know.”

Yoo Yeonha’s face turned bright red at his words.

* * *

I sat face-to-face with Yoo Yeonha two hours later. Her face still seemed hot with embarrassment. I could probably fry an egg on it.

Gulp, gulp—

She downed a glass of water before opening her mouth.

“T-To think you had such a skill...”

“Technically, I did die. It hurt a lot.”

“Haa... b-but... thank you for being alive.”

Yoo Yeonha slammed her head on the table. White steam rose from her head. I wasn’t exaggerating. Steam actually came out, probably from a skill she used.

“What do I tell Nayun...?”

“Oh right, what happened to Chae Nayun?”

Before I noticed, Chae Nayun had discovered the truth. I worried about her fragile mind when Yoo Yeonha suddenly shot up.

“Nayun... went back to the Himalayas.”

“Why?”

“To... get revenge.”

“Revenge?”

“Yes, she said she’d take revenge on the humanoid monster and make her grandfather pay for his sins. She left before I could say no.”

“I see.”

I fell into thought. The situation seemed quite serious. *Do I have to visit her to show that I’m still alive?* Yoo Yeonha misunderstood my silence.

“You still like Nayun that much?”

“*Huh?*”

I stared at her, bewildered by the sudden question. She wore a somewhat bitter smile.

“I didn’t take you to be such a romantic. Don’t worry, Nayun is stronger than you think.”

“Can you stop saying weird things? You’re wrong.”

Yoo Yeonha only bashfully smiled.

“Okay. Also, I want to apologize again for keeping that secret.”

She meant the fact that Yoo Jinwoong played a huge role in the Kwang-Oh Incident. It slightly pained me because of my synchronization with Chundong, but I wasn’t furious or anything.

“I can’t say I’m not angry, but... *Huu...*”

I couldn’t react too differently from Kim Chundong over such a sensitive topic. This strange synchronization slightly increased every time I did something against Kim Chundong’s wish. I didn’t worry too

much since the amount could be considered negligible.

“I lived because of your father. It’s not like he wanted to do it. Even if he did, that has nothing to do with you. There’s no guilt by association in Korea.”

I stood up with a new smartwatch around my wrist. *Essential Smartwatch Code Black*. This luxury watch made from titanium and blood diamond cost 17 billion won.

“I got the watch, so I’ll be leaving. I also made some food. You can eat it later.”

I made some rice and kimchi stew while she calmed herself and collected her thoughts. I could guarantee the flavor since she only had high-quality ingredients in her fridge.

“Wait...”

Yoo Yeonha stopped me as I prepared to leave.

“*Hm?* What now?”

“Why are you wearing a suit?”

“Oh, this?”

I planned on visiting Buckingham Palace... I chose my words as Yoo Yeonha walked up to me.

“Your necktie is loose.”

She placed her hands on my tie. Then she unfastened it.

“...”

I just stood still. The scent of her hair made me feel weird. As the tie slowly formed a knot...

Tak—

Something heavy fell on my chest. I glanced down at Yoo Yeonha's forehead on my chest. Soon, she spoke in a small voice.

"...Stay."

"*Huh?*"

"Stay."

She began to shake me back and forth.

"Stay, stay, stay, stay!"

My head bobbed. I had never experienced being grabbed by the collar before. Of course, it didn't last long. Yoo Yeonha kept her hands on my collar and headbutted my chest.

"Stay in touch. You're our majority shareholder."

"..."

Her voice sounded noticeably affectionate. I blushed and scratched my neck. I had been busy, but I still didn't contact her for 3 months. It wasn't strange she thought I died.

"If I have time."

"Excuses."

Yoo Yeonha released my collar and finished fixing my tie.

"There."

She tapped my shoulders and backed away. Then she looked at the tie and smiled in satisfaction.

“Oh right!”

She suddenly shouted as if she recalled something important.

“Don’t look at the messages I sent you when you return to the tower! If you do, our relationship is ov—”

— Emergency news! African monsters are marching north. Monsters from other continents are also invading human territory! Civilians are advised to stay indoors while...

A disaster warning popped up on my new smartwatch. Other devices received it as well.

Yoo Yeonha’s smartwatch and those from people outside all beeped with disaster warnings.

“...”

We silently stared at each other.

* * *

[21F – Card Kingdom]

“Finally...”

Shin Jonghak looked at a card he obtained on the 21st floor.

[Echo of Light] [Applied Effect] [7 star] Effective Good ○ Will apply the Echo of Light effect to a target weapon. ○ Echo Attack: Attacks from the target weapon will resonate like an echo. Attribute Infusion: Will add a light attribute to basic attacks and echo attacks.

This 7 star card applied the light attribute to a weapon of choice. Furthermore, the weapon could perform an additional attack with an echo. The amount of TP he spent felt worth it.

“Huhuhu...”

Shin Jonghak smiled as he held the card in his hand. He thought back to all the work he put in. He had spent all his TP and even used funding from outside the tower.

“Oh! It’s *[Echo of Light]*! I saw it in the card encyclopedia. It’s super rare, right?”

Yi Yeonghan chattered from next to him.

Shin Jonghak glared at him before putting the card away.

“It makes light attribute echoes if you attack, right?” Yi Yeonghan spoke again.

“Shut up.”

“Do you even have a weapon to use it on? You’ll need at least a level 8 weapon to unlock its full potential.”

“I do, so shut up.”

Shin Jonghak carefully observed his surroundings. Thankfully, he didn’t see anyone who could be a thief. Not even experts let their guards down in the *[Card Kingdom]* full of skilled pickpockets.

“Are you going back to the 26th floor?”

Yi Yeonghan asked too many annoying questions. Shin Jonghak could only sigh and accept the situation.

“Yeah, I’m going back right away.”

“Oh, as expected of Desolate Moon’s boss!”

Guilds held similar positions in the tower. Essence of the Strait ranked number 1 while Frost Sanctuary and Desolate Moon followed close behind. Only the English Royal Court and Creator’s Sacred Grace departed from the norm. The former held more influence in the tower while Kim Suho’s achievements single-handedly carried the latter.

“You can’t do anything even if you go up, right? The demon king is fighting Kim Suho.”

“He might not beat him.”

“*Mmm...* so you’re going to challenge the demon king next?”

“That’s right, because I’m much stronger than Kim Suho.” Shin Jonghak nodded with confidence.

“As expected of the emperor’s bloodline.”

The two heroes heard a bright voice. Shin Jonghak turned towards the person who praised him.

“Nice to see you, Jonghak. It’s been a while.”

Jin Seyeon smiled like usual. Shin Jonghak felt happy to see her, but nodded without revealing any emotions.

“Yes, nice to meet you too.”

Paat! A flash of light flared up in the sky and the three heroes simultaneously looked.

“Suho must still be fighting,” Jin Seyeon muttered.

“Do you think he can win?” Yi Yeonghan asked.

“It’ll be hard,” Shin Jonghak replied.

Jin Seyeon laughed at his cute jealousy, but Shin Jonghak only pouted.

Paat! Another flash of light spread across the sky like a spider web.

— Must be intense.

— Damn, what a show.

— How can their magic power shockwaves reach all the way down here?

— By the way, what happens if Kim Suho wins?

— That won't happen, so don't worry.

It wasn't just Shin Jonghak, Yi Yeonghan, and Jin Seyeon. Everyone in the Card Kingdom looked up at the sky. They all wondered the same thing inside and outside the tower. Could Kim Suho defeat the demon king on the Tower of Wish's final floor?

* * *

Kim Suho slowly opened his eyes. A crushing pressure and hot pain pressed on his body. He couldn't move, but endured the pain.

“You lost again.”

A soft voice rang out from nearby. Kim Suho turned his head and spotted the witch standing next to his equipment and Misteltein.

“The king only used 50% of his power and won with 73% of his energy remaining. You used all your power and lost.”

The witch reported the results like a game.

“Your equipment has been repaired. You now have two choices. You may give up or try again—”

“Again.”

Kim Suho spat out a single word as a wave of pain swept through his body. He coughed a mouthful of blood and continued.

“I'm trying... again.”

His fight against the demon king ended in complete defeat. He challenged him three times and lost all three. Kim Suho could never have imagined or experienced such strength in his entire life. However, this only made his conviction burn brighter. He wouldn't be able to stop the future calamities and protect his new home if he couldn't defeat the demon king here. His determination as a knight still burned inside him.

“...”

The witch silently stared at this knight. She dropped her head and softly muttered after a long time.

“I will give you four days to recover.”

The witch left, but Kim Suho didn't despair as he writhed in pain. The difference between him and the demon king didn't frighten him. He still had many chances and refused to give up.

“—!”

Every muscle in his body screamed. However, Kim Suho swallowed his cries and raised his body. He felt more familiar with recovering from a broken body than anyone else. His soul had even experienced death. His conviction resembled a sword that wouldn't yield.

“Haa, haa...”

Kim Suho eventually forced himself up while covered in blood and sweat. He turned around after feeling a strange gaze on him.

“Cough.”

The witch kept staring at him.

* * *

[Seoul, Korea, Random Rooftop]

— Emergency report! African monsters are marching north.

— At least 30,000,000 of them at the smallest estimate.

— This isn't a naturally occurring phenomenon. Orden, the self-proclaimed monster king, has taken responsibility, shocking the public...

“Oh.”

Jin Sahyuk shook her head and turned off her smartwatch. She returned to Earth after spending a long time in the tower, but the world remained chaotic as usual. Nothing interesting had occurred and people only talked about monsters.

“Orden...”

Bell mentioned someone by that name. A monster in Africa who wanted to conquer all of Earth.

“*Hmm.*”

Jin Sahyuk didn't care about a mere monster. She only worried about what she heard from Rachel today.

— Hajin said Puharen was an incarcerated royalty. He said it came from a movie... what was it called?

Jin Sahyuk chewed on a leaf like a cigarette and mulled over Rachel's words.

Kim Hajin knew Puharen, someone he shouldn't know. She left Crevon because it drove her mad.

“*Huuu...*”

Jin Sahyuk looked at the sky and sighed. Then she muttered as if talking to the air.

“Come out.”

Her words sounded vague, but she clearly spoke to someone who soon revealed himself.

Tak—

Light footsteps rang out. No one knew whether he came from above or below. Jin Sahyuk stared at the human-like rabbit.

“Are you a rabbit or a human?”

Jin Sahyuk’s voice reached Gato. He simply glared at Jin Sahyuk and asked his own question.

“Young human, I can feel that you’re strong. Are you Black Lotus?”

“Pft.”

Jin Sahyuk sneered. Could these idiotic monsters not even tell sexes apart? *So much for being humanoid.*

“Don’t you know Black Lotus is a male?”

“I only heard he dresses completely in black.”

“My hair is navy, idiot. It looks darker because it’s night.”

The rabbit unleashed his magic power to compare the image of Black Lotus with Jin Sahyuk. Gato nodded after concluding his results.

“Then I have no business with you. My target is Black Lotus.”

He turned around and didn’t plan on fighting. He possessed a strong desire to fight as a monster, but he had a command to follow: protect the king’s allies and kill Black Lotus.

“Oh?” Jin Sahyuk sneered while looking at Gato. A fierce wind blew and her smile disappeared.

“Oi, rabbit.”

She stopped him and dusted off her hands. Gato turned around and saw Jin Sahyuk glaring with a twisted smile. Dark magic power burned around her.

“With whose permission are you looking for that bastard?”

She spoke in a relaxed manner. However, her magic power felt the opposite. Gato had no reason to fight and chose to retreat. He prioritized completing the king’s mission, but found himself stuck on the rooftop. A wall prevented him from leaving.

“...?”

Gato stepped back and wondered why. This wall didn’t resemble a barrier or a spell. It came from a new gift that Jin Sahyuk awakened called *[Reality Manipulation]*.

“Your older sister here is feeling like shit today.”

Jin Sahyuk laughed while staring at Gato. He instinctively realized he had no choice but to fight. This meant his actions wouldn’t disgrace the king’s orders.

“Why don’t we have a go until one of us dies?”

Chapter 253

Unknown Future (1)

Jin Sahyuk observed the rabbit's movements. Dark demonic energy gushed from him like steam. His grey fur also slowly turned black and his striking crimson eyes glared at her.

She watched the monster transform as she silently expanded her domain. The 3rd wall that stopped Gato from escaping a few moments ago expanded even further to encompass the entire area around them.

“What is this?”

The magical phenomenon startled Gato as he had never seen anything like it. Jin Sahyuk arrogantly smirked instead of replying. The monster stood no chance with her domain fully formed.

“Don't make a fuss and just die.”

Jin Sahyuk spoke with her arms crossed. Her arrogant tone infuriated Gato. Only the king could act like that in front of him.

Guooo...

His demonic energy swirled like a storm, causing thin scars on Jin Sahyuk's cheeks.

“For my king!”

Gato shouted and dashed towards Jin Sahyuk. However, he couldn't reach her. The distance between them wouldn't decrease no matter how hard he ran.

“I'm also a king.”

Jin Sahyuk declared while watching him trying to overcome the infinite distance.

The space responded to her voice and iron bars shot from the ground where Gato stood. He jumped to avoid them, but chains suddenly chased him. Gato circled in midair to shake them off and darted towards Jin Sahyuk again.

“Consider yourself lucky.”

Jin Sahyuk unfolded her arms and magic power gathered around her hands. She didn’t shoot it out, but restructured her domain. The king’s domain changed shape according to her wishes. The ground separated and rose into fractals that changed into sharp blades aimed at Gato.

— *Crack!*

However, her fractals failed to penetrate Gato’s hide. Surprisingly, they both smirked at each other. The fractals that clung to Gato’s hide exploded before he could understand the meaning behind her smile. The blades shattered and he shrieked in pain from the burning heat.

“—!”

Enraged, Gato released his demonic energy and melted the fractals away. Then he rose into the air with ominous demonic energy flowing around him.

“Come.”

Gato darted forward and the shockwaves from his feet reverberated in every direction. This time, even the king’s domain couldn’t stop him. He instantly arrived in front of Jin Sahyuk and swung his fist.

“*Uuk!*”

Jin Sahyuk blocked with her arm, but it snapped in half like a daikon. Immediately, Gato’s kicks poured in. They carried the strength of a rabbit’s legs and crushed Jin Sahyuk’s lower body.

“*Keuk!*”

It felt like a bomb exploded from within her. Her eyes widened in shock as blood spurted from her mouth. She made a lethal mistake allowing him to close the distance. How did a mere rabbit possess so much strength? Jin Sahyuk didn’t have the time to ponder such a question.

Gato smiled and placed his hands around Jin Sahyuk’s neck. *Craaaack!* He tore her head off. The headless body went limp and fell to the ground without a sound. He continued smiling in satisfaction with Jin Sahyuk’s head in his hand.

“It’s over.”

However...

“A beast is nothing but a clown in my domain.”

A voice descended from above. Startled, Gato quickly shifted his gaze to the sky. Jin Sahyuk stood there, arrogantly looking down at him.

“That was an interesting show, clown.”

“You— damn— little— human!”

Gato’s magic power exploded in a fury. *KWAAAANG!* Jin Sahyuk didn’t care that it partly damaged her domain.

Tzzzzzt...

A spark emerged from Jin Sahyuk’s fake corpse. It transformed into chains and wrapped itself around Gato’s neck. Spears, swords, arrows, and axes also flew into the sky. They all pointed towards Gato.

“Now, it’s time for punishment.”

Jin Sahyuk lightly waved and all her weapons immediately responded. They poured towards Gato like hail and each presented the monster

with a unique form of death. Explosion, penetration, freezing, necrosis, asphyxiation, paralysis, amputation...

“...”

Soon, the monster rabbit collapsed with all kinds of wounds. Gato barely breathed with death just around the corner. Jin Sahyuk slowly walked over to him.

“I’m the one who will kill Black Lotus.”

She declared with a sharp sword in her hand.

“Go tell your king...”

A smile spread across her face at the feeble foe in front of her.

“Don’t interfere.”

Chwiing! The blade penetrated Gato’s heart. He gasped for air a few times before meeting his end.

“*Haa.*”

Jin Sahyuk’s face stiffened as she released the king’s domain and fell to the ground.

That was close. All the strength left her body because of magic power exhaustion. She thought humanoid monsters would be weak, but that rabbit proved her wrong. Jin Sahyuk closed her eyes with a sigh and a certain face popped up in her head. Irritated, she opened her eyes again.

“Damn it.”

Kim Hajin. Kim Hajin. Kim Hajin. She couldn’t stop thinking about him.

“How do you know?”

Jin Sahyuk wanted to ask him how he knew about Puharen? She resented herself for not being able to confront him.

“Haaa...”

Not long ago, he drove her to the brink of death and she begged him for her life. Her body violently trembled every time she recalled this traumatic memory. She felt angry at herself for still fearing him even after all this time. Jin Sahyuk could only close her eyes in embarrassment. Then she finally lost consciousness and stopped thinking about Kim Hajin.

* * *

Monsters around the world grew restless and violent, not just the army of 30 million marching north from Africa.

I couldn't do anything in the face of this monster mayhem. I simply hurried to Essential Dynamics' underground workshop near the southern sea with Yoo Yeonha.

“Take whatever you need.”

Incredible machines filled the workshop: drones worth millions of won, stealth aircrafts similar to the F-22, small tanks, and even high-tech body suits found only in movies. The epitome of magic and science undoubtedly lay before me.

“All of these are your inventions?”

“Yes. We developed them, but never publicly announced any. A lot of people are keeping us in check these days, so they definitely won't allow our patent applications to pass. We'd only be giving others a chance to steal our ideas if we made them public. That's why we kept them hidden.”

My gaze shifted to the assault drones and stealth aircraft. I could make use of them. Yoo Yeonha noticed my interest.

“This drone's codename is ESX-039. It has a pocket enchanted with

space expansion magic that can hold up to 5000 magic bullets. The AI also fires in the most efficient way.”

“Mmm. Really?”

I could enhance machines up to 4 times. First with *[Equipment Link]*, then *[Random Consolidation System]*, *[Aether]*, and lastly *[Algorithm]*. With these, even the simplest gun could become as powerful as an artifact.

“I’ll just take these drones for now.”

These drones would be a great addition to the team. I placed my hand on the four drones. Then I activated *[Equipment Link]*, one of the laptop functions I gained from a previous update.

[Equipment Link] [5 Streak Consolidation] — Will link any owned machine to Kim Hajin. (Max: 7) — The linked machine can only be controlled by its owner. The owner may control the linked machine at will. — The output of linked machines will increase by 15%.

I linked myself to all 4 drones and they moved as I commanded even without a power source.

“Oh wow. Did your gift advance by another level? It’s not only guns that respond to you now.”

I handed a card of the *[Dwarven Supercar (Converted)]* to the surprised Yoo Yeonha.

“What’s this?”

“I’ll lend it to you in exchange for the drones.”

“Pardon?”

I unlocked the card for Yoo Yeonha, who seemed confused. The dwarven supercar appeared in the air with a poof.

“Oh?”

“Learn to ride it. With this, you can go from Busan to Seoul in 10 minutes. It can even fly.”

“Do you actually expect me to ride something so conspicuous?”

“You’ll be fine at night.”

I infused my magic power into the vehicle. The snowmobile turned transparent and blended into the darkness thanks to my old enchantments.

“It won’t be noticeable at night, but use a cape of transparency if you’re still concerned. They’re pretty common these days.”

“I wouldn’t say they’re common. Effective goods from the tower all cost a fortune. Anyways, I’ll use it well. Thanks!”

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes twinkled as she sat in the driver’s seat. She learned how to drive in the tower, so she should be able to easily control it. I turned my smartwatch back on.

— 30,000,000 monsters are heading north. People living in Western Europe have been urged to evacuate...

— Monsters are rampaging throughout the entire world, not just in Africa. Governments have declared a state of emergency and...

The story had moved on to the Orden arc. Humanity would lose at least Africa, the entire Middle East, the Iberian Peninsula, Greece, Italy, Ireland, Scotland, and other countries near the Mediterranean. However, this would only be the beginning.

“Oh, also...”

I looked back. *Vroom— Vroom—*

Yoo Yeonha flew in the air on the dwarven supercar.

“What happened to the essence barriers?”

“Ah.” Yoo Yeonha hurried back down.

“We shipped them to other countries already. I didn’t make as much money as I could’ve, but I figured now wasn’t the time for that. I sent one to England a long time ago too.”

“Good. Then I’ll be leaving now. Don’t follow me.”

“Okay.”

I stepped into the elevator with the drones by my side. Yoo Yeonha looked at me one last time.

“Oh, and I’ll clear things up with Nayun.”

“How?”

“I’ll tell her you suffered serious injuries, but miraculously recovered.”

Her smiling face disappeared as the doors closed before I could reply.

I returned above ground with the drones and Spartan appeared by my side. The ocean by the workshop also entered my view.

“*Hmm.*”

I contemplated while gazing at the darkness above the southern sea. The last segment of my story would soon begin. Humanity would form an expedition team against Orden. Not long afterwards, Earth would partly transform into the demon realm. The contamination would start from both poles. After that, I didn’t know the future anymore.

Of course, I had a tentative idea of how the story would end. In the final arc, Jin Sahyuk would make a deal with a devil. She would obtain peace for her homeland, Akatrina, in exchange for transforming Earth into the demon realm. Jin Sahyuk tried to destroy Earth using the devil’s power, but Kim Suho ultimately defeated her.

“Jin Sahyuk.”

Of course, the remake wouldn't end so easily. Jin Sahyuk held the key to this story.

“Huuu...”

I deeply sighed and thought about her. That wounded princess ascended a fallen kingdom's throne only to meet a painful death. I had to decide whether or not to kill her.

I took out two *[Communication Letters]* in the seaside's darkness. These effective goods from the tower could be used to communicate regardless of their locations. They could also be reused after erasing the writing on them. I could probably deliver one to Jin Sahyuk through Rachel.

“Hey drone, deliver this to Rachel in England.”

I handed a *[Communication Letter]* to one of the drones and it quickly disappeared into the sky.

* * *

[Hero Association, Temple of Justice]

A meeting currently took place in the office revered by all heroes. The 12 Temple of Justice members gathered for the first time in a while.

“They discovered an astounding amount of jewelry in Yoon Younghwa's private vault, whom Black Lotus killed, no, assaulted.”

Chairman Park Hanho addressed the first item on their agenda. This remained their most important topic even as more urgent matters emerged.

“First, Black Lotus.”

His appearance, arrow, and the note he left at the scene projected into

the air as a 3D hologram.

“The note reads, [*A warning to the monster king’s dogs*].”

Several heroes showed interest in Black Lotus’ handwriting. It looked so beautiful even Yi Yongha and Nicholas exclaimed in amazement.

“The monster king most likely refers to Orden. Black Lotus is saying Yoon Younghwa received bribes from him.”

Park Hanho pulled up a video of Yoon Younghwa’s interrogation.

“Where did you get all those blood diamonds?”

— I don’t know.

“Even though we found them in your safe?”

— I don’t know. Why are you interrogating me? I’m the victim here. The victim of an assault! I only came because you promised to heal me. I won’t be treated this way...

“What an annoying old geezer.”

Aileen said as she tapped on the desk.

“He obviously took bribes from Orden. Blood diamonds without identification numbers and... what else?”

“A sorcery mask.” Park Hanho added to Aileen’s remark.

“Yeah, that. It’s an artifact only found in Africa to cast hypnosis and aphrodisiac spells. What exactly did this perverted old geezer need it for?”

“Regardless, private prosecutions go against the law. We’ll need to adjust Black Lotus’ bounty.”

“Then do it.”

Why are we even having a meeting if he's just going to do whatever he wants? Aileen grumbled and leaned in her chair.

“Do whatever you want. I don’t care.”

“...”

At her remark, Park Hanho studied the other members in the room. None of them seemed to object.

“It’s settled. Then...”

[Grade 1 Black Bounty — Wanted Criminal: Black Lotus]

Like that, Black Lotus’ bounty increased. It wouldn’t change the status quo, but they couldn’t do anything else. They simply met to review the solutions presented to them by the lower echelon. A grade 1 black bounty signified the most dangerous criminals that required a group of heroes to capture.

“Next on the agenda is the Orden Assassination Team. This is today’s most important topic.”

They quickly moved on to the next discussion.

“Different groups have suggested we should form a team against Orden in the face of recent events. We plan on forming at least 2 teams...”

Park Hanho looked around the room.

“Do you have any heroes you’d like to recommend? Of course, we’ll simply be forming teams among ourselves if none of them are strong enough.”

It seemed everyone had a thing or two to say this time. The heroes in the room gave their recommendations or condemned the choices of others. However, Aileen only yawned and smacked her lips in boredom.

“Aileen?” Chairman Park Hanho turned to her.

“What?”

“And your opinion?”

“Well...”

Aileen stroked her chin in thought. A minute passed and she suddenly jerked as if she thought of someone. Everyone’s attention shifted towards her.

“What? Did you think of someone?”

“*Huh? Ah*, that’s...”

Aileen twisted her body in embarrassment. The Temple of Justice members had never seen her act so strangely. They focused even more on her next words out of curiosity. At last, she spoke a name.

“F-Fenrir?” Her cheeks turned slightly flushed.

“...”

“...”

“...”

No one said anything. No signs of support or opposition. Everyone simply stared at Aileen in silence. Fenrir, the mercenary who used a gun. His most famous nicknames included Lotus Killer, Monster Wolf, etc.

“I, I’m kidding. Just a joke! *Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha.*”

Aileen squeezed out a laugh to fend off the embarrassment, but it only worsened the situation. The members either glared even harder or pitifully sighed. They gave Aileen no choice but to resort to anger.

“Damn it! I said I was just joking. I’m gonna pull your eyeballs out. Hey, what’re you looking at? *Hm?* I said, what are you looking at? Stop it right now!”

She started to make a fuss and even the Temple of Justice members couldn’t stand her notorious tantrums.

“Is what I said that absurd? *Huh!*”

She even beat up Cheok Jungyeong the last time they fought on the 21st floor. Magic power surged from her even stronger than in the past and her Spirit Speech shook the room until the meeting concluded. With Aileen’s strong recommendation, they placed Fenrir on top of the recruitment list for the Orden Assassination Team.

* * *

[8F – Crevon]

Four days passed after the Orden incident.

“A letter? For me?” Jin Sahyuk frowned at Rachel.

“Yes,” Rachel simply replied.

“Someone has the nerve to send me a letter? Is it from a man?”

She barges into the commander's office only to talk about a letter? Jin Sahyuk looked slightly upset.

“Yes, technically.”

“I have no interest in some dull man who writes letters.”

“It’s from Fenrir.”

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk stared at Rachel in silence. She couldn’t grasp the meaning

behind those words and sat in a daze. Finally, she spoke after some time.

“For real?”

“Yes.”

“Kim Hajin?”

“Yes.”

“Why would Kim Hajin, Fenrir, send me a letter?”

“I don’t know.” Rachel handed the envelope to Jin Sahyuk.

“Please take it. I have to leave because of the recent monster incident.”

Jin Sahyuk faked a look of discontent before receiving the envelope.

“Well then.”

She carefully opened it and checked its contents.

“*Mmm?*” She finished reading it quite fast.

“What the...”

The blank letter contained nothing on it. She even flipped it over and checked inside the envelope, but couldn’t find anything.

“What does it say?”

A voice suddenly flowed into her ears. Startled, Jin Sahyuk raised her head.

“*Huh?*”

Rachel stared at her. Jin Sahyuk assumed she had already left.

“*Uh, um*, well.”

Jin Sahyuk couldn't say it appeared blank, so she changed the topic.

“Why are you still here? I thought you had something important.”

“Pardon? *Ah, um...* is it about the movie?”

“What?” Jin Sahyuk found her response rather strange.

“Wait, are you jealous?”

“...”

Rachel slightly flinched, but soon smiled like usual.

“Certainly not.”

“Then why are you so eager to know?”

“...”

Honestly, it could be jealousy. She introduced two friends that grew closer with each other than with her. Rachel couldn't describe her feelings in words, but quickly turned around and grabbed the doorknob.

“Then, I'll be off.”

Rachel suddenly disappeared.

“What was that?”

Jin Sahyuk nonchalantly watched her leave and looked at the letter again. Then she realized something.

“This is a magic letter.”

It functioned like a carrier pigeon. The two letters linked to each other, so any text on one would appear on the other.

“That crazy guy.”

Why did he send it blank? Was he too embarrassed to write first, so he's making me do it? Arrogant as always.

Jin Sahyuk crumpled the letter into a ball and threw it in the trash can.

“...”

Tok, tok, tok, tok. She tapped on her desk with a finger and whistled, but her gaze kept shifting back to the trash can.

Resist. Must resist. No matter how much I want to ask him...

“Dammit.”

She couldn't hold out even for 10 seconds. Jin Sahyuk picked up the letter from the trash.

Chapter 254

Unknown Future (2)

[England, Buckingham Palace]

Rachel sighed as she watched the ocean. Beaches recently became prohibited due to the monsters entering England. The new essence barrier prevented civilian casualties, but the situation hadn't been resolved yet. It had only just begun.

[Dear Precious Princess]

Rachel clenched her teeth at the letter in her hands. It came from England's greatest enemy, Lancaster.

"What's up? You don't look too good."

Ah Hae-In walked over and asked. Rachel hid the letter and nonchalantly turned back.

"Um, it's nothing. Is Evandel doing okay?"

"Don't worry about that. She's not doing anything that will burden her."

"Really? But Evandel's summons are—"

"Don't worry."

Evandel's army amounted to almost 3000 now and spread out across Europe to help humanity. Everyone called her creations mystical animals that helped humans.

"I made Evandel form a chain of command in her army. For that, she needed an especially intelligent creation."

“Ah, I heard she made a monkey last time.”

“A monkey wasn’t enough.”

Ah Hae-In continued with a smile. “She made a unicorn.”

“Pardon?”

The winged horse with a white horn might be the most famous mystical animal in the world.

“Evandel’s unicorn serves as the commander in charge of her army, so you don’t have to worry. Evandel is having fun by herself without participating in anything complicated.”

Ah Hae-In showed Rachel a crystal ball showing Evandel running around and having fun. She seemed to be playing tag with Hayang. Rachel smiled like always when she saw Evandel. Then she suddenly recalled something important.

“Ah, Duchess Ah Hae-In, the association sent a message asking about the source of the mystical animals. I’d like to ask you for adv...”

“Don’t trust the association.”

Ah Hae-In immediately replied. Rachel tilted her head at Ah Hae-In’s serious expression.

“Orden’s spies might be among them.”

“Pardon?”

Ah Hae-In continued at Rachel’s bewilderment.

“We can easily spot djinns, but not the humans persuaded by the monster king. The monster king should’ve convinced many from the association to join his cause.”

“How can that be? The association carries the will of hero Shin

Myungchul. It's hard to believe that..."

"The monster king's servant also came to me."

Ah Hae-In faced Rachel.

"He knew what I wanted and what I lacked. He said he'd give it to me."

"What do you mean?"

"He said he'd give me a body that could birth a child. I'm unable to have one because of my magic's side effect."

Rachel didn't know how to react and remained silent. Ah Hae-In faintly smiled.

"However, they didn't know me well enough. Even if I could have a child, what use would it be if the world belonged to monsters?"

"..."

Rachel nodded. Her admiration for Ah Hae-In grew to another level as she watched Evandel through the crystal ball.

"Knowing the weakness of his target's heart. That must be Orden's gift." Ah Hae-In spoke once again.

"Gift?"

"Yes. Who said only humans could have gifts? *Ah*, it's time for the news broadcast."

Ah Hae-In turned on the TV and the news came on at 6 P.M.

— Orden's kingdom has been found in Africa. It remained hidden underground all this time, but somehow rose above ground in a single night. Experts...

Tzzzzt—

The screen flickered before the reporter could finish. It turned grey and black. Then a new image suddenly popped up as Rachel and Ah Hae-In wondered what happened.

— Greetings, humans. I am Orden, the monster king.

Rachel and Ah Hae-In's faces immediately stiffened. A huge giant sat on a throne. His outer appearance resembled a human, but some of his facial features looked non-human like his eyes that flashed with a sharp light.

— Today, I intend to give humanity a warning and an offer.

Orden easily hijacked the broadcast signal. All channels in England currently showed the same screen.

— Now...

Tzzzzt—

However, the video cut off again shortly afterwards. *Tzzzzt...* Static rang out as Rachel and Ah Hae-In frowned. They focused on the screen to hear about the monster king's plans.

“...?”

However, Orden's voice didn't continue and a strange symbol appeared instead. This symbol looked all too familiar to players from the tower. Ah Hae-In jumped in surprise.

“Rachel, this symbol...”

“Yes, you're right.” Rachel nodded at the beautifully embroidered black lotus.

“It's Black Lotus.”

Subtitles appeared beneath the symbol the moment Rachel spoke.

[Humanity will not listen to a mere monster.] [Monster, who dares to declare himself king and his foolish underlings.] [And the dogs who eat the meat offered by this fool.] [I will come to kill you all myself.]

The screen blacked out after these four sentences. Rachel and Ah Hae-In stood still for a moment as chills ran down their backs.

— Holy... the hell was that? Orden and Black Lotus just...

Soon, the original news broadcast returned. However, the reporter remained in a daze after the broadcast battle between the monster king and Black Lotus.

— *Huh?* We're back?

Startled, the reporter straightened his posture.

— *E-Ehem*, our broadcast seemed to have been hijacked...

Ah Hae-In smiled after seeing this.

“Looks like Black Lotus and the monster king don’t get along.”

Rachel nodded and quickly went on the internet.

“England wasn’t the only country that saw that.”

* * *

[Pandemonium – Chameleon Troupe’s Hideout]

“Wow, how did you hack into the broadcast stream without lifting a finger?”

I smiled at Jain’s question. Orden’s broadcast hijacking also occurred in the original story. I simply interrupted it with my hacking ability.

“He shouldn’t hijack broadcasts anymore now that he knows it won’t work.”

Orden tried to deliver a message to the entire world, but I completely shut him down. Of course, he might not give up, but I held the advantage since I could counter-hack just by looking.

I had good reason to stop him too. Orden could infuse magic power into his words. Not on the level of Aileen, but it would still be effective against defenseless civilians.

“You’re getting more popular Hajin. Look, your name is trending again.”

Jain clasped her hands and showed me a social media trending chart.

[1. Black Lotus] [2. Orden] [3. Black Lotus vs Orden]

Black Lotus and Orden topped the charts. I glanced at my smartwatch and found that my SP had gone up by 407 points.

“Anyways, Jain...”

I massaged my sore eyes because I hadn’t blinked while hacking the broadcast stream.

“Don’t we have better artifacts?”

“*Hm? Ah*, the ones here are only presents. Or should I say offerings?”

Artifacts littered the floor from Pandemonium’s djinns.

“None of them seem particularly useful. Is it normally like this?”

“Yep.”

Ding! The elevator stopped on our floor and two Chameleon Troupe members appeared.

“Oh. Hey, Arashi.”

Hirano Arashi, the seat of brown, was a woman with long hair who liked to wear silk robes. She walked past Jain without saying anything. I let her be and looked at the giant who arrived with her.

“Cheok Jungyeong, I heard you lost to Aileen.”

“W-Whaaaat!”

Cheok Jungyeong immediately roared. The building slightly shook and Jain furrowed her brows.

“You crazy buffoon...”

“Lost! What! Who lost? Who told you that?”

“Okay...”

Cheok Jungyeong began to make excuses.

“I could’ve won with one more punch, but she looked too much like a kid! Who’s going to believe she’s an adult? Not me, that’s for sure. I missed my timing because of it and that wench used this opening to...”

I ignored his flurry of words and turned to Jain.

“We don’t have any better artifacts? Aren’t we going to meet Wicked soon?”

The strongest member of the Nine Evils, Wicked, requested to meet the Chameleon Troupe. He wanted to discuss assassinating Orden. Now, even djinns planned on forming an assassination team.

For this specific task, djinns could be more trustworthy than heroes because Orden’s persuasion didn’t work on them. They had already sold their souls to devils.

“Mmm... Boss keeps all the good ones to herself.”

“Oh, I see.”

“She doesn’t want to give any to me, so you should ask her.”

“Okay, I’ll take it from her and give some to you too.”

I needed pinnacle grade artifacts to effectively utilize my special skill, *[Four Colored Enchant]*. Otherwise, I could just use the items I crafted.

“Okay, good luck! I’ll be cheering for you.”

I walked over to Boss’ room.

* * *

[Pandemonium – Fallen Ghost Rank Gladiator’s Waiting Room]

Jin Sahyuk returned to her home. It wasn’t technically her home, but Pandemonium’s fighting arena. She had no other choice since she never purchased a house.

“Lord Jin Sahyuk, will you begin fighting in the arena again?”

An employee of the fighting arena followed her as she unpacked without replying. She didn’t carry much, only the effective goods she brought from the tower.

“Lord Jin Sahyuk, can we schedule a fight for you?”

Her new leather armor gave off a cold, dark blue light. The coat made from a special fabric also contained magic enchantments.

[Lv.8 Deep Dark Leather Armor (J – RedOrder)] [Lv.8 Battle Armor Coat (J – RedOrder)]

She had no clue what the words in parenthesis meant, but Lv.8 items were the highest level items players could turn into effective goods.

She spent 3 months of her salary to purchase them from the auction house.

“Um... Lord Sahyuk?”

“Geez.”

Jin Sahyuk glared at the arena employee before changing her clothes.

“Stop bothering me. Do you wanna die?”

“No... not at all...”

“Tsk.”

Jin Sahyuk frowned and shooed him away.

“Alright, do whatever you want. The opponent better be interesting.”

“Y-Yes, thank you!”

Only then did the employee run out with a smile.

“Sigh, these worms.”

The fighting arena business didn’t look too good after Pandemonium split into two between Satan’s Servants and the Chameleon Troupe. Jin Sahyuk didn’t feel too happy about her hobby being disturbed either.

She took off her clothes and changed into her new equipment. The leather armor and coat felt more than satisfactory. She smiled and nodded.

— *Knock, knock.*

Someone suddenly knocked on the door. *Since when did the fallen ghost rank waiting room become so noisy?* Jin Sahyuk felt annoyed as she opened the door. *Thud!*

“Who the hell are you?”

A strange creature stood behind the door. It looked like a skeleton wearing a robe to disguise its non-human appearance. He seemed to be a lich. Jin Sahyuk smirked at his glowing eyes.

“You’re here for revenge?”

— Not at all.

The lich’s voice echoed like in a cave.

“Then why are you here? You came to die too?”

— I am here to pass on my king’s message. He wishes to make a trade with you.

“Trade?”

— Yes.

This time, Jin Sahyuk laughed out loud.

“*Ha!* Interesting lot, aren’t you? Didn’t I say I wouldn’t talk to mere beasts?”

The lich didn’t show any sign of displeasure at Jin Sahyuk’s provocation. He seemed incapable of that and simply continued.

— The king’s message is as follows: *I will allow you to return to your home world.*

“What?”

The atmosphere instantly changed as magic power surged from Jin Sahyuk’s body. She grabbed the lich by the collar and threw him into the room.

KWANG!

The lich let out an odd scream as he flew across the room and struck the wall. Then Jin Sahyuk ran up and stepped on his neck.

“How do you know about that?”

— Do not... underestimate... the memory of monsters. There are monsters... who remember your home world.

“What?”

— Monsters... are not the enemy of humanity. The king only wants to open people’s eyes. Humans should join hands with us to defeat the devils.

Jin Sahyuk loosened the strength in her leg since it seemed worth it to hear him out.

— Africa contains a fragment of the continent you once lived in. Furthermore, some of the monsters that gained intelligence came from that continent.

“...”

— The king wishes for you to join him.

The lich took out a small crystal from his pocket. This blue crystal looked like a tower crystal.

— This is a sign of his goodwill.

“Goodwill?”

Jin Sahyuk stared at the item. She had learned the *[Appraisal]* skill from the tower as someone who hated being scammed.

[Continental Fragment] — You may use this fragment to return to the recorded past: Akatrina during the continental year 555.

“W-What? I can return to Akatrina?”

Jin Sahyuk's voice flickered with hope.

— Yes, but you cannot stay there forever. This is only a recorded past. Changing the past does not affect the future. You will only experience a world of the past.

The lich explained and Jin Sahyuk's excitement subsided.

“Then what use is it? I don't need it.”

Jin Sahyuk clicked her tongue and threw the crystal. No, she tried to throw it, but her hand refused to let go.

— Do you really not need it?

The lich stared at Jin Sahyuk with a soft smile.

— You can take it. It is a gift from the king. There's no need to pay anything and you do not need to become our ally either. It is just a token of our goodwill.

“...”

The blue crystal glowed with a silvery light. *Returning to Akatrina...*
Jin Sahyuk stared for a long time before tightening her grip on it.

— Great decision.

The lich got up with a smile.

— Then I will be off. Feel free to visit us if you change your mind.

The lich slowly backed out of the room. However, Jin Sahyuk still had one question.

“Oi, wait.”

— Yes?

“Can this bring other people with me?”

The lich immediately nodded.

— If you’d like. The power of the crystal is boundless.

“Mm, is that so?” Jin Sahyuk grinned.

“That’s good.”

Then, in the next moment...

—...!

Magic power shot out from her hand towards the lich. It spread out like a spider web and slashed the lich apart into five pieces.

* * *

I came back home for the first time in a long time. Now that Evandel fell asleep, I sat on the couch while contemplating my next gift.

“Hmm...”

[Buster Call] — Using stigma’s magic power, you may summon vassals from the Tower of Wish who swore their loyalty to you.

I came up with this gift from a comic I used to enjoy. With it, I could summon my loyal NPCs and even the *[Genkelope’s Vessel]* from the tower. However, only one problem occurred.

[You do not have enough SP. A total of 30,000 SP is required.]

I had nowhere near close enough. The results remained the same no matter how many restrictions I placed on it.

“It should decrease once Suho clears the tower.”

The tower's outer shell would fall and it would combine with the outside world once Kim Suho defeated the demon king. Then the required SP should drastically drop.

Of course, I would probably need at least 5000 SP at the very least. Even if the tower's outer shell fell, it remained vastly different from our world. A huge amount of energy would be required to materialize something from the tower.

“Ah... what to do... what to do...”

Should I go with the other gift I came up with or should I wait a bit more for [Buster Call]? As I contemplated...

Sssk, sssk—

The sound of words being written rang out. I looked at the communication letter I gave Jin Sahyuk.

“Oh?”

I didn't think she would write back so soon.

[I'm also participating in Pandemonium's Orden Assassination Team.]
[Let's meet and settle this once and for all.]

Chapter 255

Same Goal, Different Paths (1)

[16F – Genkelope’s Vessel]

I visited the vessel for the first time in a while. We came to attend a meeting with Wicked for the djinns’ expedition team against Orden. The two opposing parties decided to meet inside the Tower of Wish since players could resurrect after dying.

“A lot of people came.”

“Yeah.”

Many things had changed in the 6 months I hadn’t visited. For starters, the entrance inspection became much stricter and more high-tech than most airports. The security guards wearing power armor seemed to be at least level 16.

“It’s changed a lot. It’s all mine, but it doesn’t feel like it.”

Once again, greed boiled inside me. I could bring this vessel outside by awakening a new gift.

“You’re right. So much has changed since the last time that I could get lost.”

Boss scanned the crowd. At least a few hundred players waited to enter the gates. I studied them with Boss.

— What do we do to get to the 17th floor?

— They have a separate transport ship. You just have to pay TP to go up. Don’t even think about doing anything stupid on the 16th floor. There’s a PK ban and they prohibit fighting. Try visiting the hotels and

restaurants in Area 3.

— *Ah*, I see. Thank you.

— Visit the arena and dungeon if you want to grow stronger. You can practice against NPC guards in the arena and the dungeon is located on the lowest level.

Kim Youngjin, Essence of the Strait's Tower of Wish supervisor, caught my eye with his group of rookies. It might be slightly inaccurate to call players who reached the 16th floor rookies. I walked past the long line of players waiting to check in.

“Look, they’re cutting!”

“No cutting in line!”

“Hey! What are you doing?”

“Alright, please be quiet.”

A few players snarled at us, but a security guard stopped them. We entered the ship accompanied by guards.

“Hajin, I heard the Hero Association also bargained with you.”

Boss said as we entered the vessel's inner area.

“Oh yeah, they did.”

I didn't know under whose recommendation, but the Hero Association tried to recruit me. Of course, I had no intention of joining them. Rather, I planned on infiltrating the Tower of Heroes, the association's headquarters, while they focused on Orden. I wanted to save the young child being exploited there.

“More importantly, what do you think of my plan Boss?”

They locked up and abused the young child with the authority of

healing there. They took her years ago, so she must be a teenager now.

“It’ll be difficult.”

We had to rescue that girl. The association’s upper echelon raised her with the utmost care 8 years ago. However, things had changed. Now they exploited her only to satisfy their selfish desire to overcome aging.

“Jain, Cheok Jungyeong, and Jin Yohan seem to want to do it.”

“How about you, Boss?”

We had to since this girl played a major role in the story’s final half. Those in power had grown much greedier than in the original story, so the child might not survive for long.

“I...” Boss silently stared at me.

“I’ll do as you please.”

I smiled in relief. "Thank you."

"You're welcome."

Boss also warmly smiled as we walked down the street and observed the scenery.

Soon, we arrived at the meeting place. I had never heard of this hotel, but they seemed to have built it in my honor and called it, [*HAJ HOTEL*]. A large round table stood at the center of the room. We sat around it, placed on our hoods, and waited for the djinns to arrive.

“Hajin, you stay quiet.”

“*Huh?* Oh, okay.”

Boss and I sat absently-mindedly. She threw a glance at me before

fixing her gaze in the air and rolling her eyes up and down. Boss began reading a tower webnovel.

I became lost in thought. Suddenly, a question crossed my mind. *What was Chae Nayun doing right now?* I could always see for myself. I sent a thought to Spartan. *Go find Chae Nayun in the Himalayas. Then share your vision with me.*

A snowy mountain stretched in front of me when I closed my eyes. Chae Nayun stood near an inn located in the middle of a mountain. Tears rolled down her cheeks as she read a letter in her hands.

— Oh, thank God. I'm glad... I'm so glad...

The letter probably came from Yoo Yeonha. Chae Nayun murmured countless thanks while holding on to it. I could roughly make out the contents. She seemed to have lost a bit of weight from the recent hardships, but looked genuinely happy now. Seeing her like that made me feel slightly melancholic. She would always be the first person in this world who expressed such feelings for me. I never forgot the vivid, heartwarming affection from her. I still didn't know what she saw in a man like me.

— Chae Nayun. What are you doing there? Wait, are you crying?

Someone came up to her and I hadn't expected to see him there. The only named character in the Himalayas should've been Heynckes.

— I-I'm not crying. What do you mean I'm crying? More importantly, aren't you going back to Mt. Baekdu?

— How can I leave when that old geezer is trying to steal my disciple?

The Wolf of Valhalla, master rank hero Yoo Sihyuk, frowned at Chae Nayun.

— What anchovy is calling me an old geezer?

I watched the interesting turn of events with anticipation.

“Hello!”

The door burst open and an upbeat voice resounded. Boss and I turned our attention back to the room. Wicked recently rose to the top among the Nine Evils and approached us full of confidence.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Wicked, Ha Yeonhee.”

She seemed too young to be Wicked, but Boss and I shook her hand anyways. Wicked’s underlings rushed in and stood on either side of the room.

“Now, let us start the meeting! *Hahaha!*”

Wicked laughed hysterically.

* * *

[Vast Expanse’s Cave]

The leaders of two groups spoke to each other in a cave cozier than most towns.

“Me?”

“Yes. The association would like you to join the Orden Assassination Team.”

Essence of the Strait’s Yoo Jinwoong calmly looked into the eyes of Vast Expanse’s Yoon Kwangwon. Vast Expanse had aged elegantly. His eyes contained azure magic power and shone from a distance. His thick beard looked exceedingly stunning and his long hair resembled a sage or a hermit’s.

“You’ll need at least tens of billions of won if you want to recruit me.”

“That is a cheap price considering we expected hundreds of billions,” Yoo Jinwoong replied with composure.

“Also, what use is money if you lose all of your land to monsters?”

Vast Expanse smiled at Yoo Jinwoong’s words. “Say, what do I look like to you? Why do you assume the association is willing to pay such a high price for me?”

“That’s a strange question. Are you not the immeasurably strong Vast Expanse?”

Vast Expanse slowly shook his head. “No. I only see myself as an old man. Strange. Yoo Sihyuk is merely 8 years younger than me, yet he looks your age.”

Yoo Jinwoong simply waited for Vast Expanse to continue.

“A superhuman who has mastered magic power usually ages at that rate until he’s seventy.”

Vast Expanse stroked his beard with a hand covered in aged spots.

“Not for me. My side effect is growing old.”

Of course, side effects became much rarer these days with every hero being systematically managed. However, they commonly occurred among heroes of the past who had to fight every day without proper management. Yoo Jinwoong tried to look away from the wrinkles on Vast Expanse’s face.

“Then what is it that you want?”

“I heard the association has a child with the authority of healing.”

“Yes, that's correct.”

Yoo Jinwoong nodded. The Tower of Heroes did keep a girl with the authority of healing. Her authority could cure all illnesses and injuries except death. However, the misuse of her power at a young age could potentially double her side effects. Therefore, the association vowed to protect the child and promised her a peaceful childhood. These days, high ranking officials began taking advantage of the child as a tool to

extend their lifespans.

“I heard she can even reverse aging.”

Vast Expanse spoke with anticipation flickering in his eyes.

“Reversing the aging process is, in some ways, putting off death.”

“I’m aware, but even now she’s being used to extend the lifespans of several political figures. Is that the right thing to do?”

Yoo Jinwoong couldn’t answer. Just recently, the child used her power to heal the scars on Chae Joochul’s body from the devil. Everyone understood that served the public good.

“Don’t you know the association is rotting? I can assure you some heroes have already switched sides with Orden’s proposals. Orden did come to me once. He offered me youth, but I declined.”

Vast Expanse’s eyes arched into a gentle smile. His smile contained a mixture of self-esteem unique to a man who believed in himself and revulsion towards others.

“I believe ten evils exist in this world, not nine. People say Wicked triumphs over all these days, but I hold a different opinion. The worst of the ten evils is...

His mellow voice filled with hostility. “The association.”

Yoo Jinwoong’s expression turned into a frown. “You... how could you say such a thing?”

“The association’s 7 chairmen are rotting away while hiding under the light of Shin Myungchul’s achievements. Do not trust those codgers who tarnish the name of a great hero. They must be dragged down from their seats,” Vast Expanse spoke solemnly.

Yoo Jinwoong simply sighed. Even he didn’t know about the relationship between Vast Expanse and Shin Myungchul. He only knew that every hero revered Shin Myungchul, who had been active

since Outcall. Vast Expanse, a latecomer at the time, also admired Shin Myungchul.

“Give me the girl. I will take care of her. I do not give away what’s mine nor do I let my possessions break. I won’t lay a finger on the child until her authority has matured.”

“Even if I wanted to...”

He’s impossible to persuade. Yoo Jinwoong dejectedly thought to himself.

“One of the association’s biggest sponsors is Chae Joochul.”

Humans and djinns alike feared this name. Chae Joochul’s influence grew stronger now than ever. Nevertheless...

“Hahahaha!”

Vast Expanse leisurely laughed. Yoo Jinwoong felt envious of Vast Expanse’s next words.

“I am not afraid of Chae Joochul. I only fear one thing and that is growing old.”

* * *

[England – London]

England issued evacuation and mobilization orders as ocean monsters raged. Citizens evacuated inland while heroes and guilds gathered at the shore. Rachel arrived at the English Channel with her guild members.

“What’s the situation?”

“Sea monsters are rampaging across the English Channel. The mystical animals are assisting us, but the barriers and breakwater won’t last.”

The government officials gravely answered her. The Thames River ran through the heart of London and remained safe thanks to the essence barrier. However, bigger and higher ranked monsters rampaging at the seaside couldn't be stopped. Ireland had already abandoned its capital, Dublin.

"We have confirmed multiple intermediate rank, grade 1 crentios, 3 high-intermediate rank, grade 8 sirens, high-intermediate rank, grade 5 crasios catfish, high-intermediate rank, grade 1 kraken..."

One of the officials continued to report when...

Kuoooo—

Far away, a giant catfish blasted a waterspout over the sea. A whirlpool, combined with violent currents and massive magic power, transformed into a typhoon that rushed inland. Rachel drew her sword in the face of this disaster. A water elemental appeared from the fairy sword Galatyn.

"Warturtle, stop it!"

The water elemental dove into the sea and formed a new current. This current rotated in the opposite direction against the catfish's typhoon. Then the typhoon bounced into the sky and turned into ordinary rain.

"Sunshine, Earth, Fiery."

However, merely stopping its attack wouldn't be enough. They could only put an end to this by killing the monster. Rachel called for her elementals. Now fully grown, they stood and glared imposingly across the sea.

"Everyone, please get ready!"

Rachel wanted to create an environment suitable for the assembled heroes. She planned to order Warturtle to block the flow of currents, Sunshine and Earth to form artificial land, and Fiery to partially evaporate the water hiding the sea monsters.

“Warturtle?”

However, Rachel’s elementals didn’t need to act.

Chwaaaaa!

A giant weapon flew in from somewhere far away. All the heroes looked back in surprise because the weapon’s power seemed even greater than its overwhelming speed.

Countless weapons flew across the sky and easily crushed the horde of sea monsters. Monsters couldn’t escape by hiding underwater. The magic power weapons plowed through the water and severed their heads.

Kwaaaak!

The weapons continued to rain down.

Who in the world could cast such an attack? Rachel looked back in astonishment.

“Ah!”

As expected, Shin Jahyuk stood there with her arms folded and commanded her weapons like in Crevon.

Rachel didn’t know why Shin Jahyuk came, but their allied force welcomed the help.

“Aim for the monsters!”

Rachel shouted and the heroes became encouraged by their new ally’s remarkable strength. They roared as Rachel executed her plan with the elementals.

“The water is gone! The princess dried the sea!”

“Attack the sea monsters on shore!”

“Die, you monsters, die!”

Three hours after the fierce battle...

Rachel greeted Jin Sayhuk at the vice leader’s office inside the English Royal Court guild. Jin Sahyuk sat in front of Rachel and looked around. The frugal yet elegant interior reflected the owner’s nature. First, Rachel bowed to Jin Sahyuk.

“Thank you for coming all the way here even though I didn’t ask for ___”

“Enough of that.”

Jin Sahyuk interrupted her and leaned forward. She looked straight at Rachel and made unexpected eye contact.

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk smiled as Rachel tilted her head.

“Remember that letter you gave me last time?”

“Ah, yes.”

Rachel finally had a rough idea of the situation. Jin Sahyuk probably wanted advice regarding Kim Hajin, but Rachel felt uneasy as if a small fire had started in her stomach. She clenched the hands on her knees into fists. Jin Sahyuk saw this and calmly spoke.

“Thanks to you, I arranged a meeting with him.”

“Pardon?” Rachel’s shoulders slightly trembled.

“M-Meet? You’re meeting him?”

“Yes, I think I’ll see him within a month. Anyways...” Jin Sahyuk continued while watching Rachel in amusement.

“What does Kim Hajin like? I’d like to prepare a gift.”

She intended to poke fun at Rachel and it worked quite well. Rachel couldn’t even properly look at Jin Sahyuk’s face. She wriggled her fingers and her aimlessly wandering eyes almost seemed pitiful.

“I, I’m not sure...”

“*Hmm?* Judging by that, I guess you aren’t very close to—”

“B-Books. He likes books.”

Rachel cut in before Jin Sahyuk could finish. She also didn’t know where her impatience came from.

“Books?” Jin Sahyuk frowned. She found it hard to believe a man who loved books existed.

“Yes. You probably don’t know, but Hajin always ranked first in theory at Cube.”

“*Um...* really? Is he that good?”

“Not just good. He’s incredible.”

Rachel continued with a stern expression.

“One professor in particular always praised him and said Hajin could’ve easily won a Nobel Prize if he focused on theory. This professor also won a Nobel Prize himself.”

“*Mm*, yeah? Nobel Prize, you say... I get it, thanks. You’ve been a great help.”

Jin Sahyuk only came all the way here to observe how this elegant princess would react to her provocation. She simply felt bored and needed a little entertainment. Rachel spoke from behind her as she prepared to leave.

“Miss Shin Jahyuk.”

“*Hmm?*”

Jin Sahyuk turned towards her again. Suddenly, Rachel looked quite serious and even bit her lips. Jin Sahyuk almost laughed, but managed to hold back.

“Please don’t get too comfortable with him since you’re being introduced as my acquaintance. My country considers Kim Hajin a top priority in diplomacy. Hajin is the technical advisor at Essential Dynamics and also Jeronimo’s...”

Rachel’s polite, yet strict warning went on.

“Fenrir has a close relationship with our government—”

“Okay, okay. I get it.” Jin Sahyuk cut her off and turned around. She could feel Rachel’s burning gaze on the back of her head.

She’s quite fun to tease.

“I’m leaving.”

This entire meeting only wasted time, but Jin Sahyuk felt satisfied with Rachel’s response. She left the office in a much better mood with light steps.

Chapter 256

Same Goal, Different Paths (2)

The meeting with Wicked progressed smoothly. Wicked asserted dominance over the current djinn society with confidence and vigor.

“The association said they would carry out their mission in April, but I don’t think they’ll succeed.”

I agreed with Wicked’s assessment. The association’s first assassination team would fail and suffer immense losses because of traitors. Unfortunately, I never specified the traitors’ identities in the original story.

Honestly, everything from this point on would be a mess. I forced the story’s progression for the sake of ending it and only recalled writing a few lines about the Hero Association’s first assassination team. I’d give myself a beating if I could for being so idiotic.

“We’ll wait for them and set out in June. It’ll be good for us if they finish off Orden, but we’ll just have to do it ourselves if they fail.”

“Who’s participating in the assassination team?”

Boss asked Wicked. She didn’t flinch in front of Wicked’s presence since they could stand head-to-head with each other.

“You mean the noteworthy members? Evil Society’s executives including Kim Hakpyo, Terror and his subordinates, Destruction and his subordinates...”

Wicked only listed infamous djinns.

“I don’t plan on leaving that scoundrel monster alive. Other djinns think the same. Plucas would’ve done the deed himself if he hadn’t

died.”

“Plucas?” Boss frowned at this name.

“Plucas is the devil Chae Joochul killed.”

Wicked didn’t sound mad because she didn’t serve Plucas. She served the famous Baal.

“How about it? I think we’re far more likely to succeed than the Hero Association.”

Djinns succeeded first in the original story. They infiltrated Orden’s kingdom after the Hero Association’s defeat, managed to cut off one of the monster king’s arms, and killed countless of his subordinates.

The follow-up group consisting of Chae Nayun, Yi Yeonghan, Rachel, Yun Seung-Ah, and Kim Suho succeeded thanks to them.

Kim Suho didn’t participate in the first assassination team because the Hero Association wanted to keep him in check after he conquered the Tower of Wish. Of course, Kim Suho couldn’t even think about Orden now while fighting the demon king.

“I, Wicked, will acknowledge your authority over the parts of Pandemonium you currently control if you participate.”

Boss’ eyebrows twitched. It certainly sounded like a generous offer considering djinns only ever cooperated among themselves.

“How is it? I think it’s a fantastic deal.”

Wicked turned her attention to me.

“I liked the way Black Lotus shot down Orden over the broadcast.”

“...”

Boss frowned at the casual compliment as Wicked stared at me.

“So?” Wicked turned back to Boss.

Only then did Boss look at me. I nodded and Boss gave her approval.

“We will participate, but we don’t take orders from anyone.”

Meanwhile, I pondered if the Chameleon Troupe ever participated in the djinn’s assassination team in the original story?

“*Hahaha!* Not taking orders from anyone! Right, that’s the Chameleon Troupe!” Wicked heartily laughed.

“Let’s eat now that we’ve decided!”

Three hours after the meeting...

The Chameleon Troupe and Wicked left, but her subordinates remained in the meeting room. The 6 executives gathered their underlings for a discussion.

“Will we really let them be?” Wicked’s sixth executive, Yi Junghan, broke the silence.

“You think I will? Those bastards even stole from my vault!”

The first executive shouted and slammed his fist on the table.
KWANG!

The Chameleon Troupe had established reasonable rules when they took over Pandemonium, but djinns didn’t like to suffer the slightest loss. High ranking djinns like Wicked’s executives benefited a lot from working with Satan’s Servants.

“The boss will get angry...”

“No, the boss wants this too. Didn’t you feel it? Think back to how those two fools acted so arrogantly, not even taking their robes and hoods off. Boss let it slide because of our current situation, but she wouldn’t have hesitated to slaughter them otherwise.”

The executives interpreted Wicked's intentions on their own. They claimed to know what Wicked thought and presumed she would be happy if they killed those arrogant fools.

"Perfect. We'll kill those bandits the moment we finish our work."

The second executive, Yoon Yonghan, agreed with the first executive, Kirken.

"No, why don't we kill them before? After all, we can always form a new assassination team."

"*Hm... that's not a bad idea.*"

Then the fourth executive, Plaiun, spoke.

"*Leave the trap to me.*"

"Plaiun, I told you to learn Korean. How do you live in this day and age without knowing Korean?"

"Sorry, but I don't have any talent with languages. I'm thinking about learning a *translation skill*."

"Just speak in English if you're going to mix them."

Kirken nagged at Plaiun, but translated his words to the others anyways. Like that, Wicked's executives came to a consensus. As they prepared to dismiss the meeting...

"*Um... Kirken hyung.*"

The sixth executive, Yi Junghan, carefully spoke up.

"What."

"Rather than killing all of them, why don't we humiliate them to make an example?"

“Humiliate?”

“Y-Yes.”

Yi Junghan laughed and continued as Kirken furrowed his brows.

“One of them had quite the figure. Don’t you think so?”

“Who? Their boss?”

Kirken thought of the Chameleon Troupe’s Boss who didn’t show the slightest fear in front of Wicked.

“No, not her. It’s...”

Yi Junghan coughed in embarrassment. He awkwardly scratched his neck and stared at Kirken.

Goosebumps rose on Kirken’s back.

“You mean... Black lotus?”

“Well, his skin looked quite fair, but don’t misunderstand. It’s not like I want to. I just think it’s the best way to humiliate them...”

Yi Junghan salivated as he gave a half-hearted excuse. Kirken frowned in disgust while looking at him drooling.

“*Hmm...*” Kirken nodded without objecting to it.

“Do what you want.”

“*Haha*, thank you hyung.” Yi Junghan smiled and bowed.

Faraway, someone spied on their private conversation.

“T-T-Those crazy bastards!”

Captain Horner furiously shouted inside the Genkelope Vessel's command room. He observed the meeting room in case anything happened to the ship commander. Now he felt glad he did.

“Impudent fools! They dare to insult our ship commander!”

The usually calm captain became full of rage. Horner took a deep breath to calm his trembling hands. Then he immediately made a call.

— Yes, captain.

“Lieutenant, it's an emergency.”

Tower of Wish players feared the *[Alcatraz Prison]* the most. Horner spoke to the lieutenant in charge of this prison.

“I will send over pictures of players. Follow and arrest them no matter what. It doesn't matter what you charge them with. Spitting on the ground, smoking in the streets, playfully fighting each other... treat even the lightest crime as treason.”

— May I ask what happened?

“It has to do with the ship commander Extra7's safety.”

The lieutenant hesitated at first, but jumped in surprise when he heard Horner's explanation. He replied with a voice full of tension.

— Yes, understood!

“Let us stuff these criminals in jail.”

Three hours later...

“W-What!? We didn't even do anything!”

“Fuck, what's going on?”

“Let go of me! Do you know who I am? I'm Kirken! With the flick of a

hand, I can bury all of you in the depths of—”

“Additional two years for resisting arrest.”

“Hold up, two years?”

The guards dragged about 40 djinns to the Genkelope Vessel’s *[Alcatraz Prison]* and charged them with obstruction of business. Apparently, they spoke too loudly in a restaurant.

* * *

[30F]

“Too slow.”

The demon king’s words heavily weighed on Kim Suho sprawled on the ground.

“Looks like you’ve reached a wall.”

Kim Suho had already lost 30 times. He finally succeeded in bringing out the demon king’s full strength, but couldn’t last a minute against him in that state.

Kim Suho looked at the demon king who no longer wore any armor. The demon king hadn’t worn armor for protection, but simply to limit his own speed.

“Knight, you are in quite a miserable state.”

Kim Suho didn’t believe in judging appearances, but the man in front of him looked like a king. His skin seemed far paler than a human’s and his eyes and hair appeared darker too.

“I will no longer accept your challenges if you do not show any progress.”

The demon king left with those words and his fluttering cape blocked

Kim Suho's vision. Kim Suho felt like crying, so he closed his eyes. Consecutive losses, hopeless defeats, continued despair, and a wall that seemed too high to overcome. Helplessness seeped into his bones and voices telling him to give up rang in his mind.

However, countless people like Kim Hajin and Yun Seung-Ah also appeared. Their trust and belief in him pushed him further.

I can't give up. I can still go on. For my friends who trust in me, I...

He raised his body once more.

"I can win."

Even as torrents of magic power swept him away and the difference in strength tore his hands apart, his legs and ribs broke, but his sword hadn't broken. He still had a chance as long as his sword remained. He wouldn't give up as long as he had a chance.

"I can win..."

A sword's strength depends on the knight's conviction. The stronger the conviction, the sturdier the sword. Kim Suho still believed in the words his master once told him.

"Um..."

The witch approached Kim Suho, who gasped for breath. Then she handed him a small pouch.

"This is?"

"Your sparring partner left it for you."

Kim Suho blankly stared at it and recalled what Kim Hajin said.

Open this when things aren't looking good. It'll help a lot.

"I thought you forgot about it, so here you go."

Kim Suho smiled at the witch's words. *Forgot? How could I forget something Hajin gave me? I just didn't use it yet because I didn't want to cheat.*

"Isn't it about time you seek some help?"

The witch sounded kinder than usual.

"Haa..."

Kim Suho sighed and grabbed the pouch after thinking about it for a while. It felt extremely light. He had no idea what it contained, but held high expectations considering who it came from.

He slowly opened the pouch.

"Eh?"

It contained three pieces of paper like coupons.

[Point Coupon] [Point Coupon] [Special Consolidation Coupon]

* * *

[Korea – Seoul]

A month passed and the day of the Orden Assassination Team's departure arrived.

— The Hero Association has finished preparing for their mission. Effective goods from the Tower of Wish are also being used in full force...

I suddenly thought of Kim Suho while watching TV.

"Has he used them yet?"

Suho should be in a bloody battle against the demon king who probably became even stronger than in the original story.

As such, I gave Kim Suho two [*Point Coupons*] and one [*Special Consolidation Coupon*] that I obtained from using settings intervention. I didn't want to give away these precious items, but they should be more effective on Kim Suho's high stats. Making Kim Suho stronger would only benefit me. Honestly, I didn't have much of a choice.

— The Orden Assassination Team will set out in one month.

The news anchor reported on the Hero Association's Orden Assassination Team. The one month he mentioned only served as a smokescreen tactic. They should've already set out today and I would retrieve the girl with the authority of healing while they left.

— Jin Seyeon, Aileen, Shin Jonghak, Yi Yongha, and many other famous heroes will participate in this campaign.

The anchor's words froze my thoughts as I stared at the TV with a serious expression.

“Wait, wait, wait...”

A sudden suspicion rose within me. Aileen never appeared after the Orden arc in the original story. Jin Seyeon didn't appear either and neither did Yi Yongha. I only focused on Kim Suho's point of view at that point. Kim Suho defeated Orden with his allies and I never revealed what happened after because I went on hiatus just as the devils began to make their move.

“This...”

I looked at Aileen smiling brightly on TV. A character that stopped appearing in the novel. Nothing had been explicitly stated, but could it be?

“That's where she dies?”

Goosebumps rose on my body. Not a single character among them could die. They all possessed important roles in stopping the future calamities. However, I didn't know who would betray them since I glanced over it with a single sentence in the original story.

“Kim Hajin, you idiot.”

I blamed myself as I stared at the TV.

— Aileen, do you have anything you want to say? Any words of encouragement?

— Words of encouragement? Well, we’re going to win for sure. *Oi*, Jin Seyeon, Yi Yongha! You say something too.

— Yes, *um*, it’s Yi Yongha. My wife let me go, so... I love you Younghee!

— *Ah* geez, stop that!

Jin Seyeon, Aileen, Yi Yongha, and even Shin Jonghak seemed full of energy.

— Thank you. That was the Spirit Speech Master Aileen. Back to you.

The reporter ended the interview and I fell into thought. Jain and Cheok Jungyeong should be able to kidnap the girl with the authority of healing without me.

However, only I could save Aileen’s party if they encountered a life-or-death crisis.

“*Ah*, fuck.”

I cursed and picked up the Desert Eagle. Then I immediately contacted Boss.

* * *

[Pandemonium Fighting Arena – Jin Sahyuk’s Waiting Room]

“Fuck you, you fucking fuck! Why the fuck would you come with me?”

Jin Sahyuk let out a flurry of curses. Of course, Bell stood on the receiving end. He simply shrugged after having grown used to Jin Sahyuk's foul mouth.

"Why not? I have to check whether or not you'll betray us."

"Are you crazy? Did you finally lose your mind? Did you?"

Jin Sahyuk grew mad because Bell declared that he would be joining Wicked's assassination team. The Chameleon Troupe would also participate and Bell knew what would happen if they met. Looking at Bell's snickering face pissed her off.

"You're the one who took that crystal from Orden without telling me."

Bell voiced his suspicions.

"Ha, do I have to get permission for everything?"

Jin Sahyuk planned to return to the past with Kim Hajin so she could figure out his identity. However, Bell wanted to hinder her plans.

"Sahyuk, you're just going to tremble in front of him anyways. I bet you'll stutter the whole time."

Jin Sahyuk's shoulders flinched, but she quickly straightened her back and stood tall.

"Y-You're crazy. W-What do you m-mean I'm going to s-stutter!"

"You've been having nightmares, right? I saw it. *Spare me. Spare me. Don't do it.*"

Bell snickered and projected a hologram in the air. Jin Sahyuk stared at it in silence. The screen displayed a video she didn't know about.

— No, stop. Don't do it...

— It hurts, fuck... fucker...

— Spare me... it hurts... I'm... sorry...

It must be another one of Bell's skills. Jin Sahyuk's mind went blank. Then it exploded. The explosion erupted through her skull and rose into the sky.

"You... you..."

Jin Sahyuk only acted according to her feelings now.

"YOU MOTHER FUCKER!"

Her roar shook the earth. The windows in the waiting room shattered and the furniture flew into the air.

"*Haha*, what's wrong? I found it adorable. If I show this to Kim Hajin, he won't hate you so much anymo—"

"SHUT IT!"

A magic spear shot forward, but Bell leisurely transformed his body into magic power. Jin Sahyuk's spear couldn't pierce him.

"...?"

At least, that's how it should've been. Bell noticed a sharp pain when the spear phased through him. He doubted it at first.

Ssk—

"What?"

He looked at the injury on his thigh. Then he looked back at Jin Sahyuk. Rage overcame her and she only blindly attacked.

Ssk—

This time, he suffered a deeper cut on his hand.

“Ah... I get it.”

Bell smiled at the wound. Before he noticed, Jin Sahyuk had advanced by another level.

Looks like my death isn't far off.

Bell happily received her attacks and the spears phasing through him felt ecstatic.

“Good, good... a bit more, a bit more...”

He climaxed under the ecstasy of the pain.

Chapter 257

Orden's Territory (1)

A total of 1,000 heroes gathered for the Orden Campaign. Most of them ranked higher than high-intermediate and many ranked above high rank. They didn't waste any time with the Middle East and Europe under attack. The Hero Alliance Team verified the internal structure of Orden's kingdom, divided 1000 heroes into different teams, and identified the most efficient way to infiltrate the enemy base.

"Let's see..."

Aileen, captain of the special task force, checked her magic pocket in the limousine bound for the military portal. It contained a high grade external injury healing potion, high grade internal injury healing potion, high grade magic power recovery potion, high grade vitality recovery potion, promised return scroll, magic scroll, magic tent, beef jerky, and other provisions.

Essential Pharmacy provided top-notch potions and return scrolls. The package included tents and provisions in case the operation became prolonged. Each country's government and the association prepared excellent items.

"Now that's what I'm talking about."

Aileen grinned in satisfaction, but quickly regained her composure as captain and glanced over her team.

"Did everyone finish checking their supplies?"

Jin Seyeon, Yi Yongha, Shin Jonghak, and the new high rank hero, Seo Youngji, examined their supplies.

"Yes, I've checked. Everything is here."

“I have everything.”

“Me too.”

“Okay. Good. Your captain is satisfied.”

Aileen sternly nodded. She glanced at her smartwatch that outlined their operation.

[First, travel to the underground portal in Egypt. Once you arrive, you will immediately enter Orden's kingdom using Aileen's skill, teleport. It shouldn't be difficult since we've already figured out the internal structure using drones.]

Tirring— Aileen received a text message while she went over the details. It came from Yun Seung-Ah, the third attack team's leader.

— Unni, which way are you going?

Yun Seung-Ah participated as the leader of Creator's Sacred Grace. She led a regular team with about a dozen heroes from her guild.

— This operation is classified. I can't tell you.

— Look at you acting like a captain.

Aileen smiled as she typed a reply.

— I've always been captain material.

"We've arrived."

The limousine stopped and Aileen glanced out at the military portal. She looked at her team and ordered them in a heavy voice.

“Let's go, everyone.”

“Okay, let's get off.”

“All right.”

The task force of 5 elite heroes exited the limousine and Aileen stretched her short legs.

Clack. Clack.

Her high heels clicked as she walked on the runway and time seemed to slow. Grandiose music rang in her ear and she could feel the glances of nearby soldiers. She didn't fear anything even in the face of imminent battle. Rather, she walked with delight because this would only mark the beginning of Spirit Speech Master Aileen's legend...

“*Hmm...*”

“*Cough.*”

“Ah. Weather, the weather looks nice.”

The team desperately held back their laughter. The tiny and serious Aileen looked too cute, but also funny. Fortunately, they arrived in front of the portal without bursting into laughter.

“Salutations! It's an honor!”

The soldier in charge saluted. Aileen nodded with a serious look.

“Sure. Is this the portal?”

“Yes, this portal links to the underground tunnel in Egypt. The Egyptian VIPs used it last to evacuate. However, the distance between Cairo and Orden's kingdom is quite far as you already know.”

Africa transformed into the land of monsters, but they hadn't taken over every single region. The monsters fought among themselves and ate each other, so a few regions became entirely devoid of humans and monsters.

“Most heroes will enter Orden's kingdom through such regions.”

“But we don’t have to.”

Aileen didn’t plan on following the normal route.

“We formed this task force to infiltrate Orden’s kingdom before everybody else, deliver inside information, and blow up key locations.”

Aileen lowered her voice, but it didn’t matter.

“We’ll enter the portal and travel to Orden’s kingdom using my teleport skill.”

“Will it be alright?”

The distance between Egypt and Orden’s territory at the center of Africa stood over 10,000 km apart. Still, Aileen leisurely smiled at the soldier’s worry.

“I, Aileen, am the captain of the Hero Alliance’s first special task force. I wouldn’t have become captain without the qualifications.”

“Ah, yes. Of course, you’re amazing.”

Aileen and the soldier seemed to click as he looked at her in awe. Aileen nodded in content.

“Let’s start the portal.”

“Yes.”

OOOONG— Magic power and electricity resonated. Aileen nodded to the soldier before stepping through and the soldier saluted in response.

“Salutations! Miss Aileen, captain of the Hero Alliance’s first special task force, I pray for your victory!”

“Of course. I’d like to know your name as well.”

“I’m Colonel Kim Wangho.”

“Colonel Wangho, sounds like a good name.”

Aileen’s expression turned resolute as she spoke to Colonel Wangho in a low voice.

“Immediately shut down this portal if we send a signal. We cannot allow enemy forces to make use of it if the operation somehow fails.”

“Pardon?”

“Do as I say. I am Aileen, captain of the Hero Alliance’s first special task force.”

Seo Youngji seemed slightly confused as she listened in on their conversation.

“She’s more mature than she appears.”

“No, no.” Jin Seyeon strongly disagreed.

“She’s just engrossed in her title right now. She’s surprisingly into such things.”

Yi Yongha also nodded. “She’s going to make a lot of fuss over this captain thing.”

Their small talk went on aimlessly until Aileen called them.

“Hey, team!”

“Yes, yes.”

“We’ll be starting our mission now. Is everyone ready?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“Your answer sucks! Again!” Aileen kept shouting at them.

Guess we’ll just have to play along. The 4 members straightened up and followed Jin Seyeon’s signal.

“Yes! We’re ready!”

“Good. Now I’ll do a last-minute roll call.”

“*Huh?* We only have four of us.”

“*Shush.* They did this in the movies I watched, so you’ll do it too.”

“...”

And so, the roll call began: high-intermediate rank, grade 1 Shin Jonghak, high rank, grade 7 Seo Youngji, master rank Jin Seyeon, and Temple of Justice Yi Yongha.

“All set. Now let’s enter the portal.”

Aileen finally led the team through the portal.

* * *

[Orden’s Territory]

The Hero Alliance’s first special task force instantly arrived in Central Africa with Aileen’s teleport.

“*Uaaa...*”

Teleport covered an extremely long distance. Aileen used a great deal of magic power and trembled from the dizziness. Yi Yongha caught her as she fell and only then did Aileen finally look around.

“*Huh?* What the... Where are we?”

“...”

Aileen became confused like the others. Orden's territory didn't look anything like they had imagined.

“Why is there asphalt in Africa?”

Shin Jonghak muttered in a daze. He had expected a desert, but they spotted regular city roads. The scenery didn't feature any nature like grass or trees. It looked completely different from what the allied team captured with satellites and drones.

“Chief, are the coordinates correct?” Jin Seyeon asked and Aileen nodded without hesitation.

“What, of course. Do you think I'd make such an elementary mistake?”

Aileen looked at her smartwatch to confirm that they arrived at the right place.

“First of all, I think we're at the right place. *Uh*, I mean... we arrived at the correct destination. Oh, look over there!”

Aileen suddenly pointed into the distance. A castle could be seen in the sky. It might be a mirage, but it looked like a huge castle.

“*Ah*, you're right. I see something over there too.”

“Yes. We'll head that way for now!”

Aileen led the squad like a brave captain.

* * *

[Tower of Heroes]

The 77 story tower built by the association didn't look as wide compared to its great height. However, the interior contained much more space than its appearance. They constructed this iconic building

with a magic engineering technique called expansion architecture.

A single tower floor could contain 4-5 houses and it did feature separate housing spaces for employees.

"Professor, where did magic power come from?"

A certain child lived in a house on the 33rd floor. This child, Yi Yuri, possessed the authority of healing and some also called her the girl of authority.

"It's widely accepted that it came about after Outcall."

The 15 year old, under the association's strict protection, took private lessons from a Cube professor.

"I reckon such an answer won't be enough to satisfy you." The professor handed her a copy of the research paper he prepared beforehand.

"Please take a look at this."

"Oh, is this one of his papers again?"

The professor nodded.

"Yes, it's incredibly sophisticated and detailed. I still can't believe a mere 17 year old student wrote such a masterpiece."

"Ah, I see."

Yi Yuri gladly received the paper. Indeed, she spotted a familiar name written across the top.

[Birth of Magic Power and Precursor to Outcall] – [Cube Class 1, Rank 934, Kim Hajin]

Kim Hajin, a genius whose achievements in magical theory became recorded in textbooks. Yi Yuri had already read 5 papers written by

him. They all discussed different subjects, but sounded equally perfect.

“I run across this name a lot while studying.”

The professor softly smiled at her words.

“Students at Cube experience the same. He submitted a total of 23 exam papers and 8 essays. Major academic journals later published all of them. A total of 8 studies is currently underway based on Hajin’s papers.”

“Wow, that’s amazing.”

“He was by far the brightest student I’ve ever taught.”

The professor smiled as he reminisced about the distant past. A scholar who pursued the profound truth like him considered Kim Hajin as a great stimulus. *Kim Hajin was brilliant and intelligent, gifted and creative... Tiriring.* His smartwatch suddenly beeped and he glanced at the message.

“Ah, it seems something came up. I’ll be out for a while, so please read the paper in the meantime. I’ll be back soon.”

“Yes, professor.”

The professor left as Yi Yuri read the paper.

“Oh...”

The more she read Kim Hajin’s paper, the more she admired it. Academic papers never felt entertaining, but his papers easily drew her in as though enchanted with magic.

Kiik—

Soon, the door opened and Yi Yuri glanced up. The professor returned with a warm smile.

“Yuri, I have good news.”

“Yes?”

“Your parents came to visit. You’ll be able to spend the rest of the day with them.”

A big smile spread across Yi Yuri’s face. Normally, she only saw them once every two months at most.

“Really?”

“Yes, but you’ll be strictly guarded. Would you like to go?”

“Yes! O-Of course.”

Yuri quickly got up and packed her belongings, including the papers. She even changed into her favorite clothes.

“Please follow me.”

The professor led Yuri with a smile. She excitedly followed the professor, who switched on the tightly locked elevator on the 55th floor.

“Come, let’s go.”

“Yes?”

Only after arriving in front of the elevator did Yuri notice something off. Her intuition warned her to stop and look around. This floor usually had several guards, but none of them could be seen today.

“Excuse me, professor, but— *Ah!*”

The professor caught Yuri by the wrist as she tried to step back.

“You should follow me if you want to live.”

He said as he pulled her.

“Wha, what? P-Please wait.”

The elevator door closed and they quickly descended to the first floor. The professor almost dragged Yuri out of the elevator. The Tower of Heroes stood in the middle of Gwanghwamun, but only an empty lot greeted them outside.

“Professor, where are we?”

“Don’t be afraid and follow me. We’re going to see your parents.”

The professor, Jain in disguise, tightly held the sobbing Yi Yuri’s wrists. Jain tried to take Yuri to their hiding place. However...

“Where are you going?”

A figure silently appeared and stopped her. Jain frowned at the uninvited guest’s sudden appearance.

“Hi. Long time no see. You’re Jain, right?”

Kim Junwoo, a hunter from the Vast Expanse, casually greeted her. His narrow fox-like eyes formed a straight line. However, Jain had an even more powerful and destructive being on her side.

“Yeah, long time no see, dog of Vast Expanse,” Cheok Jungyeong muttered as he stepped forward.

“You’re right. It’s been a while, pig.” Kim Junwoo smiled at him.

“Oh? I’ll take care of this bastard, so take the kid and buzz off.”

Jain tried to do as told, but just how many people hid in this empty lot?

“You won’t be able to leave.”

An aged voice rang out and an old man in uniform suddenly appeared. Cheok Jungyeong and Jain froze as they saw him.

“That child is my hope.”

Vast Expanse, considered the strongest in his field, appeared in front of them. Cheok Jungyeong stared at Vast Expanse to confirm his identity. A few minutes passed in silence and Jain carefully asked, “It’s just you two?”

Kim Junwoo silently nodded. Numbers would be insignificant with Vast Expanse present.

“*Phew...* That’s good.”

Jain sighed in relief. Soon, just like Vast Expanse, the Chameleon Troupe appeared from the darkness. One by one, shadows came into view: Seat of silver, Kaita. Seat of indigo, Yoo Kyunghwan. Seat of brown, Hirano. Seat of green, Jin Yohan. Seat of turquoise, Setryn. Seat of blue, Khalifa. And lastly, the seat of white, Boss. All but two members gathered and surrounded the two men.

“*Hahahaha...*”

Was this the confidence of a man considered to be one of the strongest?

“You must be the Chameleon Troupe. It’s been a long time since I’ve been entertained.”

Vast Expanse only smiled at the strong foes around him.

* * *

[Orden’s Territory]

Meanwhile, I arrived at the heart of Africa with Spartan. I could see Orden’s territory in the distance and studied it from afar.

“What?”

At first, I wondered if I came to the right place. It looked quite different from my original setting. I imagined a castle in the middle of nowhere, but a vast land full of traps and barriers surrounded this splendid castle.

“It sure did change a lot,” I muttered in despair. I could only rely on my eyes and ears from now on.

“Huuu...”

I took a deep breath and gathered stigma's magic power into my eyes. With grade 2 Master Sharpshooter, the thousand-mile eyes showed me a full view of Orden's territory.

The most likely place to find Aileen's party... As I pondered, a single barrier came into view.

[Time Barrier] — A week inside this barrier will equal an hour outside. However, the flow of magic power and stagnant air will make it impossible to train inside. — Entrance is free, but you must pay to exit. — Breaking this barrier will require a power equivalent to the grand magic dispel or an appropriate authority.

This looked like the most suspicious trap around Orden's territory. Of course, I brought the *[Mystic Key]* with me for such things.

“Let's see...”

My vision easily penetrated through the time barrier. *Is there anything in there?* I thoroughly scrutinized it.

“Oh?”

I discovered three people with dirty faces, torn clothes, and protruding bones from starvation. Aileen, Shin Jonghak, and Jin Seyeon had all been trapped inside.

— I'm starving...

Aileen pitifully muttered. Jin Seyeon would always comfort Aileen at such times, but even she seemed to be on edge right now.

— I'm starving as well.

— *Ah...*

The three heroes looked like skeletons. I searched around the vast area within the barrier and understood why.

“There's nothing.”

No grass, beasts, water, or monsters.

— Water, water, *ahhhh*... Water...

Orden knew how to deal with Aileen. You simply had to avoid someone as strong as her. Fighting by not fighting. He would've easily set them up thanks to the traitor. They would actually die if this dragged on.

“Spartan, go get some bags of food from back home.”

— *Pieeek.*

Spartan returned about 3 minutes later with the bags of food and water. I grabbed them and ran towards the barrier.

Chapter 258

A New Episode (1)

[Orden's Living Quarter]

At the heart of his kingdom, Orden sat on a throne in front of his loyal subordinates.

“An intruder has entered the time barrier.”

The servant kneeled and reported to the king.

“Yet another fly has entered the trap.”

“The intruder seems to know how the time barrier works. The souls trapped inside will escape if we let him be. We’ll need to do something about him.”

Hearing this, the king looked at the servants kneeling in front of him. Kurukuru, Lacor, Veritas, and Garimto... If he wanted, his loyal servants would annihilate these arrogant intruders.

“I will handle it.”

A human spoke before the king could say anything. The servants glared at the human with discontent. However, the human didn’t show any fear. Instead, she snorted and confidently spoke.

“I will strike him down.”

Jin Sahyuk’s words made Orden smile.

“Will you?” Orden asked.

Jin Sahyuk nodded with confidence. “Of course.”

She had joined Orden after her fight with Bell. Of course, she didn’t plan on fully cooperating with them. Jin Sahyuk only had to embrace a bit of disgust to avoid Bell’s hindrance.

“I will make him disappear from your sight.”

She wasn’t lying. She planned on bringing Kim Hajin to Akatrina’s past. The opportunity came earlier than anticipated, but she didn’t mind. She wanted to leave this place that reeked of humanoid monsters.

“Good, then you may do so.”

Orden approved and Jin Sahyuk released her magic power with a smile. Her new gift, *[Reality Manipulation]*, formed a portal.

“I’m leaving you sons of bitches.”

She cursed at them before disappearing into the portal. Unsurprisingly, the king’s servants grew furious.

“My king, why have you accepted such an impudent human into our ranks?”

“Kill... that... bitch...”

“*Kururu, kurururu...*”

Orden released his magic power and suppressed their dissatisfaction.

* * *

[84 Days Totaling 12 hours in Real Time]

Aileen’s party marched towards the castle in the distance. As 1, 2, 4, and 8 hours passed... they realized their surroundings hadn’t changed the slightest.

“Something’s wrong.”

“*Hmm...* Why don’t we split into two teams? We have ways to communicate, so it should be fine.”

The team split into two at Jin Seyeon’s suggestion. Aileen, Jin Seyeon, and Shin Jonghak formed one while Yi Yongha and Seo Youngji formed the other. They decided to contact each other if they found anything.

Then 1, 2, 3, 4, 10 days passed... and finally 84 days. The food they brought wouldn’t last 3 months and they also lacked water. The group decided to give up and use their return scrolls.

“W-Why isn’t it working?”

Of course, the scrolls didn’t work inside the time barrier. Despair set in when their last hope disappeared. Aileen, Jin Seyeon, and Shin Jonghak collapsed to the ground in frustration.

Even a Ferrari couldn’t run without fuel and better cars required better fuel. Once exhausted, superhumans resembled ordinary people.

Even so, they hadn’t expected death by dehydration and starvation. No one thought they would meet their end by hunger instead of battle. Their minds collapsed as time passed and the despair only grew. That’s when it happened. They felt an unknown presence approach as they prepared to accept their deaths.

Then they regained hope. The man who appeared like the wind wore a coat of armor that shone brighter than anything they had ever seen.

“*Huh?*”

“What’s... that?”

The three individuals blinked at Kim Hajin and barely had the strength to talk. Kim Hajin walked up and handed them water bottles.

“Get up.”

These might've been the coolest words Aileen, Jin Seyeon, and Shin Jonghak ever heard in their lives.

* * *

First, I gave them water.

Gulp— Gulp—

I began to cook after watching them drink. I only made soup since they starved for a long time. Even superhumans would struggle to digest in that state.

The three paupers walked up to me a few minutes later.

“Done.”

“*Ooooh.*”

I handed a bowl to Shin Jonghak. A hobo look replaced his usual handsomeness.

“...”

Shin Jonghak only stared at me without taking the bowl. He smacked his lips, but seemed too embarrassed.

“What are you waiting for? Shove it if you don't want it.”

He finally took it when Aileen tried pushing him away. I also handed Aileen and Jin Seyeon their share. They returned with empty bowls 3 minutes later.

“*Aah... Cough,* so, how did you come to save us?”

Aileen licked everything off her bowl and stared at me with a regretful look. I told her the excuse I prepared beforehand.

“I've been here for a while.”

“Oh...”

“As expected of the famous Fenrir. I admire you, senior.”

Jin Seyeon and Aileen both signaled me to refill their bowls.

“Senior?”

“Didn’t you say you arrived here before us? That makes you our senior. Thank you, senior. Thank you.”

Jin Seyeon’s eyes became full of emotions. She seemed ready to kowtow and kiss my feet. They had it much harder than I thought. I looked at Shin Jonghak to see if he wanted another bowl as well.

“*Hrp, hrp...*”

He licked his bowl with his back facing me, but I could tell from the sound and how his shoulders moved. I snatched the bowl out of his hands.

“*A-Ah!* W-What do you want? Give it back!”

“You finished it, geez. You can have seconds.”

I filled all 3 bowls and returned them.

“I don’t need your help.”

Shin Jonghak remained obstinate. His eyes fixed on the bowl of soup, but his mouth rejected me. *Whoosh, whoosh*. I tried shaking the bowl in front of him and his eyes followed as if enchanted.

“*Ssp, ssp, sssssp.*”

“Are you sure you don’t want it? I can see you drooling.”

— Today, just for today, you can be my cook.

Shin Jonghak murmured. I smiled and handed him the bowl. Afterwards, I cooked some meat and even provided them with potions to boost their vitality.

“Ah... you saved us. By the way... do you have any dessert? I’m just feeling a bit dizzy... *ah*, I’m going to fall... I, I think I need chocolate to heal me...”

“Thank you. I owe you my life. Please accept my kowtow...”

“How did you find us here? You won’t be able to leave either.”

Aileen, Jin Seyeon, and Shin Jonghak respectively spoke. They all possessed quite unique personalities. I gave Aileen some chocolate with a wry smile.

“Thanks... *nyam*.” Aileen blushed and bashfully smiled at the chocolate.

“How did you fall into a trap the moment you arrived?”

Aileen’s expression turned into a frown.

“I don’t know. I’m wondering the same. We just teleported to the coordinates from the higher-ups.”

I could sense where the trouble came from.

“Who came up with the plan?”

“*Hm?* Oh, our hairy leader discussed it with the association beforehand.”

“Leader?”

“Yep, his name is Park Hanho. You’ve heard of him, right? He’s the Temple of Justice’s chairman. You’ve probably seen his name in textbooks.”

I finally found out the traitor's identity. He never played an important role in the original story, but he wasn't the Temple of Justice's chairman for nothing. In my *[Potential List]* of character power levels, Park Hanho possessed...

[Park Hanho 9.45/9.45]

A max potential score slightly higher than the *[9.4/9.55]* rating I gave Aileen.

“...”

My expression stiffened and they surmised what happened.

“You mean Park Hanho betrayed us?”

Aileen asked and I calmly nodded.

“It must be the person who formed the plan if the ones who carried it out didn't do anything wrong.”

“But Park Hanho doesn't have a motive. I know him well, and he—”

“No.” Aileen interrupted Jin Seyeon. Her face became more serious than ever.

“Now that I think about it... That old man, his daughter recently died.”

“Pardon?”

“I've seen something too.”

Aileen recalled Park Hanho talking to the association's upper echelon. He shouted at them, saying his daughter needed the authority of healing, but the upper echelon wouldn't grant his wish. Park Hanho wore a frightening expression when he hung up the call. His daughter died a month later from her illness.

“They say Orden pokes at other people’s weaknesses. His daughter died, so... his motive is clear.”

“He joined Orden to bring the dead back to life? How foolish.”

Shin Jonghak coldly commented and I couldn’t disagree.

“Anyways...” I gave them my bag full of food.

“Stay here until we know what’s going on for sure. It might be more dangerous to go out.”

Now I could ask the *[Book of Truth]* to confirm the suspect. Asking for the traitor in general didn’t work with just 5 streaks of stigma, but asking if Park Hanho joined Orden should work.

“It’s not like we have a choice. We can’t leave this place anyways,” Aileen grumbled.

“That’s fine. I’ll weaken the barrier.”

I already knew the first assassination team would fail, but I needed to find out the traitor’s identity.

“Weaken? How?”

“I’ll tell you about that later. For now, we have to find Yi Yongha and Seo Youngji.”

Guooo—

Magic power flickered from a distance. We quickly stood up and raised our guard.

Soon, a person walked out of an oval portal. This person held on to two other people. Jin Sahyuk suddenly appeared with Seo Youngji and Yi Yongha.

“...!”

Our eyes widened and Jin Sahyuk sneered as she held up the half-dead Yi Yongha and Seo Youngji.

“Yo.”

“...”

“Y-You crazy bitch! Let them go!”

“Who are you? Reveal your identity!”

I remained silent, but Aileen and Jin Seyeon reacted strongly. They seemed ready to charge at Jin Sahyuk.

“I’ll kill them if you come any closer. Especially you, dwarf girl. I’ll kill them the moment you open your mouth.”

Jin Sahyuk stopped them with a single sentence. She formed a blade with magic power and pointed it at Yi Yongha and Seo Youngji.

“You bitch... who did you call a dwarf?”

“I have no business with you fools, so screw off. Oi, Kim Hajin.”

Jin Sahyuk called me and I silently glared at her while infusing stigma’s magic power into my thousand-mile eyes.

“*Kuek.*”

Jin Sahyuk flinched and cold sweat formed on her forehead. She might even faint on her own if I continued evoking her trauma.

“Ah, fuck!”

Did her state of existence increase? Jin Sahyuk released her magic power and overcame my gaze.

“You son of a bitch! Stop glaring if you don’t want these two to die!”

That's what Jin Sahyuk said, but I knew she wouldn't kill hostages. Cowardly victories went against her principles.

I smiled and teased her.

"You're taking hostages now? You really hit rock bottom. I thought you would become somewhat human at least. I guess I should've killed you back then after all."

Immediately, blood vessels popped up on her face. She grew genuinely furious and glared at me as I mocked her. Of course, I didn't cower from her hostility.

"Shut up and come here before I kill them."

"Why, you can't kill me?"

"Shut up before I rip your mouth apart."

"Well, alright. I'll come over so try ripping it."

I walked over in a relaxed manner while preparing to activate my unique skill. One, two, three steps... Jin Sahyuk suddenly took something out of her pocket and I mistook it for a bomb.

"What..."

I activated *[Fate]*, but she took out a blue crystal instead. My eyes, which now had my laptop's function, showed me the description.

[Continental Fragment] — You may use this fragment to return to the recorded past – Akatrina during the continental year 555.

"Ah, wait. That's—"

I tried to stop her, but Jin Sahyuk already infused magic power into the blue crystal. Then it blew up.

KWANG!

The magic power condensed inside the crystal caused a huge torrent that engulfed everyone in the area.

* * *

“Ah...”

Jin Sahyuk opened her eyes and felt dizzy. She looked up at the familiar sky. Two moons and gem-like stars beautifully laid out across the blank canvas.

“Where are we?”

“Isn’t that obvious?”

A voice answered her. Startled, she shot up and saw the man sitting on the grass.

“The recorded past.”

His somewhat sorrowful eyes looked at the sky.

“Continental year 555, March 8th.”

Kim Hajin looked down at her. His eyes, dyed in magic power, sparkled like gems. Jin Sahyuk reflected in his blue eyes.

“It’s your kingdom.”

“...”

His words instantly cleared Jin Sahyuk’s chaotic thoughts. She shot up and looked at the two moons, countless stars, and icicles hanging on every tree.

“Akatrina...” Jin Sahyuk murmured in a daze.

The home she wanted to return to. Memories of when she ruled Plerion resurfaced in her mind.

“Get up if you remember now.”

Kim Hajin sighed and stood up. He seemed familiar with this world.

“What?”

“I said, get up.”

He acted like he had a destination in mind and Jin Sahyuk stared at him intensely.

“Kim Hajin, isn’t it time you reveal your identi—“

“Shut up and follow me.”

“What?”

“It’s nothing much.”

Kim Hajin scratched his neck. He woke up earlier than Jin Sahyuk thanks to the Orb of Regeneration in his pocket. Jin Sahyuk remained unconscious while he thought by himself for 3 hours.

“We have to clear the quest.”

“W-What are you talking about?”

“You broke a tower crystal. We can’t get out of here unless we clear the quest.”

Kim Hajin looked at the sky with a troubled expression. Some rather complicated information hung in front of him.

[Problem] — Jin Sahyuk and Kim Suho’s home world, Akatrina, isn’t mentioned enough. [Changes] — The continental fragment’s power has been greatly increased. — A new Akatrina episode has been added to the rushed story. — Rewards have been added to the new episode.

[Reward List] — Items that may be found by progressing through the story:

1. *Mysterious Magnifying Glass* 2. *Omnipotent Magic Pen* 3. *Purifying Crystal* 4. ??? [*Failure Condition – Jin Sahyuk’s death*]

“What are you talking about?” Jin Sahyuk cut off his thoughts.

“...”

Kim Hajin ignored her and entered the field of grass to his right. Jin Sahyuk dumbfoundedly stared at him.

“That guy...”

Kim Hajin walked forward as though he knew where to go. He didn’t seem confused or flustered. He simply went on his way like taking a walk in his neighborhood park.

Seeing this, Jin Sahyuk became sure of her suspicions. Regardless of his identity, Kim Hajin definitely came from Plerion. He had to have served her since she reigned as Plerion’s king. Her expression stiffened when she thought about this.

However, Kim Hajin had different thoughts.

[Book of Truth – Akatrina Continent Map]

“Mmm.”

He created a trustworthy map using the Book of Truth. It might’ve been even better than some of Akatrina’s maps.

“Cough.”

Jin Sahyuk chased after him. The two silently walked for a long time. Jin Sahyuk grew sentimental after seeing her home, but knew it was just an illusion.

Kim Hajin didn’t hesitate towards somewhere as Jin Sahyuk followed in confusion.

“Ah, there it is!”

Soon, they found a castle and Jin Sahyuk shouted in surprise. “The royal palace!”

Kim Hajin stopped and stared at it. Soon, he coldly smiled.

“Royal palace my ass.”

“What?”

“That’s the Schupert Castle. We’re far from the royal palace.”

“Hah?”

Jin Sahyuk furrowed her brows and looked at the castle once more. Indeed, it looked different from the royal palace in her memories. It appeared far smaller even at a glance.

“Cough.”

Jin Sahyuk shut her mouth and continued following him. For some reason, his usually narrow shoulders looked wide today.

Haaa... Jin Sahyuk inwardly sighed and pondered. I was right. Kim Hajin used to be a Plerion citizen. Even if he’s not Kindspring, he undoubtedly served me...

Kim Hajin turned around and faced her. She froze in surprise from his sudden action.

“Hurry up, idiot. Stop being such a nuisance. *Tsk*, so useless.”

“Uh... Huh?”

Kim Hajin’s murmuring resounded in Jin Sahyuk’s heart.

Chapter 259

A New Episode (2)

Vast Expanse kept both his feet on the ground. He didn't need to move when his will permeated underneath everything. Sometimes the earth shot up towards his enemies. Other times it spread in the sky like an umbrella. His gift perfectly suited offense and defense. Vast Expanse became one with the earth as he fought the Chameleon Troupe.

The Chameleon Troupe's combined strength tenaciously countered Vast Expanse. Cheok Jungyeong smashed the earth barrier. Boss charred the soil with her hellfire shadow. Hirano Arashi attacked with destruction magic. Kaita's wires, Jin Yohan's serpent spear, and Setryn's daggers all rushed towards Vast Expanse.

The explosive fight continued as magic power collided. The clash of earth against metal caused huge flames to soar. From a distance, it looked as if multiple firecrackers had been set off.

"Why don't we stop here?"

They couldn't afford to take any more time. Boss requested a talk before launching her ultimate skill.

"We'll have to resort to other means if you continue to hinder us."

"..."

Vast Expanse silently looked at Boss and suddenly smiled at her.

"So that small child by Yeonjun's side grew up this much."

Boss clenched her fists at the previous Boss' name.

"Child, why do you want the girl?" Vast Expanse pointed at Yi Yuri

passed out on the ground a short distance away.

“We want to protect her.”

“Protect?” Vast Expanse’s expression slightly changed.

“Right now, she’s being used as a tool for political figures. She’ll continue to be exploited until she dies, but we want to protect her from that.”

“And who asked you to do such a thing? Was it perhaps the child you call Black Lotus?”

“Yes.” Boss nodded.

“Why would he ask for that?”

“I don’t know.”

“You don’t know his motive or purpose, yet you’re willing to grant his request.”

Vast Expanse scornfully smiled. “That’s not what I taught Yeonjun.”

“I know.”

Boss shook her head. Vast Expanse and the former boss, Yi Yeonjun, had a master-disciple relationship. Vast Expanse had taught Yi Yeonjun the mercenary mindset, which Boss also inherited.

“However, I owe a lifetime of debt to the man who requested this.”

Someone precious to her had asked for help. Everyone came today for the same reason. Boss didn’t force any of them to participate. Before they knew it, Kim Hajin became an important part of the Chameleon Troupe.

“I can grant his request because I’m not Yi Yeonjun.”

Vast Expanse's face stiffened at her remark. He sought to find traces of his old disciple in her. However, she harbored a slightly different determination. Vast Expanse's lips curved into a smile.

"Junwoo, put down your sword."

Kim Junwoo lowered his weapon and Vast Expanse's magic power also dissipated. He planned on letting them go and they didn't refuse his kindness.

"Thank you."

"You don't have to thank me. I'm only retreating because our goals align."

Vast Expanse spoke as he turned around.

"I shall visit you again in the near future. Keep the girl safe until then."

He slowly walked away and... *Paat!* Vast Expanse disappeared with a flash of light.

* * *

[Recorded Past, Akatrina]

The Akatrina continent resembled the fantasy worlds often found in novels. The sky contained two moons and countless stars. These vast celestial bodies lit up the sky. I walked amidst this strange, yet beautiful scenery.

[First Goal — Reach The Capital, Plerion]

The popup window that appeared announced our first goal. I continued walking with this window in the upper right-hand corner of my vision. We walked for about half a day according to the Book of Truth.

“Mmm.”

A new day dawned and the sun rose above our heads. We spotted a wall in the distance, but it looked horribly damaged. I checked its information anyways.

[Outer Wall of Plerion] — Plerion's outer wall destroyed during the war.

"This is the outer wall of Plerion."

I recited the information to Jin Sahyuk, who followed me. She widened her eyes and checked it.

"You're right."

We paused in front of the wall and could see the ruins beyond. Dry bloodstains dyed the ground and it reeked of corpses. The view truly looked gruesome.

"By the year 555, the entire continent had already turned to ruins. Many wars swept the continent like storms and monsters flooded in before we could recover. Only Count Schupert's territory that we just passed and Plerion, the capital, remained intact. However, those two cities remained at odds with one another."

Jin Sahyuk explained the dreary sight. She acted differently than on Earth, perhaps because her memory seal had weakened.

"Let's go."

"..."

We walked past the crumbled wall. Not a single sign of life could be found. Only houses long destroyed and countless corpses of residents and soldiers remained.

"It looks like the wall recently came down."

No more than a week had passed judging from the corpses. Jin Sahyuk

nodded in agreement.

“Seems so. A battle must’ve taken place not too long ago. Oi, what do you plan to do from here?”

Her question dumbfounded me. *She clearly doesn’t understand the situation.* I sighed instead of getting angry and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Why are you asking me that? You’re the one who dragged me here.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk frowned and stared at me with her sharp eyes.

“It’s about time you became honest, little prick.”

“What? The hell are you—”

Drk, drk— The sound of galloping hooves rang out. It came from many horses, but sounded feeble for some reason. I looked towards that direction and spotted an army of about 300 cavalrymen approaching with a royal flag. The horses seemed to be in terrible condition. They probably hadn’t eaten in days. After all, life on Akatrina would soon go extinct. Its current living conditions could only be described as post-apocalyptic.

"You scoundrels!"

The army arrived in front of us and someone shouted because of our unusual clothes. Jin Sahyuk tried to speak like a king to them.

“*Hmph*, you insolent fools. Who do you think you’re talk—”

“Be quiet. You’re not the king right now.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk quickly understood what I meant. She glanced over the

cavalry and her eyes widened. A little girl in loose-fitting armor, barely over 10 years old, rode the tallest horse.

“Whoa whoa.”

The girl slowly came forward while soothing her horse. We stared at the child who looked just like Jin Sahyuk, only 15 years younger. They also looked strangely different because the girl had blonde hair and blue eyes.

“Who are you?”

The girl, cute as a doll, asked as she tried to keep her composure. I could see the grit and tenacity flickering in her eyes.

I looked at Jin Sahyuk. She also looked at Plerion’s young ruler in a daze. What would it be like to face myself from the past? Obviously, I had no idea.

“Answer me. If you don’t—!”

The horse leaped as the little king prepared to shout.

“Woah, woah. Stay still, you little...”

A knight dismounted from his horse to hold her reins. Only then did the little king look down at us.

“Reveal your identities. Did Schupert send you? Explain your attire.”

“No, we’re...”

I glanced at Jin Sahyuk. However, she remained speechless.

“We’re from the temple.”

“Temple?”

“Yes.”

The knights naturally refused to believe me.

"You fool! Do you know who you're lying to? The temple is already...?"

Actions always convinced others better than words. I manifested sacred power using stigma. The knights blankly stared at the white light rising from my palm. Then the light flew to a soldier and immediately healed his injuries.

"A-Ah, my wounds have healed!"

"Is this enough?"

I politely smiled at them. Suddenly, a joyful voice sprang from the young Jin Sahyuk.

"So, so the temple has not been destroyed?"

I looked at the little Jin Sahyuk. Her big eyes and grin appeared too inexperienced for a king.

* * *

We marched inside the city with the convoy of knights. However, the city didn't appear to be in great shape. The walls eroded and the people starved. They paid little attention to the king passing by.

"In the year 555, the people had already lost all hope."

We arrived at a guest room in the Plerion royal palace.

"I lost something dear to me amid the political strife and the servants who caused it ran away with the food and valuables. The state coffers and stores grew empty. My servants disappeared one after another, but I never noticed their betrayal. One day, I woke up and found that only the knights who swore loyalty to me remained."

Jin Sahyuk spoke with tearful eyes in the tidy room with two large

beds.

"Two years later in the year 557, I died while running away from monsters and Schupert."

"And the last knight with you was Kim Suho?"

Jin Sahyuk snorted. "He's not my knight. They all died and only he survived. Kim Suho must be here too now that I think about it."

"Whatever you say."

I sprawled on the bed. A new episode suddenly began, but I shouldn't consider it a bother. This episode could be the most important turning point.

I wanted the *[Purifying Crystal]* as a reward. Soon, Earth would begin its demon realm transformation too. I never hinted at how to stop this transformation in the original story, but the remake now offered me a solution. The purifying crystal could probably purify and stop the demon realm transformation.

Tiring—

Another window popped up in front of me.

[Second Goal — Acquire 6 Continental Fragment Pieces and Partly Restore Plerion.]

"Hey, where's the crystal fragment?" I immediately asked Jin Sahyuk.

"What are you talking about?"

"The fragment you blew up. Check your pockets."

"What do you— Hey, are you crazy!"

"I said, check your pockets."

Knock knock. Someone arrived at the door as I prepared to rummage through Jin Sahyuk's pockets.

— Come out.

A thick voice spoke from outside.

"I don't have it, you little shit!"

"Why don't you? This is so annoying. You're useless..."

I opened the door after confirming that Jin Sahyuk didn't have the crystal fragment. The young knight outside stared at us with discontent.

"The king has generously prepared a dinner for you. Follow me."

We followed the knight without any resistance as he led us to the dining room.

The large dining room featured a long table in the center with knights lined up on both sides of the room. Little Jin Sahyuk, Prihi, sat at the head of the table.

Prihi greeted us with a nonchalant, yet joyful expression.

"I prepared a meal to welcome my honored guests."

Smoked pork, a few bowls of soup, salad, and a loaf of brown bread sat on the table. It seemed the metal plates had already been stolen and only wooden cutlery remained. We sat in our seats.

"Thank you."

"*Haha*, no need for gratitude. More importantly, is it true the temple still exists?"

I nodded while trying to act as divinely as possible. It felt like playing house with her.

"Yes, and the temple hopes that Plerion will soon regain its former glory."

Prihi failed to hide her smile.

"*Kmm*. Well, that's enough chitchat. Please eat."

"Thank you."

Prihi seemed satisfied, but the knights around us didn't. Every single knight had to starve in exchange for this one luxurious meal.

"Then should I call you priest?" Prihi asked as she ate the soup.

"Yes, please call me Priest Kim."

"*Mm*. Priest Kim. And next to you is?"

"Oh, she's my servant."

"Wait, what. What? What?"

Jin Sahyuk sadly looked at the pork before jolting up. Prihi shot her future self a discontented look because of the ungraceful response. Everyone else in the room did the same.

— Unbelievable.

— How is it possible for a mere servant to dine with the king?

I only tried to poke fun at Jin Sahyuk, but ended up offending the knights. They probably felt upset about a mere servant eating their food.

"*Haha*, I'm sorry about the poor joke. This person is also a priest. She has very special spiritual powers."

"Oh, I see. Spiritual powers, you say..."

The meal went on. *Clatter clatter*. I looked around as my spoon moved.

— Knight Leot caught that pig.

— I looked forward to eating it too.

— It can't be helped. They're from the temple.

— That's precisely the problem. The temple crumbled to nothing. Those suckers can't help us anyways. They'll just be eating all our food while claiming to be divine priests.

I didn't eat much since I didn't feel hungry and whatever I left behind would go to the knights. I thought I'd let them have it.

Instead, I chose to examine Prihi. She nibbled at the smoked pork with her small hands and seemed to be enjoying it. The knights didn't express any dissatisfaction because of that face.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk also looked at her past self without laying a finger on her food.

— At least they're tactful.

— The king doesn't eat much, so we can all probably take a bite or two.

— That's good. *Gulp*

The dinner continued and the young king grew full. *KWANG!* Suddenly, the door burst open and a scout rushed in.

“I have an urgent message! Schupert's soldiers have broken past the inner wall.”

“What!” Prihi shouted with her greasy lips.

“Count Schupert claims he has captured spies dispatched by your majesty.”

“Stay here, honored guests. Let’s go!”

The king and her knights immediately left the room. A thought suddenly crossed my mind in this incomprehensible situation.

“Wait, spies?” Prihi had asked if Schupert sent us when we first met.

Which meant Schupert probably... I quickly stood up too.

“Hey, come with me. I think others may have come here besides us.”

“I planned on heading out anyways.”

Jin Sahyuk prepared to use her magic power. We followed the king and her knights past the terrified citizens and climbed the wall.

“King! I have brought the spies you sent me!”

Schupert’s great army lay below, but it only consisted of about 3000 troops. Still, it seemed big compared to the king’s army.

“I said I’m not a spy!”

A high-pitched voice came from below.

I smiled at them. They had locked up Jin Seyeon and Aileen in a wooden cell and also tied their hands and feet. As expected, the others ended up getting caught in the explosion.

[Magic Suppressing Shackles] — Will inhibit the wearer’s magic power.

Wow, *that’s a great item*. I secretly admired it when Prihi suddenly shouted.

"Imbeciles! How dare you defy me when you have kept your peace because of the former king’s kindness?"

Prihi's eyes turned bloodshot and her body trembled with anger.

"Haha. Little king, even now you bring up the former king! Very pathetic. That is why all of your men have left!"

— *Hahahahaha!* Foolish king! How ridiculous for a child to act so arrogantly?

The soldiers below only laughed as Prihi bit her lips and her knights hid her behind them.

"Those bastards... You're all dead."

Jin Sahyuk took a step forward to vent her rage.

"Hahaha. We shall depart now, infantile king!"

The enemy didn't seem to desire a fight. They prepared to depart and left Aileen and Jin Seyeon behind.

"King, your scheme to lure monsters with the spies almost impressed me. However..."

As Count Schupert spoke, something dark and red wriggled on the far horizon. Its movement looked far too grotesque to be a natural phenomenon.

"Huh."

I recalled seeing something like that before. An army of monsters approached us from the distance.

"You are too stupid, weak, and evil. Accept the reality, Prihi. Plerion has already fallen."

"Schupert!" Prihi shouted in a shaky voice that couldn't be considered dignified.

"Haha. You should think about how to repel those monsters first

instead of screaming.”

Schupert and his soldiers turned back. The knights couldn’t stop them from leaving.

“The number of monsters...”

Now, they also witnessed the slowly advancing monsters.

“Oi, can you deal with that?” Jin Sahyuk asked me.

“Probably.”

I pulled out a small iron box from stigma’s storage. This box made from settings intervention contained approximately 10,000 bullets.

“You retreat. We’ll stop them.”

“No. You said you belonged to the temple. Please take the king somewhere safe. We cannot stop those monsters.”

“We believe you’ll find a way if the temple hasn’t perished. Think of it as a retreat for the sake of future advancement. Take the king and run!”

The knights each spoke, but the king remained silent. She quietly sobbed in grief and anger. Prihi couldn’t suppress the indignation welling up inside her. Jin Sahyuk stared at the little king.

“No, we can stop them.”

I stretched aether out and wrapped it around Jin Seyeon and Aileen. Then I pulled them over the wall. *Hiyak— Kyaak—* The two of them fell on the floor with strange screams.

“The only way we’ll survive is by defeating them.”

I took out the Desert Eagle and it shone with a sharp flash of light. The knights looked at me in bewilderment, but I didn’t care. I simply

aimed at the monsters below.

* * *

Meanwhile, at Yoo Yeonha's mansion in Seoul.

"Haa..."

Yoo Yeonha processed all the papers piled up on her desk and buried herself in her chair. Her workload had increased recently because of the Orden Incident. However, she planned to take tomorrow off after finally finishing.

"Yaaawn..."

She turned on the TV and an interesting show happened to be on air. It told of a forbidden romance between a low grade hero and a master rank hero.

— It doesn't matter if you're a low rank hero. What matters is that I love you...

Tzzt— We have breaking news.

The screen switched and the news came on.

— This is a breaking news report. Orden claims to have taken multiple heroes who broke into his territory as hostages.

"What?"

Yoo Yeonha jumped and stared at the TV.

— Nothing has been confirmed, but Orden claims the captives are: Aileen, Yi Yongha, and Park Hanho from the Temple of Justice, master rank hero Jin Seyeon, high rank hero Seo Youngji, high-intermediate rank hero Shin Jonghak, and S-rank mercenary Fenrir. Orden demands the association and the Korean government to...

Yoo Yeonha's expression suddenly froze. Not only Shin Jonghak, but Kim Hajin as well? She tilted her head and wondered if she misheard.

Tirring—

Her smartwatch rang at the same time. It came from the government and the association.

[Calling for an emergency meeting. Orden is holding heroes and a mercenary hostage.]

The message also contained Shin Jonghak and Kim Hajin's names.

Chapter 260

A New Episode (3)

A gun barrel flashed, spears and swords made from magic power rained from the sky, and magic arrows also fell. Lightning formed from words and knights shot out their crescent slashes of magic power. That would adequately describe the entire fight.

The opposing side consisted of at least 10,000 monsters. However, the 4 of us with 300 or so knights easily annihilated the entire army. These remaining knights could all be considered veterans of war.

“Sigh.”

I stored my gun away after the battle concluded and ended up using roughly 3000 bullets today. Even well-known magic power monsters like Aileen and Jin Sahyuk seemed exhausted.

Only the sound of rough breathing could be heard. A huge pair of eyes stared at us when I turned around. I looked at the young Jin Sahyuk full of admiration and wondered how such a cute kid changed so drastically. It didn't quite make sense.

“Hey, hey, hey.” Aileen called me over for an explanation.

“I fought because we didn't have a choice, but do you know where the heck we are?”

“Right, this doesn't seem like Earth. Is this another one of Orden's traps?” Jin Seyeon asked.

I wouldn't blame them for not understanding. Anyone would find another world hard to believe.

“No, it's not a trap. It's a bit complicated, but just pretend we're in

another world. You know, like a fantasy novel.”

“The heck?”

“I’ll explain in detail later. Anyways, how did you two get caught?”

“I don’t know. I fainted and woke up shackled.” Aileen pouted as she recalled.

“Oh, then what about those monsters?”

“I don’t know. They just kept chasing us.”

“*Huh?* Why would they...”

Suddenly, I noticed something in Aileen’s hair. It shone quite noticeably in my eyes.

“*Ah!*”

I examined it more closely and recognized the tiny crystal fragment. Then I quickly took it from her hair.

[Continental Fragment] — A crystal that maintains the recorded past. — Will emit an odor that attracts monsters.

“*Huh?* What’s that?”

“Looks like this crystal attracted those monsters.”

I ended up finding a crystal without much effort. I only needed 5 more since the settings window said we needed 6.

“Fenrir, can you explain this to the ones behind us?”

Jin Seyeon pointed to the 300 knights and soldiers respectfully staring at us.

“Ah... *Haha*, these two are priests as well. As I said before, we possess rather special divine powers.”

They all seemed to be in quiet disbelief, so I quickly changed the topic.

“We brought livestock for Plerion.”

Everyone’s tired eyes lit up as soon as they heard about food.

“Livestock?”

“Is that true?”

A small hand reached out and grabbed my sleeve. It belonged to Prihi.

“Is, is it true you brought livestock?”

Prihi’s eyes shook with hope and expectation. Seeing her pull my sleeve with anticipation touched me quite a bit.

I bent down and nodded.

“Yes, of course. First, let’s return to the palace.”

* * *

We returned to the royal palace and I explained our situation to the others.

“So we have to collect all the crystal fragments to go back?”

“Yes.”

“And we’re here because of this idiot?” Aileen pointed at Jin Sahyuk.

“Idiot? What did you just call me?”

Jin Sahyuk frowned at her coarse words, but Aileen wouldn't flinch even in front of Chae Joochul. She glared at Jin Sahyuk even fiercer.

"That's right, you crazy idiot."

"*Ha*, say that again, you little dwar—"

"Shut up."

"..."

Jin Sahyuk's mouth closed shut. Unable to talk, she shot up and pointed at Aileen. Then she began gesturing about Aileen's short height.

"Stay still, crazy."

Aileen seriously unleashed her magic power and sealed Jin Sahyuk's actions. Of course, Jin Sahyuk didn't go down without a fight. She unleashed her magic power and tried to overrule the restrictions on her body.

"Geez, will you just stay put?" I intervened and stopped her.

"..."

Jin Sahyuk froze and stared at me. Sadness and indignation filled her eyes. *What did she want me to do about it?* She sighed at my cold response and ran outside.

"Oh right, what do we do about livestock? I don't have any on me."

Aileen spoke about my proposal to Plerion.

"Don't worry. I can make them right now."

"Make them?"

"Yep."

The recorded past materialized from the tower crystal's power. Its laws followed the real world, but the tower crystal contained omnipotent power that could alter it. I currently held a piece of that tower crystal in my hand.

"You're going to make a chicken? Are you crazy?"

"Lady Aileen is correct. It's impossible to create life. Even attempting to do so is forbidden."

Aileen and Jin Seyeon objected, but I simply smiled.

"I told you, this isn't the real world."

I infused stigma's magic power into the crystal fragment. For now, I could only make a single chicken with a single streak of stigma.

— *Bok, bok!*

"*Whoa!*"

"W-What just happened?"

Aileen and Jin Seyeon jumped in surprise when a chicken appeared out of nowhere.

"This is the tower crystal's power."

"Wow, that's interesting. Can I do it too?"

Aileen curiously reached out for the crystal fragment. However, I didn't give it to her.

"No."

"Don't be stingy. Give it here. It originally belonged to me."

"Aileen can't do it. I'm the only one who can."

“What? Why?”

Aileen could probably alter the landscape with a bit of practice, but only a divine power like stigma could create life with the crystal’s help.

“You wouldn’t understand even if I explained. You know I ranked first in the world in theory, right? You have to do many calculations in your head to make it happen.”

I made up a believable excuse that no one could refute.

“Wow, you’re so amazing. What a smarty pants.”

“Don’t be sarcastic, Lady Aileen.”

Aileen frowned at Jin Seyeon’s sudden seriousness.

“Who are you to say whether I can be sarcastic or not?”

“He saved our lives.”

“*Hmm.*”

I proceeded to use the tower fragment to create a pig, a male chicken, and a female chicken. I felt a bit dizzy after spending all 5 streaks of stigma, but the painkiller from my *[Medicinal Memory Physique]* helped a lot.

“*Huuu.*”

I sighed from the light pain and examined the livestock.

[Pig] — A fat pig that seems tasty. [Female Chicken] — A female chicken that will lay many eggs. [Male Chicken] — A male chicken that will mate well.

Thankfully, nothing seemed wrong with them.

“Now let’s see...”

I took out the *[Random Dice]*. The second goal required us to restore Plerion’s capital. I rolled the dice while thinking about items that could help their food situation.

*[Fast Growing Rice] [Fast Growing Wheat] [Yummy Corn] [Salty Potato]
[High Performance Cement]*

I didn’t receive any fantasy-like items like in the tower, but what I got would definitely help.

“You sure have a lot of strange skills.” Aileen murmured in admiration.

“Let’s go give them these.”

I peered past the door. Countless knights eagerly waited outside after hearing that we would offer livestock to the king. I grabbed a chicken while Jin Seyeon and Aileen grabbed the other two livestock.

The knights approached the moment we opened the door. What we held in our hands shocked them.

“M-My god! Chickens! They have chickens!”

“And a pig too.”

“H-How did you get all these?”

Their passionate reactions startled Aileen. She walked up to me and whispered, “Why are they all so happy?”

“The demon realm transformation corrupted most of this world’s food supply and Schupert stole the rest of what hadn’t been corrupted.”

Livestock that stepped on demonized soil transformed into an undead. The same occurred with plants. A perfectly fine rice plant would suddenly turn into a man-eating monster.

“Ah... I see, so that’s why the palace looked so shabby.”

We handed the livestock to the knights.

“You can eat the pig today. As for the chickens, set up a farm to collect the eggs.”

“Haha, of course, of course! First, we’ll report to the king!”

The knights happily laughed and led us away. It seemed Prihi wanted to see the livestock as soon as possible too and appeared nearby.

“Oh! A pig! And chickens! They have a male and a female!”

The young ruler jumped up and down in excitement. A few knights smiled and some even cried tears of joy.

“Your Highness, we won’t have to worry about food anymore!”

“It will only be a matter of time until these two chickens turn into hundreds, then thousands!”

We watched them celebrate. Soon, the king approached to express her gratitude.

“Thank you. I don’t know how I can repay you.”

“Haha... We still have more things to be grateful for.”

“Hmm?”

I handed her the rice, wheat, corn, and potato. Prihi’s eyes widened.

“This is...”

“They’re seeds. Move your subjects to a share house and plant them.”

Prihi blankly stared at the seeds before taking them in a daze. Then

she glanced at me for a moment and quickly ran off. *Pa, pa, pa*— Not long afterwards, she reappeared with a magnifying glass.

[Mysterious Magnifying Glass] [Pinnacle Grade Magic Artifact]
▷ *Weakness Identification* — Will use magic power to identify the target's weaknesses. ▷ *Emotion Identification* — Will use magic power to identify the target's feelings towards you. *(The identified weaknesses and emotions may be inaccurate when the user's magic power is running low.)*

“Oh?”

She brought over one of the four rewards for this Akatrina episode.

“It’s one of my prized possessions. This magnifying glass can identify a target’s emotions. I’m sure you can make better use of it since you’re from the temple.”

“Ah, thank you.”

I took it with gratitude.

“*Huhu*, a valuable person recognizes a valuable item.”

Prihi didn’t hide her happiness after seeing that I liked her present.

* * *

[Korea, Seoul]

Yoo Yeonha stared at the woman in front of her.

“...”

She would describe her with only one word, macho. This woman had wild hair like a lion’s mane and a deep scar across her collarbone. She wore a black cape and carried a longsword on her back. Chae Nayun looked too different from the last time Yoo Yeonha saw her.

“Nayun, what happened in the past few months?”

The matured Chae Nayun slightly surprised her. However, Chae Nayun still sounded the same.

“Never mind that, I heard the monsters kidnapped Kim Hajin.”

“No, Orden’s just bluffing.”

“I plan on marching over and smashing everything into... *huh?*”

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened. “Really? How do you know that?”

Yoo Yeonha smiled and took out a watch artifact.

“This magic artifact synchronizes with Kim Hajin’s smartwatch. It shows his biological clock no matter where he is or what he’s doing.”

This artifact would prevent another one of Yoo Yeonha’s huge misunderstandings. It couldn’t spy on Kim Hajin, but only informed her of any dangers.

“Look here, you can see his vitality and his nervousness or tenseness. Everything’s normal, so Orden is lying. He’s just trying to scare us.”

“Then what about the other heroes?”

“They’re likely with Kim Hajin. Lady Aileen wanted to bring Kim Hajin with her and their GPS coordinates briefly overlapped.”

Yoo Yeonha calmly replied. Chae Nayun looked stunned after hearing all this. *Then do I have to go back to the Himalayas? I came back for nothing because I’m dumb.*

“Nayun, I know this might not be the time to ask, but are you ready to meet him?”

Chae Nayun smiled at Yoo Yeonha’s worry.

“Of course. It’s about time. You don’t have to worry.”

Yoo Yeonha could only bitterly smile. *What if Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin came back together after this?* It should be a good thing, but Yoo Yeonha felt her heart ache just thinking about it.

“I see... I’m glad.”

Yoo Yeonha knew why she felt this way. She thought about how Kim Hajin knew all her embarrassing secrets like how she loved ramen, hamburger, Korean stew, rice soup, Coke, and Sprite. She would never reveal this to anyone, but Kim Hajin knew all about them. He regressed from the future and Yoo Yeonha could only guess they might’ve been lovers or as close as lovers.

Then what relationship did Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun have before he regressed in time? Was he closer to her than me? Or just as close?

Yoo Yeonha’s thoughts didn’t continue for much longer.

Paat!

A huge spark of light flashed in the sky. Startled, Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun looked out the window.

Paat!

The flashes continued fiercer than normal.

Paat!

The third flash of light brightened the entire world. This time, the light lingered like another sun in the sky.

“Hey, Yeonha, that’s...”

“Yeah, it’s the Tower of Wish.”

They looked at the sky and realized the Tower of Wish would soon conclude.

[Akatrina Continent]

The king's post-horses set out to find Yi Yongha, Shin Jonghak, and Seo Youngji on the second day. Furthermore, they finished building the chicken coop in less than a day.

Prihi went to see the royal court's most prized possession on the third day, the chicken coop. She smiled at the chickens laying eggs and spent many hours sitting in the coop listening to them.

On the fourth day, Jin Seyeon guided them on how to plant the seeds. The plants grew quickly, but many impatient citizens secretly dug and ate them, causing a small commotion in the capital.

They reinforced the castle walls with magic power and cement on the fifth day.

Kiik.

Late at night on the sixth day, Jin Sahyuk infiltrated the royal palace's secret library like usual. She hoped to recall her former servant's face.

"It should be somewhere here..."

Over thirty years had passed and Jin Sahyuk forgot his appearance because of her artificial memory seal. However, she still remembered his name. She knew the royal library held a record and portrait of every knight.

"Year 550, July 3rd..."

She already checked through the years 547-549 in the past few days. They recorded everyone who entered the royal palace, so she had to work through many pages.

"Kindspring, Kindspring... *aah*, fuck."

How the fuck does this have 50,000 pages? Jin Sahyuk cursed and sighed, but continued flipping. She hated things like menial labor the most, yet it suddenly became her most important task.

One hour, two hours, and three hours passed.

Jin Sahyuk continued to look through the records until 4 A.M. when a patrolling knight arrived.

Tap, tap.

She felt a presence walking through the hallway outside. A studious knight made the rounds early today.

“...!”

Jin Sahyuk discovered the servant’s name just as the knight entered the library. Her heart raced as she read the name.

[Kindspring Winter]

The abandoned princess’ first servant, Kindspring of the Winter clan. *Kindspring Winter*. Old memories resurfaced in her mind.

Kindspring didn’t have a real last name because of his commoner background. Jin Sahyuk gave him the name Winter because he wielded the ice attribute.

“Ah...”

Jin Sahyuk looked at Kindspring’s portrait. The servant who swore eternal loyalty to her. His name remained in her heart along with regret and sadness. The dear servant that time buried shot up in her mind like an erupting volcano.

Chapter 261

A New Episode (4)

Jin Sahyuk vacantly stared at her old servant's portrait. Her heart pounded and the hand holding the page shook. She grew dizzy as cold sweat ran down her back.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk had considered the possibility, but the shock still overwhelmed her. She couldn't think properly and trembled as a wave swept her body inside out.

[Kindspring Winter]

His portrait bore a frightening resemblance to Kim Hajin. They looked the same except for the bushy beard and their hair colors. Prihi also slightly differed from her in hair color and complexion.

She finally discovered the truth. Kim Hajin must've resented her as Kindspring. She couldn't blame him since she betrayed and killed him.

“Fuck.”

Jin Sahyuk quietly swore. She couldn't keep her eyes open and dropped her head on the desk. She felt nauseous as her memory seal partly eroded and old memories returned with regret.

Tok, tok— Someone tapped her, but she didn't respond.

Pssh, pssh—

The figure shook her shoulders from side to side. This gesture made her so dizzy she raised her head to glare at the intruder.

"What are you doing here?"

The young king of Plerion, Prihi, faced her. Jin Sahyuk's threatening gaze didn't intimidate her younger self.

"Even priests cannot use the royal library without my permission."

Jin Sahyuk stared at the king's face, her past self. She used to be this foolish and pitiful ruler. Despite all that, she began to resent the little girl in front of her.

Jin Sahyuk brushed her sweaty hair and pointed at the portrait in the record book.

"King, do you know this person?"

"..."

Prihi's expression immediately froze.

Jin Sahyuk glared at her with her eyes full of magic power. She urged Prihi to answer, but the young king only broke out in a cold sweat.

"Answer me if you know him."

Prihi silently stared at Kindspring's portrait, but her eyes filled with regret and an unspeakable pain like fire turning to ashes.

Sadness swelled inside Jin Sahyuk. Suddenly, she heard a shout from outside.

— The post-horses have arrived! They found the other priests!

* * *

The post-horses returned with good news in the early morning.

"We seriously almost died."

They brought Seo Youngji and Yi Yongha to the palace. The two looked beyond filthy and basically half-dead, but managed to survive by eating grass and drinking rainwater.

“It’s all thanks to Youngji that I survived.”

Yi Yongha said as they sat in the withered royal garden.

“Same here. I only survived because of Yongha. For the first time, I learned that cooked grass could taste good.”

They grew closer after surviving together for a week and looked at each other affectionately. Then Aileen pulled Yi Yongha’s ear with a look of discontent.

“Ak, *aak!* What?”

“Are you having an affair?”

“No way. You know my wife is the only one for me.”

I asked them about our top priority now that everyone had gathered except for Shin Jonghak.

“Excuse me, but have you seen a crystal like this?”

“Crystal?”

“Yes.” I took out the tower crystal fragment from a cylindrical container.

“No, we haven’t.”

“We only spent our time searching for food to eat.”

The duo shook their heads. They probably wouldn’t have made it here in one piece with a crystal. I stored my crystal away and asked them about our second priority.

“How about Shin Jonghak?”

Yi Yongha and Seo Youngji simultaneously sighed. “We haven’t seen Jonghak either.”

“That’s what worries me the most. He’s strong, so he’s probably alive somewhere, right?”

“*Hmm.* Okay, I understand.” I nodded hesitantly.

How did Shin Jonghak separate from the rest? Everyone else arrived in pairs. I began to ponder when...

“It’s good to see more people from the temple!”

A child-like voice rang out. I turned to see Prihi and Jin Sahyuk standing side by side.

Something felt off with Jin Sahyuk. Her usual arrogant demeanor had disappeared and she looked at me with sorrowful eyes.

Jin Sahyuk sighed and turned back after we made eye contact. She went off somewhere else with faltering steps.

"Well then, let us dine together. Half the 63 eggs are infertile, so we should enjoy a good meal."

Prihi declared with a bright smile. Her cute smile made me smile as well.

"Yes, that sounds great. I'll cook."

* * *

[30F, Demon King’s Castle]

The demon king swung his demonic sword and Kim Suho countered with his holy sword.

KAANG!

Magic power exploded when they clashed. The demonic sword felt heavy and Kim Suho could never withstand it in the past. However, he effortlessly blocked it now.

KWANG!

The demon king swung again and spoke in between the relentless attacks.

“Your sword has changed a lot.”

KOOONG!

Kim Suho answered while pushing him back.

“I realized the power that I already possessed.”

KWAANG!

The demonic sword and holy sword clashed again. Kim Suho didn’t give up a single step against the demon king. He realized the true ability of his gift, Sword Saint, and what it meant to cut anything.

KWAAAANG!

Kim Suho severed all the doubts in his mind. He cut off his fear and his dread until only victory remained.

“Today will be the last.”

Kim Suho believed in himself and his friends who believed in him. The Sword Saint would triumph over the demon king in this swordfight.

KWANG!

The holy sword dissolved the demonic sword’s energy. Kim Suho

wanted to cut the demon king's soul, not his sword.

Sword Saint only becomes complete when it confronts the heart instead of the blade.

Kim Suho arrived at this enlightenment and swung with all his might. He bore the desire to win and thoroughly excluded any other emotions to embody the Sword Saint's true nature.

"Your determination is interesting."

The demon king laughed after blocking a blow. Kim Suho also smiled and sincerely enjoyed this fight. This life-and-death battle comparing the state of existence between two swords completely engrossed him.

"—!"

He waved his sword and shouted as golden slashes flew towards the demon king, who defended again with a smile.

Kim Suho suddenly appeared in front of the demon king. His speed now matched the demon king's attacks. The king couldn't help but feel impressed and laughed out loud.

"Hahahaha..."

The two clashed while smiling at each other.

Less than a step remained before the Tower of Wish would conclude.

* * *

[Akatrina Continent]

Five weeks passed in Akatrina. Plerion's capital improved quite a bit during this time. The restoration work proceeded smoothly and they finished the communal shelter for 8,633 citizens. My *[Random Dice]* supplied them with building materials and Aileen's magic power took care of the construction along with Yi Yongha's fire.

I continued to make new livestock every day. We ended up with 53 chickens, 12 pigs, and 6 cows. A new barn housed them and chickens constantly cried in the coop that the knights always guarded. I would've made more, but a single crystal fragment had its limits. I couldn't even make a single chicken with 5 streaks of stigma now.

Jin Seyeon enthusiastically volunteered and Seo Youngji helped her. The two worked in the fields and dug wells with the people. Thieving citizens disappeared thanks to their hard work and the potatoes and corn fully grew in 4 weeks. They evenly distributed everything among everyone free of charge.

Furthermore, Jin Sahyuk became quite passionate about Prihi's education. She taught Prihi the basic application of magic power and tormented her with Machiavelli's governing theory.

For some reason, Jin Sahyuk kept avoiding me and wouldn't talk or even make eye contact. She did secretly glance at me every now and then or follow from a distance, but always ran away when our eyes met.

At first, I thought she might be trying to assassinate me. However, days passed without her showing the slightest sign of hostility. My confusion only grew each day.

"I think it's about time to search for the crystal shards."

We stood on top of the perfectly repaired castle wall. I suggested this to the others as we looked down from the rampart.

"I feel like something bad will happen if we leave."

Aileen seemed to have grown fond of Akatrina.

"That's why I'm planning on going alone."

"Isn't that too dangerous? We don't have the slightest clue where to find them." Jin Seyeon expressed her concern.

I shook my head with a smile. "It's okay. The crystal shard I have will

react with nearby shards. It probably won't take long to gather all of them."

"Don't underestimate the outside world."

One of Prihi's knights standing guard at the wall came forward. They called this macho knight who wielded a heavy claymore Leot.

"Outside not only has Schupert and monsters, but also the Vigilante."

"The Vigilante?"

"Yes, they surfaced about 2-3 years ago when things got bad. They were engaged in guerilla warfare between Shupert's castle and our castle to steal food, horses, and weapons."

"Ah... I see. That should be fine." I simply nodded since I felt confident in escaping.

"I'm only going to patrol around the area today."

I jumped down the wall.

Tak— After landing, I spotted Jin Sahyuk leaning against the wall and staring at me.

"What?"

"I'll go with you." Jin Sahyuk said and stood beside me.

I felt curious why she'd been avoiding me and also had something to discuss with her.

"Do as you please."

And so, we walked together.

Occasionally, I checked the crystal in my hand as we proceeded through the forest. Then I spoke after a period of silence.

“I heard you’ve been rummaging through the underground dungeon and royal library.”

“...”

I heard from the knights that Jin Sahyuk spent a lot of time there.

“Who exactly are you after, Kim Suho or Puharen?”

Kim Suho didn’t exist in this world. The tower crystal’s power probably couldn’t recreate his extraordinary existence. Jin Sahyuk shook her head at my question.

“Neither.”

“Really?”

I could tell she found something from the look on her face.

“It’s Puharen, right? It must be since you know when he’ll turn into a devil now.”

“I told you, I’m not looking for Puharen.”

Jin Sahyuk stopped and stared at my face as if trying to find something. She seemed quite pent-up.

“Are you testing me right now?”

For some reason, her words sounded strangely emotional. I looked at her completely bewildered as her face distorted. I couldn’t tell whether she felt sad or angry.

“You’re so mean...”

Jin Sahyuk spoke with a trembling voice. Then...

Woong—

The crystal began to vibrate and I covered her mouth with my hand.

“Uuup!”

“Shut your mouth for a second. Someone’s here.”

— There’s no need.

A heavy voice pierced my ears.

Soon, a group of knights appeared from behind the bushes. I didn’t sense their presence and assumed only one enemy had found us.

“The hell, why are there so many?”

At least a hundred knights appeared from behind the bushes. Even Jin Sahyuk took a step back at their overwhelming presence.

“Looks like you two came from the royal castle.”

Their leader smiled and stepped forward. His armor looked dazzling, but I focused more on his sword.

The center of his hilt contained a blue crystal that could only be a continental fragment.

The man looked over at us one by one.

“You’re here on a patrol? What poor luck to bump into us.”

His voice sounded slimy and I quickly devised a plan to steal the crystal. However, Jin Sahyuk suddenly burst out in anger.

“Raylen, you son of a bitch. Fancy meeting you here.”

“Hahaha. So you know me. Not surprising, considering only a handful of sword masters are left.”

“Sword master?”

My expression turned grim.

“That’s right. My name is Raylen, the sword master of Schupert.”

This bad situation might’ve just gotten worse if he spoke the truth. Only a few sword masters existed for a reason. As their title implied, they could be considered invincible with a sword.

Kim Suho would reach the sword master realm after defeating the demon king. The man in front of us boasted as much strength or even greater than Kim Suho.

“Are you the king’s servants that the count mentioned?” Raylen asked while raising his sword and the knights behind him also drew their weapons.

Guoooo...

The magic power of 100 knights formed a small whirlpool that surged throughout the forest.

“Jin Sahyuk, get ready to run.”

“You run. I’ll kill that son of a bitch even if this is all an illusion. You should also know that traitorous bastard.”

Jin Sahyuk glared at Raylen and formed her magic spears and swords in the air.

“—!”

She immediately fired them towards Raylen, but he swung his sword and easily knocked them away. We faced a total disadvantage here. One sword master would’ve been enough, but 100 knights also showed up.

“No, don’t be stubborn and...?”

I stopped talking and looked at the sky. A huge shadow covered the ground where we stood. The others also instinctively looked up.

“What...”

Hundreds of spears poured from above and blocked the sun. These spears didn't belong to Jin Sahyuk, but to a third party.

The knights suddenly shouted, “It's the Vigilante!”

“Everyone, prepare to fight!”

“Those wolves came back!”

The spears landed as the knights prepared to strike back. Huge explosions occurred all around us.

KWAAAANG!

The smoke completely blocked my vision, but aether protected me. I looked at where the spears came from while the aether shield surrounded me.

A man who seemed to be the Vigilante leader stood there. He looked strangely familiar despite the thick beard, dark swollen eyes, and shabby cloak fluttering in the air. Shin Jonghak's appearance had dramatically changed, but I recognized him without a doubt.

This whole situation felt like déjà vu. I suddenly recalled the first recorded past we visited a long time ago. Back then, only I fell into the past at a different time. What if Shin Jonghak also experienced the same and fell in at a different time?

“Shin Jonghak?”

He turned to me. At first, I thought he felt relieved to see me.

“Three years...”

It didn't take long for him to prove me wrong.

“I've been waiting here for 3 years, you scumbags!”

Shin Jonghak pointed his crimson spear at me to vent his rage.

Chapter 262

The Omen of Assembly (1)

[3 years ago, Akatrina]

Shin Jonghak woke up in a forest. The leaves shook from the cold wind and he could only hear the sound of nature.

“...”

He shot up after staring at the leaves for a while. This forest contained many things he had never seen before. The trees looked different from the ones on Earth. Hunger struck him before he could further question his surroundings.

Let's find something to eat first.

Shin Jonghak began his quest for survival by tasting various leaves, looking for edible roots, and pondering if his body could handle poisonous mushrooms.

After wandering in the forest for about an hour...

“Hmm?”

He found a leather bag on the ground.

I heard leather can be cooked and eaten. Wait, is that what I think it is?

“...!”

A thought crossed his mind and he ran to the bag.

“Ah!”

Kim Hajin had brought this food bag. It featured [*High Grade Space Expansion*], [*High Grade Freshness Preservation*], and [*Weight Reduction*].

Gulp.

Shin Jonghak swallowed hard and checked the contents inside. Then he subconsciously exclaimed.

“Oh...”

The bag could practically be considered a food warehouse. It contained enough to last him a year.

“*Hm*, I guess he’s useful after all.”

Shin Jonghak took out a strip of beef jerky. *Nom, nom*. He began to look for his comrades as he filled his stomach. However, he couldn’t find anyone no matter how hard he looked. Soon, it turned to night and he started a campfire to cook a proper meal.

“Who’s there?”

Some uninvited guests arrived. A group of 8 carrying baskets and spears. They looked weak at a glance and clearly starving.

“I’ll kill you if you don’t answer.”

Shin Jonghak raised his spear.

“*Ah, u-um*, sorry. We made a huge mistake...”

They introduced themselves as hunter-gatherers. According to them, many citizens died from the prolonged war between Schupert and the royal palace. Those who survived became runaways and formed their own groups. Shin Jonghak had no clue what they just talked about, but had to admit this might be a different world.

“Then lead me there.”

He visited their hunter-gatherer base out of curiosity. They lived day-to-day looking for food like their name suggested and often starved. Shin Jonghak offered them some food. However, some thugs who smelled it also came.

“Where did you lot get that food?”

Three armored knights appeared from the darkness and the hunter-gatherers trembled in fear.

“Offer it to Count Schupert if you want to keep your life.”

The knights acted arrogant and aggressive, so Shin Jonghak pierced their hearts with his spear. The three knights died in the blink of an eye.

The hunter-gatherers suddenly bowed to Shin Jonghak after the battle. He liked the feeling of being treated like a king.

“P-Please accept us...”

The hunter-gatherers’ chief pleaded to him. Shin Jonghak needed people to look for his comrades, so he decided to take in these barbarians.

Like that, a month went by.

He found a farmable plot of land and made the hunter-gatherers sow seeds. Then he chose 30 men and women with talent for martial arts and taught them the spear. They grew quickly because the atmosphere contained ample mana.

Like that, half a year went by.

They ran out of food and their small farms couldn’t feed 500 mouths. Shin Jonghak had no choice but to form the Vigilante and steal supplies from Schupert’s territory.

Like that, a year went by.

Shin Jonghak became the Vigilante's full-fledged leader. His hair reached his shoulders and he trimmed his goatee to look cool.

Their members also grew stronger by the day. Hardworking disciples became powerful enough to be called knights.

Like that, two years went by.

Shin Jonghak came to a great realization while protecting the hunter-gatherers, stealing supplies from Schupert's territory, and fighting the count's knights. His black flame spear could also scorch the enemy's magic power now. He called his newly evolved gift, Magic Devourer. However, his growth only increased his desire to return to Earth and his hatred for the ones who placed him here also grew.

Three years later, Shin Jonghak finally found who he had been searching for.

Raylen and his knights had cornered them, but Shin Jonghak didn't even care about the sword master.

"I waited three years."

He pointed his spear at Kim Hajin's back. *Kwaaaaa...* Black flames shot up from it.

"What happened and where..."

During the past three years, Shin Jonghak killed thousands of monsters and defeated hundreds of knights. He fought as often as he ate and only thought about surviving. He even had to take care of 500 lives in this unknown world. Even the slightest carelessness meant death, so remained on guard every second.

"What have you been doing for the past three years..."

Shin Jonghak reached a never-before-seen realm from this heavy responsibility and all the life-and-death situations.

"You better properly explain if you don't want to die."

He became a spear god who surpassed all limits and emitted boundless magic power with an overwhelming presence.

* * *

“Well damn...”

I became speechless. Shin Jonghak’s sudden growth surprised me, but not as much as his intense killing intent that felt like it stabbed my heart.

“He’s tough to deal with. Retreat.”

Even Raylen, the sword master, looked troubled. They retreated as soon as Shin Jonghak made his move. None of the knights uttered a word of complaint. *Poke*— Jin Sahyuk poked my side.

“Oi, what’s up with him?”

“Looks like he’s been here for three years.”

“Three years?”

“Yeah, it happens occasionally. He’s been trapped in time alone.”

Shin Jonghak and the Vigilante members quickly moved after Raylen and the knights disappeared. They surrounded us in the blink of an eye.

Shin Jonghak came up to me and glared. He seemed to have aged at least 6-7 years.

“Explain, Kim Hajin. I might kill you depending on your answer.”

Tension enveloped me because his presence felt completely different than the old Shin Jonghak. He seemed genuinely enraged.

“I will. We’ve been looking for you too, *cough*.”

I cleared my throat and pointed at Jin Sahyuk.

“First, it’s all because of her.”

One hour later...

I finished explaining everything to Shin Jonghak. He became furious when he heard what happened and charged Jin Sahyuk. Surprisingly, they fought on equal footing. Shin Jonghak initially overwhelmed her, but it came down to a matter of suitability.

Shin Jonghak’s black flames burned Jin Sahyuk’s magic power. Not being able to use her *[Magic Weapon Emission]* set her at a big disadvantage.

I got goosebumps watching their fight. I never expected Shin Jonghak to fight evenly with Jin Sahyuk. My shock couldn’t be described when he almost won in the beginning.

Of course, Jin Sahyuk would’ve won with her cheat gift, *[Reality Manipulation]*, if the fight prolonged.

We returned to Shin Jonghak’s town after their conversation of fists.

“The crystal you talked about is in this town.”

Shin Jonghak told me about the crystal shard they possessed. The town itself surprised me more than the crystal. They had built fences, guards, watchtowers, and most things a town would require.

“You built all this on your own?”

Jin Sahyuk asked him. She had acknowledged Shin Jonghak’s strength after their fight.

“Everyone helped. Of course, I did 70% of the work. Around 673 people live here now.”

Shin Jonghak proudly explained, but soon looked back at me with a

complicated expression.

“You said this place is just a materialized fake world?”

“Yeah...” I nodded.

“...”

Shin Jonghak didn't say much, but couldn't hide his bitterness.

“Take it. We can go back with six, right?”

Shin Jonghak handed the shard over.

[Continental Fragment Piece] — A crystal that maintains the recorded past. — Will supply mana for growth.

As expected, each crystal shard had its own function. This must've contributed to Shin Jonghak's rapid growth. Now we possessed two fragments.

“Bring your townsmen to the capital. It's a much better place now.”

“Capital?”

“Yeah.”

Shin Jonghak seemed reluctant. The Vigilante members next to him felt the same. They clearly seemed unhappy with having us here.

“Staying here is dangerous. Monsters will arrive soon.”

Jin Sahyuk tried to persuade him, but he only scoffed while asking how she knew that. Jin Sahyuk scoffed back and explained.

“This is the world I lived in. I know better than anyone else what will happen in the future.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak stared at her and turned towards me.

“Kim Hajin, what is this crazy bitch blabbering about?”

Then the second fight between Shin Jonghak and Jin Sahyuk began.

* * *

[Pandemonium, Chameleon Troupe's Base]

Boss wanted to immediately head out and rescue Kim Hajin when news broke that the humanoid monsters captured Fenrir. She lost her cool and couldn't see in front of her or hear what anyone said.

However, Spartan managed to stop her since he shared a connection with Kim Hajin.

“I'll say it once again. You're dead if anything happens to Kim Hajin.”

From that day on, Boss always had Spartan by her side. She wanted to know if anything happened to Kim Hajin as soon as possible.

— *Pieeek.*

Spartan pitifully shook his beak.

“I'm kidding. Well, half-kidding.” Boss smiled and held Spartan in her arms.

“So, what are we going to do Boss? We kidnapped her parents too.” Jain asked while staring at Boss from the couch.

“First, let the three of them talk,” Boss briefly replied.

“Un, okay. You should also know something else before that.”

Jain's expression stiffened.

"I heard a rumor that Bell also joined the Orden Assassination Team."

"..."

Boss' shoulders froze. Just hearing that name filled her with rage. However, she constantly told herself to calm down for a more thorough revenge.

"Also... about the Kwang-Oh Incident. We found the mastermind behind it. You've heard of Kim Sukho, right? He's the former president."

Boss nodded. Kim Sukho, the former Korean president, also seized control of the association.

"We have a lot of work to do."

"You're right." Jain snickered and stretched.

"*Mmm...* Oh right, we decided to include Droon in this mission."

"What?" Boss furrowed her brows.

"We don't have a choice. We need his power for this mission. Think of all the powerful individuals joining the Orden Assassination Team."

Jain found out through Droon's information network that the association planned to deploy their second team around the time as the djinns.

Yoo Jinwoong, Chae Joochul, Yun Seung-Ah, Vast Expanse, Yoo Sihyuk, the Temple of Justice, Wicked, Destruction, Evil Society, Satan's Servants, Pandemonium... Famous heroes and djinns from everywhere including Kim Hajin's friends like Chae Nayun and Rachel would all participate.

"Also, that child will probably come out of the Tower of Wish soon.

He'll participate for sure when he finds out what happened."

Of course, they meant Kim Suho. This assassination mission would become a ferocious battlefield with all sorts of characters. No one knew what would happen.

"Well, I'm sure none of them will stand a chance against Droon."

Jain smiled as she thought about Droon. He had entered puberty and refused to talk to them recently. However, he showed interest in Yi Yuri who seemed to be around the same age.

"Jain, Droon is too dangerous."

"No, Boss. Dangerous vs dangerous, crazy vs crazy. That's the best."

Droon's gift rivaled an authority. He could summon and tame aliens who wandered in the chaos between dimensions. His rabbit, Mimyo, could ignore Aileen's Spirit Speech and even devour a devil.

"..."

Boss silently nodded and recalled a painful memory from the past. Thinking about the day Kurukuru killed Kim Hajin made her dizzy.

"Fine."

As Jain said, they needed to borrow Droon's power to combat the monster king and his servants.

* * *

[Akatrina Continent.]

Shin Jonghak and the Vigilante entered the capital. I thought Prihi and her knights would oppose, but they surprisingly welcomed it because the Vigilante only bothered Schupert over the years.

"Yaaawn..." The sun had set and I lay in bed late at night.

“Now I only need to collect four more.”

I should be able to gather them all in 2-3 months since I possessed two and already knew another one's location. Only 2-3 weeks should've passed in the real world.

“I wonder what Boss is doing.”

I didn't know why I suddenly thought of her.

Tok, tok—

Someone knocked on my door.

“Who—”

The door opened before I could ask. Jin Sahyuk approached in her pajamas.

“What's up?”

“I can't sleep, so I came to find you.”

Jin Sahyuk said something that didn't quite make sense while staring at me with a serious expression.

“You can't sleep? What does that have to do with me?”

“Today, you asked who I was looking for in this world.”

I nodded. I did ask that earlier.

“Yeah, so what?”

“I wanted to ask you something.”

“At this hour...?”

“Kindspring.”

I furrowed my brows. *Kind what?*

“Kindspring Winter.”

Jin Sahyuk’s serious and somewhat sad expression forced me to be serious as well.

“That’s who I’m looking for. Have you heard of him?”

Kindspring Winter. I didn’t know that name. *A kind spring and winter?* I almost jokingly replied with, *He’s a kind person*, when a thought suddenly crossed my mind.

Kindspring Winter. Spring and Winter. Spring, Chun. Winter, Dong.

Chundong.

I played with the words until my thoughts suddenly stopped when I realized the possibility. It felt like a hammer struck me in the back of my head.

“Kindspring Winter?”

I swallowed hard and muttered the name again. *Could it be? No, why would Kim Chundong’s name suddenly pop up here?*

“Right, that’s who I’m looking for. It’s been a long time, so long that I didn’t even remember my servant’s face.”

Jin Sahyuk bitterly looked at me. I slowly got up from bed and needed some time to think on my own.

“I don’t know who that is...”

“I already found him. The royal library has portraits of every servant.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk stared at my face as though looking for someone else in it.

I remembered what Kim Chundong told me when we met in the Tower of Wish.

— We'll meet again, but do me a favor before then...

Jin Sahyuk's gaze remained on my face. Soon, she spoke.

"Kindspring... looked just like you."

I became speechless.

"Oi, Kim Hajin."

Jin Sahyuk spoke in her usual manner.

"Don't you have something to say? You... son of a bitch."

Something suddenly popped up in front of me. A remake notice created by a change in the story's setting.

Chapter 263

The Omen of Assembly (2)

[Remake Notice — Kim Chundong's Diary]

The chirping birds woke me and dry grass tickled my back. Leaves swayed in the air and I clearly wasn't in my room anymore.

Several questions arose in my mind. Why was I here? Did someone kidnap me?

Honestly, it didn't bother or startle me at all. I'd been drowning in numbness all my life. Neither happy nor sad, so I adjusted to the dramatic change without even flinching.

I stood up and walked through the forest to find out about my location. The more I walked, the stranger I felt. Two moons shone above with countless twinkling stars.

After a while, I heard people talking and headed towards them. Soon, I arrived at a strange village with people dressed in archaic clothes and buildings that looked like they belonged to the Middle Ages. Nevertheless, my momentary confusion subsided and I remained calm thanks to the ice attribute magic power in my heart.

I asked the villagers about this place. They said we were on the outskirts of Plerion and that the year was 533. I quickly grasped the situation after that. I wasn't dreaming, someone hadn't abducted me, and this wasn't a game. Somehow, I had been transported to another world.

Who brought me here? How and why did they bring me here?

Such questions didn't matter. I only lived because I was born and had always been alone. Where I lived felt trivial, so I began a new life in Plerion.

I trained to survive. Fortunately, Plerion contained plenty of magic power. I practiced my swordsmanship and polished my magic power. After 10 years, I became a royal knight.

I served and protected the royal concubine who gave birth to a daughter named Prihi. However, the concubine never had a chance to meet Prihi in person. As the third princess, Prihi grew up in the royal palace where her mother couldn't enter. The concubine could only watch her daughter from afar.

Three years passed and a child came to visit me one day. Prihi wished to meet her mother. I found her tiny figure and sparkling eyes quite cute, so I secretly let her in. Prihi returned after talking with her mother for 10 minutes. She gave me a big smile and expressed her gratitude. The 3 year old child began to visit her mother once a week and their faces grew brighter each day.

Another year passed.

Without prior notice, they transferred me to the royal central knights away from the concubine. Prihi, unaware of my reassignment, came to visit her mother like usual. However, they caught her and the king severely punished her. Rumors had it he whipped her until all her tears dried. From then on, I spent my time away from the princess and concubine.

As time went by, calamities began to appear across the entire continent. The king also fell ill to make matters worse.

One day, the 5 year old Prihi came to see me again. She told me her mother had passed and that her siblings had caused it. Prihi suppressed her tears and asked for help.

Please become my servant. My mother died and I am powerless...

I realized for the first time that I could be someone's only hope. I, too, sought hope from her.

Even then, the princess did not know my name. I introduced myself as Kim Spring. She asked if it was Kindspring for clarification and I simply nodded.

A lonely life without parents, friends, and love.

I swear by my name to serve Your Highness forever.

Surely I wouldn't regret dedicating such a life to someone.

[End of Kim Chundong's Setting.]

I chuckled as I read Kim Chundong's diary. To sum it up, the real Kim Chundong also went to a different world when I replaced him.

"What's so funny?"

Jin Sahyuk frowned. She looked completely serious right now. I thought of what to say, but how could I possibly explain this situation? I could only remain silent.

"Cough."

Then I cleared my throat.

"Do you still hate me?" Jin Sahyuk asked with a bitter expression.

"..."

I silently stared at her. Her eyes flickered with complicated emotions. *Should I insist I'm not Kindspring and that we only look alike?* However, my heart refused to lie and violently trembled due to *[Synchronization]*.

"Be with me again."

Jin Sahyuk continued. She seemed confident that I was Kim Chundong.

"We'll figure everything out once we return to our homeland. We must return to Plerion no matter how much time has passed. Don't you understand that?"

“...”

Her remark made me serious too. Jin Sahyuk only wished to return to Akatrina and reconstruct Plerion. However, Akatrina's demon realm transformation had long been completed. Even if she could go back in time, doing so would be suicide.

“The devils have already taken control of the continent. Reconstruction is impossible.”

I flatly opposed her, but Jin Sahyuk remained adamant.

“Then I might as well die if that's the case. I am the king of Plerion. Life outside Plerion is meaningless to me. I'd rather die in my country if I'm going to die anyway.”

Jin Sahyuk would never compromise since she only lived for that one reason, but I had already decided.

“I decline.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk's shoulders trembled. She didn't do a very good job hiding her anger. Fortunately, she directed it towards herself and not me.

“It's late. Go to sleep.” I pointed at the door. Still, Jin Sahyuk looked at me without moving. Her lips slightly trembled as if she had something to say, but no words came out.

Click.

Eventually, I turned the light off and crawled into bed. About half an hour passed before Jin Sahyuk's presence finally disappeared.

“Huuu...”

I buried myself under the blanket and thought of Kim Chundong. I couldn't come up with any definitive answers to the questions in my

head. The more I thought, the more I felt lost.

* * *

A new day dawned, but Jin Sahyuk hadn't slept at all. Miserable thoughts and anxiety haunted her. Finally, she reached a single conclusion.

Of course he's not going to forgive me. After all, I still haven't apologized.

However, she still couldn't understand one thing.

Why is Kim Hajin so fond of Prihi? She betrayed Kindspring.

"Tsk."

Jin Sahyuk gazed outside her window at the sun. It gracefully shone on the mountains and streams below. Her hometown bathed in blue light looked beautiful as ever.

"What if..."

This felt all too happy and cozy to be an illusion. Couldn't she just stay here forever by somehow hindering the others from collecting the crystal shards? It didn't sound like such a bad idea.

However, she knew she shouldn't. It would be wrong as king to settle for a fake over the real. *A king should not be complacent. A king should protect her people and her land. A king should not abandon her country. A king should...*

— No, that's not how you do it!

A cranky voice suddenly interrupted her train of thought. She slowly got up and discovered the dwarf called Aileen repairing the castle wall outside.

— Here, watch this. This magic power will repair the wall!

The cement perfectly aligned itself to the wall. Such a gift seemed wasted on that dwarf.

— *Hm?* Miss Aileen, you're up early.

Jin Seyeon approached the dwarf and patted her head with a bright smile.

— Yep, Kim Hajin said he'll give me some chocolates.

Kim Hajin. That name alone ruined Jin Sahyuk's mood.

"That dwarf..."

You can't address him so casually. He's not the kind of person you can befriend. He served me first. He only lived for me and not you...

However, she had abandoned her faithful servant. Jin Sahyuk clenched her teeth and shut the window. Then she drew the curtain and lay back in bed. Right now, she needed more time to contemplate her decisions.

* * *

[30F, Demon King's Castle]

Golden magic power and black demonic energy collided with each other in every direction. The whirlpools of energy turned into a giant typhoon that violently tore everything apart and charred the soil. The outcome lay at the eye of the storm.

Two men stood at the center after everything returned to normal. Kim Suho shone brightly with his sword lodged in the demon king's chest. This fatal blow finally decided the winner.

A heavy silence filled the castle. Kim Suho froze with his sword still piercing the demon king, who only looked at him without moving. From a distance, one could mistake them for hugging each other. A strange happiness flickered in the demon king's eyes.

“Has it been... almost half a year?”

The king’s voice reverberated.

“I had a... great time... watching you grow...”

The demon king smiled and reached out to touch Kim Suho’s hair. It had grown much longer and swayed from his touch.

“I... will not... forget you... for you granted me death...”

The king’s body turned to dust. He slowly faded away from head to toe. Kim Suho looked at the king with unwavering eyes.

The king briefly spoke his last words.

“Thank you... I’ll gladly... accept this death...” he said in one breath.

Then the king completely disappeared as Kim Suho looked at the empty throne across the room. The demon king had always occupied it. Kim Suho felt unfamiliar with this vacancy.

“The final floor still remains.” The witch approached him from behind and calmly explained.

“It is called the *[Floor of Decision]*.”

A golden staircase appeared above the throne. The final path shone brightly as Kim Suho nodded.

“I understand.”

“And this.”

The witch handed him a slip of paper. Kim Suho frowned in confusion after grabbing it instinctively.

“This is?”

“You’ve been given the right to take one of the tower’s residents outside as your supporter.”

[Summon Coupon]

“Just so you know, I am level 40.”

The witch coyly appealed to him. Kim Suho gave her a small smile and stood in front of the staircase.

Each golden step contained a different phrase engraved on it.

[Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.]

Kim Suho climbed the stairs while reading each phrase.

[A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another as I have loved you.]

Kim Suho figured out the last administrator’s identity after reading that phrase.

[Though you have caused me troubles, many and bitter, I will return once again; from the depths of the earth you will raise me.]

A saint born from a virgin and the central figure of the world’s largest religion whose birth marked a new calendar.

Jesus Christ.

“Ah...”

The saint brightly smiled at the end of the stairs. Kim Suho diligently climbed towards him.

* * *

[The Akatrina Continent]

Two months passed and we finished the castle wall's construction along with the communal shelter. We also mostly took care of the food supply.

"So, you don't like studying?"

Currently, I took a walk in the garden with the young Jin Sahyuk. Flowers began to bloom again in the barren royal garden.

"That is not the case. My teacher simply acts too tyrannical even though I am king," Prihi grumbled. Of course, Jin Sahyuk served as her teacher.

"You have to study to become stronger."

The Prihi next to me only represented a materialized past. This conversation didn't matter, but I still encouraged her.

"As you already know, we won't be staying here for long."

We have already found 3 crystals. It wouldn't take long to obtain the remaining 2 shards since we have already figured out their locations in Schupert's territory.

"Right. You cannot stay here." Prihi suddenly stopped. She looked at me with sad eyes.

"It's just that... you remind me of my old servant."

"Servant?" My conscience pricked me. She probably meant Kim Chundong.

"Yes, but he's a lot older than you. I sent him to prison a while ago, so I don't even know if he's still alive. He used to be my most loyal servant."

Prihi solemnly continued. I couldn't help but think she looked cute even with that glum expression. I wanted to pinch her chubby cheeks.

“I sent him away, but...?”

Someone suddenly blocked our path.

“What is it, Jin Sahyuk?”

The king flinched at my words. She widened her eyes and backed away.

“W-Why are you here again? We already f-finished today’s class.”
Prihi feared Jin Sahyuk who approached without hesitation.

“L-Look at this. I, I know how to condense magic power now. Isn’t this good enough?”

The king recited everything she learned earlier in the day with a frightened expression. Nevertheless, Jin Sahyuk approached the king and grabbed her wrist. Prihi slightly trembled and closed her eyes.

“You should practice more if you have time for chitchat.” Jin Sahyuk glared at me as she pulled Prihi away.

“Wait, wait... I haven’t eaten yet...” Prihi pleaded, but Jin Sahyuk remained adamant and forcefully dragged the small king.

“Geez.”

I watched them leave as I took out the *[Mysterious Magnifying Glass]* to check Jin Sahyuk’s current emotions.

[Jealousy]

She envied her past self because she thought I was Kindspring.

“Hmm...” I sighed quite heavily.

“Priest Kim! Schupert has appeared! He has surrounded the castle!”

A knight came running and shouted.

Chapter 264

The Omen of Assembly (3)

Schupert came fully prepared for battle. His army numbered at least 5000 at a glance.

“...”

Prihi looked at Count Schupert and Raylen, the two traitors, from above the castle walls. Schupert glared at his former king.

“King, I heard you accepted the Vigilante into your ranks.”

He mentioned Shin Jonghak, which made Aileen and Jin Sahyuk frown from next to me.

“You seem to have gained some resources from the Vigilante group.”

Count Schupert looked displeased. He could tell Plerion’s dilapidated walls had been reinforced.

“A declaration of war will be unavoidable if you don’t hand over the man behind this.”

“...”

Prihi didn’t answer. *Declaration of war*. Those three words fell heavily on the young king’s shoulders. Schupert also noticed her fear and sneered.

“Hand him over now. Nothing bad will happen to Plerion if you do. I will guarantee what little authority you have left.”

Prihi clenched her fists at the count’s arrogance.

“Fuck off, you piece of shit!”

Someone cursed out loud. The improper language echoed throughout the castle and everyone stared at that person in a daze.

Jin Sahyuk furiously glared at the count. He also stared at Jin Sahyuk and wondered if he heard correctly. Jin Sahyuk only gave him a twisted smile.

“I’ve been wanting to say that for a long time.”

“Your servant lacks decorum. Perhaps she takes after—”

KWANG!

Jin Sahyuk’s spear struck the ground next to him before he could finish. *Pzzzt...* The ground cracked and debris shot into the air. Schupert swallowed his saliva at the destructive magic power.

“It won’t miss next time. Fuck off if you don’t want to die.”

Jin Sahyuk had shown more patience than ever before. Schupert angrily looked at her.

“In 2 months, we will come to claim your heads.”

“Screw off. We planned on attacking you first, dirty traitors.”

“...”

Schupert didn’t respond. He simply shook his head instead of wasting his time.

“You heard what he said, right? He’s declaring war.” Jin Sahyuk spoke after Schupert’s army retreated.

“We’ll begin hell training starting today. It doesn’t matter whether you’re a knight or an ordinary soldier. If you don’t show up, I will—”

“Pft.”

A snort interrupted Jin Sahyuk and she turned around. Shin Jonghak arrogantly stood there with his arms crossed.

“Mind your own business.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk’s face stiffened as sparks flew between them. The surrounding knights and soldiers slowly backed away when Aileen spoke with Spirit Speech.

“Do it down there if you’re going to fight. Don’t damage the walls.”

Jin Sahyuk and Shin Jonghak obediently went down the castle walls. Then they began fighting when they reached the bottom. *Kwang! Koong!* Magic power exploded and flames erupted. Their fight seemed just as heated as their personalities.

* * *

[Tower of Wish, Final Floor – Constellation of Decision]

Kim Suho followed the saint to the 31st floor surrounded by glass panes on all sides that depicted different floors in the Tower of Wish.

“I’m glad you’re the one who arrived here.”

The saint spoke. Kim Suho simply stared at the glass panes. The 2nd floor, 3rd floor, 8th floor, 16th floor, 21st floor... He could see all the tower’s players and residents.

“This is what you have achieved.”

The saint smiled, but his voice multiplied into several voices. Kim Suho turned around and saw many existences in the form of spirits. These exalted beings had been at the forefront of human religion: Buddha, Muhammad, etc.

“Then can I know now?” Kim Suho asked. “Why I was reborn into this world.”

It might sound foolish to ask the reason for his existence, but he still wanted to know. The saint gently smiled and shook his head.

“You will realize your value and fate soon enough. Instead, I want to ask how you view this tower?”

Kim Suho looked at the window panes. He saw Prestige, Crevon, the demon realm, and the demons who shed tears at the news of their lord’s death.

“You have to make a decision.”

“A decision?” Kim Suho looked back at the saint.

The saint nodded.

“Whether to maintain this world or destroy it.”

The Tower of Wish supposedly contained all the wishes of humanity. Many residents lived here and players from Earth also challenged themselves to change here. Players carried hope, greed, and expectations. Residents welcomed them while envying their freedom.

However, neither of them resented their births. The tower residents found happiness in their own way. Some smiled while watching their children grow and others found new love with the players from Earth.

“I...”

The Tower of Wish had become a world of its own like Akatrina and Earth. No one had the right to destroy it.

“I wish to maintain this world.”

The saint smiled at Kim Suho’s words. “I see, but you must destroy the tower with your own hands to achieve that.”

“Pardon?”

The saint pointed at the holy sword Misteltein.

“Cut the shell that limits this place as a tower rather than a world. Only then will this place become a proper world.”

Kim Suho’s eyes widened.

“The Tower of Wish will become one with Earth?”

He asked with genuine curiosity. The saint shook his head and continued.

“No, they will remain separate. The tower residents still won’t be able to leave while players can freely come and go. However, the boundary between this world and the phenomenon realm will become much thinner and this world will become everlasting.”

Kim Suho also knew about the phenomenon realm. Some of the administrators always spoke about it.

“This might cause the most heinous villain or the bravest hero in history to reappear.”

Kim Suho nodded. He didn’t need to think much. He already made his decision when the saint first told him.

“Yes, I understand.”

Kim Suho didn’t decide based on the tower residents or the players’ happiness. His choice didn’t carry any philosophical meaning or emotional intent.

“I still wish to maintain this world.”

It simply felt right to Kim Suho.

“Then cut the tower from this place.”

Kim Suho raised his sword and magic power blazed around him as he activated his ultimate skill. A brilliant golden light shot out from Misteltein.

Kim Suho swung his holy sword to cut the shell that restricted this world.

“—!”

The holy sword dug into the tower’s origin.

* * *

[Pandemonium, Chameleon Troupe’s Base]

“Is it okay then?” Cheok Jungyeong awkwardly scratched his neck on the 6th basement floor.

“Yes, it seems you overworked your body while using this energy blast skill. You shouldn’t use it too excessively.”

Yi Yuri smacked Cheok Jungyeong’s shoulder. Thanks to her, Cheok Jungyeong discovered an internal injury he didn’t even know about.

“Th, tha, thanks... *cough*, rest well.”

Cheok Jungyeong got up while struggling to express his gratitude. Yi Yuri’s mother grabbed him as he left.

“Wait... *um*... when can we go back home?”

“What?”

Cheok Jungyeong turned around. His intimidating face made Yi Yuri’s parents flinch.

“I told you, you can’t go back.”

“B-But...”

“If you do, you won’t be able to see your daughter ever again. She won’t be able to see you either. You have to stay here for at least 5 years. It’s not that bad since you’ll all be together, right?”

With great power came great side effects. Yi Yuri had to receive thorough training for 5 years before she could properly utilize her authority. Her body had to become capable of handling it first.

“B-But we can’t. We have work to do and—”

“Here.”

Cheok Jungyeong threw them a gold bar. He rummaged through his pocket and threw a few more thinking one might not be enough. They totaled 10 kg, which amounted to 500 million won.

“We’ll give you as much money as you need. We also have a blood diamond for training too. We’ll let you go on walks after a little while, so what’s the problem?”

Yi Yuri’s parents seemed more concerned about being trapped underground for 5 years, but Cheok Jungyeong failed to see this.

“Leaving this place will be dangerous for you. Don’t you understand? We’ll give you more money than you can ever imagine if you just stay here for 5 years. That’s not too much to ask, is it?”

“...”

We can’t get through to him at all. Her parents inwardly sighed and nodded as Yi Yuri consoled them. Honestly, it felt the same to her here or in the Tower of Heroes. The only difference might be the boy around her age named Droon. Yi Yuri faintly blushed when she thought about him.

Woooong...

A small earthquake rippled. It felt unnatural, so Cheok Jungyeong ran out to check. He only needed 3 seconds to arrive at Boss’ office on the 3rd underground floor.

“Boss! Did you feel that just now?”

Cheok Jungyeong called her as soon as he arrived. Then he tilted his head and doubted his eyes for a moment. Boss wore a bear head of some sort.

“Mm, you’re here, Gyeong.”

“Boss, what’s that?”

“Oh, this? I got an effective good selector that only worked on Lv.4 items or below, so I brought this back.”

Her first gift from Kim Hajin. Boss played with the bear’s cheeks with a satisfied smile.

“This thing has a surprisingly high magic affinity. I want to enchant it.”

“Uh... right. Anyways, did you feel that earthquake?”

“Oh, that?” Boss leisurely looked outside the window at the golden light that flickered in the sky.

“Looks like the Tower of Wish is ending.”

“The Tower of Wish is... ending?”

“Yes, Kim Suho must’ve done it.”

Chwaaa... The brilliant golden light spread across the entire sky. All of humanity saw the wave of light that signaled the tower’s end.

[Player MasterHolySword has conquered the Tower of Wish]

* * *

[Akatrina]

Prihi prepared for war against Schupert. She had many soldiers at her disposal. Around 4000 people came to the capital from all over Akatrina after hearing that Plerion had been restored and that the Vigilante had joined her. Plerion's population now reached 13000.

Jin Sahyuk served as commander and selected the 3000 most talented individuals to form her army. Thankfully, we had more than enough food to go around. Our 3 crystal shards provided ample livestock and the fertile farmland could be harvested once every 2-3 weeks.

Plerion's northeast mines also returned to operation. The king gathered miners and paid them with food. Around 100 or so volunteered for this position. Aileen became their supervisor and her Spirit Speech greatly improved their efficiency.

Blacksmiths also went back to work once they received the ores. Yi Yonghwa melted the ores with his hellfire and I crafted armor and weapons with Young Dwarf's Dexterity.

[Young Dwarf's Dexterity has improved to grade 3!]

My gift finally increased after a month of making 20 armor and swords every day.

"The capital has changed a lot thanks to all of you."

Currently, I met the king in her bedroom.

"We still have several obstacles," I said to Prihi as she smiled in bed.

"*Haha*, what do I have to fear? Plerion's reconstruction is only a matter of time."

"You should sleep. It's getting late."

"..."

However, Prihi refused to sleep. She seemed to be hoping for something. I grinned and took out a book, the tale of Romeo and Juliet, which I copied down with my laptop's functions. Prihi's eyes

sparkled.

“Do you want to read before going to bed again?”

“Y-Yes. What genre is it this time?” Prihi quickly took the book.

“It’s a romance story. A tragedy to be more precise.”

“A tragedy...”

Prihi already seemed sad as she opened the book and I slowly left the room.

“*Huuu.*”

I sighed and descended the stairs. Suddenly, I thought of the crystal shards. We already possessed three. Count Schupert carried one while his knight, Raylen, carried the other. As for the sixth crystal shard... I didn’t need to look for it. I already found it hidden deep inside Prihi’s bedroom. She must’ve hidden it to prevent us from going back.

“What are you sighing for?” Jin Sahyuk’s sharp voice rang out as I walked down the stairs.

“...”

She stood on the other side of the staircase and must’ve fought Shin Jonghak judging from her slightly charred hair.

“You don’t want to go back either?”

I shook my head at her words. “Of course not. What about you? Wouldn’t you want to stay here forever?”

“What are you talking about?”

“Puharen isn’t in this world.”

I explained to her. This materialized past didn’t contain Kim Suho or

Puharen, who became a devil and destroyed the kingdom. This world should continue for a long time.

Surprisingly, Jin Sahyuk refused.

“I’m not interested in what’s fake.”

“Is that so?”

“You seem to be.”

“What?” I only stayed close to Prihi to receive the co-author’s rewards. Jin Sahyuk didn’t know and sent me a sharp look.

“The Prihi you’re talking to is fake.”

“I know that.”

“Do you?”

Jin Sahyuk looked serious. She had been acting too forward recently. Should I tell her that I’m not Kim Chundong? Well, even if wanted to... [*Synchronization – 8%*]. The synchronization rate had already become too high. My foot must’ve already become Kim Chundong’s at 8%. I should just remain silent while talking to her.

“Go to sleep.”

I walked past her as she blocked my path. Her voice rang out over the distance between us.

“Your king isn’t her, but me.”

I ignored her and continued walking.

“I’m the real one!”

Can she just shut up for one second? As I thought that, she screamed at the top of her lungs.

“Kim Hajin! It’s me!”

She kept filming a drama by herself. I didn’t say a word and went downstairs to the 1st floor. Aileen and Seo Youngji happened to also be in the first floor’s reception room.

“...”

“...”

Did they overhear our conversation? Their hands slightly trembled as I thought about what to say.

“L-Lady Aileen, how have things been recently?”

“M-Me? W-Well, it’s been fun. I’m eating chocolates. *Nom, nom.*”

Awkward didn’t even begin to describe the situation. They definitely heard us. I sighed and an even louder scream than Jin Sahyuk’s rang out through the royal palace’s crystal ball.

— It’s an emergency! Schupert’s army is making a move!

Everyone in the reception room jumped in surprise. *They made a move already?* We ran to the castle walls with soldiers and knights already on standby.

“Priest Kim!” A knight called me and I jumped on top of the castle wall.

“What happened?”

“Look over there.”

The knight pointed towards the horizon. I could see something moving en masse, so I widened my eyes to take a closer look. However...

“The heck?”

“Can you see them?”

“Yes, but they’re...”

Citizens, refugees to be exact, ran towards us instead of the enemy.

— *Aiya*.

— Mommy, I left my toy behind.

— *Haaargh*, I can’t walk anymore.

I focused stigma’s magic power into my eyes and my vision stretched past the marching refugees, mountains, and rivers until it reached Schupert’s castle.

“Ah...”

A giant existence about 5 meters tall stood among a mist of demonic energy and continued to destroy everything in sight. Then a new alert popped up in front of me.

[Third Goal – Stop the devil or escape from the recorded past.]

Jin Sahyuk’s stepbrother, Puharen, actually materialized in this world as a devil.

“Well, shit...”

Schupert must’ve kept him captive.

Chapter 265

Assembly (1)

Prihi's stepbrother, Puharen, was the youngest and became the crown prince as the queen's only son. However, he held no interest in the throne and his feeble nature didn't suit it either. He was also far too young to be king.

After the former king died, Prihi imprisoned Puharen with the help of her other siblings who also hoped to become king. Soon, Prihi's siblings began to die one after another under mysterious circumstances. The third and fourth heirs passed away in fatal accidents. The second heir died from food poisoning and Prihi became the only one left.

"Devil?" Jin Sahyuk approached and interrupted my train of thought.

"Puharen is right over there."

I nodded and gestured into the distance.

Jin Sahyuk's expression immediately froze. She turned to face me in astonishment.

"Pu, what, Puharen!"

"Yeah."

"You said he wasn't here!"

"That's what I thought."

"What the..."

Stunned, Jin Sahyuk looked at the other side of the wall. Refugees

approached the castle as Puharen's demonic fog spread across the land.

"Fuck."

Jin Sahyuk muttered. To her, Puharen symbolized fear itself. Her response seemed reasonable since Puharen's devil, Morax, should be even stronger than Plucas.

"What happened?"

Prihi soon arrived. She climbed up the castle wall and looked at the procession of refugees stretched across the horizon.

"Refugees."

A knight told her. I estimated at least 10,000 at a glance.

"Refugees?" Prihi frowned.

"Yes, it appears Schupert's territory has experienced some kind of disturbance. They're trying to take shelter here."

Prihi remained silent and watched them march closer to the royal palace gate.

"Your Highness, please give us your order."

A knight finally urged her after a long time. Prihi studied the refugees' faces as Jin Sahyuk and I looked at her.

"..."

She silently pondered and didn't know if Plerion could afford such a sharp increase in population. They could grow crops in the city now, but they would certainly suffer a shortage if the population suddenly doubled. She also faced a moral dilemma. Those refugees used to be Schupert's citizens and all betrayed the king.

“Those people betrayed us and joined hands with Schupert.”

Prihi finally opened her mouth. Everyone braced for her next words.

“However...”

Prihi continued as she clenched her fists. Her small hands showed determination.

“People strive to survive.”

Jin Sahyuk watched Prihi in a daze. I hoped Jin Sahyuk would learn a thing or two from Prihi, who acted completely different from her current self.

“Therefore, I am also at fault for their betrayals.”

The refugees finally arrived at the castle and begged us to open the gate.

Prihi looked down at them and shouted, “Open... the gate!”

“The king has commanded us!” the knights roared.

“Open the gate! Open the gate!”

The gate slowly opened with loud cries and the refugees rushed inside with cheers. The remaining knights jumped off the walls to protect them.

“This barrier will protect everyone.”

Aileen also activated her Spirit Speech. *Guooooo*— A magic power barrier instantly stretched and covered the sky. This giant barrier protected the entire procession of refugees. Its size looked simply overwhelming. *As expected of the human dwarf... I mean dragon.*

Chwaaa...

Hundreds of magic arrows blasted past the barrier. Jin Seyeon aimed precisely at the monsters terrorizing the refugees. Numerous knights, Shin Jonghak, Yi Yongha, and Seo Youngji also stepped forward to help.

“Why aren’t you doing anything?” I nudged Jin Sahyuk who stood still while looking at Prihi. She flinched and turned to me.

“Haaa,” Jin Sahyuk sighed.

“I’ve said this before, but...”

Jin Sahyuk clenched her fists.

“I’m the real one. Don’t forget that. I’m the only real one.”

Jin Sahyuk jumped off the rampart to the battlefield below.

* * *

[Korea, Tower of Heroes]

The tower’s outer shell crumbled after Kim Suho cleared it. At first, people assumed the tower had been destroyed. Panic swept across the globe and stocks plummeted. Then announcements came that the tower remained intact and only slightly changed. People could still enter and players inside could carry on with their adventures.

“When is he coming out? It’s taking too long.” Chae Nayun asked in a cafe on the Tower of Heroes’ 3rd floor.

“The association probably has a lot to ask him. Mainly about the reward he received for clearing the tower. They must be curious if he would like to kindly share it with them. If he doesn’t, he’ll have to pay an unbelievable amount of taxes.”

Kim Suho’s meeting with the association executives went on for 3 hours straight. Those who came to celebrate his success all waited for him.

“Tsk.” Yoo Yeonha disliked the association for this very reason. Who had the stupid idea to hold a meeting with someone who just came back from the tower without any rest? She clicked her tongue in discontent.

“I’m so fed up with these association guys.” Chae Nayun muttered a similar response.

“Oh, is that Nayun and Yeonha?”

“...?”

They both turned at the soft and familiar voice. Yun Seung-Ah, the guild leader of Creator’s Sacred Grace, greeted them.

“Oh wow! It’s been a while, unnie.”

“Hello.”

Chae Nayun seemed happy to see her, but Yoo Yeonha struggled to hide her discomfort.

“It’s nice to see both of you.”

Yun Seung-Ah sat at their table with a smile.

“I see you put up your hair, Nayun. It’s cute.”

Chae Nayun wore her hair in a ponytail. She happily brushed it, but also seemed slightly embarrassed by the compliment.

“*Haha...* Long hair gets in my way a lot, so I decided to tie it up. I’m going to cut it short soon.”

“You shouldn’t. It looks pretty right now.”

Yun Seung-Ah patted Chae Nayun on the head and turned towards Yoo Yeonha.

“Mmm, Yeonha?”

“Yes?”

Yoo Yeonha felt uncomfortable around Yun Seung-Ah and Yun Seung-Ah probably felt the same because of the relationship between Creator’s Sacred Grace and Essence of the Strait. Essence of the Strait currently ranked first and became virtually invincible, but the two guilds always fiercely competed with each other.

Yun Seung-Ah attacked first.

“I almost felt sorry for you, but I’m glad everything worked out. I heard Essence of the Strait invested a lot of money in the Tower of Wish. Good thing it didn’t collapse.”

She meant Creator’s Sacred Grace ended up winning despite the astronomical amount Essence of the Strait invested.

“Right. It seems people can still freely enter the tower as long as they have an entrance ticket. Nothing seems to have changed, so it’s not a big deal. Rather, I believe the tower has become an even bigger market.”

Yoo Yeonha replied while looking at Yun Seung-Ah.

“It’s such a shame other guilds manage most of the profitable enterprises inside even though Suho won. I’m sorry.”

Yun Seung-Ah’s eyebrow slightly twitched at Yoo Yeonha’s pity and sympathy.

“Ah, please don’t be. After all, we’ll get the reward for clearing the tower. I’m curious what it’ll be.”

“Pardon? I thought the reward belonged to Suho.”

Yoo Yeonha feigned a sympathetic smile. Yun Seung-Ah found her rival’s tone extremely irritable and the veins near her temple protruded.

“Kim Suho is Creator’s Sacred Grace. He’ll be promoted to vice leader soon.”

“Really? I heard the salary for your guild’s vice leader only amounts to the same as other guilds’ team leaders.”

Yoo Yeonha tried to money shame Yun Seung-Ah, who immediately countered.

“Isn’t that still better than having a mere chief officer manage everything?”

“Hahaha.”

“Hahahaha.”

The two continued smiling at each other. The blades lurking in their eyes looked sharp as ever and Chae Nayun chose to stay out of their conversation.

“Lately, rumors have been floating that you’re the hidden leader.”

“Oh, right!” Yoo Yeonha interrupted Yun Seung-Ah. She grinned and clapped her hands.

“I heard your birthday passed a while ago. Congratulations. How old are you now? 32? 33?”

“...”

That dealt a fatal blow. Yun Seung-Ah couldn’t say anything and her expression froze. She wanted to point out the unfair question, but doing so would only unveil her insecurity. Instead, she smiled leisurely.

“Oh, you don’t have to congratulate me. After all, you’ll be my age sooner or later.”

“Even then, I’ll be a lot younger than you.”

“...”

Yun Seung-Ah felt as if Yoo Yeonha's words had punched her on the chin. Tears sprang up in her eyes since she wasted away all those years for her guild. She used to be young too.

“Damn it. Why are you even here?”

Finally, Yun Seung-Ah dropped all the pretense. Yoo Yeonha replied with a victorious smile.

“I'm here to congratulate Suho. Also, he asked me about Orden.”

“As I thought. Seriously, he's too diligent.”

Yun Seung-Ah sighed. He planned on dealing with Orden immediately after the Tower of Wish even though she urged him to rest.

“Nayun, are you also here for Orden?”

“*Huh?* Yeah.”

“Why?”

Chae Nayun bitterly smiled. She wasn't exactly stable right now. A lot of things still lingered on her mind like the Kwang-Oh Incident, her father, her grandfather, Kim Hajin, and Chae Jinyoon. She wanted to clarify her doubts.

“Because Kim Hajin is there.”

* * *

[Pandemonium, Plaza Basement]

Boss finished preparing for the *[Orden Assassination Team]*. The djinns would arrive tomorrow and they would commence the mission the following day.

“Wicked?” Boss tilted her head, intrigued by the rumor she just heard.

“Yep, apparently Wicked got into a bad situation with all her henchmen arrested.”

“Really? What happened?”

“Well, the truth is...”

Jain explained the rumor in detail. After the Chameleon Troupe’s last meeting with Wicked, every single one of her key personnel got arrested and imprisoned on the 16th floor. Jain didn’t know why, but losing all executives would be damaging even for Wicked.

“For now, we’re safe because our goals align. However, Wicked and other djinns might try to murder us after we deal with Orden.”

Boss, Jain, and even Kim Hajin didn’t know about the arrests. One might call it the result of excessive loyalty.

“Then what’s Wicked up to right now?”

Jain grinned mischievously at Boss’s question.

“She’s probably binge drinking. Rumor says she cries to sleep every night. *Hehehe*.”

“*Hmm*. Cry? That woman?”

Wicked always acted notoriously cold-blooded. Sure, she also appeared cheery and rewarded obedience, but showed no compassion towards disobedience. She must’ve killed over 4 digits by now when it came to just djinns.

“A lot of people have seen her with puffy eyes.”

Boss briefly imagined Wicked with puffy eyes, but found it difficult to picture any djinn crying.

“Wicked must be super desperate for our help. She heard we reached the 29th floor and wanted to ask if Black Lotus could help release her people.”

“And in return?”

Boss put on a menacing expression. She despised people who asked for favors without offering anything.

“She’s offering us Pandemonium’s fighting arena. Remember how Wicked took over the arena last time?”

“*Hmm*, arena... Tell her we’ll think about it.”

* * *

Meanwhile, Wicked lay in bed around the same time. She sighed and vacantly stared at the ceiling with no idea how she got herself into this mess.

“Damn it.”

Every single one of her executives got imprisoned. She raised them herself and they served her directly. All of them equaled at least a high rank, grade 4 hero. Wicked felt extremely proud of her executive team since she rose to the top with them.

Of course, losing her executives didn’t mean she became weaker. After all, Wicked could match any master rank hero. However, her group began to fall apart without its executives. She couldn’t guarantee they would win against Terror now.

“Those sons of bitches.”

Wicked clenched her teeth when she thought about the 16th floor’s prison. She tried using connections to get her executives out, but failed miserably. Her attempt to physically destroy the prison also proved futile. The 16th floor’s NPCs all boasted great strength and skills, but something called the *[System]* also drastically reduced her stats.

— Wicked.

“What!”

She shouted at the voice over the intercom. Recently, she’d been overcome with the horror of dying. Without her executives, she didn’t want to think about what would happen if Terror allied with Destruction and raided them.

“*Cough*. Yeah, so what?”

Wicked jumped to her feet and feigned her usual cheerfulness in front of her underlings.

— We’ve received a message from the Chameleon Troupe.

“What? The Chameleon Troupe?”

— Yes. I think they left a message regarding the issue on the 16th floor. They said they’ll think about it.

Wicked’s heart immediately sank, but she feigned nonchalance and nodded.

“*Pfft*. The Chameleon Troupe wouldn’t be able to do anything we couldn’t. Tell them we’ll be waiting and get back to your training!”

— Yes, understood.

Tk. Wicked sighed after the call disconnected.

“Dammit.”

She couldn’t believe a pack of thieves became her last hope.

How did it come to this? How can I, Wicked, be dragged down by a mere prison? Does this mean the executives I raised lost to a bunch of NPCs?

She couldn’t comprehend the situation no matter how hard she

thought about it. Her downfall felt too disgraceful. Wicked trembled in anger with her eyes closed.

* * *

[Akatrina Continent]

Refugees continued to pour in until daybreak. We closed the gate after letting the last one in. One of the refugees turned out to be the sword master, Raylen.

We planned to interrogate him, but he seemed to have lost his mind and kept muttering to himself. We had no choice but to use Aileen's hypnosis.

"Huu..."

The interrogation currently took place in the dungeon. I climbed back to the reception room on the first floor and rested on a chair. My thoughts drifted to Puharen. This quest just got much more difficult now that he fully deviled.

"So you came here."

I contemplated how to solve this mess when Jin Seyeon approached me.

"Did the interrogation finish?" I asked her.

"No. He can't form sentences very well, but I'm sure everything will work out since Miss Aileen is doing her best."

Jin Seyeon replied with a small smile, "More importantly, what do you plan on doing now, Hajin?"

"I don't know."

I only had two options left after the situation spiraled to this.

“We can kill the devil or just run away.”

“Run away?”

“Yes, we can escape since Raylen brought the two remaining crystals.”

Of course, I didn't feel too excited about running away. This world might only be a manifestation of the past, but I grew quite fond of it. My synchronization must've also affected me.

“*Mmm...*”

Jin Seyeon also suffered from the same dilemma. Nevertheless, we couldn't just attack him. Morax fully awakened as a devil and ranked 21st among all devils.

“The devil we're up against is much stronger than the one Chae Joochul fought.”

This world didn't have Kim Suho or Chae Joochul. Jin Seyeon fell silent at my remark. This silence continued until the morning sun shone through the window.

“Hajin.”

Jin Seyeon finally opened her mouth. She wore a big smile on her face.

“This has nothing to do with our current situation, but...”

Her tone always sounded genuine without any pretense or insincerity. It felt soothing just like I described in my settings.

“Do you know about the Kwang-Oh Incident?”

Her question startled me. Jin Seyeon already asked me about it when I disguised as Black Lotus.

“I've heard of it, but why are you suddenly asking?”

“...”

Jin Seyeon mysteriously smiled in an all-knowing way.

“Honestly, I’ve been wanting to tell you this for a while.”

She stared at me as if I had to absolutely listen to her next words.

“I also lost my parents to that incident.”

Chapter 266

Assembly (2)

“...”

I froze for a long time and didn't know how to respond to Jin Seyeon's confession. She spoke first as I pondered.

“It hasn't been that long since I found out. I pestered my friend over and over again... over again... Oregon...”

“*Huh?*”

My eyebrows furrowed at Jin Seyeon's strange joke. She snickered and shook her head.

“I'm just kidding. Sorry.”

“*Erm...* So you heard from your friend?”

“Yes.”

I stared at her. Jin Seyeon wasn't meant to be an important character in the original story. She didn't receive much screen time despite being a master rank hero. I didn't write anything special about her background, so the co-author would've had free rein to add whatever he wanted.

“Friend... Is it Yoo Jinhyuk?”

Only Yoo Jinhyuk knew about my past and would tell someone about it. I must've guessed correctly as she slightly flinched.

“As I thought, you knew.”

“He’s a well-known person.”

“*Cough...* Honestly, he didn’t tell me much. I’ve known Jinhyuk since a young age, so I could tell from his facial expressions. He can’t hide anything from me, *hahaha*.”

Jin Seyeon laughed, but suddenly looked bitter as she faced me.

“I knew a long time ago that someone had survived since I investigated it myself. Two years ago, I found out that you might’ve been the survivor and wanted to meet you ever since. Of course, I had to confirm my suspicions first.”

I listened to Jin Seyeon’s serious voice and remained silent.

“Then I went to see Jinhyuk. He didn’t answer my questions, but his expressions did.”

I didn’t have Chundong’s memories, so I didn’t know what Chundong knew about the incident. This unexplainable past only proved that I didn’t belong here. I had only replaced Chundong and Kim Hajin’s past didn’t exist in this world.

“My father died at the Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter. His name was Jin Younghwan. He should’ve been the strongest and the bravest hero there. He died while protecting the civilians.”

Jin Younghwan. I never wrote such a character, but I knew his name from the diary Yoo Yeonha showed me.

“And what are you getting at?” I briefly spoke.

Jin Seyeon smiled. She must’ve prepared for this.

“We can’t just abandon this world even if it’s fake, like how my father didn’t run away from Kwang-Oh.”

“...”

I looked at my hand. The lines of my palm stretched out like a complicated spider web.

“I really like this quote from a book.” Jin Seyeon suddenly recited what she once read.

“To confront what must be confronted.”

“...?”

My eyes widened. In this world, Korean history became one of the most important subjects. The book, *Namhansanseong Fortress*, should also be a best seller in this world.

“I think I’ve read that book before.”

I bitterly smiled at what I shared with the people of this world, a part of my Earth recorded in my settings.

“Let’s fight and not run away.”

Jin Seyeon spoke with a warm smile.

* * *

Aileen approached me the next day as I stretched.

“What beautiful weather.”

She looked at the sky with somewhat drowsy eyes. She seemed exhausted from interrogating Raylen with her magic power.

“It’s the crystal shard’s effect that Raylen brought. It improves the weather within a 6 km radius.”

The two crystals Raylen brought contained different effects. The first one improved the weather and the second amplified a weapon’s power.

“I see. I guess I’ll stretch too.”

One, two, one, two... Aileen stretched for about 15 seconds before stopping. Then she stole a glance at me before crying out.

“*Aah...* I suddenly feel so dizzy...”

She stuttered like a falling leaf and collapsed to the ground. I blankly stared at her as she spoke with rough breathing.

“I’m hurt.”

“...”

She simply wanted chocolate. I laughed and threw one over. Then she shot up energetically.

“Anyways, are you confident?”

“*Hm?* What do you mean? *Nom, nom.*” Aileen asked while nibbling on the chocolate.

“I heard you decided to fight too.”

“Who do you think I am?”

Gulp. Aileen swallowed the chocolate and pouted at me.

“That old man Chae Joochul killed a devil by himself, so why can’t I?”

“I guess you’re right.”

I laughed and nodded. Then Aileen put on a strange expression.

“So what’s your relationship with Jin Sahyuk? I heard both of you talking about a fake king and real king.”

“Oh, that? It’s a secret.”

“What?”

I threw Aileen another chocolate before she could get mad. *Nom, nom, nom*— She quietly nibbled on it.

“Alright, let’s train.”

“I’ll let you off this time since this chocolate’s so good.”

Aileen and I headed to the training hall.

* * *

Misteltein also absorbed a portion of the tower’s essence when it destroyed the outer shell. Absorbing this divine power finally completed Misteltein’s awakening.

[Awakened – Wish Sword] ▷ [Wish Sword] [Pinnacle Grade] [Composite Attribute of Fighting, Light, and Holy] — Sword Resonance: The holy sword’s ringing will pierce the mind and shake the heart. — Sword Crest: The height of all swords. You may freely form sword qi and sword reinforcement. Will become one with the user and eternally stay by the user’s side. — Divine Power Release: You may gather and release divine power from your sword.

Misteltein’s final form, the Wish Sword, could form sword qi and sword reinforcement without magic power. It could even cut space and time with Kim Suho’s Sword Saint gift.

However, Kim Suho didn’t reveal this to the Hero Association. They questioned him about his rewards for a long time, but Kim Suho only said he received 3 pieces of paper and a single item. The association obviously didn’t believe him and even invited an agent whose gift could detect lies. However, Kim Suho severed the investigating agent’s gift and turned his lie into truth.

“Really? That’s all you received from the tower?”

“Yes.”

Even Yun Seung-Ah felt flustered. She looked forward to hearing about his rewards and secretly hoped Kim Suho might now own the tower. At the very least, she hoped he would've received an infinite supply of entrance tickets.

"That's unexpectedly cheap. The journey must've been the reward."

Chae Nayun widened her eyes at Yoo Yeonha's assessment.

"Damn, can I quote you on that? *The journey must've been the reward.*"

"It's nothing special."

"So what items did you get?" Yun Seung-Ah quickly asked.

"Ah, it's this."

Kim Suho proudly told them about his rewards: the [Lv.11 Flying Cape], [Supporter Summon Coupon], and two [Point Coupons]. The summon coupon meant he could even summon the witch.

"Oh... I see."

Yun Seung-Ah nodded. The summon coupon sounded useful, but the witch slightly bothered her.

"Suho, can you write down your bank account?"

Yoo Yeonha tapped her smartwatch and asked. Kim Suho tilted his head.

"Bank account? Why?"

"Our guild placed a bounty on the tower. We're supposed to reward whoever conquered it."

"What?"

Yun Seung-Ah openly expressed her discontent. "You put a bounty on

it? Wasn't that only for your guild members?"

"No, we decided to give it to whoever conquered it. For the record, it's 10 billion won."

"It's fine. We don't need it. We're not that desp— Wait, 10 what? 10 billion?"

Yun Seung-Ah's eyes widened and Yoo Yeonha proudly smiled.

"Yes, 10 billion won. Suho can also ask for items worth 10 billion won."

Yun Seung-Ah became speechless. Korean won became the most stable currency in the world, so 10 billion won wasn't a small amount.

"You're that rich?"

"Of course. Even the mansion I live in cost tens of billions."

"..."

Yoo Yeonha furrowed her brows at the speechless Yun Seung-Ah.

"Aren't you underestimating us too much? Including our subsidiary businesses, we make more in a month than Creator's Sacred Grace does in a year."

"..."

Yun Seung-Ah could only keep her mouth shut. Essence Dynamics, Essential Pharmacy, Essence University, Essence Foundation, etc. Indeed, Essence of the Strait's subsidiaries only gained more fame as time went on.

"Suho, give her your bank info. Let's take the 10 billion," Yun Seung-Ah spoke dejectedly.

"Ah, okay."

Kim Suho wrote down his bank account. Then he stared at Yoo Yeonha.

“So...”

His expression turned serious and he wanted to ask her several questions.

“Tell me about Hajin. I heard Orden kidnapped him.”

An uncharacteristic rage filled his voice.

* * *

[Akatrina Continent]

The battle’s preparation went smoothly. Plerion’s soldiers and knights trained every day as we planned our strategy. Puharen should lack the ability to discern traps because of his rage. We decided to use that to our advantage and spent the past 2 weeks digging a huge trap. Then we inscribed a magic power trap powerful enough to blow up any monster.

Meanwhile, Prihi oversaw the cultivation of crops and livestock. Everyone regained trust in their king thanks to her efforts and encouragement. Plerion felt more like a country now. However, we didn’t have much time left.

“The devil is coming.”

Koong— Koong—

On a full moon night, the devil’s footsteps rumbled towards us after he destroyed Schupert’s territory.

“Yes, I can see him.”

Civilians evacuated to the farthest part of the city while we came to the outskirts with Plerion’s soldiers and knights. We stood on the

castle walls and stared into the darkness. A devil with a huge body and a bull-like head marched towards us.

“We’ll grow stronger by another realm if we can get through this. We can do it.” Jin Seyeon encouraged everyone.

“We can return home once this is over, right?”

“Of course, don’t worry.”

Seo Youngji and Yi Yongha consoled each other. *Did nothing really happen between them?*

“Quiet, you two. Stopping crying all the time.”

“He’s coming. Get ready.”

Everyone prepared for battle after Aileen grumbled and Shin Jonghak murmured.

I stared at the sauntering giant. The devil seemed to grow bigger as he arrived. My heart pounded and fear overcame me. A part of me wanted to run.

“Huu...”

I took a deep breath and looked around. The Divine Archer Jin Seyeon, Spirit Speech Master Aileen, Assassin Seo Youngji, Hellfire Yi Yongha, Final Boss Jin Sahyuk, and Vegeta/Black Flame Dragon Shin Jonghak. I believed we could win since I also had the authority, *[Devil Hunter]*.

I took out my bullets with a trembling heart.

“Synthesis.”

Then I used *[Lv.10 Synthesis]* on my 300 sniper bullets. I fused hundreds of bullets into one to increase its destructive power. I also added a *[Continental Fragment Piece]* to the bullet.

[Continental Fragment Piece] — A crystal that maintains the recorded past. — Will amplify the weapon it is embedded in.

Finally, I finished all my preparations.

“I’ll make the first move.”

I climbed the watchtower and activated my ultimate skill, *[Complete Understanding of Spirit Power]*.

Tzzzt...

Crimson sparks crackled around me and a sense of omnipotence surged within me along with a bottomless supply of energy.

“*Whew.*”

I transformed the Desert Eagle into a sniper rifle and enhanced it with various abilities.

I used *[Random Consolidation]* on the bullet and gun, boosted my stats with every effect from *[Medicinal Memory Physique]*, activated *[Aether]* and *[Algorithm]*, used *[Partial Devilization]* on my right arm, poured 5 streaks of stigma into my bullet, and even used *[Overclocking]* to boost stigma even more.

“*Auu...*”

Overclocking used my life force to add additional streaks of stigma. The process made me twist in pain as if someone stabbed me with a knife. Even so, I clenched my teeth and endured until the 6th and 7th streaks of stigma went into the bullet.

Kwaaaaaa!

Stigma surpassed its limits and a visible aura erupted from the Desert Eagle. Magic power and spirit power swirled together to form a huge whirlpool. I mustered my strongest attack.

KOONG!

The devil finally stepped on the trap. Tree roots and magma erupted to restrain his movements. Aileen activated her Spirit Speech at the same time.

“A lightning bolt will strike you down!”

Lighting flashed and briefly stopped the devil’s movements.

I aimed at the devil’s vital point around its belly button. A demonic energy barrier protected him, but my anti-magic property should easily pierce it. I didn’t hesitate at all.

Click!

I pulled the trigger. It felt like my soul also shot out. A loud bang reverberated and my body flew back from the recoil. The Desert Eagle’s chamber also burst.

KWAAAAA!

The bullet spiraled with a huge torrent of energy. Even my eyes couldn’t estimate its speed.

—!

Stigma’s magic power instantly destroyed the barrier and dug into the devil. Soon, it pierced his body and destroyed his organs.

— *Guooooo...*

The devil screamed and spat out a mouthful of blood before collapsing. *Wait. Why did he suddenly fall?*

“W-What happened?”

Aileen’s voice rang out and she looked just as shocked as me.

Koooong...

A huge earthquake occurred after the devil fell. He didn't move an inch and seemed completely dead.

"The heck? Did he die?"

Aileen murmured. She wasn't the only one surprised. Shin Jonghak jumped down from the castle wall, Jin Seyeon had prepared to shoot her magic arrows, Yi Yongha also had his hellfire ready, and Jin Sahyuk continued watching the entire scene. Everyone looked at me in a daze.

Then Jin Sahyuk jumped to the watchtower.

"Kim Hajin, you..."

She paused in the middle of her words and looked shocked.

"Y-Your eyes are bleeding!"

"..."

I almost asked what the hell she meant when I coughed a mouthful of blood. *Kuhuk!* Blood splurged out and my vision turned blurry. I staggered back and forth while feeling nauseous.

"Hey! Snap out of it!"

Jin Sahyuk held me up as I emptied my stomach. Reddish-black blood and vomit came out like a waterfall. Then I closed my eyes.

"Kim Hajin—"

Jin Sahyuk's voice cut off and several alerts popped up in the darkness. [*The devil...*], [*Devil Hunter...*], etc. Only one alert caught my attention.

[*You have spent 3 years of your lifespan from Overclocking.*]

Chapter 267

Assembly (3)

“...”

My consciousness returned and I slowly opened my eyes. I felt a soft mattress underneath me and read the sentences that blocked my view.

[New Episode Complete — You have succeeded in stopping the devil.] [Your authority, Devil Hunter, has increased after inflicting fatal damage to the materialized devil.] [You have acquired 485 SP] [Your Master Sharpshooter proficiency has dramatically increased.] [Algorithm and aether's maximum outputs have been enhanced.] [Aether partially understands the existence of a devil now.] [Your physical lifespan has been reduced by 3 years.]

Of course, the message about my lifespan stood out the most.

“Huuu.”

I raised my upper body with a sigh. I expected *[Overclocking]* to have some side effects, but added 2 additional streaks of stigma because I thought it wouldn't be enough. Of course, I probably should've realized a materialized devil would be weaker than an actual devil.

[Damage inflicted on the materialized devil Morax: 96%]

I either underestimated myself or overestimated the devil. I ended up inflicting 96% of the damage by myself. My single attack probably left it on its last breath while the others finished off the remaining 4%.

“How do you feel?”

I heard a voice as I checked my condition. Jin Sahyuk stood there as I turned around.

“Fine,” I briefly answered her.

I lost 3 years of my life, but didn’t worry much.

*[Abnormal Status] Major wound — You have lost 3 years of life
(Currently recovering through the Orb of Regeneration).*

The Orb of Regeneration already began to heal me. It would probably take 3-4 months to fully restore my lifespan.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk stared at me. Her strange gaze and silence felt unfamiliar. She finally spoke after a while.

“I understand your intentions.”

“What? What intentions?”

How would she know when I didn’t myself? Jin Sahyuk turned back without replying. I took out the magnifying glass and examined her emotions.

[Remorse, Resolution, Resignation]

I couldn’t understand her feelings at all. *Kiik*— The door shut amidst my confusion.

“What was that?”

I had no idea what she meant, but whatever. I had successfully claimed every reward from this small arc by defeating the devil. This arc also allowed me to gauge my strength and I seemed to be much stronger than I thought.

[Clear Rewards] — 1. Mysterious Magnifying Glass 2. Omnipotent Magic Pen 3. Purifying Crystal 4. ???

“Mmm.”

Naturally, I grew most curious about the fourth reward. *Tirring*— Suddenly, a notification window popped up.

[You may ask me one question because you have completed this episode.]
[The question may also be a favor. I will grant it if it is within reason.]

“What?”

My eyes widened. I had never seen this type of message before. It clearly came from an unknown existence with intelligence.

“What the, who are you?”

[Is that your question?]

“Huh?”

Calm down. You need to stay calm.

“No, no. That’s not it.”

I stared at the window in a daze. Was this the fourth reward? A chance to interact with the co-author? If so, what should I ask? *Gulp*— I tried my best to come up with a question. Then I came to my senses. I couldn’t decide on something like this right away.

“Later.”

I shook my head and tried not to rush. I should wait until a more decisive moment whether it be a question or a favor.

[I see.]

Thud!

“Hey, hey!”

The door burst open and several people rushed in: Aileen, Jin Seyeon, Yi Yongha, Seo Youngji, and also Prihi and her knights. All of them

seemed surprised.

“What’s up with you? You said the devil was super strong, but you killed him by yourself!” Aileen shouted in a cheeky tone.

“Ah, well, he turned out much weaker than I expected...”

Now I would have to spend hours explaining what happened. I smiled, but inwardly sighed.

* * *

[Orden’s Kingdom]

Meanwhile, the assassination plans commenced on Earth. The djinns divided into teams and proceeded into the western territory. Heroes, including those who belonged to the association, proceeded into the eastern territory. The two parties already made a secret pact.

“Damn, this place has a lot of monsters.”

Tak, tak— Cheok Jungyeong shook his hands and— *Koong!* Dozens of monsters fell from the sky.

“That monster king sure lives up to his name. He’s got tons of monster followers.”

They had already entered the innermost underground tunnel outside Orden’s kingdom. For an individual team, the Chameleon Troupe did better than everyone else.

“Droon, how far are we from Orden?”

Boss asked as she tore apart monsters. Droon closed his eyes and measured the distance.

“Around 6 km... I think.”

“Wow! I see something over there!”

A loud voice rang from behind them and Boss turned around. Wicked had lost all her executives and only came with 4-5 subordinates. They looked more like a clique than a gang.

“Wicked?”

Boss understood why Wicked came to them. She probably feared hanging out with the other djinns like Terror and Dread without her executives.

“*Haha*, it’s great to see you again. The reason I came here is—”

“Boss, someone’s coming this way.”

Droon interrupted Wicked. Boss immediately activated her Yaksha transformation. Her body turned black as a whirlwind rushed towards them. Boss already knew this creature.

Kurukuru...

An insect’s faint buzzing resounded throughout the tunnel and Boss’ face distorted into a frown. She didn’t care too much about Orden, but wanted to kill this damned insect the most. Boss prepared to greet Kurukuru as a true Yaksha.

* * *

[Recorded Past — Akatrina]

Plerion quickly prospered with no more external threats. People throughout the country rushed to the capital and the capital’s population exceeded 50,000. I easily resolved the food shortages with my random dice and the crystal shards. The country stood back on its feet as the job market and economy stabilized.

“Today is the last day.”

We walked around the central plaza and inspected the city one last time. The once barren plaza became lively again. The surrounding landscape also contained signs of life like ponds, trees, and shrubs.

"It's regrettable that we have to leave," Jin Seyeon bitterly murmured.

"It is."

I replied and looked around. Our trip to Akatrina had been unexpected, but we gained a lot from this experience like Shin Jonghak's growth, Jin Sahyuk's change, information on Kim Chundong's life, and a faint clue regarding my existence.

"We can't stay here forever. We have to hurry back. Who knows how many years have passed in the outside world?"

Aileen expressed her worries about the time difference.

"Well then, let's go."

We left the bench and headed towards the royal palace. The civilians busily went around and didn't mind us. I took it as a good sign.

We entered the royal palace as Prihi watched the flowers in the royal garden with Jin Sahyuk.

"...!"

Prihi noticed that we returned, but seemed reluctant to approach. She must've sensed that we would say goodbye today. I approached her with a smile.

"Your Majesty."

"..."

Prihi didn't respond. She wouldn't even look at me. I kneeled on one knee in front of her.

"Please don't be upset. We'll meet again someday."

As I wrote the original novel, I regretted releasing so many meaningless chapters just to meet the deadline. The co-author must've

noticed this and probably rewrote this arc to be useful later on.

“Is that true? Will we meet again?” Prihi asked in a voice mixed with doubt and anticipation.

“Of course. I don’t lie.”

“...”

Prihi looked at me with teary eyes, but didn’t cry. She maintained her composure as king. Jin Seyeon stood behind me and suddenly came forward.

“Those who meet must part and those who part will meet again.”

“Right, such is the way of the world.”

Prihi nodded and wiped her eyes. Then she took out the last piece of crystal she’d been hiding.

“Here... take it. It’s the last crystal shard.”

[Continental Fragment Piece] — A crystal that maintains the recorded past. Will increase the bearer’s wisdom and intelligence.

We finally possessed all 6 crystals, but Prihi also wanted to give me something else.

“Also...”

A baseball-sized crystal that shone white instead of blue.

“This crystal came out of the devil you killed. Take it with you,” Prihi explained.

I grabbed the *[Purifying Crystal]*. Prihi would need it as well, so I infused stigma’s magic power into it. The crystal vibrated and split into two around an 8:2 ratio. I returned the smaller shard to her.

“This crystal will prove useful to Your Majesty as well. Please protect your world with it while you await our reunion.”

I suddenly felt a fierce gaze on the back of my head. I turned around only to find Jin Sahyuk glaring at me. Her gaze contained a mixture of sadness, regret, anger, and jealousy.

“Okay. Thank you. I’ll do as you say.”

Prihi nodded with a bright smile as Jin Sahyuk glared at her. I grabbed Jin Sahyuk’s wrist and pulled her towards me.

“Yes. Well then, see you later.”

I brought the 6 shards together. Prihi and the knights surrounded us while respectfully bidding farewell.

— Thank you for everything! It has been an honor to work with you!

The lies we told about being priests had long been revealed and we also said our farewells with big smiles.

“It’s been an honor for us as well.”

I bowed and Prihi suddenly whispered to Jin Sahyuk.

— I’m not going to become you.

She might’ve been trying to insult Jin Sahyuk, but Jin Sahyuk looked surprised.

“Now go. Thank you for everything,” she said with a mysterious smile.

“Yeah, well, it’s been an interesting experience for us too.” Aileen calmly replied, but looked like she might cry. Her nose turned red as a tomato. I brought the crystals together before she started weeping.

“We’ll be off.”

The 6 crystals converged into one with a dazzling light as I infused it with stigma.

Chwaaa...

The crystal's light obscured our vision.

* * *

[Orden's Territory]

We found ourselves back in the real world exactly where we left. Jin Seyeon, Aileen, Yi Yongha, Seo Youngji, and Shin Jonghak... Everyone except Jin Sahyuk could be seen.

"Ah, so we're back? I feel a bit sad now."

Aileen stretched as a teardrop flowed down her cheek.

"What the... I-I'm not crying. I just yawned. I said I'm not crying."

First, I checked my connection with Spartan, who informed me of the current situation.

"It looks like we won't have time to rest."

"Hmm?"

Aileen tilted her head.

"Why?"

"The djinns' Orden Assassination Mission is currently underway. The Hero Association joined them as well."

I tapped the smartwatch with a bitter smile.

"Seriously?"

“Yes. Please follow...”

I discovered something on the ground. It looked like a sparkling rainbow gem.

What’s this?

I bent over and picked it up.

[Tower Seed] — A seed containing the changed world of Akatrina.

“Ah, so the narrative contained another secret.”

This must be the chapter’s fourth reward. I thought it might be asking the co-author a question, but this seed seemed like the real reward. Tens of thousands would continue to live in this fake world within the tower seed. The Akatrina we experienced would rise like a tower if we planted it in the ground.

“What will we do now? That Jin Sahyuk kid already disappeared.”

Aileen urged me as I pondered about Akatrina.

“Give me a minute. I need to do one more thing.”

First, I tried to create a new gift. According to Spartan, Kim Suho already cleared the tower. The amount of SP to create my desired gift should’ve decreased.

[Buster Call] [Intermediate Rank] — Will summon loyal vassals from the Tower of Wish using stigma’s magic power.

[Will you spend 8000 SP to create Buster Call?] [Would you like to save?]

The price decreased from 30,000 SP to 8,000 SP. I clicked yes without hesitating. Immediately...

[A huge accumulation of luck has activated!] [All of your misfortunes may have been for this moment! Your gift, Buster Call, has increased to high-

intermediate rank!] [Your luck doesn't end here! Your gift, Buster Call, has increased to high rank!] [In addition, a portion of SP (2000 SP) spent will be returned!]

Golden fireworks exploded before me.

* * *

[Orden's Kingdom, Underground Prison.]

Kim Suho entered the underground prison with Yun Seung-Ah to rescue the hostages. They easily broke in since Yun Seung-Ah already memorized the inner structure.

However...

"Suho, doesn't this place feel weird?"

Yun Seung-Ah noticed something off when they reached the prison. All the heroes in the cells looked too healthy after being locked up for 2 months. Of course, Orden might've treated them humanely, but...

"*Hmm?* What's weird?"

Kim Suho stopped to ask after frantically breaking the cells open. The heroes who had been locked up came out with big smiles.

"It's just that... *Ah!*"

Yun Seung-Ah noticed someone and all her doubts melted away.

"Senior Hanho!"

Yun Seung-Ah rushed to meet Park Hanho, the Temple of Justice's chairman. He had been locked up in the innermost cell. Kim Suho also recognized him and quickly followed.

Crack!

Kim Suho broke the prison cell with a single slash and freed Park Hanho.

“Ah, thank goodness. How did you get stuck here? Hurry on out.”

Yun Seung-Ah brushed the dust off Park Hanho.

“Are you okay?” Kim Suho asked worriedly, but Park Hanho didn’t reply. He only stared at them with an expressionless face.

“Senior? I mean chairman? What’s wrong?”

Park Hanho remained silent and they felt a grim sense of foreboding. Park Hanho usually acted kind and gentle, but currently seemed a bit ominous. Yun Seung-Ah slowly backed away.

Tak—

However, she ran into something. The heroes that Kim Suho released already surrounded the two of them.

“Chairman Park Hanho?”

Kim Suho muttered as he instinctively grabbed his sword. This kind of development felt too familiar.

"Oh, yes, hello. I guess you two came to save me."

Park Hanho finally spoke without a hint of emotion. A certain premonition crossed Yun Seung-Ah’s mind. She spoke while trying to suppress her doubts.

“Yes, we’re here to save you senior. You know, like how you saved me last time.”

“*Hmm*. I see.” Park Hanho nodded and his metal-colored magic power suddenly blazed around him.

“You didn’t need to.”

Park Hanho's magic power contained the rare unbreakable attribute. He always stood in the front to protect his allies, a hero others revered and depended on.

"Suho, take out your sword."

Something about him had changed. Yun Seung-Ah clenched her teeth and drew her sword.

"I'm happy here," Park Hanho whispered.

Guooooo...

Suddenly, a huge rumbling descended from the underground prison's ceiling.

Chapter 268

Assembly (4)

[Orden's Territory]

I ran towards Orden's castle and dismantled all the traps along the way with the *[Mystic Key]*. We also plowed through all the monsters that blocked our path. However, what we worried about most ended up happening. As we arrived closer, more monsters appeared until it became overwhelming.

"Hey, there's just too many."

Even Aileen looked dismayed. I couldn't blame her since over 10 million monsters stood in front of us. I doubted even Chae Joochul could break through.

"I count roughly 12 million including the ones flying and hiding underground."

Jin Seyeon estimated with her eyes. That amount sounded crazy.

"That many? Should we just go back? We can meet up with the Hero Association's forces."

"No."

Aileen suggested we retreat, but I declined. This seemed like the perfect chance to test my new gift.

"I have a way."

"What way?"

[Buster Call]

I spent 4.5 streaks of stigma to activate my new high rank gift and summoned the Genkelope's Battlecruiser.

Chwaaaaa—

Stigma's magic power shot up from my body and pierced the clouds. A hole appeared in the sky and the light formed a portal.

“Uuu...”

My head and chest ached, but I finished summoning it.

Guoooooo...

A fierce wind blew and dirt rose from the ground as a huge object appeared.

“...”

“...”

“...”

Everyone fell silent.

Genkelope's Battlecruiser descended from the sky, a product of transcendental magic engineering only found inside the Tower of Wish. Earth's current technology couldn't even build a tiny part of it.

[Genkelope's Battlecruiser has been summoned through your gift, Buster Call.] [The vessel and crewmen's stats have increased by 30%.] [Special skill algorithm has reacted to Buster Call. The vessel's stats have increased by another 12.5%.] [Buster Call will remain active for 36 hours and may be reused after 90 days.]

Such an overpowered gift also came with a huge restriction, but it even gained the ability to boost its stats along with the crewmen after reaching high rank. I felt genuinely shocked that its long cooldown might be the only downside.

— Hello, ship commander. Is this your world?

Horner's voice rang in my ear.

“Huh?”

— Give us your command.

“Command...”

Only one command made sense in this situation.

“First, wipe out the monsters below you.”

* * *

[Orden's Underground Prison]

Guooo...

A huge rumbling shook the underground prison. However, Kim Suho kept his eyes on Park Hanho without moving an inch. Park Hanho's killing intent felt all too real.

“Senior, snap out of it.”

Yun Seung-Ah infused her sword with white flames. She pointed her blade at the man she once admired.

Park Hanho maintained his silence, but Yun Seung-Ah could almost read his mind. She knew he had experienced several tragedies. Djinn had killed his wife and younger sister. His only daughter also died from an illness. Even so, Park Hanho performed his duty as a hero and Yun Seung-Ah felt proud to be his junior.

“This isn't who you are.”

It seemed no one had known what he felt inside. Yun Seung-Ah sympathized with his rage and despair.

“Senior—”

“Yeonhee could’ve been saved.”

Park Hanho spoke with a deep and dark sadness.

“Yeonhee would still be alive if those association fools shared just a tiny portion of Yuri’s authority.”

He spoke with regret and sorrow. Neither Kim Suho nor Yun Seung-Ah could say anything. Yun Seung-Ah had heard the rumors regarding the authority of healing. That the old, power-hungry men in the association abused it to prolong their lives.

“It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Park Hanho smiled and the corners of his mouth stretched to his ears. His eerie smile sent chills down Yun Seung-Ah’s back.

“The king gave Yeonhee back to me.”

With that, Park Hanho unleashed his magic power. The heroes surrounding Yun Seung-Ah and Kim Suho did the same.

“You’re out of your mind!” Yun Seung-Ah shouted as she took a few steps back.

“Suho! We’re going to die if we don’t kill them!”

“Yes!”

When Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah prepared to fight...

KOOOOONG!

A bigger rumbling shook the prison. Of course, they didn’t pay attention to it and focused on the enemies in front.

Clang! Clang!

Swords clashed and sparks flew. However, their fight didn't last long.

“—!”

When Kim Suho prepared to cut Park Hanho's unbreakable magic power after 10 minutes of fighting...

Jiing—

A laser rang out and created a circular hole in the ceiling. Dozens of soldiers hopped down and wore power armor with [*Genkelope*] written across it.

— By the ship commander's orders, we will suppress all who wish to harm you two.

The Genkelope soldiers entered the fray to protect Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah. They moved quickly as expected of elite soldiers.

Jiing—

Magic powered lasers suddenly joined the fight between blades. Anyone could predict the outcome.

* * *

A large battle took place near a trap called the Room of Foolishness a bit farther away from the underground prison.

“Stay in your positions! Be careful not to get surrounded! We can get through this if we stay sharp!”

Essence of the Strait's high rank, grade 1 Kim Youngjin shouted. He entered Orden's territory as the leader of a 20 member team that included Rachel, Chae Nayun, Yi Jiyoona, and Yohei.

“*K-Kyak!* Rachel! P-Protect me! Don't let your supporter die!”

High-intermediate rank, grade 1 supporter Yi Jiyoona screamed for

help as a high-intermediate rank monster charged towards her.

“Fiery!”

Rachel sent her fire elemental to protect Yi Jiyeon and Fiery’s blast scorched the monster.

“*Haaat!*”

Chae Nayun’s sword immediately slashed down. Her blade grew up to 10 meters with her magic power.

“*Tsk.*”

The sheer amount of monsters overwhelmed them despite Chae Nayun’s powerful attacks.

“*Aaaagh!*”

An hour had passed since the battle began. No one could see the end as more monsters appeared.

“Why are there so many!” Chae Nayun angrily bellowed, which only made her the target for more monsters.

Woong—

She swung her claymore and a crescent-shaped sword strike slashed apart dozens of monsters.

“Know your place you damned fools!”

Koong! Koong!

A huge monster with heavy footsteps appeared.

Kwang! Kwang!

It stood 30 meters tall with a horn protruding from each of its two heads. It also held a giant club. This twin-headed ogre posed more of a problem among high rank monsters. It should be from a particularly elite breed judging from its black skin and had to be at least grade 3.

“Hu-man! I – will – eat – you!”

The ogre screamed in human language. Everyone’s jaws dropped at the talking monster.

“Be careful. It’s a humanoid monster,” Kim Youngjin seriously muttered.

Guooo...

The sky suddenly turned dark and a giant flying object descended from the clouds. A fierce wind blew from the pressure.

“The hell is that? Wait, isn’t that?”

Chae Nayun stared at the mysterious object and shouted. She wasn’t the only one. The other elite members from the Tower of Wish also recognized this mysterious entity.

“That’s... Genkelope Vessel?”

The team members looked up in shock and awe.

Voooong—

The ogre swung its club at the battlecruiser.

“The – heck – are – you...”

The ogre couldn’t finish its sentence as the battlecruiser’s starlight cannon instantly vaporized it.

Jin Sahyuk looked down from a height of 500 meters. She could see several battles and countless magic power explosions.

“Aren’t you going to join them?”

Bell appeared next to her with his body wavering like water. Jin Sahyuk didn’t even spare him a glance. She kept wondering why Kim Hajin sacrificed himself to save the recorded past.

“...”

From her perspective, Kim Hajin did so to cast aside his longing for Akatrina. He had let go of his past self. Jin Sahyuk had no choice but to give up on him. The man who once served her became her enemy now. She had to admit it.

However, the image of Kim Hajin with Prihi flickered before her. *Did we ever look like that in the past? I never smiled at my servants. You always stood behind me, so I didn’t know how you felt.*

“Sahyuk?” Bell called her, but that name sounded odd to her today.

“What?”

“How was Akatrina? You still want to return, right?”

“Cut the bullshit.”

Jin Sahyuk swore to herself once again that she would return to her homeland. Even if only death awaited her, even if no hope existed there anymore... She no longer felt confident living in the same world as Kim Hajin. Jin Sahyuk only felt humiliation, defeat, pain, agony, regret, and sorrow when she thought about him. She would do her best to live in a world without him because she knew he would only continue to resent her.

“Bell,” Jin Sahyuk seriously called him.

“Hmm?”

“You said the end is near.”

Bell nodded.

“Yep, it’s soon. You’ve heard of Baal, right? He can open the dimensional gate.”

“Right, Baal.”

Jin Sahyuk knew that name. Bell always told her to kill him and make a trade with Baal to return to her world.

“When can I meet this Baal?”

“Mmm... I don’t know, but I’m sure he’ll appear sooner or later.”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t like Bell’s ambiguous statement.

“Where is he now?”

“Who knows? Baal is everywhere. He could be next to you right now.”

Jin Sahyuk ignored his nonsensical joke. Bell grinned and looked at the sky.

“Just wait a bit. Once he descends, you’ll meet him even if you don’t want to.”

As Bell muttered those words... A giant portal over 100 meters in diameter suddenly appeared in the sky.

“What’s that?”

Jin Sahyuk stared at the portal. A ship crossed through as a tempest blew. Its huge body and pair of wings stretched out. Jin Sahyuk recognized this monstrosity created from magic engineering.

“Genkelope?”

The battlecruiser opened its hangar and fired its cannons after appearing. Magic powered lasers blasted down, cannon balls exploded, and fighter jets shot out from the hangar.

“Ah, looks like Kim Hajin summoned it.”

“What?”

“He can do all kinds of strange things. Is this his ultimate skill? How interesting.”

Jin Sahyuk’s face immediately distorted. *When did he learn something like this?*

B-B-B-BOOM!

The battlecruiser rained fire on the monsters who stood no chance against the ultimate product of magic engineering. At first, the battlecruiser only attacked Orden’s monsters.

— Wait! A wanted criminal has been spotted on the east side!

Jin Sahyuk suddenly heard a familiar voice and a sense of foreboding overcame her.

“East side?”

A wanted criminal on the east side... Wait!

— I see her too!

— Everyone, change target!

— The ship commander’s mortal enemy has been spotted!

Whooosh—

The fighter jets changed course and coincidentally headed towards her.

“H-Hey, wait, wait, wait.”

Of course, she knew the wanted criminal they referred to meant her.

— Capture her!

Jin Sahyuk felt wronged and cursed out loud.

“Fuck, why me!”

The fighter jets already set their sights on her. Of course, Bell had already long disappeared.

“Dammit!”

Jin Sahyuk began to run with no other options.

Chapter 269

Gathering (1)

First, he thought the sky looked blue when he first opened his eyes. This thought felt instinctual, yet unnatural at the same time. It came from his perception and intelligence.

The monster stared at the sky in a daze. The blue sky looked beautiful, but this didn't seem like much of a revelation. He couldn't tell whether the idea of a blue sky had already been established in the past or just explored for the first time today.

The monster struggled within the swamp of his own mind. His intelligence opposed his instincts and dominated him. He couldn't find the answer to his existence.

— Grrr...

The monster heard another monster's low growl amidst his confusion. It clearly represented hostility.

A second thought rose in his mind from this encounter. *Who is the monster facing this monster? Is a monster that agonizes over its own existence a monster?* His intelligence felt like a burden that confused him and made him feel hollow.

In the end, Orden remained a hollow existence. No one could understand the first monster born with intelligence. He wasn't human, so he couldn't become part of society. However, he also couldn't adopt a monster lifestyle with his intelligence. Being born in the land of monsters only led to pain.

Orden never ceased to think despite his sense of emptiness. He broadened his perception and trained his intelligence. He never stopped questioning himself. His existence, his life, his identity, his emotions, his values...

However, he only grew more hollow as he tried to understand his origins. He realized this existential problem could never be resolved.

Naturally, he turned to humans for answers. He studied them and their behaviors. Orden wanted to feel comfortable with his existence like humans who freely lived.

Did Orden understand humans now? He could ingest them and give birth to monsters with intelligence like himself. He could speak with the monsters he created. He enjoyed it while it lasted, but his curiosity could never be satisfied.

Orden wanted answers. He assumed humans possessed what he searched for since intelligence originally began with them. He also wanted to destroy humanity for this very reason. Perhaps the answer would reveal itself when humanity went extinct.

Orden didn't intend on ruling humans. His desire couldn't be considered physical. Orden, the monster king, sought to understand humans to understand himself.

His thoughts of the past continued to linger.

Tok, tok.

Small footsteps interrupted his train of thought. Orden opened his eyes and discovered a small child. A girl who had already died once. Orden had ingested her dead body and reconstructed her. The child came back to life, but not the same as before.

"What are you doing here?" Orden asked the frightened child.

"Daddy told me to hide. He said this place is the safest."

She meant Park Hanho, the most useful human he had convinced.

"Go back to your father."

Orden coldly announced, but the child didn't budge. He couldn't tell if she feared him. Orden looked down at her with slight discontent.

“Um... Umm... Ummm...”

The child opened her mouth to say something, but hesitated. The king grew impatient.

“Speak your mind.”

“Ah... it’s just that... Daddy is fighting right now... Can you help him? I don’t like it when Daddy gets hurt...”

She made a bold request and laughter escaped Orden’s mouth. Immediately, he wondered why he laughed.

“...”

Orden lightly rubbed his mouth and his lips curved into a twisted smile. The child smiled at him, which confused him even more.

“Hey, you little rascal!”

One of Orden’s servants suddenly appeared. He hurried towards the girl and snatched her wrist. Then he bowed to the king.

“I apologize! Come here, stupid human!”

However, Orden already stood up.

“No.”

Orden continued, still confused about his own behavior.

“She’s right. It’s time for me to step up.”

The monster king’s voice resounded.

“I shall punish those who defile my land.”

A mysterious beam of light from the battlecruiser lifted us into the vessel. Then we found ourselves on the ship.

“This is Genkelope’s most powerful battleship. It can sustain up to 9000 passengers and about 400 fighter jets.”

Horner, the ship’s captain, explained to us. The interior seemed pretty complicated like it came out of a sci-fi movie, but some parts looked more straightforward.

“Wow, I haven’t seen this. Is it new?”

Horner nodded.

“Yes, it’s called the Genkelion. It’s an ultimate weapon created by Genkelope’s AI, GenphaGo.”

“Ultimate weapon?”

“Yes.” Horner smiled.

“We plan to take back our homeland someday using this ship.”

“Ah...”

I quickly understood. The tower arc had ended, but the world inside persisted. The 15th floor, through indefinite development, now became the most profitable floor in the Tower of the Wish. It wouldn’t be long before they recaptured their homeland, the fallen Genkelope.

“More importantly, how are things looking below?”

I asked Horner and he pulled up a video.

“Well, we found lots of monsters. Not only on the ground, but also above and below as well. You don’t have to worry though. Genkelion won’t be defeated by such monsters.”

“Mmm.”

His confidence assured me about my decision to create Buster Call.

“Kim Hajin...”

Shin Jonghak suddenly interrupted us. He looked quite confused.

“What is this place?”

“A battlecruiser built by the people on the 15th floor, just as Horner explained,” I immediately replied.

Shin Jonghak frowned and his eyes seemed to say, *I know that much.*

Now seemed like a good time to reveal my secret.

“I own the entire 15th floor.”

I had rescued its NPCs one by one using the *[Mystic Key]*. I had also acquired GenphaGo, the AI that oversaw the 15th floor’s development, through my negotiation with the 7th floor’s administrator. I even invested an astronomical amount of TP to finally achieve my goals.

“Y-You own the 15th floor?”

Shin Jonghak, Aileen, Jin Seyeon, Seo Youngji, and Yi Yongha all dropped their jaws.

The 15th floor looked like a fantasy world with magical technology. They must’ve never considered someone could own it.

“Yeah, but let’s talk about that some other time. *Hmm?*”

I turned to the video again and saw a group of fighter jets moving frantically.

“What’s that?”

Dozens of jets chased after someone. This person flying in the sky looked awfully familiar.

— This is the last straw! Get lost or I'll kill you all!

Jin Sahyuk shouted as she continued to run away. Horner called somewhere to check and returned with an explanation.

“Oh, I think she's the criminal you mentioned last time.”

— Get lost before I kill you!

Jin Sahyuk aimed her spears at the fighter jets, but they moved like the wind with their 50% stat boost and easily evaded her attacks. The pilots scoffed and fired their lasers.

— You crazy bastards. That stings! Fuck, that stings!

I slightly smiled as I watched Jin Sahyuk swear.

“Just let her go.”

“Pardon?”

“She's alright now. You don't have to be so hard on her.”

“Ah, yes. Understood.”

Horner ordered the fighter jets to halt and they promptly retreated.

“Next...”

Orden suddenly appeared on the roof of his palace as I prepared to give the next order. He stood at the center of his spire and looked like a slightly big human that resembled a lion.

Kwaaaaaa...

Orden began gathering magic power in his hands. His flow of magic power looked rather unordinary. A magnificent beam of light stretched out and sucked the nearby air currents.

That looks dangerous. I suddenly received a settings change notification.

[Problem – The third arc’s main boss died too easily.] [Solution – Orden’s potential has increased to 9.9/9.9.]

I became speechless. A 9.9 potential basically meant he equaled a god.

“Horner, is it possible to bring in all the allies on the ground?”

“Yes, of course. Portals are always ready to be used,” Horner replied to my serious question.

“Then please bring them in right now. We need to get out of here. We’re no match for him.”

I didn’t know what Orden planned on doing, but we’d all die if we stayed. *Co-author, you son of a bitch.*

“Yes sir.”

Horner nodded and dispatched the *[Emergency Portals]*.

Jiiinnng—

Beams of light stretched out from the battlecruiser and pulled all the heroes and Genkelope crew members back inside. The fighter jets also returned to the hangar.

I ordered Spartan to take care of the Chameleon Troupe. Spartan could easily use the authority of teleportation now at his current level.

“Activate the interstellar migration device.”

We escaped before Orden’s magic power exploded. The magical device we used could fold dimensions and instantly travel across vast amounts of space.

Kwaaaaa...

The battlecruiser disappeared from Africa and reappeared in Korea just as Orden's explosion almost turned the world upside down.

* * *

[The Next Day at Yoo Yeonha's Mansion]

The association and djinns failed to defeat Orden and retreated. Orden became much stronger than in the original story and his strength shocked the public. The association learned the hard way that a head-on attack wouldn't work.

"Huuu."

The media began to discuss the fall of humanity. Meanwhile, I visited Yoo Yeonha with Yun Seung-Ah and Kim Suho. The two of them looked pale and shocked by whatever they saw.

"You can tell us what you saw."

Yoo Yeonha seemed just as irritated as me. Yun Seung-Ah slowly raised her head and proceeded with a deep sigh.

"She came back to life."

"Came back to life? Who did?"

Yun Seung-Ah hesitated to answer. Yoo Yeonha and I folded our arms and waited. The next words that came out of her mouth shocked us.

"Senior Hanho's daughter."

"Huh? Who?"

Park Hanho's daughter should have died. Reviving the dead should be impossible even in this world.

"What does that mean?"

“It means exactly what it means. Senior Hanho’s daughter is alive. I remember visiting her in the hospital and I also went to her funeral, but...”

Yun Seung-Ah continued to explain. They discovered that Park Hanho betrayed us when they went to rescue the hostages. She saw Park Hanho’s daughter curled up on a bed and trembling in the corner while they all fought. The girl ran away and Park Hanho knocked out the dazed Yun Seung-Ah.

“I... have no idea what’s going on. Yeonhee’s face...”

Yun Seung-Ah buried her head in her hands and Kim Suho didn’t look any better.

I watched them for a while before getting up. Then I signaled Yoo Yeonha to follow me.

“What’s up?”

She asked as I took a deep breath. Now might be the time to gather the Nine Stars.

“I have a favor to ask.”

“A favor? So suddenly?” Yoo Yeonha tilted her head.

“Yes, we can’t deal with this situation on our own. We need help from the old generation.”

“*Huh?* By old generation, you mean...?”

The old generation saved the world in the past and the new generation led the present. However, the old generation could never be replaced. They simply possessed too much power. Perhaps Kim Suho, Jin Sahyuk, Aileen, and Chae Nayun could match the old generation, but only after completing all their future training to realize their full potential.

“Do you mean the Nine Stars?” Yoo Yeonha muttered in a daze.

“Right, the Nine Stars.”

Orden’s strength went beyond my imagination, but other threats also existed. We didn’t have much time and it would be too late if we contacted the Nine Stars after the devils descended.

“You’re joking, right?” Yoo Yeonha became dumbfounded.

“Even for me, something like that’s...”

“Just fetch me their locations and I’ll do the talking. I already know Heynckes’ location, so don’t bother about him.”

I prepared to leave, but Yoo Yeonha blocked my path.

“Where are you going? You haven’t told me about the 15th floor and that battlecruiser in the sky. Just what is dat, I mean, that—”

She became tongue-tied after trying to speak quickly. Yoo Yeonha coughed and glared at me.

“The association is calling for you about that. You do know I’m holding them back, right?”

“Ah, I’ll tell you about the ship later. I have a lot to do right now.”

“God.” Yoo Yeonha frowned. “What things?”

“Mmm...” I put on a solemn expression as if I’d been hiding something all along.

“I think... I’ll need to be serious from here on out.”

I hadn’t figured out everything about spirit power yet. I simply couldn’t leave everything to Kim Suho anymore now that the situation escalated to this. I needed to train and prepare for the upcoming battle.

“Serious?”

Yoo Yeonha looked at me in surprise.

* * *

[April, 1980]

Chae Joochul sensed nature among a destroyed civilization. The beat of the beginning, which originated from destruction, could be felt. The Immortal released his will into nature, two forces resonated, and nature returned its essence. The essence rose slowly and formed a certain figure that merged with Chae Joochul. Then he became one with nature.

Chae Joochul opened his eyes as nature's incarnation. He began at sunset, but the sun had already sat above his head. His whole body grew wet from blood and sweat. He hadn't noticed the passage of time or the toll on his body. Chae Joochul reabsorbed his magic power.

Kwaaang!

The magic power exploded within him and seeped into his blood vessels. Chae Joochul raised his body, which had turned slightly turquoise.

Swish!

He spread his folding fan and the essence of nature swirled in the air before turning into a huge typhoon that engulfed the surroundings. A huge fire flared from within the typhoon. The harmony of wind and fire looked breathtaking. This natural phenomenon couldn't be grasped by humans.

Such disasters occurred in succession. Red, green, and grey gathered to form a scene of destruction. He put on a grand display of his gift, *[Multi-Colored Immortality]*.

— It hasn't withered.

A gentle voice flowed through the storm into Chae Joochul's ears. He turned around and spotted Shin Myungchul, the owner of Seoul and

the present era's strongest.

Chae Joochul silently stared at him.

— I meant this flower, not you.

Shin Myungchul smiled and fiddled with the flower on the side of the road. Chae Joochul retracted his flow of magic power and his body returned to normal.

— Your power is amazing, but don't overwork yourself.

Shin Myungchul spoke, but Chae Joochul didn't reply. He didn't think Shin Myungchul came all the way here just to meddle with his training. Shin Myungchul always acted easygoing and lazy. With a smile, Shin Myungchul sat on the ground.

— It's funny. People who love nature are usually described as sentimental, but the person most in touch with nature seems completely insensitive.

— It's because nature doesn't have feelings. Nature only comes and goes without demanding empathy or rejecting destruction.

Chae Joochul answered indifferently.

That sounded very much like a Chae Joochul answer.

— You will become a pillar one day.

Shin Myungchul faintly smiled at him.

Chae Joochul awkwardly smiled while trying to imitate him. Then Shin Myungchul's expression turned solemn and he asked Chae Joochul.

— By the way, when are you coming back? Seoul needs you now.

Chae Joochul shook his head. He only planned on returning after

learning how to control his powers better.

— I see.

Shin Myungchul nodded and stood up.

— I won't bother you. Send me a letter once you return.

Chae Joochul watched him leave. Shin Myungchul always seemed so leisurely and elegant. Every time Chae Joochul looked at him, his heart faintly throbbed.

However, Chae Joochul couldn't describe this emotion. Did he envy or hate him? He couldn't tell. Chae Joochul simply returned to his training. He closed his eyes again and became one with nature. It felt a little better this time.

One day, two days, four days... two years passed.

Chae Joochul now perfectly understood his gift. On the other hand, his ability to feel emotions deteriorated even more.

He climbed down the mountain and onto the battlefield of monsters. However, the monsters could no longer stand up to him.

A typhoon appeared with the wave of his hand, lightning struck with the shake of his fan, and an earthquake swept through the monsters with a single step.

Chae Joochul conquered half of Seoul with overwhelming strength like how humans treated ants.

Whiiish—

“...”

Chae Joochul slowly opened his eyes as the wind passed.

A luxurious ceiling had replaced the distant memory. Chae Joochul

realized he had been dreaming. He hadn't dreamed in a long time.

Nevertheless, Chae Joochul calmly got up from bed like usual. He cleared his throat, straightened his clothes, took a quick shower, and checked his smartwatch.

Several messages came in today.

[Kim Suho wants to speak with you regarding the girl of authority's kidnapping.] [Lady Nayun appears to have met Kim Joongho.] [The association has called for a meeting regarding Orden.] [Yoo Yeonha from Essence of the Strait wants to meet with you.] [Various newspapers have asked for an interview...]

Chae Joochul's deep gaze ran over the sentences one by one.

The name Yoo Yeonha stood out the most.

Chapter 270

Gathering (2)

[Orden's Territory, Underground Laboratory]

Orden visited his lab and the humanoid monsters there immediately stopped to bow. These monsters didn't physically excel in anything, but possessed extreme intelligence. Orden particularly liked them.

"Stand."

The king commanded and only then did they rise. Orden looked at the giant egg-shaped capsule that stood out the most among various equipment. This capsule could heal humanoid monsters.

"..."

Orden looked at Kurukuru inside. Only he survived out of the 6 humanoid monsters that fought the Chameleon Troupe.

"Kurukuru lost, but he continues to grow."

A voice explained to Orden, who turned around to face the human servant with a scarred face.

"Kurukuru learns from his mistakes. He will become even stronger after recovering."

Lancaster reported. The monster king glanced at his human servant and turned back to Kurukuru.

Kurrr... Kurrrr...

Kurukuru's eyes glowed crimson as he looked at the king. He wanted to express his loyalty and joy.

“The synthesis of humanoid monster 2.0 has been completed.”

Lancaster’s words intrigued the king.

“Do any of them deserve to be called my servant?”

“Yes, of course. Four succeeded out of 31,103. The results are incredible despite the low success rate.”

Lancaster explained as he led the king towards four capsules.

“This is it.”

Orden stood in front of the capsules.

“What do you think?”

The four humanoid monsters possessed both human and monster characteristics. Orden began to gauge their origins.

The first one used to be a Himalayan mountain tyrant with a tiger-like appearance. The second used to be a ghost with a translucent body. The third used to be a bird of despair with a beak, mournful eyes, and peacock tails. The last one looked like a golem that resembled a human with stones for hands.

“These four perfect humanoid monsters came into existence because of Your Majesty’s grace.”

Orden possessed the ability to absorb and release energy like the qi absorption technique often found in martial arts novels, but more elaborate and unrestricted. He mixed various forces, reconstructed them in his gut, and released it out of his mouth in the form of hearts. The researchers took care of these hearts until they fully grew into humanoid monsters.

“Please name them.”

The king agonized over Lancaster’s request. He always struggled to

come up with perfect names. After a long time, the king finally announced his new servants.

“I shall call them Tigris, Xphil, Doloren, and Toji respectively.”

“Those are excellent names.”

Lancaster flattered the king while recording a video of the four capsules. He planned to threaten England with it.

* * *

[Battlecruiser]

I spoke with the Korean government’s representatives inside Genkelion, the giant battlecruiser I summoned. Genkelion remained even longer than 36 hours thanks to the *[Orb of Regeneration]*. Aileen stood by my side and claimed the government would dismiss my opinions without her support.

“Yes, this cruiser belongs to me.”

“Ah...”

One of the representatives exclaimed in amazement. *SP + 3, SP + 1, SP + 2, SP + 3, SP + 4...* Even now, my SP continued to increase as every media outlet covered the Genkelion.

“I see.”

The other representative nodded. I wasn’t sure what position he held, but he seemed important. I only knew his name since he introduced himself as Baek Joonghyun.

“We acknowledge your ownership of items from the Tower of Wish. However, we cannot allow you to occupy our country’s airspace in the future due to public panic. Of course, we thank you for safely returning our heroes this time. I believe you might even be awarded the Order of Military Merit.”

Korea's merit system seemed quite systematic and strict in this world. The Taeguk Order of Military Merit basically made its recipient nobility.

"Yes, I understand." I nodded.

"Will the ship permanently remain in its current position?"

"No, I can make it appear and disappear at will."

"If that's the case, would you be willing to help us during the third Orden Assassination Mission?" Baek Joonghyun nonchalantly asked, but the idea of a third mission distracted me. This arc should've originally ended with the second mission.

"I can help, but I believe it would be unnecessary to involve a large number of individuals."

I carefully offered my opinion. Orden's explosion completely wiped out all the monsters on land, so we wouldn't require a lot of heroes this time. Instead, we needed a small group of elite heroes to attack Orden's palace.

"Yes, we agree. However, we haven't decided on the team's size. We won't be able to infiltrate Orden's base without getting past his powerful servants. Victory will be difficult with a small group."

"Yeah, whatever. So what exactly will he be getting?" My self-appointed patron, Aileen, decided to intervene.

"First, we're offering a bounty for the humanoid monsters."

"Bounty?"

"Yes, 100 billion won and an artifact per head."

Baek Joonghyun muttered as he shook his head. "Though I'm not sure anyone would willingly walk into the jaws of death."

“No, not that.” Aileen suddenly frowned.

“You have to give him something for what he’s already done. He just saved hundreds of heroes!”

Aileen’s sharp cry sounded dependable today.

“Yes, you’re right. I almost forgot.”

Baek Joonghyun calmly nodded and took out a piece of paper. The blank paper surprised me.

“Please write down one artifact you’d like.”

“One? One? Seriously?”

Aileen put on a threatening expression. She looked rather cute than scary, but her social status seemed to work against Baek Joonghyun.

“Then... please write down everything you want.”

“*Mmm...* really?”

I thought for a moment, but nothing came to my mind. *I didn’t fight with artifacts in the first place... Wait.* An idea suddenly crossed my mind.

Why don’t I get something to use with [Synthesis]?

I looked at Baek Joonghyun and wrote down an artifact.

“Is this okay?”

I asked for *[Napoleon’s Musket]*, one of the artifacts in the French Museum. It might come in handy once I combined it with the Desert Eagle.

“*Hmm...*”

Baek Joonghyun silently stared at the paper before nodding.

“I believe it’ll be possible.”

“Really? Wouldn’t it cause a diplomatic problem? It’s Napoleon after all.”

“No country can defy us under the current circumstances.”

Baek Joonghyun smiled and explained in a chilling voice.

“Ah...” I realized the weight and power of my setting. Who would dare defy the world’s most powerful nation?

“At any rate, please don’t concern yourself with politics. No diplomatic disputes will occur. We’ll simply be trading artifacts.”

Baek Joonghyun remarked as he glanced at the clock. It struck exactly 6 P.M.

“Thank you for your time. I shall take my leave now.”

Baek Joonghyun stood up as the promised 30 minutes ended. He seemed extremely punctual.

* * *

[England, Buckingham Palace]

The association’s mission failed, but they didn’t suffer much casualties thanks to Genkelope’s battlecruiser.

“Phew...”

Rachel safely returned to the palace and sighed as she recalled her near-death experience.

Tk, tk, tk, tk, tk.

The sound of typing rang out. Rachel tilted her head and looked at the couch. Evandel sat in a cute dress while tapping on her smartphone and Rachel's lips naturally curved into a smile.

"What are you doing, Evandel?"

"I'm texting."

Evandel smiled at Rachel's question.

That's right. She recently made some new friends. Rachel recalled the three children Evandel spent time with: her best friend Yun Haeyeon, the 9 year old Leonardo also known as Britain's future, and Baire Moren's 3 year old daughter. Rachel felt surprised the first time she saw that girl. She found it strange that Baire Moren, who once competed against Kim Hajin, already had a wife and kid.

"Are you texting Haeyeon?" Rachel lovingly looked at Evandel and asked.

"No." Evandel shook her head.

"Then who..."

"I'm texting Hajin."

"*Hmm?*" Rachel flinched, but soon nodded.

"Ah, I see. Have a great time."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Rachel turned around at the brief reply and feigned disinterest. She needed to deal with lots of issues today as the guild leader. They had a meeting with Essential Dynamics, the 21st recruitment of Tower of Wish challengers, hero deployments for national defense, etc. However, Rachel's eyes kept rolling to the side.

“Hehe. Tk, tk. Hehehehe. Tk, tk.”

The sound of typing and laughing continued. Rachel couldn't help but wonder what they spoke about. She wanted to ask Kim Hajin several questions as well. For example, what happened with Shin Jahyuk and what was he up to these days? Rachel straightened her posture to steal a glance when Evandel made eye contact with her.

“...”

“...”

Evandel slid her phone into her arms after 3 seconds of silence. She didn't want Rachel to see.

“No, that's not what... Evandel, don't you think it's time for you to start using a smartwatch?”

Smartphones became nothing more than relics. Only children used them before moving on to the more complicated smartwatch.

“Master Ah Hae-In already taught me how to use one.”

Evandel replied as a notification rang. *Tiriring*— Her face immediately lit up with another text from Kim Hajin. Rachel began to chew her fingernails as she looked at the happy Evandel.

It's not surprising Evandel doesn't want me to see her phone. Is there any way I can access those messages? Rachel thought to herself.

“Hacking?”

She never tried hacking before. *Hacking, hacking...* Rachel repeated to herself as she searched her computer. Then she came to her senses and pulled up her messenger.

[Kim Hajin]

She stared at the name for a while before gathering enough courage to

text him. Rachel felt confident he would reply since he was texting with Evandel.

[Hajin?]

[Yes?]

He quickly answered as expected. Rachel took a deep breath and carefully tapped her keyboard.

[Did something happen between you and Shin Jahyuk? Ah, it's nothing serious ㅎ; She just hasn't come to work ㅂㅂ]

[Ah lol Nothing happened. We just watched a movie. That's all. We don't talk anymore.]

[Oh, I see... Maybe that's why ㅎ.]

She excitedly typed on her keyboard and felt a pair of eyes on her. Evandel fiddled with her phone on the couch and stared at Rachel. To be more exact, she stared at Rachel's screen.

“...”

Rachel adjusted her monitor. Evandel didn't show Rachel, so Rachel wouldn't show her either.

“No fair.”

Evandel puffed her cheeks and sulked.

[Public anxiety is growing every day because of the Orden Incident. How's the situation in Korea? I've heard that immigrants have reached an all time high. England is filled with tension. The monsters in Africa might break into Europe at any moment...]

Tk, tk, tk, tk.

Nevertheless, Rachel continued to move her fingers across the

keyboard.

Tk, tk, tk, tk.

Evandel also tapped on her phone.

Tk, tk, tk, tk, tk, tk, tk, tk...

The sound of two keyboards competed with each other and this childish situation grew quite tense.

* * *

[Underground Training Room in Pandemonium]

I sat cross-legged on the ground with my eyes closed. Orden's potential had changed to 9.9 and anyone would struggle against him. However, we shouldn't give up because of a difficult opponent. We could also grow stronger like Orden. Unlike the original novel, we now had the Tower of Wish on our side.

"Huuu..."

I took a deep breath and made a mental list of people and things from the tower that could help. First, Medea had reached the verge of manifestation. Second, the cards on the 21st floor could come in handy with my luck. Third, the tower contained numerous spirits that could equal an entire army.

"Haaa..."

I paused my train of thought and opened my eyes. To my surprise, I found Cheok Jungyeong's face right in front of me.

"Geez, you scared me!"

"What's there to be afraid of? More importantly, what are you doing here? Meditation?" Cheok Jungyeong muttered while scratching his sideburns.

“Of course not. Anyways, how are you doing?”

I heard the Chameleon Troupe fought against Kurukuru and the other humanoid monsters after they infiltrated Orden’s territory. Boss tore off Kurukuru’s legs, Cheok Jungyeong crushed some monsters, and Droon’s rabbit swallowed 3 humanoid monsters alive.

“Why would you worry about me?”

Cheok Jungyeong only snorted despite my concern.

“Those monsters are nothing.”

“Really? Then get out of my way. I have to train.”

“Meditation isn’t training. Why don’t you spar me?”

“No.”

“*Tsk, tsk.* What a wimp.”

Cheok Jungyeong grumbled and left.

The familiar silence returned. I focused on breathing again while sitting down. This breathing exercise would increase the potential of my spirit power.

Ssp... Huu...

Spirit power fundamentally came from one’s soul. I tried to control the spirit power condensed in my soul, but everything felt too unfamiliar. Nevertheless, I kept trying. I already possessed *[Complete Understanding of Spirit Power]* as my ultimate skill, but I needed to learn the basics to use it more effectively.

“*Ugh*, I have no idea how this works.”

I sprawled on the floor after 10 minutes. Breathing didn’t seem to work and I didn’t know what else to try since I didn’t know anything

about spirit power. Unlike the main character, I always relied on modifying the settings to get through. Extras like me didn't achieve results with effort. Did I have no room for improvement left because of my way of living?

“No, wait.”

I shook my head and pulled myself up. Why did I try so hard? I always got through by modifying the settings. I could just do the same again.

[6,083 SP]

Fortunately, I accumulated quite a sum thanks to the Orden incident. Then I looked at the *[Arts]* tab.

▷ *Arts (2/3) 1. Parkour 2. Charming Voice*

“Ugh, stupid charming voice...”

Seeing it only brought bad memories. I decided to add a third art to the last empty slot.

▷ *Third Art [Exuberant Spirit Power Technique] [Intermediate Rank]*

[2500 SP will be used. Would you like to save?]

I pressed save without hesitation.

[Saving...] [A huge accumulation of luck has activated!] [What great luck! Congratulations, your art has increased to high rank!]

A flood of ideas entered my mind about how to harness spirit power and how to use spirit skills.

“Kim Hajin.”

Boss suddenly appeared from the other side soaked in sweat. It seemed she just finished training.

“You don’t look too good. Are you stuck?”

Boss asked and my eyes sparkled. I wanted to experiment with the ideas in my head.

“Boss, stand still.”

“Stand?”

“Yeah, I want to try something.”

Boss tilted her head as I jumped to my feet and directed spirit power to my brain.

Chapter 271

The Meaning of the Emotion (1)

I redirected spirit power to my brain and it turned into something entirely different. To be more precise, it turned into words.

[Constructing spirit power...]

Yellow characters appeared in the air like a pop-up ad.

[Completed.]

Spirit power fundamentally came from one's soul. It measured one's experience accumulated over the years. As a result, the amount and application differed greatly between individuals. It depended on what kind of life one led and what one valued.

However, my spirit power consisted of a more logical standard of measurement.

[Exuberant Spirit Power ▷ Your spirit power will resemble hardware with a specific algorithm.] [You may create and use Rational Miracle, your body's equivalent software.] [However, you may only store up to 4 miracles due to your brain capacity.]

It took the form of a laptop because of my previous experience as a writer. My writer consciousness remained because everything began with a novel and I carried a heavy responsibility. The nature of my spirit power reflected this.

[Please enter ① Skill Summary, ② Activation Condition, ③ Consumption Value, ④ Ability and Effect.]

Spirit power transformed into a keyboard and my fingers danced as if possessed. My will transformed into words and eventually formed a

miracle.

[You have successfully created your first miracle.]

I understood the process after going through it once. I could always delete or modify miracles without any SP, so I didn't spend too much time on the first one.

[Summary — Will summon a spirit doll that consumes the opponent's energy] [Activation Condition — Must reveal the skill's name to the opponent] [Consumption Value — Will cost 0.5% of spirit power per second.] [Ability — The doll will adhere to the opponent and absorb their energy] [Effect — Will recover 0.25% of spirit power and reduce 0.5% of the opponent's energy per second.] [Miracle creation has been completed.]

Plop!

The miracle could be freely activated on its first time. A doll that looked like a devil appeared in the air.

— *Sweck, sweck.*

It looked like a badger or maybe a raccoon.

“What's this?” Boss widened her eyes at the strange creature.

“Um... It's Little Kim Hajin.”

[Penalty for horrible name — Skill performance has greatly reduced.]

“No, wait, wait. That's not it.”

I thought for a moment and changed it to a slightly better name.

“Bloodsucking Cleaner.”

[Plain name — Skill performance will remain the same.]

“It's Vampire Scavenger.”

[Better name — Skill performance has slightly improved.]

“What does that mean?”

“Well, it’s a skill that only exists in my head.”

I stuck the Vampire Scavenger on Boss. It clung to Boss’ arm and strangely laughed.

— *Huhuhung, huhuhung.*

“What are you... *Eh?*”

It started sucking Boss’s energy and her shoulders trembled.

“How does it feel?”

“Weird... *uuuu!*”

“Why don’t you try pulling it off?”

Boss shook her arm with the *[Vampire Scavenger]*. She shook once, twice, thrice... but the Vampire Scavenger didn’t flinch.

“You probably can’t take it off with raw strength.”

Only spirit power could counter spirit power. My first day of using spirit power went surprisingly well.

“*Huup!*”

Boss activated her gift, *[Infinite Shadow]*. A huge shadow almost enveloped the *[Vampire Scavenger]*, but I quickly responded.

[Add Ability — Nullify the target’s gift.] [Warning — Consumption Value will increase by 100 times.]

Nullifying a gift would make the *[Vampire Scavenger]* a significant

weapon, but it required just as much risk. I added a new condition to counter this risk.

[Condition — Must observe the opponent for at least 360 hours] [Your luck has activated. Spirit power consumption will only double.]

I had already observed Boss for 360 hours, so it nullified Boss' gift right away.

"What?" Boss felt shocked when the shadows by her side disappeared and she looked at me dumbfoundedly.

"What's wrong?" I asked while feigning ignorance.

"Is this spirit power?"

"Yes."

"It's strange. My shadows won't come out."

"Of course, it's because I'm absorbing your gift."

"Absorbing?" Boss frowned as I slyly smiled. Suddenly, I wanted to poke fun at her.

"It's called succession. Your gift is mine now."

"Don't lie. Do you think I'm stupid?"

I didn't say anything for 10 seconds and Boss began to worry.

"Take this raccoon off of me."

"..."

"That's an order!"

"Haha, I'm only joking."

“Take it off right now!”

I laughed and took the *[Vampire Scavenger]* off Boss’ arm. She looked at my new weapon disapprovingly. The *[Vampire Scavenger]* turned back into spirit power and returned.

“So that’s spirit power?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“It’s similar to skills from the tower.”

“Oh, you’re right.”

Spirit power formed the foundation of skills in the tower.

“Mmm...”

Boss stared at me before activating her gift again. She freely moved her shadows and sighed in relief. I began to prepare another miracle to test on her.

I thought of *[Spirit Bullet]*, a bullet that affected the nervous system and disrupted physical movements.

* * *

[East Sea, Military Hero Academy.]

Many heroes hadn’t visited their alma mater in a long time. Normally, outsiders couldn’t enter Cube due to frequent djinn invasions, but alumni gathered here today for a great cause. The government sponsored a qualification exam to choose the elite task force against Orden.

“A ton of people showed up today.”

A total of 9,000 from all around the world applied. They volunteered for a noble cause, but the rewards also enticed them.

The first reward promised permanent residency or citizenship in Korea. This privilege would also extend to the participating hero's family. Most of the applicants from foreign countries wanted this reward.

The second reward simply consisted of a 10 billion won down payment along with a 5 billion won monthly salary (the association assumed this mission would last a long time). The participants would also be awarded up to 300 billion won after the mission depending on their contribution.

The third reward immediately gave the heroes who passed the screening an artifact of their choice.

Every applicant seemed eager because of these rewards.

“Geez...”

Of course, some heroes had no interest in them like Chae Nayun. She looked around apathetically. France, Germany, Russia, etc. Heroes from all over filled the room, but none of them interested her.

— Leclace, you're here too?

— I don't have a choice. This is my only shot after failing the qualification exam for permanent residency.

— You too? *Uhahaha*.

Leclace and Levellock came from France and Russia respectively. They were quite famous as high rank, grade 2 heroes. Still, Chae Nayun felt unimpressed. She might've been amazed in the past, but things had changed.

“I'm so bored. When will my turn come?”

They prohibited all electronic devices, which meant no smartwatches or game consoles. Chae Nayun thought she might die of boredom as she waited.

“What’s up?” A figure suddenly approached her. His voice sounded familiar, but he looked quite different.

“Hey, goat beard.” Chae Nayun greeted Shin Jonghak with a giggle.

“Goat beard?”

“That’s what you have. Say *baa*. *Baaaa*—”

“*Baa*... No, no.”

Shin Jonghak frowned and stood next to her. Chae Nayun looked at him. He seemed much older now, probably because of that ugly beard.

“What are you looking at?”

“Whatever. Did you already finish the qualification test?”

“I’m a judge.”

“What? Seriously? How?”

Shin Jonghak smiled and showed her his hero ID card.

[High Rank Grade 1 Shin Jonghak (Rank 315)] [Vice Leader Desolate Moon]

Chae Nayun’s jaw dropped.

“What the. How are you high rank, grade 1? No, more importantly, you’re ranked 315? Who did you bribe?”

“*Ha*, it’s simple. I just beat up another high rank, grade 1 hero.”

Shin Jonghak’s confidence dumbfounded her.

Then an announcement came on.

— Next up, Chae Nayun. Intermediate rank, grade 2.

Her rank seemed too pitiful compared to Shin Jonghak. Naturally, the waiting room buzzed with voices.

— An intermediate rank came? How come this person didn't fail the screening?

— Hey, isn't that Chae Nayun, Chae Joochul's granddaughter?

— No, she probably just has the same name. There's no way Chae Nayun is only an intermediate-rank...

Chae Nayun sighed.

"You're still an intermediate rank?"

Shin Jonghak asked, slightly dumbfounded.

"Yeah, so what? I could beat you up if I wanted. I just didn't get tested officially!" Chae Nayun claimed.

Shin Jonghak only scoffed as she jumped to her feet, annoyed by his mockery.

"I'm going."

Stomp, stomp.

"Kim Hajin won't be coming."

Shin Jonghak muttered from behind as she headed to the test room. Chae Nayun stopped and he simply shrugged.

"Just letting you know."

"I know."

She only turned her head to face Shin Jonghak. Then she continued walking into the test room. An unfamiliar scenery greeted her as she opened the door.

“I’m Chae Nayun.”

The test room looked like a vast field that stretched endlessly in every direction, providing applicants with enough room to show off whatever they wanted.

“We will now begin intermediate rank, grade 2 Chae Nayun’s evaluation.”

The judges sitting across her announced. She knew both of them, Aileen and Yoo Sihyuk. Chae Nayun smirked at her master.

“Wipe that smirk off your face and show us what you can do.”

Master rank hero, rank 23 Yoo Sihyuk sternly announced. Chae Nayun found it hard to take him seriously.

“Okay, okay.”

Chae Nayun took out her sword. Her claymore stood 2 meters tall and towered above her. She poured magic power into the weapon she had taken from the Tower of Wish.

Kwaaaaa...

Magic power blazed around the claymore and it grew about 10 meters tall, almost touching the sky. Yoo Sihyuk smiled as Aileen watched expressionlessly.

“This is about 30%... Here I go!” Chae Nayun waved her sword with a shout.

BOOM!

Her attack continued to swell with heat and the wind around them

rushed towards the two judges. However, as her attack neared the judges...

“Stop.”

A small voice stopped her sword. The tiny fraction of Aileen’s Spirit Speech transformed into a giant force that bounded Chae Nayun. Aileen glared at the warrior in front of her and coldly announced.

“Intermediate rank, grade 2 Chae Nayun, you pass.”

* * *

I lay under the night sky that brightly shone with the moon and stars. The soft wind brushed past my cheeks and the grass caressed my back. The sky looked like a beautiful canvas with specks of light splattered over dark paint. This plain scene couldn’t be found where I came from. To be fair, I had never looked at such scenery back then.

“I also enjoyed today’s training.”

The beautiful scenery carried me away until I heard a voice. Boss sounded like usual while I lay exhausted from all the training.

“Yeah.”

I gave her a small smile. We had trained together for the past week. Boss served as a good opponent to test my spirit power. I didn’t have to go easy on her since she could block any attack. I also enjoyed occasionally poking fun at her even though she never seemed to realize it.

“Should we do this again tomorrow?”

“...”

I didn’t answer. Instead, I recalled what happened today. I gave Boss an afro with my *[Spirit Bullet]*, manipulated her nervous system to reverse the signals for her arms and legs, and made her do a handstand.

“Let’s do this again tomorrow.”

Boss repeated. I thought she would find it bothersome, but she somehow enjoyed it.

“Well, we’ve already trained 12 hours a day for the past week.”

“So you don’t want to do it again?”

Boss pouted and I simply smiled.

“Can you take off that bear head now?”

Boss wore that bear head every day for the past week. I couldn’t understand why she liked it so much.

“It’s still useable.”

Boss shook her head.

“What do you mean it’s useable? You can wear so many better helmets.”

“Enchant it for me with your four color enchantment. That’s a good skill.”

“I’d rather use it on another artifact. Why would I enchant something like that?”

Boss suddenly became quiet. She chewed her lips while sulking and closed the bear’s mouth. Then her face disappeared under the bear’s.

I smiled at Boss and turned back towards the sky. Suddenly, the *[Mysterious Magnifying Glass]* crossed my mind.

“Boss?”

— What.

[Mysterious Magnifying Glass] [Pinnacle Grade Magic Artifact] ▷ Weakness Identification — Will use magic power to identify the target's weaknesses. ▷ Emotion Identification — Will use magic power to identify the target's feelings towards you. (The identified weaknesses and emotions may be inaccurate when the user runs low on magic power.)

I wondered what Boss currently thought and felt. With a grin, I held up the magnifying glass.

“Wait a sec. I’m just curious.”

— *Hmm?*

I would need to spend all 5 streaks of stigma to figure out Boss’ weakness. However, I could probably find out about her current emotions for less. I infused 2 streaks of stigma into the magnifying glass.

“...”

Soon, letters appeared on the glass.

— What’s that?

Boss’ voice echoed inside the bear helmet and a cold breeze ruffled her hair. I froze and remained silent until the wind scattered the fallen leaves around us.

— What?

The lens only displayed 3 phrases, but I couldn’t simply ignore them.

[Guilt, Desire to be together, Affection.]

Chapter 272

The Meaning of the Emotions (2)

The magnifying glass revealed 3 emotions.

[Guilt, Desire to be together, Affection]

I could understand guilt. After all, Boss confessed that she murdered Kim Chundong's parents. However, I didn't understand affection. Of course, affection came in many forms like between friends and comrades.

— Kim Hajin?

Boss suddenly called my name. I felt surprised, but replied as calmly as possible.

“Y-Yes?”

— Wicked asked us for a favor. She said she'd give us Pandemonium's fighting arena if we freed her executives on the 15th floor.

Boss changed the topic. Horner's excessive loyalty had caused Wicked's downfall. I wouldn't mind if Wicked collapsed, but she seemed more reasonable than the other Nine Evils like Destruction, Terror, and Dread.

“R-Right... then I'll work on taking them out one by one.”

— *Mm*, good.

Boss finally took off the bear head. We stared at each other and her eyes looked firm as always. She probably didn't know her feelings either. Boss spent her childhood bathed in blood and death while being cursed and abused. An ordinary person would've pissed their

pants if they saw her. She should've lost all her feelings long ago in that cruel hell.

The current me felt a deep familiarity with Boss and I genuinely relied on her. I wondered why. Was it because I created her or did I also hold feelings for her? I looked at the sky and avoided her eyes.

"Huuu..."

I subconsciously sighed. I would have to confess one day that I wasn't Kim Chundong if Boss' affection stemmed from her guilt. The parents she killed had nothing to do with me. I didn't belong in this world, my past didn't belong to me, and she didn't need to feel guilty.

A streak of light fell from the sky.

"Hmm?"

The shooting star sparkled.

"It's a shooting star. Make a wish. I'm sure it'll come true."

Boss widened her eyes and murmured. I mustered the courage to stare at her instead of looking at the shooting star. Boss looked at the sky and I genuinely sympathized that she had to live through such a harsh life. Her wistful beauty made my heart skip a beat.

"Did you make a wish?" Boss innocently smiled.

"No, I missed it," I muttered in a daze.

"Don't worry. Another one might appear. Keep your eyes out."

We silently stared at the sky as Boss eagerly waited for another shooting star. Then she turned back somewhat dejected.

"Hajin."

She called my name and clearly not Kim Chundong's.

“Yes.”

I answered indifferently. She looked into my eyes and muttered, “I’m sorry about a lot of things. I can’t express it in words.”

Her voice touched my heart and made me feel guilty. I laughed and shook my head.

“I told you. You can forget now.”

She must’ve made a wish about it.

* * *

Boss returned to her room after saying goodbye to Kim Hajin. Spartan slept on her bed and had turned it into his nest for some reason. Boss smiled and sat at her desk. She still had to take care of several things before sleeping.

First, she messaged Wicked to ask about which executives needed to be freed first. Then she replied to the Hero Association’s secret message regarding the Orden Assassination Mission.

She suddenly felt an emptiness in her heart as she wrote her reply. Boss had no choice but to put her pen down.

“...”

Exhaustion overcame her. She had already achieved most of her goals. The Chameleon Troupe controlled half of Pandemonium. She had reclaimed the previous boss’ authority over the city and engraved their name into the minds of djinns and humans. Only revenge remained.

“Bell...”

Boss thought about Bell, the traitor who killed the previous boss and disappeared. His name used to evoke uncontrollable rage, but her anger subsided as time passed until it eventually froze.

“...”

Kim Hajin's face appeared in her head along with Bell's. At first, she only meant to use him as a tool to kill Bell and planned to throw him away. However, Kim Hajin held a different position now.

T-Thump—

“*Hmm?*”

A sudden pain struck her heart. Boss tilted her head and wondered if she had suffered an injury while training. She couldn't determine anything and turned on the CCTV that monitored Yi Yuri.

— Droon, look at this.

— What is it?

Yi Yuri and Droon laughed and talked inside the CCTV. The two teenagers looked happy together.

“These two...” Boss' eyes burned as she saw them flirt.

— Look, these flowers are growing underground.

— Do you like flowers?

Only curses and abuse filled Boss' childhood. Self-hatred consumed her formative years. Not a single day passed that she didn't resent her parents for giving birth to her.

— Of course! They're pretty! Do you not like them?

— *Huh?* N-No, I like them too.

She couldn't understand the feelings between Yi Yuri and Droon.

“...”

Boss found the scene quite interesting and continued watching them for a long time.

* * *

Korea's former president and the Hero Association's current head, Kim Sukho, sat on his elegant *[Lv.6 Elven Chair]* and received a report in his mansion.

— Yi Panho of the National Assembly was ambushed and killed last night.

— The association's executive, Kim Yoonyong, passed away tonight.

— Kaiser, the CEO of Atro Technology, was found dead in his office.

— Black Lotus seems to be behind all these deaths.

Kim Sukho sighed after hearing the reports. Yi Yuri's kidnapping still bothered him, but now he had to worry about Black Lotus as well.

“Are you positive they all became Orden's dogs?”

— Yes, we found evidence supporting it.

“Tsk.”

Kim Sukho shook his head. *Fools. I told them over and over again not to be greedy.*

— What should we publicly announce?

“Bury it for now. What's the situation on the special task force?”

— Around 177 members have been selected. They're all trustworthy.

“Got it. I'm hanging up now. You know how to reach me if something happens.”

Kim Sukho finished his call with Violet Banquet.

“*Huu...* those bastards.”

Kim Sukho quietly cursed. He couldn't believe his trusted aides all secretly communicated with Orden. Their deaths turned out to be good news, but he still felt a tinge of regret. Orden also reached out to him as well. Kim Sukho stood by his decision to reject the monster king, but didn't expect to lose Yi Yuri.

“Black Lotus...”

The new black seat of the hunting dogs he once used. He now realized they grew too dangerous to be left alone.

“*Hmm...* I guess I have no choice.”

He could only think of one solution. A group unrelated to djinns with the power to resist the Chameleon Troupe. A legendary mountain hermit had formed this group of assassins long ago. Not many knew that they had revived in the far east. Kim Sukho began writing a letter to their leader. *An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.* He planned to deal with those wild hunting dogs.

* * *

[Korea, Seoul]

Chae Joochul and Yoo Yeonha faced each other in a traditional house surrounded by greenery. The young woman in her twenties didn't cower in front of the Immortal. Her heart stood firm.

“Thank you for taking the time to meet,” Yoo Yeonha spoke.

“I didn't have a reason to refuse.”

Chae Joochul found no reason not to and simply felt bored. Other old chaebols got together for fun or discussed the Truth Agency, but not him.

Yoo Yeonha carefully began their conversation. “I came to ask a favor. As I stated in my letter—”

“You want to meet the Nine Stars.”

“Yes...”

Yoo Yeonha nodded under the immense pressure. The magic power Chae Joochul subconsciously emitted carried the same power as an ordinary hero’s attacks.

“The Nine Stars won’t be of any help. They’re nothing but retired senior citizens. Why do you think they’ve stayed silent? They’re all living in hiding, scared their side effects might worsen.”

“It’s not that. I just wish to talk to—”

“Can you cure their side effects?”

Yoo Yeonha swallowed her saliva at Chae Joochul’s question. A method to cure the side effects of their gifts. She had no clue, but chose to believe in Kim Hajin.

“Yes, I do.”

Yoo Yeonha made the biggest gamble in her life because she trusted Kim Hajin. Chae Joochul’s eyebrows twitched and he glared at her.

“Can you bear the weight of those words?”

“Yesh, I can. I mean...”

Yoo Yeonha became tongue-tied for a split second. She made an uncharacteristic mistake due to her nervousness and felt even more embarrassed by Chae Joochul’s lack of reaction.

“Yes, I can.”

Beeeeeeep—

An alarm sounded from their smartwatches. Yoo Yeonha felt surprised, but her gaze calmly remained on Chae Joochul.

“Go ahead.”

“Yes.”

Yoo Yeonha glanced at her smartwatch with Chae Joochul’s permission. Then her eyes widened at the disaster alarm that signaled a worldwide attack.

* * *

[China, Shanghai]

The monster king spoke.

Let the world witness your strength.

The humanoid monster resembling a tiger infiltrated Shanghai. The king had named him Tigris. He used to be the biggest mountain tyrant on the Himalayan mountains. Now he stood like a human in the middle of Shanghai’s streets wearing a hoodie. None of the civilians around noticed his identity.

Tigris carefully observed his surroundings and took off his hood. Then he shouted at the top of his lungs.

“I CAME! I SAW! I CONQUERED!”

His roar emitted an omnidirectional shockwave that burst the brains of civilians nearby. Screams rang out as buildings collapsed and he began eating the remaining humans.

The city instantly fell into chaos, but China’s heroes quickly responded.

“Who are you?”

“Reveal your identity!”

The heroes pointed their weapons at Tigris, but he didn't move an inch. He didn't need to as he stood tall like a tree and swung his fists.

Boom! Boom!

The heroes' heads exploded. Tigris had killed them from 300 meters away with only punches. His attacks went beyond common sense. Blows that defied distance. Tigris could destroy anything within his sight and called this power, *[Boundless Tiger Fist]*.

“*Uhahahaha!* Weak, you're too weak!”

Tigris burst into laughter.

“My name is Tigris! I am the tyrant that will slaughter all of you!”

* * *

[France, Paris]

Doloren walked through Paris while whistling and humming. Her voice sounded as beautiful as a nightingale's.

“You will revive after a short rest.”

Her voice flowed into the ears of civilians, corroding their brains. The civilians who died became zombies who followed her every command.

“Your corpses will revive.”

The zombies bit the other humans and Doloren smiled at this sight.

“I will lead you to immortality and you will bloom again!”

Paris' heroes couldn't stop her singing. Her voice enchanted them and they became even stronger zombies. Doloren's singing continued until death descended on the entire city.

[England, London]

Toji arrived in London. He looked no different than a human besides his two hands made from rocks. He finally stood in front of Buckingham Palace.

Destroy Buckingham Palace and murder Rachel according to the king's wishes.

Lancaster had given him a special command.

“Here it is, Buckingham Palace.”

The earth dragged along with him as he walked and a shattering sound rang out with every step.

“Stop th—”

“Who are—”

He killed everyone in his path and no one could utter more than two words. Toji simply killed all of them by swinging his fists.

“...”

Then he stopped near the entrance because of a large wolf.

“*Huh?*”

Toji tilted his head. This wolf seemed too big compared to the wolves he knew.

“You. Die.”

His curiosity only lasted for a moment as he swung his fist once more. The earth shot up like a whip towards the wolf. *Crack!* However, the wolf crushed the earth with his teeth.

“Huh?”

Toji’s eyes widened.

“You, not, animal?”

— *Grrrrr.*

The wolf smirked. His name was Fenrir and his strength couldn’t be ignored as Evandel’s first creation.

“I, see. *Aha.*”

Toji nodded. He understood, but didn’t react any differently. He swung his fists again. Cracks appeared and turned into giant fissures.

BOOM!

The earth exploded, but the wolf used each shattered piece as a foothold to maneuver.

Toji didn’t stand still either. He transmitted his will into the earth underneath the wolf.

Something strange happened as Toji’s original body crumbled into dirt. He reappeared from under the wolf and grabbed the beast.

“I, Toji. Earth is me. I am earth.”

Toji smiled and broke the wolf’s back.

Chapter 273

Vow (1)

Crack—

Toji tightened his arm around Fenrir and a pressure rivaling an earthquake crushed the wolf's back. Toji threw him aside as Fenrir rolled back and struck a wall.

“I... stronger.”

Toji smiled and murmured. Then he returned to annihilating the royal family.

— *Grrrrr.*

However, another animal growled and Toji slowly turned around. This time, a tiger as large as a house blocked his path.

“This... zoo?”

The tiger didn't come alone and Toji had now been surrounded. A strange bird and a horse appeared in the sky. He could also feel odd presences underground. Even with his dull senses, Toji knew the odds had turned against him.

Ssss...

Fenrir stood up again after his bones and organs had been crushed. The regenerative ability he gained from devouring a troll quickly healed his injuries.

“What.” Toji only grew more confused.

Guooooo...

An unknown magic power suddenly erupted. It came from a summoning spell that called forth a mystical beast.

“Turtle.”

Toji mumbled as he saw the black turtle of the four cardinal guardians and the 8 star magician, Ah Hae-In.

Ah Hae-In looked down at Toji from the turtle’s shell.

“You’re a new one, aren’t you?”

Toji looked back and forth between the turtle and the kid standing on top. The beasts surrounding him quickly moved as he pondered.

— *Kuooo!*

— *Grrrowr!*

The tiger and wolf shot forward and restrained Toji’s limbs. Then the birds blasted magic power at him.

“Hehe...”

However, Toji didn’t feel any pain. He changed his body into sand and entirely negated their attacks.

“No pain, no pain... *huh?*”

However, he soon realized something began to absorb his magic power. His eyes widened at the 6 female ghosts floating around the black turtle.

Ah Hae-In grinned. “They’re succubi that specialize in absorbing magic power.”

“N-No stealing!” Toji swung his arm, which turned into a whip that shot towards the succubi.

The black turtle specialized in defense among the four cardinal guardians and quickly formed a barrier.

Clang!

Toji's attack couldn't pierce the black turtle's carapace. Ah Hae-In had never experienced anything that could break through the black turtle's defense.

Clang! Clang!

Even so, Toji continued to attack. To Ah Hae-In's surprise, cracks began to appear on the black turtle's barrier.

"Hmm, you're quite an amazing fellow."

She didn't feel threatened even though she acknowledged Toji's strength. His magic power would eventually run out.

Clang! Clang! Clang!

Toji grew sleepier as he endlessly attacked the black turtle. His instincts told him to retreat, which he could easily do. He just had to turn into sand and scatter away, so he transmitted his will into the earth. However, a magic cage suddenly appeared around him and he couldn't transmit his will outside for some reason.

"What?"

This shocked him and he didn't know this wasn't a spell, but a change in reality.

Kwang!

Toji slammed his fists against the cage, but nothing changed. "What is, this?"

Kwang! Kwang!

The cage didn't budge no matter how many times he struck. Strangely, attacks from outside could enter as the succubi continued to drain his magic power.

Kwang! Kwang! Kwang!

"That won't do any good, idiot."

A sharp voice rang out as Toji frantically pounded. Jin Sahyuk appeared in the air.

"...?" Toji stopped and stared at her.

"You won't be able to escape."

She had formed that blue cage with Reality Manipulation. The cage isolated Toji from reality and only death awaited him inside.

"Really? *Yaaawn*."

Toji's drowsiness grew worse as his magic power disappeared. Growing sleepy usually meant the end for a golem. He finally fell asleep.

"He's sleeping?" Jin Sahyuk murmured dumbfoundedly.

"Wow! You've grown quite strong, knight Shin Jahyuk." Rachel appeared and praised Jin Sahyuk.

"Well, it's nothing."

Jin Sahyuk had visited Rachel to resign as the Crevon royal family's knight commander. Toji happened to attack, so she joined the battle out of boredom.

"I recently experienced another enlightenment."

Jin Sahyuk could use her Reality Manipulation authority better now after experiencing Akatrina's recorded past.

Ah Hae-In approached them on the black turtle. “Shin Jahyuk, how do you plan on dealing with that monster?”

“*Huh?* What do you mean? I can just kill him, right?”

Ah Hae-In and Jin Sahyuk had worked together before in Crevon.

“No, he probably won’t die.” Ah Hae-In shook her head.

“What do you mean?”

Jin Sahyuk shot a spear towards the sleeping golem, but it didn’t damage the curled-up Toji at all.

“The heck?” Jin Sahyuk frowned as Ah Hae-In crossed her arms.

“The black turtle can appraise the strength of ores.”

According to the black turtle, Toji’s body boasted a 9.9 out of 10 strength.

“We can trap him, but it’ll be impossible to destroy him.”

Something with a 9.9 value could never be destroyed.

“It seems like Orden created some absurd monsters.”

* * *

[India, Himalayan Mountain Range]

I arrived at the foot of the Himalayas to meet one of the Nine Stars, Heynckes. Traveling here didn’t pose any issues since I simply arrived with Spartan’s teleportation authority.

“*Mmm.*”

I stared at Heynckes’ inn that hung on a cliff. It seemed as if it would

fall with even the slightest wind. The sign read, *Himalayan Daybreak*, and I mustered the courage to enter.

Kiiik—

The door creaked open and the man behind the counter looked up as he listened to the radio. He had tied his long white hair and his handsome face had a scar around the left eye. He looked well-aged just as I described in my novel.

“Is it you?”

Heynckes spoke before I even entered. I stopped to think about what he meant since I hadn’t expected such a greeting. Heynckes frowned after seeing my confusion.

“Are you the man who murdered my precious disciple’s brother?”

“Precious disciple?”

I felt dumbfounded at first. By disciple, he must’ve meant Chae Nayun. However, they never even knew each other in the original novel and shouldn’t have spent that much time together in this world.

“How long are you going to stand there? Come in. Don’t be a wuss.”

“Wuss?”

If anything, Chae Nayun seemed to have influenced the way he talked.

“What, you don’t want to?”

“No.”

I walked inside. Heynckes would obviously recognize me now that I thought about it. As the Lord of Steel, all his tools possessed intelligence rivaling humans and they shared a hive mind as well.

“Talking should be easier if you know me.”

I sat next to him and got straight to the point.

“I came to ask for your help.”

Coincidentally, the radio also reported why I came.

— Orden’s elite humanoid monsters have invaded several countries. A tiger monster known as Tigris attacked Shanghai, a zombie apocalypse has been reported in Paris, and—

Heynckes turned off the radio and looked at me. His towering stature made him look more than just intimidating.

“Making such an absurd request on our first meeting. You’re just like my disciple in that regard.”

Tk. Heynckes took out a wooden cup and poured some vodka.

“I said the same thing to her. My body can’t fight anymore.”

“If the Nine Stars won’t fight, then who—”

“The Nine Stars existed 50 years ago, kid.”

Heynckes cut me off and handed me the vodka. I looked back and forth between him and the cup before chugging it. A small fire lit up inside me.

“*Cough...* I can help you if you’re worried about your side effect.”

Heynckes suffered from a side effect called steel transformation.

As the Lord of Steel, his body also transformed into steel. He turned his internal organs, spine, and left eye into steel that possessed his will. However, his authority didn’t stop there and continued to rampage.

To him, time became a one-way road to becoming complete steel. More parts of his body would gradually transform, including his brain

and blood. In the end, he would become a chunk of steel and die. However, I possessed herbs that could only be found in the Tower of Wish and should be able to create a medicine with the help of settings intervention.

“I know how to heal the side effects you’re suffering from.”

The Nine Stars hated having their side effects mentioned, so I also risked my life coming here.

“...”

Heynckes quietly looked at me and his left eye turned grey before I realized. This steel eye experienced the world one-millionth times slower and could detect lies.

“Es ist wahr.” Heynckes glared at me and spoke.

I translated the German using the laptop in my head. He asked if I spoke the truth.

“Yes, it’s true.”

His eyebrows twitched when I answered. I grew nervous, but what he said next caught me by surprise.

“You learned German?”

“Pardon?”

“I asked if you learned German.”

“Ah... Yes, a little.”

Heynckes’ left eye returned to normal and he seemed noticeably less cautious than before.

“Why would you learn such a thing? It’s not the 1980s anymore.”

He gently smiled.

“Huh? Oh, um...”

This world greatly differed from my previous one since Korea became a superpower. The entire world learned and spoke Korean. Not many interpreters or translators existed and Koreans didn't need to learn foreign languages since even academic papers and official documents used Korean.

“I learned it because I know you're German.”

“Mm, is that so? You've got manners. How much have you learned?”

“I should be able to communicate normally.”

“Oh, wirklich?”

Heynckes laughed heartily. I didn't remember giving him such a setting, but he seemed like a big patriot.

“Well, that's another story.”

Heynckes turned serious once again. “Unfortunately, I have no intentions of curing my side effect.”

“Huh?”

Heynckes' side effect should be one of the worst among the Nine Stars, but he didn't want to reverse it?

“I used to fear death when I was younger. That's why I escaped to this place, but it's different now. If someone my age still fears death, then he hasn't matured enough.”

“Really?”

“Yes, really. However, I still want you to do one thing.”

Thankfully, I could do something else for him. I quickly nodded and Heynckes spoke with a mischievous smile.

“Settle things with my disciple.”

Silence descended. I replied exactly 3 seconds later.

“*Hah?*”

“It doesn’t matter how. Just settle things with her.” An innocent smile emerged on his face.

“You mean with Chae Nayun?”

“That’s right.”

I couldn’t accept such an offer so easily. I didn’t know what Heynckes knew, but my relationship with Chae Nayun couldn’t be fixed with a few sentences.

“*Um*, that’s not something that can be solved so easily—”

“My disciple and I already know everything. Chae Nayun knows why you killed her brother and what he would’ve become if you hadn’t.”

“I know.”

I also heard about it from Yoo Yeonha.

“Then that’s an even bigger problem. Why are you hesitating? What a wuss.”

Heynckes crossed his arms and looked at me as if I was a fool.

“...”

Chae Nayun might’ve said, *That’s none of your business, old man!* However, I wasn’t her and stealthily checked Heynckes’ potential after thinking about it.

[Heynckes] [9.75/9.6]

A 9.75 out of 9.6 potential. The values didn't make any sense.

"Ah."

I quickly understood since Heynckes' ability allowed him to surpass his potential. His *[Steel Transformation]* side effect made him stronger as he neared death.

"So? What's your answer?"

"..."

I silently stared at him. He could fight against Orden with a 9.75 potential. I had no choice but to listen to his request.

"I will."

Heynckes immediately smiled and nodded in content. Then he suddenly took out a dagger.

"Feed this dagger your blood and make a vow."

"A vow?"

"This dagger contains my Will of Covenant. It'll pierce your heart if you don't keep your vow."

"..."

I glanced at the dagger.

[Covenant Dagger] [Product of an Authority] [Steel Attribute] — A dagger containing the will of Heynckes' steel spirit. [Covenant] — You must keep the vow you make upon feeding your blood to this dagger. — This dagger will pierce your heart if the vow is not fulfilled. — The person whose heart is pierced will die.

The item's description strongly emphasized its absolute ability and hinted at Heynckes' true strength. Only Shin Myungchul ever defeated him.

"I'm being generous since I think of you as a man among men from what my disciple told me."

Heynckes handed me the dagger.

"I, Heynckes, will do the same if you make this vow. I will kill this Orden you speak of."

"..."

I slightly hesitated, but this would be a cheap price to make one of the Nine Stars my ally. Plus, I had to meet Chae Nayun eventually.

"Fine, I accept."

I mustered the courage and nodded.

Chapter 274

Vow (2)

Yoo Yeonha finished her meeting with Chae Joochul despite the sudden calamities. She achieved her initial goal through persistent persuasion. Chae Joochul promised to introduce her to Oh Jaejin, a member of the Nine Stars. Afterwards, she staggered back to her limousine.

“Are you feeling okay?”

Jin Sechan, Yoo Yeonha’s secretary, asked the moment she entered the car. She shook her head and felt dizzy from Chae Joochul’s magic power.

“Let’s go home. I need to sleep.”

“Yes, miss.”

Like a competent secretary, Jin Sechan adjusted the limousine to its optimal temperature and activated the mana stone with an air purifying function. Then he turned up the speaker so his boss could listen to the reports from the Falling Blossom guild members.

— China, four guilds based in Shanghai have been completely exterminated.

— France, Paris has been sealed off.

— England, they succeeded in the subjugation.

— Canada, sudden deaths continue to occur. Multiple witnesses have reported sightings of a ghost.

Yoo Yeonha listened with her eyes closed. The humanoid monsters

invaded several countries and began killing civilians, but she felt no sympathy. Rather, she began to calculate the profits her guild could make.

“Have we been asked for aid?”

“Yes, multiple countries have already asked for our heroes and potions. They would like to discuss the prices later and—”

“Reject the request for heroes, but tell them we’ll provide potions. You know, the new ones, *[Essence of Recovery]* and *[Essence of Bravery]*.”

It would be foolish to dispatch her heroes to their deaths, but potions carried no risks. Essence Pharmacy had recently developed two new potions. Giving other countries these free potions would serve as good marketing since consumers didn’t like purchasing anything new.

“Send the potions to them without charge.”

“Yes, miss.”

Those in dire need couldn’t be picky. She would use this opportunity to simultaneously improve her company’s image and promote her products.

“Now, please let me rest.”

Yoo Yeonha leaned back in her seat and closed her eyes.

“Yes, miss.”

Jin Sechan cautiously drove to provide a comfortable ride. He glanced at Yoo Yeonha through the rearview mirror. She looked incredibly beautiful in her sleep.

He couldn’t suppress the unbearable emotions in his heart. He told himself thousands of times that his love would never come true, but it never died. Jin Sechan tried to convince himself that he could still love her without calling her his own.

— We'll let you have her.

The proposal from Orden's servant suddenly crossed his mind.

“...”

He tightened his grip around the steering wheel and condemned his foolish desire.

* * *

I headed to the *[World of Wish]* after making my vow with Heynckes.

The Tower of Wish had been renamed after Kim Suho destroyed its outer shell. Its slogan also changed from, *The tower full of humanity's wishes*, to *The world where humanity's wishes may come true*.

I returned to the 15th floor on Genkelope's vessel to release Wicked's executives as promised.

“Are you sure?”

Horner worriedly asked in front of the most notorious facility on the 15th floor, *[Genkelope Prison]*. I sympathized with him since he told me what these djinns planned to do before he locked them up.

“Don't worry about it. Let's go inside.”

“Okay.”

I entered with Horner while disguised as Black Lotus.

“*Hmm?*”

The prison conditions seemed surprisingly good. Most rooms featured a bed and a TV, a separate bathroom, and prisoners enjoyed decent food.

“This place looks quite nice.”

“Everyone still wants to get out. Inmates consist of around 300 players. Life inside here is easy, but the labor is hard.”

I listened to Horner as we headed deeper into the prison. The hallway grew darker and the facilities began to deteriorate.

“This is it.”

We reached the end of the basement floor.

“...”

I became speechless when I saw the inhumane conditions that Wicked’s executives lived in. They didn’t even have a bed, let alone a TV. A separate bathroom didn’t exist either. Filth covered the floor and walls. The cell looked completely empty, so they had nothing to pass time with.

I carefully looked in the cramped cell with the 6 executives lying in silence.

“Wake them up.”

The prison guard rattled the bars at Horner’s command. *Kwang, kwang, kwang!*

“*Huaaak!*”

Startled, the executives shot up and looked at us. Their bloodshot eyes trembled with fear and dread. I studied them for a moment before asking.

“Which one of you is Kirkin?”

“W-Why do you ask?”

The executives shuddered. Wicked’s executives should be as strong as high rank heroes, so seeing them scared felt strange. I guess their poor physical health also affected their mental health.

“Don’t make me ask twice.”

I coldly spoke and the skinniest djinn raised his hand while trembling.

“I-It’s me.”

Kirkin had been Wicked’s right-hand man, but his former glory could no longer be seen with all the bruises on his body.

“Come closer.”

Kirkin obeyed as he trembled in fear. The long period of cruel treatment must’ve conditioned him to follow orders.

“Open the door.”

“Yes sir.”

The prison guard unlocked the door and Kirkin stepped out with his head down.

“Kirkin, do you recognize me?”

“...?”

Kirkin slowly lifted his head. I wore a hood and robe, but anyone would recognize my black lotus symbol. Kirkin widened his eyes and nodded.

“B-Black Lotus...”

“Correct. I’m here on behalf of your boss, Wicked. She asked me to release you.”

“Pardon?” Kirkin’s eyes twinkled with a glimmer of hope. He swallowed his saliva and asked, “D-Does that mean...?”

I exchanged glances with the guard next to me.

“Inmate Kirkin, you have been granted ranker’s amnesty. You better thank ranker, Black Lotus.”

* * *

[Wicked’s Sanctuary]

Four months have passed since the incident. Wicked, despite her success a few months earlier, couldn’t step a foot outside her sanctuary. Everyone knew her executives had disappeared, which made her an easy target.

“*Huek!*”

Wicked woke up shaking from a nightmare. Her soft skin had turned coarse and her eyes that once twinkled had died. She looked completely ruined.

“*Haaa, haaa...*”

She tried to calm down, but tears gathered in her eyes.

“How did I end up like this?”

Her downfall happened so abruptly. She took control of the fighting arena not too long ago and even declared she would bring Orden down. She thought the world lay at her feet back then. Then she recalled her executives’ faces. They made so many precious memories together.

Why did you guys get yourselves locked up? You should be helping me become the lord of all djinns...

Tiriring—

She received a text message while lamenting.

[Kirkin released - Lotus]

It came from Black Lotus. She stared at the message for a while before jumping to her feet. Immediately, the sanctuary door opened in slow motion. Wicked widened her eyes as she stared beyond it. A dear subordinate she hadn't seen in a long time came sobbing.

"Kirkin!" Wicked shouted and rushed towards him.

"Boss..."

Kirkin greeted her with tearful eyes. Their touching reunion would make anyone cry.

"Kirkin, how did you escape?"

"Black Lotus helped me," he replied with a whimper.

"Black Lotus did? How?"

"They had this thing called ranker's amnesty."

Kirkin explained that Black Lotus used his ranker's amnesty, a special privilege given only to the first rankers who helped free Genkelope. Of course, Horner made this up on the spot.

"It's all thanks to Black Lotus."

"Thank goodness!"

"How are the others?" Wicked asked as she patted Kirkin on the back.

"Not good. The prison is filthy. They force us to do hard labor and also torture us."

Kirkin burst into tears. Wicked comforted him while holding back her own tears. They had already forgotten about all the crimes they committed. Djinn's had no shame or conscience by nature.

"It's okay. Don't cry. I'll have another talk with Black Lotus. We'll get everyone else out."

She tearfully resolved as they enjoyed their reunion in each other's arms. Wicked became bound to the Chameleon Troupe now.

* * *

[21F, Card Kingdom.]

“You’re going to buy all these?”

“Yes, all of them.”

“You have that much TP?”

“So what if I do?”

“Well, I mean...”

Kim Hajin cleanly swept all the random boxes at the card store. He planned to boost his strength with his luck. Several messages popped up before he even opened the boxes.

[Your enormous luck has been working behind the scenes.] [A threatening opponent has turned into a temporary ally.] [Luck that affects human relationships is always special!] [Narrow Escape from Death (5/9) — Special stat, accumulation of luck, has been partially activated!]

Kim Hajin had no idea what these messages meant.

* * *

[Korea, Underground Bunker in Gangwondo]

Two weeks had passed since the joint training camp for the national special task force. The 177 heroes were divided into 13 different teams. As team 3's leader, Yun Seung-Ah led Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak, Yi Jiyeon, Yohei, and Shen Yuan.

“We will fight Orden head-on. The administration is depending on you, Suho.”

Team 3 went to the mission briefing inside their dormitory. All 13 teams received different missions and team 3 had the most challenging one: confronting Orden. Rumors floating around also mentioned that Aileen's team 1 shared the same mission.

"Will you be alright?"

"Yes, I'll be fine," Kim Suho confidently replied. As expected of the man who defeated the demon king.

"You won't even need to bother. I'll take care of him."

Chae Nayun interrupted with a smirk. Kim Suho glanced at her and shook his head.

"Okay, but take a look at this blueprint first. It's from the Truth Agency."

Team Leader Yun Seung-Ah drew everyone's attention with a huge map.

"Whoa! The Truth Agency?"

"That's right."

Yi Jiyeon widened her eyes. Nowadays, the Truth Agency basically symbolized truth itself. It had grown exponentially from the small website that only a few people used to know. Yi Jiyeon clapped in excitement and asked.

"I heard you need a lot of money and some kind of divine blessing to hear back from them! How much did you spend? No, wait, are you friends with the Truth Agency?"

"I didn't spend any money, but the government did. And we're not friends. I don't have enough money to hire the Truth Agency."

"Ah... *bleh*."

Yun Seung-Ah tried to ignore the last remark.

That brat. I only picked her because people called her a promising supporter, but she's so rude.

“Let’s get back to training. Prepare yourselves.”

Their training routine would be quite simple.

Clap, clap.

A sophisticated hologram popped up when Yun Seung-Ah clapped. It reconstructed the area using the Truth Agency’s blueprint as a reference.

“The boss isn’t Orden, but the training area will be similar to the real thing. Get used to it.”

They brought this training simulator from the Tower of Wish and their training would consist of fighting the Lv.50 minotaur at Orden’s palace.

* * *

[Pandemonium Arena]

Boss visited the fighting arena that now belonged to the Chameleon Troupe.

“Please take a seat, master.”

“Sure.”

Boss felt slightly emotional looking down at the stage from the VIP seat. She used to compete here in the distant past and also recently visited as an audience member. This arena had become hers now.

— Welcome to the Pandemonium Arena! Today’s big match will be Big Boon vs Rain!

A fat djinn and a skinny djinn entered the stage. The audience cheered and Boss could feel the excitement tingling on her skin.

— Begin!

The host shouted and the duel began. Big Boon tried to overwhelm Rain with his physique, but Rain quickly dodged and attacked his opponent with small stabs. This would become a battle between speed and endurance.

“*Mmm.*”

Boss watched the duel in excitement. Then someone suddenly appeared in the VIP stand.

“...?”

This woman didn’t seem to have any ill intentions. Boss calmly turned to face the uninvited guest.

“Hello.”

Boss recalled that this woman always accompanied Bell. *Her name must be... Jin Sahyuk.*

“Have you been well?”

Jin Sahyuk smirked and sounded somewhat arrogant. Boss looked around since Jain told her Bell always accompanied Jin Sahyuk. However, she couldn’t sense Bell’s presence anywhere near.

“Where is Bell?”

“How should I know? I came alone.”

Jin Sahyuk shrugged with a smile as Boss glared at her. Her gaze seemed sharp as a blade, but Jin Sahyuk didn’t feel intimidated at all.

“Is this our second meeting?”

“I’ll ask you again. Where is Bell?”

Boss’ voice filled with contempt. Nevertheless, Jin Sahyuk smiled leisurely.

“I already know what’s going on between you and Bell, but you don’t have to be so desperate to kill him.”

Jin Sahyuk’s expression hardened and she continued in a low whisper.

“I’ll be the one who kills that bastard.”

— *Ah*, Big Boon just used his signature punch! It’s a direct hit!

Big Boon’s punch landed on Rain’s stomach and pushed him to the corner. Boss’ body already turned dark as she activated her Yaksha transformation.

“Did you come to get yourself killed?”

Boss stood up from her seat. Both Bell and this woman seemed to possess a unique talent for upsetting her.

“No, I’m here for a different reason and I’ll lay it out for you right now.”

Jin Sahyuk and Boss stared at each other intensely. A fire seemed to blaze in their eyes as Jin Sahyuk continued.

“If I end up killing Bell...”

— Big Boon is the winner!

A round of applause followed the host’s announcement. Boss could hear Jin Sahyuk’s voice despite the cheering.

“I can take Kim Hajin with me, right? You only dragged him in as a tool to kill Bell.”

Jin Sahyuk clearly tried to provoke her.

Chapter 275

Vow (3)

Boss' gaze seemed to pierce her heart. Jin Sahyuk hadn't felt such hostility in a while, but didn't back down. Time silently passed.

Jin Sahyuk always acted fickle. She might give up on something and change her mind the next moment. As such, she spent a long time thinking about what to do. Finally, she decided she couldn't give up on Kim Hajin.

"Don't be so mad. I'll use him for a few years and return him."

She didn't exactly know Kim Hajin's ability, but sensed something special about his magic power from what she saw in Akatrina. She could tell because of her especially high magic power sensitivity. Reconstructing Akatrina would require Kim Hajin's special power.

"I won't hear any more of this."

Boss spoke and hot magic power rose like a tornado from her rage and killing intent. Jin Sahyuk quickly covered herself with a barrier.

"I won't let you leave alive either."

Shadows dyed Boss' body black and her intent to fight filled the air. Jin Sahyuk genuinely enjoyed this chilling moment before a heated battle.

"Do what you want."

Jin Sahyuk didn't plan on refusing a fight. She might not win, but she didn't feel like she would lose either. Moreover, she also wanted to estimate this woman's strength.

“Try to escape if you can.”

Boss finished her brief warning and shadows rose from feet to envelop the surrounding area. Her shadow barrier closed off any path of retreat for Jin Sahyuk.

“*Pft.*”

Jin Sahyuk smirked and unleashed her magic power. *Guooooo...* Hundreds of weapons formed in the air along with a crimson aura.

A battlefield even deadlier than the Pandemonium Arena appeared. The two women glared at each other before fighting to the death.

However...

“*Huh?* Boss?”

A coarse voice rang out and cooled the tension in the air. Boss and Jin Sahyuk turned towards the voice.

“Is my probation over?”

Boss had placed Cheok Jungyeong on probation in her shadow barrier last week for killing Terror’s djinns because they picked a fight with him. Jin Sahyuk didn’t worry about Cheok Jungyeong. Boss didn’t seem like the type to allow any interference in a 1 on 1 fight.

“Yes, your probation is over.”

“*Sigh*, thank goodness. Your barrier is quite interesting no matter how many times I look at it.”

Boss’ shadow barrier didn’t alter the surrounding space, but summoned beings into it. They came inside and met Cheok Jungyeong.

“Gyeong.”

“Huh?”

Jin Sahyuk stretched as Boss and Cheok Jungyeong spoke. However, her relaxed attitude didn’t last for long.

“Beat her up.”

“Oh?”

“What?”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Sahyuk’s eyes widened. They felt surprised for different reasons.

“T-Two against one isn’t fair!”

Jin Sahyuk pointed at Boss while shouting, but Cheok Jungyeong ignored her. He had been on probation for two weeks and couldn’t fight anyone. He starved for battle and felt overjoyed at the worthy opponent in front of him.

“Kuhahaha!”

Cheok Jungyeong charged like a wild beast.

“Damn it!”

Jin Sahyuk quickly activated *[Reality Manipulation]* to escape, but they didn’t allow her to do so. *Kwaaaaa!* Cheok Jungyeong’s energy blast destroyed the circular pathway Jin Sahyuk forcefully created.

“Don’t run away!”

Cheok Jungyeong happily shouted as his fist flew towards Jin Sahyuk’s face.

* * *

[Orden’s Palace]

Tigris, Xphil, and Doloren returned to the palace without Toji after completing Orden's order to wreak havoc in several countries.

"Ah, I'm bored."

Tigris didn't feel content yet and the other two humanoid monsters felt the same. They wanted to have more fun killing humans, displaying their overwhelming strength, and bathing in the sense of superiority.

"The palace is boring."

Orden ordered them to return before they could even fulfill half of their desires. They felt slightly annoyed, but obeyed their king's command.

"What the hell happened to Toji?"

Doloren murmured as she played with a human head she brought back as a souvenir. The head belonged to high rank, grade 2 hero Peindal.

"That idiot. I'm sure he fell into a trap, but he'll find his way back."

"Right? Toji won't die so easily with his tough body."

"I'm tougher and harder to kill."

They chatted as they walked towards the king's court with a praying mantis standing in front of the large gate. Kurukuru had lost a wing and an arm.

"Ew, gross. It irks me every time I see him. Why does he look like that?"

"That's what I wanted to say."

Doloren frowned as she stared at Kurukuru. Tigris approached Kurukuru and thought the praying mantis looked even grosser up

close. Kurukuru muttered as he glared at them.

“Kururu, kururu...”

“What’s he saying? Idiot can’t even talk.”

“Kururururu.”

Doloren began to translate Kurukuru’s words.

“Why did you come so late? You should’ve returned the moment the king commanded. That’s what he’s saying.”

“Pft.” Tigris sneered. “A mere praying mantis? You’re not worthy.”

Tigris slapped the huge insect. *KWANG!* Kurukuru flew to the side and rolled on the floor.

“A lowly praying mantis that can’t even talk.”

Tigris snorted and walked into the royal court. Doloren faintly smiled at Kurukuru before following Tigris.

“Kururu...”

“Lord Kurukuru!”

The servant humanoid monsters rushed to help him up. Kurukuru staggered up and stared at the three humanoid monsters in front of the king. The king simply smiled at the arrogant monsters who arrived late.

“Kurururu...”

Kurukuru clenched his teeth until his jaws swelled.

The training for the Orden Assassination Mission finally ended. Team 3 successfully defeated the minotaur inside the simulated palace. However, their teamwork couldn't be called perfect. Shen Yuan and Yi Jiyeon died before they reached the boss. Kim Suho also ended up defeating the boss on his own.

"Why are the normal mobs so strong?"

Yi Jiyeon sighed and massaged her sore muscles. Meanwhile, Shin Jonghak stared at Chae Nayun as she busily wrote something in her notebook.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

Both Yi Jiyeon and Kim Suho turned around at Shin Jonghak's voice.

"Huh?"

Chae Nayun stopped writing and smirked. "I'm talking with my master."

"Master?"

"Yeah, this notebook works like the tower's communication letter."

Chae Nayun used it to communicate with the old man who suddenly became her master. They usually exchanged light banter, but she also received valuable advice.

"Oh? Who's the person on the other side?" Yi Jiyeon's eyebrows playfully danced.

"I told you. It's my master."

"Master? Hero Yoo Sihyuk?"

"No, someone huge that none of you know about."

Chae Nayun wondered how they would react if they found out about Heynckes, but decided not to tell them. She shrugged and stored the notebook away.

“Oh right, I have to contact Hajin. *Ah...*”

Kim Suho’s few words made Chae Nayun’s heart sink. He subconsciously murmured to himself and paused after realizing what he said.

“Oh? What about Kim Hajin?”

Yi Jiyeon mysteriously smiled and skipped over to Kim Suho.

“*Uh*, well... nothing.” Kim Suho coughed and avoided answering. He wanted to thank Hajin for all the help, but didn’t have the chance yet.

“*Cough*, anyways...”

He turned to Chae Nayun, who stared at him intently.

“Chae Nayun, don’t let the boss find out about that notebook. She said no electronics and that’s no different.”

“...”

Chae Nayun nodded with a bad aftertaste in her mouth.

“What’s no different from electronics?”

Their boss suddenly appeared. Chae Nayun and the rest of team 3 froze. Before they could react, Yun Seung-Ah released her magic power and snatched away Chae Nayun’s notebook.

“*A-Ah!* Give it back!”

Of course, Chae Nayun strongly protested.

“Quiet! Prohibited items will be confiscated upon discovery.”

Yun Seung-Ah easily suppressed all dissent and began to read the notebook with a grin.

“Let’s see who our Nayun is dating.”

However, Yun Seung-Ah’s smile quickly faded because of a certain name in the notebook. *Ssk— Ssk—* She turned a few pages before raising her head and murmuring in a daze.

“Heyn... Heynckes? Is this... the Heynckes I know?”

* * *

[21F – Card Kingdom]

I spent 150,000 TP to pull three 8 star cards and one 9 star card. Even with my luck, I could only pull that many because my settings limited 8 star and 9 star cards. Of course, I didn’t complain since I could use all of them as effective goods.

“*[Anything Checkbook]...*”

I walked down the street while reading the cards’ descriptions.

[Anything Checkbook] [8 star] Effective Good — A checkbook that can pay out anything. Whoever receives a check must also carry out what was paid for.

Most checkbooks handled money, but this magical one could handle TP, magic power, and even feelings like trust that could be valued and given out.

What do I use this for?

As I pondered...

“Oh, who’s this?” Someone ran up to me while acting all excited.

“My, if it isn’t our dear master craftsman.”

Medea appeared with a blooming smile and spoke in a high-pitched voice.

“Great! Perfect timing!”

She acted like our meeting coincidentally occurred.

“Ah, yes.”

I looked at Medea with a flustered expression. It seemed she would soon descend into the phenomenon realm since she entered the 21st floor as an administrator.

“What do you need?”

“Eh? No, it’s not like I need anything.”

Medea smiled and handed me a document.

“Here, take this. I waited until you came back.”

“...?”

I glanced at the document. It contained the words, *[Complete Transfer of Prestige]*, written across it. My eyes almost popped out of their sockets, but I swallowed hard and calmed myself.

“What’s this?”

“I brought it just for you. I don’t need Prestige anymore.”

“You’re descending?”

“Yep! Uhuhuhu, uhuhuhu.”

Medea laughed like she had the world under her feet. She even twirled like a ballerina.

“To finalize my descent, I wondered if you could make me a magician’s robe and a ceremonial dress to wear underneath it.”

“...”

“I’ll prepare whatever materials you need.”

Medea looked so happy. I simply stared at her and pondered. I would have to dedicate 2-3 hours every day for at least a month to make something that satisfied her. Of course, I didn’t find that too difficult. Medea could become a powerful ally once she descended. I only worried about what would happen to Earth if she descended.

“You will, right?”

Medea urged me as I decided.

“I can.”

“*Whoooo!*”

She twirled and giggled like a kid. Her brain seemed to be missing a screw.

“However, I need you to make a vow.”

“I’m coming back alive, alive, aliiiiive!”

“Hello?”

“Yees?”

I took out the covenant dagger that Heynckes left me and Medea’s eyes widened.

“*Eh*, what’s up with that blade?”

“I want you to make a vow in exchange for the robe and dress.”

I unleashed my spirit power.

“Spirit Power Copier.”

[You have activated miracle – Spirit Power Copier.]

A yellow aura condensed in front of me and formed a copy machine.

[Summary – A copier that can copy anything.] [Activation Condition – Must reveal the skill's name.] [Consumption Value – Will vary based on what is being copied.] [Effect – Will copy anything using spirit power. (You must place the living being inside the copier to copy it.)]

“What’s that?” Medea furrowed her brows.

“It’s nothing much, so don’t worry.”

I placed Heynckes’ dagger into the copier.

[Attempting to copy the covenant dagger...] [A problem has occurred! You may not copy this item with spirit power.] [You must use stigma’s overclocking or set a penalty with settings intervention.]

“Settings intervention.”

“Why do you keep talking to yourself?”

I added a penalty to the covenant dagger.

First, it could only be used on Medea and Kim Hajin. Second, it would require 4 streaks of stigma. Third, both sides would equally carry the vow.

[The covenant dagger has been imperfectly copied.]

“Mmm, there. We just need to feed it our blood and make a vow.”

Medea’s face returned to her past expression when she looked annoyed with me.

“What vow?”

“It’s simple.”

I had to ensure Medea would become an ally by tying her down. I didn’t know what she might do once she descended. She might experiment with humans and monsters to operate some kind of chimera business because of her fickle and curious nature.

“My vow will be: I will make Medea the most beautiful robe and ceremonial dress.”

“Most beautiful?”

All caution completely disappeared from her eyes.

“Yes, and yours will be: I will not harm humanity if I descend.”

I handed my copied covenant dagger to her.

* * *

“*Auu...*”

Jin Sahyuk groaned in a dark and unknown space as she rolled on the ground. She finally escaped and couldn’t feel any presence nearby.

“*Haa... haa... huu...*”

She collected her breath and checked her physical condition. Fractured bones, broken ribs, shattered teeth, and flowing blood... Her eyes had also been injured and hindered her vision, but none of her injuries would be life-threatening.

“Those cowards...”

She spat out blood and cursed before healing her body. First, she restored her eyes with her Reality Manipulation authority.

“Coward? You’re an idiot.”

A raspy voice entered her ears as she regained her vision.

Jin Sahyuk’s eyes shot open and she turned towards the unfamiliar voice. Jain smiled at her.

“Who are you?”

“Me? You know me. I’m Rain.”

“Rain?”

“Yep, I guess my face looks different compared to back then. Of course, my real name is a secret.”

Who is this woman? Jin Sahyuk wondered when she suddenly recalled the woman who visited Bell long ago.

“Do you know how hard I tried to keep you alive? I convinced her by saying you’ll be the perfect bait to drag out Bell.”

“What? Bell? Bait?”

Jin Sahyuk forced herself to stand up. *Crack— Crack—* Her broken bones screamed in pain, but she bore it.

“Yep, you have to stay alive and kill Bell. Anyways, have you finished healing?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk nodded and Jain smiled before quickly moving and twisting Jin Sahyuk’s wrists.

“What!”

Jain placed a *[Magic Power Suppressor]* on Jin Sahyuk’s wrists and ankles.

“You fucker! What are you doing?”

“*Hmm?* Oh, I’m just making you into proper bait. What bait would be allowed to use magic power?”

“You bitch!”

Jin Sahyuk violently struggled, but Jain easily knocked her over by tripping her feet. *Thud!* Jin Sahyuk fell face-first to the ground. However, she refused to yield and shook her body side to side. She looked like a shrimp flopping on dry land.

“Let go of me!”

Flop, flop. Splash, splash.

“You cowards! Ganging up on me wasn’t enough?”

Flop, flop. Splash, splash.

Jain smiled at Jin Sahyuk, who acted like genuine bait. Then she spoke to Boss who should be watching somewhere.

“Boss, I caught a shrimp for you.”

Chapter 276

The Mountain Sage (1)

Orden sent out four monsters to wreak havoc around the globe. The humanoid monsters made front-page headlines all over the world. Hopeless news continued as people watched how the monsters destroyed their homes and killed their loved ones.

— We're currently in Shanghai, China.

The TV screen shifted and Rachel watched with a heavy heart.

— Downtown Shanghai has been completely destroyed.

The sidewalks had been overturned and skyscrapers that once reached towards the sky became nothing but rubble and ashes.

— Approximately 1,300 heroes arrived to fight one monster.

Painful cries resounded over the wreckage and the blurred corpses of heroes sprawled on the ground.

— Mei Chun, considered one of China's most promising heroes. Tulei, who returned home after graduating rank 6 from Cube. Li Jufeng, China's leading high rank hero...

The reporter gravely continued.

— A total of 987 heroes, including the three mentioned, fell while protecting their country.

A streak of tears trickled down Rachel's cheeks. She grieved from the bottom of her heart despite their diplomatic competition and petty disagreements with China. Humanity suffered a great loss with the deaths of all those heroes.

— This is a photo of the monster that caused this destruction.

Tigris, the monster that resembled a tiger. However, his figure looked too much like a human to be called a bipedal tiger. His thick fur and sharp claws also couldn't be considered human.

— Paris is still under attack by zombies. These zombies transform their victims into even more zombies. Authorities have not been able to stop their spread.

Orden succeeded if he wanted to warn humanity. The world trembled in fear when they witnessed his cruelty.

— Not every country failed. England successfully stopped their humanoid monster with the help of Lady Ah Hae-In, an 8 star magician who happened to be in England, and player Shin Jahyuk who served as knight commander of Crevon's royal knights.

However, Orden failed if he intended to destroy Earth. England successfully defeated a monster and immobilized it.

— England's defensive tactics proved successful as the World of Wish continues to grow more popular among citizens. Experts attribute the growth in popularity to the widespread rumor that the World of Wish will remain even when Earth shatters to pieces.

“Princess?”

Rachel's old butler returned and she brushed away her tears.

“Yes?”

“You should come on out. The guests will be arriving soon.”

“Ah, is it that time already?”

The heads of several countries would visit England today. Rachel had to greet them along with the prime minister and his cabinet. She quickly got up.

“Evandel, get some rest.”

Before she left, Rachel patted the sleeping Evandel on the couch.

“Uuuue...”

Evandel slightly nodded with her eyes barely open. *She must be tired from taking care of all the wounded spirits yesterday.* Rachel gently kissed Evandel’s forehead and left.

It only took 10 minutes to reach Toji’s jail cell from Buckingham Palace. Magicians continued to charge the cell that Shin Jahyuk specifically built for Toji.

“Thank you for coming, Princess.”

“It’s nice to see you.”

Rachel smiled and exchanged greetings with their defense secretary. Other ministers busily prepared to welcome the VIPs as Rachel studied their faces.

"Cut down all the trees around here."

"I heard the Immortal loves nature."

"Really? *Uh...* Then get some more trees from somewhere else."

Chae Joochul wanted to come and observe Toji. Yoo Yeonha, currently in demand by every authority in the world, would also visit. England’s citizens held high hopes, but the prime minister who should be leading currently spoke on the phone in a corner.

“Did you arrive safely in Busan? Yeah, sure. I’ll take care of the permanent residency. Don’t worry.”

The prime minister spoke in Korean even during personal calls.

“*Huh?* Yes, I’ll be right with you. My term will end soon anyways.”

Rachel couldn't help but frown. That man secretly evacuated his entire family to Korea. How could he place his family first before the country he led? Rachel felt shocked.

Koong—

A portal activated with a huge tremor as she approached the prime minister. Essential Dynamics called it the portable portal, but the device weighed 3 tons. Still, only this device could allow people to travel to specific destinations without using gifts or skills.

“Everyone get ready! They’re coming through!”

The technician shouted and the cabinet gathered near the portal. Rachel stood next to them as well.

Jiing—

The portal glowed blue and they could see a man and woman on the other side. Chae Joochul arrived first as Yoo Yeonha followed.

“Welcome!”

The prime minister approached the two guests.

“I’m Ray McKean. It’s an honor to meet you.”

“Pleased to meet you.”

Chae Joochul shook hands with him and Rachel quickly stepped up.

“I’m Rachel Elizabeth Louise. It’s an honor to finally meet the Immortal.”

Rachel held out her hand, but Chae Joochul only stared at her with a mysterious look in his eyes.

“...?”

Should I withdraw my hand or keep it still? Rachel wondered when Chae Joochul finally spoke.

“You seem to possess a similar gift to mine.”

“...?”

Rachel tilted her head in confusion. However, she soon realized Chae Joochul had praised her and could hardly breathe.

“P-P-Pardon?”

The Immortal just announced that they shared something in common. *Does that mean he’s been watching me?* Rachel felt joy and pressure from that thought.

“Oh, r-really?”

“Yes.”

Of course, Chae Joochul meant something completely different. Similar gifts meant similar side effects. He continued staring at her to see how she would react.

“Ah, t-thank, thank you.”

As expected, this generation’s heroes didn’t know about side effects. Chae Joochul passed her without a handshake.

“Good to see you.”

A woman came up and grabbed Rachel’s trembling hand.

“Ah, yes, Yeonha. It’s nice to see you too.”

“Could you show me Toji?” Yoo Yeonha smiled and cut to the chase.

“Of course, follow me.”

Rachel tried to calm her pounding heart as she led Yoo Yeonha and Chae Joochul to Toji's cell. The blue cubic prison could be seen from miles away. Yoo Yeonha looked at the cube with slight admiration.

"That's the jail cell? I'm surprised it's holding up."

"Yes, but the magicians have to keep injecting their magic power to maintain it."

Jin Sahyuk's Reality Manipulation possessed one limitation. The product required a steady supply of magic power, but that also meant it could be maintained forever with continued support.

"Is the monster sleeping?" Chae Joochul asked as he studied Toji.

"Yes, he's been asleep for a while now."

Rachel replied as Chae Joochul approached the cube and knocked on it.

Tok tok—

"What are you—" Startled, Rachel awkwardly lunged at Chae Joochul.

"How do I get inside?"

The Immortal appeared calm and simply asked.

"Pardon? Inside?"

They couldn't penetrate Toji's defense, so Rachel and Ah Hae-In agreed to imprison the monster for as long as possible. Chae Joochul had already been informed of their decision.

Still, he seemed slightly confused by Rachel's reaction.

"I have to get inside or I won't be able to kill that monster."

"Ah..."

Of course, the strongest man in the present era felt confident about such a task.

* * *

[Central Asia, Pandemonium]

The presidential suite residents of Pandemonium's most extravagant hotel, Sauron's Respite, enjoyed a peaceful afternoon despite all the commotion in the world. The room featured a perfect temperature, tranquil classical music, and beautiful scenery outside.

"Bell! They took Sahyuk!" Rumi shouted out of frustration.

"Yeah, I heard you." Bell flatly replied as he lay on the couch.

"Aren't you going to save her?"

"No. Why would I when I sent her there?" Bell smiled at Rumi.

"What?"

"I sent her there."

He spent a long time making Jin Sahyuk think she acted according to her own will.

You won't be able to change anything even if you go. Don't go. You'll just end up getting beaten. I'll do anything you say if you win against Byul.

Bell provoked her and she fell for it. He originally planned to introduce her to the Chameleon Troupe, but also wanted to bring her down a peg or two. Recently, she'd been too arrogant for his taste.

"A-Are you insane? Who knows what they'll do to her?"

"Nothing. They'll leave her alone. *Yaawn.*"

Rumi glared at the relaxed Bell. "How can you be so sure?"

“They’re not a group of thugs. Especially with Byul as the boss and Kim Hajin controlling them.”

The word director suited Kim Hajin quite well. Boss depended on Kim Hajin and wouldn’t do anything to upset him.

“Just let her be. Sahyuk will only grow stronger by overcoming obstacles.”

Bell simply needed to save her if something did happen, but Jin Sahyuk’s resilience could be compared to a cockroach.

“What are you going to do about Orden?”

“Ah, Orden?”

Recently, the name Orden became synonymous with fear. However, Bell only smiled.

“I don’t know. I’m not too worried about him.”

“Why not?”

“Orden admires humans too much to eradicate them.”

Bell looked at the ceiling from his couch. To destroy humanity required Orden to truly loathe humans, but he didn’t. Bell knew this all too well.

* * *

[Orden’s Palace]

“You have to eat. No, no snacks. You have to eat real food.”

The 3 year old Yeonhee playfully spoke to her two dolls as monster king Orden watched.

“Your name is Cindy and your name is Yeonjoo. Wow! Yeonjoo, you’re

such a good eater!”

Suddenly, Orden wondered where this child came from. Two humans originally birthed her, but she died from an illness. Afterwards, Orden reconstructed her body and soul. Then who would be considered her parents now?

“Cindy! You should learn from Yeonjoo!”

Orden continued to watch her play with the dolls. The girl placed them in front of her and beamed. *Are all human children like this or is something wrong with this one?* Orden thought to himself.

“*Nom, nom.*”

Playing with dolls in front of the king would definitely be considered disrespectful. Orden would’ve immediately disintegrated his servants for doing the same. However, he didn’t feel angry at all and a strange desire to watch the girl overcame him.

“T-This is where you were.”

Park Hanho rushed to his daughter and held her in his arms. “I sincerely apologize. My child is still young and foolish.”

Park Hanho bowed to the king.

“...”

Orden stared at Yeonhee in Park Hanho’s arms. She tried to wriggle out of her father’s arms to pick up her dolls. Orden stretched his magic power towards the dolls and delivered them to the girl.

“I see her wander here and there. Are children supposed to be like that?”

“Yes, most young children naturally act curious.”

“I see.”

Orden turned his gaze to the child again. Yeonhee smiled at him, grateful that he returned her dolls.

“Well then, we’ll leave now.”

Park Hanho lowered his head once more and Yeonhee did the same.

"Good morning."

However, she said the wrong greeting and Orden unconsciously smiled.

"No, Yeonhee. You have to say goodbye."

"Oh, goodbye. Cindy and Yeonjoo say goodbye too."

Yeonhee tilted the dolls forward. Orden silently stared at her as they turned around and left.

She's quite cute.

Orden surprised himself with such a thought.

* * *

[Pandemonium, Shady Alley]

I left the World of Wish. The sun began to set as I walked through an alley in Pandemonium while looking at requests. Some came from the Truth Agency, others came from Jeronimo Mercenaries, and the rest from the Chameleon Troupe. I attributed my overflowing mailbox to those four new monsters.

“So many came in.”

The Truth Agency became flooded with questions about Orden. I answered what I could with the Book of Truth and declined most requests for Fenrir to exterminate the monsters. As I kept walking...

“Eh?”

My body suddenly floated in the air. I didn't realize until I already flipped upside down. Fortunately, aether protected me from the impact, but the next attack came even quicker.

Multiple assassins appeared. One sliced the aether shield open, the other pushed a dagger through the gap, and yet another slashed my Achilles tendon. I felt a burning pain from my shoulder and ankle. The dagger seemed to be coated with poison.

Thud—

I collapsed to the ground as all this happened in less than a second.

I tried to activate bullet time, but my gift didn't respond. Only then did I realize why I hadn't detected the ambush.

A gift that nullifies other gifts.

I recalled discarding this setting about a group of assassins. One of its members, the Mountain Sage, possessed such a gift. I didn't know why he appeared here when he should be working in the Middle East.

Too bad assassination doesn't work on me.

His gift nullified mine, but I could still use my skills. I activated time reversal before the blade reached my throat.

Chapter 277

The Mountain Sage (2)

The Mountain Sage rose from the Middle East as the successor to the legendary assassin, Hassan-i Sabbah. Their roots dated back to 1990 when the world entered a period of rest after Outcall. It all began with a young Iranian youth who awakened the gift, [*Shackles*].

This gift could restrain humans on a small scale and even time and space on a larger scale. As if this wasn't enough, the Iranian youth also awakened a second gift, [*Void World*]. Finally, the successor to the Order of Assassins had returned after a thousand years. The youth changed his name to Hazen and officially inherited the Sabbah.

He used his previous title as Lord of Alamut and called himself the Mountain Sage. They only accepted direct descendants in their assassin group.

Hazen secretly worked in the Middle East and calmed the chaotic political scene by killing militant leaders. He disguised their deaths as accidents and used the ensuing chaos to assassinate the djinns and humans behind everything. He continued this mission for 30 years.

Kim Sukho only recently discovered their secretive group. He had stepped down as president, but his desire for power never subsided. The Mountain Sage's Order of Assassins would be the perfect tool to deal with the Chameleon Troupe. Hazen had already died, but he left behind a powerful legacy. Kim Sukho liked their meticulous assassinations and their sole desire for gold.

He used them from the shadows to eliminate his opponents. They also dug into other politicians for weaknesses that Kim Sukho could take advantage of. Through this, Kim Sukho formed a stronghold even more powerful than when he served as president. He had some doubts in the beginning, but Hazen's descendants now filled him with confidence.

Hazen's descendants had figured out Black Lotus' identity through a simple, yet difficult method of tracking all his whereabouts. Their third executive possessed the gift, *[Colossal Search]*, and didn't take long to find out the truth after they accepted the request.

Their assassination of Kim Hajin almost succeeded. No, it already succeeded once.

"Kim Hajin is Fenrir and Fenrir is Black Lotus."

Hassun, the first of Hazen's 5 descendants, spoke in the thick darkness. They hid while waiting for Kim Hajin to show up.

"Interesting."

Hayre, the youngest descendant, smiled despite his usual cold attitude.

"We don't have to report this to our client?"

"Our mission is to assassinate Black Lotus. Further talk is unnecessary. Is he coming yet, Hazehre?" Hassun asked the third descendant.

"Yes, Kim Hajin will be arriving soon."

[Colossal Search] could even predict its target's future location with incredible calculations.

"He's coming."

The 5 descendants in hiding sensed a presence and activated the gift they shared, *[Void World]*. Their bodies turned transparent as they camouflaged with their surroundings and darkness slowly spread out. Enemies could no longer use their gifts inside this dark domain. Black Lotus would die just like their past targets.

"Come out."

However, the target's voice rang out before they even could do anything. The 5 assassins slightly flinched, but didn't believe they had

been discovered. They thought Black Lotus randomly murmured as one would when returning to a dark, empty home.

“Otherwise, I’ll come instead.”

The target suddenly revealed himself.

“...?”

The 5 assassins tilted their heads. The target, Kim Hajin, emitted some kind of strange aura.

Kim Hajin called his awakened spirit power the Author’s Spirit Power. It could materialize any setting he wanted at any time. As such, Kim Hajin created [*Catch Field*], a skill that could detect anyone within 500 meters.

He also sent Spartan to fetch a trustworthy backup.

KOONG!

An eagle and a burly man appeared next to Kim Hajin. Hazen’s descendants finally realized something had gone wrong.

“What is it all of a sudden?” the burly man, Cheok Jungyeong, spoke.

“Look over there.”

Kim Hajin pointed at Hazen’s descendants in hiding. His aura shot out and lit the area. Cheok Jungyeong furrowed his brows and followed Kim Hajin’s finger.

“Should we run?” Hayre murmured.

“No, it’s already too late.”

“...!”

Cheok Jungyeong’s husky voice rang out behind them and the next

sequence of events happened too fast.

Kwang! Thud! Boom!

The 5 descendants did their best to resist, but assassins didn't excel in direct fights. On the other hand, Cheok Jungyeong specialized in direct combat and could be considered an unbeatable existence.

* * *

[England, London]

A rowdy event took place in the evening near Buckingham Palace.

Booom!

Lightning shot up from the prison cell that Jin Sahyuk created. A flaming whirlpool appeared along with winds sharper than blades. This phenomenon easily surpassed what could be found in nature.

Kooong!

The series of disasters shook the prison cell that contained Toji. Hundreds of magicians poured their magic power to maintain the cell. However, dozens of them lost consciousness in 10 seconds as Chae Joochul shook the cell.

— *Uaaaaaah...*

Toji's scream rang out. His skin melted from the extreme heat, but he maintained his form. The metal-attribute wind slashed him, but couldn't sever his body.

Chae Joochul poured his powerful attacks into the cell from outside. The injured Toji screamed, but only briefly. Toji's body regenerated as though nothing happened after the round of attacks. Then he peacefully fell asleep again.

"He truly is an interesting one."

Chae Joochul paused and apathetically murmured. *Tap, tap*. The magicians supplying magic power fainted one by one.

“Amazing. I feel like I’m dreaming.”

“A-As expected of the Immortal...”

Yoo Yeonha and England’s prime minister couldn’t help but express their awe as Rachel stood next to them with a wide-open mouth.

Heavenly natural disasters just occurred inside a tiny, 30 square meter cell. The Immortal’s power felt even more unbelievable in person.

“External attacks seem to work, but indirect attacks from outside won’t be enough to bring him down.”

“That was indirect?” Rachel swallowed her saliva at Chae Joochul’s casual words.

“Wouldn’t he at least suffer mental damage?”

The prime minister carefully asked. Chae Joochul knew that Toji had already forgotten pain. Not even imagined pain stemming from fear existed in that monster’s mind.

“No. Besides that, where is the person who created this prison?”

Chae Joochul took interest in another matter. He hadn’t seen an ability that could endure his power in a long time.

“A player created it. She’s gone now.” Rachel stepped up and explained.

“Gone? So she died?”

“Pardon?”

Rachel thought he might be joking until she met his emotionless eyes. She felt a chill run down her back from the deep void in his eyes and

squeezed out an answer.

“No, she, she went back to the tower.”

“It looks like someone else will have to handle him. Someone who can stop him from regenerating.”

Chae Joochul stepped back with dignity. His words made everyone think of one hero, Sword Saint Kim Suho, who achieved the greatest title for a swordsman in his mid-twenties.

The prime minister gave the princess a heartfelt look since Rachel knew Kim Suho.

“No need to call any brats, old man.”

A deep voice suddenly rang out. He sounded like Chae Joochul, but even deeper and more sonorous.

“...?”

Chae Joochul revealed a hint of surprise as he turned towards the voice.

The government officials quickly parted when they met Chae Joochul's gaze and the owner of the voice revealed himself like Moses who split the Red Sea.

Dark blue eyes with a scar on the left, long braided white hair, and wide shoulders with a shabby steel sword by his waist.

Everyone knew this legend and Chae Joochul hadn't met him in a long time.

“I'm a bit tired from traveling...”

The man smiled and Yoo Yeonha's jaw dropped when she realized his identity.

“I’ll personally deal with him tomorrow morning.”

Dresden’s Miracle where one man slaughtered 10,000 monsters.
Operation Krahan when a large djinn group disappeared overnight.
The legendary hero behind numerous tales. He stood second only to
Shin Myungchul among the Nine Stars.

Steel Spirit Heynckes had appeared. Yoo Yeonha couldn’t maintain a
straight face from the shock.

“Heynckes.”

Chae Joochul sounded as apathetic as before. Chae Joochul knew
about Heynckes’ side effect, so he only gave him a dry look.

“Will you be able to do it?”

“It’s time for me to help the new generation as an artifact of the past,”
Heynckes simply replied.

Objectively speaking, nothing special occurred between Chae Joochul
and Heynckes. They both kept a set distance and only stared at each
other.

However, everyone else could only silently stare at the two titans. It
felt like experiencing an important moment in history, but no one
dared to take any photos. They simply watched this once-in-a-lifetime
moment in a daze.

“It’s been a while.”

Only one person managed to muster enough courage to speak.

“Nice to meet you, Lord Heynckes.”

She also arrived as Chae Joochul’s acquaintance.

“My name is Yoo Yeonha, the Chief Strategic Officer of Essence of the
Strait.”

[Buckingham Palace]

Yoo Yeonha stayed overnight at Buckingham Palace. She began studying German, German history, Heynckes' life, and more for their meeting tomorrow. Falling Blossom continued to gather topics for their discussion.

— *Tok, tok.*

Someone knocked as she worked.

“Come in.”

The door opened and Rachel carefully walked in. She placed a tray with red tea and dessert on the table.

“Ah, thank you. I felt a bit tired.”

They exchanged smiles as Rachel sat across from her. The two women leisurely enjoyed the sudden tea time.

Yoo Yeonha sipped on the red tea while looking over documents. Rachel watched her for 30 minutes or so before finally working up the courage.

“Yeonha, about the guild alliance that Essence of the Strait brought up...”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha looked at her without speaking. Rachel grew a bit nervous, but England's unrest would greatly subside if they could ally with Essence of the Strait. Even the prime minister who planned on leaving for Korea might change his mind.

“Would you like to team up with our guild? We'll do our best to meet any demands.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha didn't say anything, so Rachel quickly continued.

“We discovered several artifacts from the Middle Ages recently. They can be lent to Essence of the Strait's members if our guilds become allies. *Ah*, Essence of the Strait can also use the rights and interest we possess in Prestige...”

Rachel and Yoo Yeonha began to negotiate when...

Thud!

The door burst open and they turned without much thought.

“*Yaawn*... You were here?”

Evandel stood there with half-closed eyes.

“...!”

Rachel jumped from her seat and Yoo Yeonha's eyes also shot open.

“What?”

Yoo Yeonha possessed an excellent memory. She would remember even if she had a horrible memory because that child looked like a cute fairy who came out of a story.

“Wait...”

That child was with Kim Hajin the last time Yoo Yeonha saw her.

“*Ah!*” Rachel quickly ran towards the door and picked up Evandel.

“Wait, wait, who's that?” Yoo Yeonha asked, but Rachel hid Evandel behind her and shook her head.

“*Huh?* Oh, it’s nothing.”

“What? What do you mean? Who is she?”

“Nothing!” Rachel didn’t have the confidence to explain and ran away.

“Where are you going!” Yoo Yeonha shot up and chased after them.

“Tell me who that is! Hold on a minute. I think I’ve seen her before in Seoul!”

Tadadadat—

Yoo Yeonha shouted as she ran across the hallway.

“As I said, it’s nothing...”

Tadadadat—

Rachel ran, almost in tears.

Yoo Yeonha knew she couldn’t catch up to Rachel, so she utilized the tools at her disposal.

“There won’t be any alliance if you don’t come back! I was going to agree, but not if you run away!”

Rachel didn’t stop running. In fact, she used her elementals to escape even faster.

“*Haa, haa.*”

Yoo Yeonha looked around the empty hallway in a daze.

Rachel and the mysterious child had disappeared. Yoo Yeonha wiped the sweat from her forehead.

“What the heck?”

So many questions and doubts filled her head that day.

* * *

I returned to the Chameleon Troupe's hideout with Cheok Jungyeong and 5 prisoners. *Koong!* Cheok Jungyeong threw the unconscious assassins on the floor.

"Why did you bring them back?"

A family of assassins, 2 in their thirties and 3 in their twenties. We could interrogate them since I only vaguely knew about them through my settings, but Cheok Jungyeong replied with a grin.

"To use for training."

"Training?"

It sounded like a typical answer from him. I built the Chameleon Troupe's hideout with magic engineering that could remove the exit. Naturally, this would keep them locked up.

"Will you be fine?"

"Of course! I've been bored, so it's perfect. There's Orden, but we have some time until I get to fight him!"

Cheok Jungyeong grinned and smacked his chest. He acknowledged Orden as a powerful enemy, but we hadn't even set a date for our mission yet. A spy had infiltrated Orden's palace and would let us know when the right time came.

"These guys have a gift for critical attacks. I can use them to train how to avoid such attacks."

"Um... sure. Make sure you find out who's behind them."

"Yeah, yeah, don't worry. Oh right, Boss recently caught someone. Her name's Jin Sahyuk. You know her, right?"

My eyes shot open. *Jin Sahyuk?*

“Jin Sahyuk and Boss? What happened?”

“Who knows? Boss said she’ll use the kid to lure out Bell. *Mmm.*”

Cheok Jungyeong stretched.

I pondered about the relationships between Jin Sahyuk, Bell, and Boss. It didn’t seem like Bell would save Jin Sahyuk from what I knew about his personality.

“*Hmm.*”

I lightly sighed and asked Cheok Jungyeong.

“Where is she imprisoned?”

* * *

I went to the Chameleon Troupe’s lowest floor. It looked more like an undeveloped floor than a prison. Jin Sahyuk curled up like a shrimp in this empty place with magic power suppressors around her hands and ankles.

“...”

She looked feeble like she hadn’t eaten or drank in days. A blindfold also covered her eyes.

What idiotic thing did she do this time?

I suddenly felt sympathetic looking at her. I developed this side effect after finding out about Kim Chundong’s past. Kim Chundong and Jin Sahyuk occupied most of my recent worries.

“*Tsk...*”

Someone with the highest potential in my novel kept getting thrashed

all the time.

“Who is it!”

Jin Sahyuk heard me click my tongue and shouted. She raised her head, but sighed after realizing the blindfold still blocked her vision.

“I-Is it Bell?”

Bell? Did she lose her intuition after being locked up for too long?

I approached with a wry smile. Then I placed my hands on her blindfold.

“Uk.”

Jin Sahyuk trembled, but sensed my intent and didn’t resist.

“Whew... It’s Bell, right?”

She sighed in relief as I carefully lifted the blindfold.

Chapter 278

Commence (1)

I carefully removed the blindfold and she slowly opened her eyes. Jin Sahyuk frowned from the light and looked up at me.

“You’re not Bell...”

She tilted her head and sat motionless for the next 3 minutes.

“What are you doing here?” I sighed and spoke first.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t reply and only dropped her gaze to the floor. Her cheeks grew slightly flushed from embarrassment.

“I’m leaving if you’re not talking.”

Jin Sahyuk flinched as I stood up. She bounced desperately like a fish out of water.

“Wait! Don’t leave!”

I stopped and looked at her. “Why?”

“Release me...”

I scanned her carefully. The magic power suppressors, an effective good from the Tower of Wish, suppressed all her magic power.

“How did you get caught in the first place?”

“I...” Jin Sahyuk opened her mouth, but shook her head with a sigh.

“I can’t tell you.”

“Then I can’t release you either.”

“Why?”

She glared at me full of resentment. Our fruitless conversation continued when...

“She said she wanted to borrow you.” I heard a voice from behind and turned to see Boss.

“Borrow me?” I felt slightly confused.

“That’s right.” Boss scowled at Jin Sahyuk.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk averted her gaze without a word.

I could somewhat imagine what went down between them.

Jin Sahyuk thinks I’m Kim Chundong, so she probably told Boss she would take me back to Akatrina. That probably led to them fighting, but I’m not sure why Jin Sahyuk would say that to Boss.

“Hajin, she’s dangerous. She’s planning to kidnap you,” Boss said as she stepped on Jin Sahyuk’s foot.

“*Kuaak*—” Jin Sahyuk screamed, but also bit Boss’ shoe.

“She’s quite vicious as you can see. You can’t let her go.”

Boss stared at me with a mysterious look. I understood her gaze even without using the magnifying glass. She simply worried about me.

“...”

I awkwardly scratched my neck. Of course, I didn't intend on returning to Akatrina with Jin Sahyuk. However, I would also have to leave Boss one day. I didn't technically exist in this world and a bittersweet taste lingered in my mouth.

"Well, it sure isn't going to be her if I end up kidnapped. You don't have to worry—"

"You still can't set her free. I have to take care of other business, but if this scoundrel isn't here when I get back..." Boss looked at me sternly.

"I won't show any forgiveness even if it's you."

She coldly warned and left.

Well, nothing I can do at this point.

I shrugged at Jin Sahyuk. She raised her head and looked at me.

"Just secretly release me," she whispered.

"Are you crazy?"

"At least give me something to eat." Jin Sahyuk frowned.

"Eat?"

"Yeah, I'm starving."

She probably couldn't withstand hunger and thirst anymore with her magic power sealed.

"Fine. Give me a moment."

I went upstairs to the kitchen. Then I finished cooking some porridge with braised beef and kimchi. Dwarf's Dexterity made cooking quite easy.

Sniff, sniff—

Jin Sahyuk enjoyed the smell before I even came down.

“Here.”

I placed the tray in front of her, but she only stared without laying a finger.

“What?”

“Untie me so I can eat.”

“You know I can’t.”

“What, so you expect me to lick it like a dog?”

Jin Sahyuk glared and wouldn’t endure such disgrace as a former king. I scooped the porridge with a spoon and offered it to her.

“Open wide.”

“Fuck...”

Jin Sahyuk realized this might be the best treatment and ate the porridge without resisting. However, the moment she tasted it...

“...!”

Her eyes widened.

“Pfft.”

I burst into laughter since I expected such a reaction. Even the most expensive ingredients couldn’t recreate this amazing taste. This simple porridge reached perfection thanks to *[Young Dwarf’s Dexterity]*.

“It’s good, right?”

“I-It’s... Give me more. I need to taste more for an honest assessment.”

I smiled and stuffed the porridge into her mouth. Soon, Jin Sahyuk lost all sense of shame.

“Give me that kimchi.”

“The braised beef too.”

“Give me one more bowl.”

“More.”

“Hey, don’t you have any radish kimchi?”

Jin Sahyuk ate like she had been starving forever.

* * *

Rachel escaped to her room with Evandel. Her heart still thumped, but she felt relieved to see Evandel already asleep in her arms.

“*Phew...*”

Rachel sighed in relief. She thought Evandel fell asleep when she left. *Did she wake up because I wasn’t by her side?* She felt a sense of pride, but soon worried when she recalled what Kim Hajin and Ah Hae-In told her. They both insisted Evandel be hidden as long as possible. Every royal servant swore a silent oath for this reason.

Rachel could always claim Evandel as a relative, but everything happened so fast and she didn’t want to lie to Yoo Yeonha.

Yoo Yeonha would do anything for her guild’s honor and glory. Rachel didn’t want to expose Evandel to such an ambitionist, but it seemed like Yoo Yeonha already knew Evandel. Rachel couldn’t stop thinking about how Yoo Yeonha said she saw Evandel in Seoul.

“*Hmm...*”

She carefully placed Evandel in bed. *Zzzz— Zzzz—* Evandel fell deeper

asleep in a more comfortable position. She looked lovely as always. Rachel got rid of all her worries and lay next to Evandel.

“Guild alliance...”

Yoo Yeonha’s words suddenly popped up in her head, but she discarded such thoughts. She didn’t want to use Evandel as a means of negotiation. Rachel patted Evandel’s head until her breathing softened. Soon, she began to feel sleepy as well.

“Yaawn.”

She closed her eyes and her hands stopped patting Evandel. The pair fell into a deep slumber.

On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha couldn’t sleep at all.

“What was that?”

Yoo Yeonha muttered as she twirled a pen between her fingers.

She had returned to her room after losing sight of Rachel and definitely recalled seeing that little girl with Kim Hajin.

“That girl clearly doesn’t have Kim Hajin’s genes. She only looks like Rachel.”

Yoo Yeonha wrapped her hands around her head. She suspected all this had something to do with Kim Hajin. He always wanted to help Rachel one way or another. For example, he pushed for the negotiation between Essential Dynamics and the British government months earlier.

Then are Kim Hajin and Rachel really... Wait. What about Chae Nayun?

“I don’t understand.”

Was Kim Hajin a womanizer who chased after girls? No. He might be a sociopath, but he’s definitely not a player.

Maybe he made a momentary mistake? That made more sense. Anything could happen between a man and a woman on the spur of the moment.

“Oh my god.” Yoo Yeonha covered her flushed cheeks.

“Oooh.”

So that means... That girl seemed to be at least 5 years old, which meant it must've happened at Cube...

“Oh god, I can't believe him.”

Yoo Yeonha felt betrayed as her imagination intensified.

* * *

Rachel slowly opened her eyes the next morning. Evandel already left for her morning meditation with Ah Hae-In.

“Yaawn...”

She stretched as someone knocked on the door.

— *Tok, tok.*

It should be her butler like usual.

“I'm awake.”

She replied and the old butler entered.

“Did you get a full night's rest?”

“Yes, is Evandel...?”

“Lady Ah Hae-In picked her up this morning for their morning meditation. Would you like a cup of tea?”

Rachel nodded and pulled herself out of bed.

“Yes, black tea please.”

A few servants brought the tea when the butler clapped. Rachel combed her disheveled hair and sat at the table.

“Enjoy your tea.”

The butler left and Rachel poured the tea into a cup.

As she began another beautiful day with a sip of bittersweet tea—

— Excuse me, you can’t do this.

A small commotion occurred outside her room.

— Stop!

— This place is off-limits to outsiders!

What’s happening? Rachel curiously turned towards the hallway.

— What do you mean off-limits? I’m the princess’ teacher and I need to speak to her right now!

She recognized that familiar voice and flinched. Immediately, the door swung open and a woman entered.

“Ah, I knew you’d be here.”

“...!”

Rachel tightened her grip around her cup when she saw that woman.

“How have you been?”

Her former teacher, the elementalist Shin Yeohwa, suddenly appeared.

Rachel felt dizzy as she recalled all those horrible days she spent with Shin Yeohwa. She had been beaten, insulted, and humiliated for no reason. Rachel wanted to erase that past from her memory forever.

“Why haven’t you been keeping in touch? Do you know how much I missed you?”

However, Rachel chose not to take any action against Shin Yeohwa. She feared Shin Yeohwa’s reputation as Earth’s best elemental, but also didn’t want to betray her teacher.

“Why won’t you answer me?”

Shin Yeohwa, oblivious to her former student’s generosity, took advantage of Rachel’s publicity and promoted herself as Rachel’s master.

“Don’t you know better than to ignore your teacher?”

Shin Yeohwa slyly smiled.

* * *

[Gangwondo, Underground Bunker]

Three weeks had passed since the training camp began. Chae Nayun stayed awake all night again because of Heynckes’ message the day before.

— By the way, I met Kim Hajin last week. He seemed like a feisty lad.

Chae Nayun couldn’t find the right words to reply. She didn’t know how she felt about Kim Hajin anymore. She only knew she wanted to see him badly.

Chae Nayun spent the night in distress and morning came before she realized it.

Tiring—

Everyone got out of bed as the alarm rang and formed a line in the middle of the bunker.

“Did you sleep well?”

Team leader Yun Seung-Ah appeared with a rather unusual guest, Spirit Speech Master Aileen.

Aileen stood beside Yun Seung-Ah with a stern look and a pair of short legs. Yun Seung-Ah looked down at Aileen with mixed emotions. She sighed and began her speech.

“So... today is the day we begin our mission. Miss Aileen will explain the details.”

Surprised murmurs filled the bunker as no one expected the mission to begin so abruptly.

“My team 1 and your team 3 will enter Orden’s territory today. We’ve been keeping the exact date hidden for confidentiality. I hope you understand.”

Aileen explained, but the declaration still felt so sudden.

“No need to worry. Our first and foremost goal is to build an outpost. We’re simply setting up a place to eat, sleep, and rest while we fight Orden.”

Aileen took out a card from her pocket.

“This is a 7 star card called *[Building Fortress]*.”

[Building Fortress] [7 star] Effective Good ○ Will instantly build a fortress above the sea, beneath the earth, over a cliff, or anywhere else. ○ The fortress will possess Lv.7 Defense and is equipped with a portal that only the card owner’s allies may use.

“This card can build a fortress anywhere. We’ll use it to build our underground outpost near Orden’s palace.”

Aileen stopped and laid out various camping gear on the ground that had been reduced in size with magic engineering.

“All of you, take one each.”

The stunned heroes quickly retrieved their gear from the ground.

“Now, I will introduce the man who will help us travel to Orden’s territory.”

A dense fog rolled over the bunker as Aileen finished speaking and a robed man appeared.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Rebé.”

Bell introduced himself as Rebé and smiled at the heroes. The task force members destined to become future leaders looked like gold mines to him.

“Is he an outsider?” Kim Suho asked, slightly suspicious.

“Yes, he is,” Aileen briefly replied.

She also felt suspicious about this outsider and only agreed because the administration insisted he could be trusted.

“Ah, please do not worry. I am already under her Spirit Speech seal as well as an oath and vow.”

Bell signed all sorts of contracts, which proved his pure intentions. He didn’t need to lie about Orden because his goals aligned with the government.

“Unni, your Spirit Speech seal is that thing where...”

“Yeah.” Aileen nodded to Yun Seung-Ah.

“His heart will burst and he’ll die a painful death with one word if he betrays us.”

Everyone felt surprised. This meant Bell basically entrusted his life to Aileen.

“Well, in that case...” Kim Suho nodded and stepped back.

“Thank you for trusting me.” Bell spoke while keeping his voice modulation under control.

“I only have one simple role in this mission. I will transport all of you to Orden’s territory using my skill, mass teleport. I guess I shouldn’t waste any more of your time. Everyone, please gather around me.”

Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yi Jiyeon, Yi Yeonghan, and the remaining Team 3 members carefully approached Bell.

“Please hold each other tightly so you don’t end up outside the spell circle. *Ah*, but don’t be too nervous. You’ll be returning here as soon as you finish setting up the outpost.”

Bell released his magic power and violet air currents swirled around him into a complicated geometric shape.

“Here we go!” he cheerfully shouted.

Guooooo...

The spell circle finished forming and Bell’s mass teleport activated.

Chapter 279

Commence (2)

[*Mass Teleport*] brought the team 3 members to Orden's territory, but they didn't see anyone from Team 1. Only the team 3 members stood on a vast field in Africa.

"Eh?"

Yun Seung-Ah grew worried when a second flash occurred.

Shooooong...

A violet magic power lit up and transferred the others: Aileen, Yi Yongha, Jin Seyeon, Nicholas, Parma, and Seo Youngji. Team 1 only consisted of 6 heroes, but everyone other than Seo Youngji and Jin Seyeon belonged to the Temple of Justice. All of team 3, except Shin Jonghak, stared at them with wide eyes.

"Is everyone here?"

Aileen stepped up and took attendance. She wore an eyepatch over her left eye for some reason. This [*Smart Eyepatch*] from the tower could easily perform complicated calculations and deductions.

"*Mmm*, great. Everyone's here."

Aileen smiled after receiving the results from her eyepatch. Rebé approached Aileen and softly spoke.

"My role ends here, but I can tag along if you wish."

"What help will you be?" Aileen furrowed her brows.

"For example, I can carry your bags. I've already made a vow, so you

can order me around as you please. Think of me as your sla—”

“Hold on a minute.”

Aileen took out her radio. The Hero Association discovered Orden could detect magic power within 500 km of his palace, so they decided to use electronic equipment.

“This is Aileen. We’ve safely arrived.”

— We can hear you. This is Commander Yi Gongmyung.

Yi Gongmyung’s intelligence and strategic mind rivaled the level of a gift. He became minister of national defense at just 30 years old.

“What should we do next?”

— We deployed a drone and dug a tunnel. It should be nearby, so please confirm.

“A tunnel?”

Aileen looked around. Indeed, some leaves and rocks covered an entrance.

“I found it.”

— Go inside. Orden and his servants’ magic power detection should become weaker underground. For everyone’s safety, don’t use magic power until I give the signal.

“Got it.” Aileen turned around and faced the others.

“Follow me, everyone!”

Team 1 and team 3 marched behind Aileen. The drone had dug a dark and deep tunnel. *Click*— Aileen turned on her flashlight.

“Hey, what do you think, Kim Suho?” Chae Nayun tapped his

shoulder.

“I don’t know, but didn’t we expect something like this?”

Kim Suho smirked and Chae Nayun faintly smiled.

“I guess so. I don’t mind since it’s fun.”

“Same.”

“Don’t lie.”

“I’m not.”

Tak, tak— Only footsteps rang out as Shin Jonghak cut in between Chae Nayun and Kim Suho. The three of them proceeded forward side by side. Chae Nayun walked while playing a mini-game on her phone.

The tunnel ran diagonally until it grew flat at a certain point.

“How have you all been?”

A voice rang out as the tension died down. Kim Suho turned around in surprise and saw Jin Seyeon smiling.

“Ah, senior.”

“I-It’s been a while.”

“Hello.”

Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, and Shin Jonghak greeted her respectively.

“I wanted to see you all.”

Jin Seyeon felt uncomfortable with team 1’s stiff atmosphere and preferred being with her juniors. First, she tried to estimate Kim Suho’s strength. She didn’t need to fight him and only looked into his

eyes. As expected of the man who recently gained the title, Swordsman of Wish, Kim Suho grew strong enough to make her smile.

“*Um*, do you know who that senior is?” Kim Suho pointed at Bera and asked.

“*Mmm...*”

“Think of me as a hidden powerhouse.” Bera possessed excellent hearing and replied before Jin Seyeon could say anything.

“A hidden powerhouse?” Chae Nayun frowned at the grinning Bera.

“Yes, many hidden powerhouses exist in this world like Heynckes who appeared again or Black Lotus. *Ah*, we could also include Orden.”

“You know Black Lotus?” Kim Suho’s eyes slightly widened.

“*Mmm...* Maybe I am Black Lotus.”

“No, that’s impossible.”

Aileen listened in and firmly interrupted.

“Black Lotus isn’t so frivolous.”

“*Cough.*”

Aileen’s sharp tone made the atmosphere awkward. *Tzzzt— Tzzt—* Her radio turned on.

— Everything is going as planned if you haven’t been discovered yet. Walk 200 km from there. You can buff yourselves with magic if you want.

“200 km...” Aileen turned towards the two supporters, Yi Jiyeon and Parma. However, Parma specialized in healing, so Yi Jiyeon would buff the team.

“Supporter Yi Jiyeon, please prepare [*Haste*].”

“Yes!”

Yi Jiyeon carefully took out her bow. Then she weaved her buff arrows with magic power.

“One for each of you.”

“Can’t you just cast a spell or something?”

Aileen didn’t like syringes and didn’t seem happy about being pierced by arrows.

“It’s more effective this way.”

“*Tsk*. Go easy.”

Aileen reluctantly closed her eyes as Yi Jiyeon shot the arrows. Being shot caused a slight pain, but anyone could bear it.

“Let’s go.”

With Yi Jiyeon’s haste buff, the group moved so fast they left behind afterimages and traveled the 200 km distance in just 3 hours.

— This is Yi Gongmyung. Use the card if everyone has arrived at the destination.

They found themselves in a spacious area that looked more like a room than a pathway.

“Understood.”

Aileen took out the fortress card.

“We will be using it now.”

She infused her magic power into the 7 star [*Building Fortress*].

“I want a tough fortress capable of holding 300 people.”

Shoong— Aileen added her Spirit Speech to the card as it turned into magic power and seeped into the ground.

No rumbling or magic power undulation occurred. Only a faint wind blew before the space began to warp. Tough iron fencing rose from the ground and dozens of small barracks appeared. A headquarter building stood in the middle.

“Wow, it’s a real fortress.”

“Amazing.”

Kim Suho and Chae Nayun murmured in awe. Everyone else felt the same. Even Aileen, who activated the card, stared in shock.

“A-Alright, let’s go inside and unpack. This will be our base of operation for the upcoming Orden Assassination Mission.”

Aileen proudly announced as she walked into the fortress.

* * *

The fortress featured 99 barracks. Three people had to share one considering the number of heroes that would use the base. Chae Nayun, Yi Jiyeon, and Jin Seyeon ended up sharing the same barrack.

The three women unpacked their belongings in the small log cabin.

“*Hmm?* Nayun?” Jin Seyeon suddenly called her.

“Yes?” Chae Nayun tilted her head as she changed her clothes.

“You dropped this. What is it?”

Jin Seyeon picked up a piece of paper that fell on the ground. It

looked all wrinkly from being kept in a pocket all the time.

“Oh, that?”

Chae Nayun bitterly smiled as she received the *[Invitation Letter to the Loveroom]*.

“It’s an effective good that can summon a person.”

“Summon?”

“Yes, I just need to know the person’s tower nickname.”

“Wow, really? Who are you going to summon with that?”

Yi Jiyeon overheard and jumped in.

“*Hm?* Oh, I have someone in mind.”

Chae Nayun immediately thought of her game master, Extra 7. He saved her when she almost died in the tower. A couple of years had passed, but she never had the chance to use it.

“I think I’ll use it soon.”

Chae Nayun planned to use it before fighting Orden. After all, it would be a waste if she died. Meanwhile, Jin Seyeon looked at the summoning paper with sparkling eyes.

“It’s a great item. I’d love to have one too. *Ah*, do you want to exchange it for this card?”

Jin Seyeon took out a card.

[A Thousand Day Wait] [6 star] — May be used 1000 days after acquiring it. After this card is activated, you will coincidentally meet the person you want to see the next day.

“*Nah*, I have to wait 1000 days to use it. That’s terrible.”

Chae Nayun read the item description and shook her head.

“No, no, think about it. It’s better since you don’t need to know your target’s player ID.”

“It’s fine. I already know who I’m going to summon.”

Chae Nayun pushed the card away. Jin Seyeon pouted and placed it back in her pocket.

“Who are you going to summon? Can you tell us his player name? Let’s hear it.”

Jin Seyeon narrowed her eyes at Chae Nayun. Yi Jiyeon also stared with eyes full of anticipation. Of course, Yi Jiyeon already knew who Chae Nayun wanted to summon. It had to be Kim Hajin.

“Technically, I don’t know who he is either. *Ah*, senior might know since you’re an expert.”

Chae Nayun cleared her throat. “Extra7... Have you heard of him?”

“*Mmm...* He does sound familiar...”

Jin Seyeon furrowed her brows and pondered. Chae Nayun focused on her and hoped for an answer. After all, Jin Seyeon also became a famous ranker in the Tower of Wish. Neither Jin Seyeon nor Chae Nayun paid any attention to Yi Jiyeon.

However...

“...?”

Yi Jiyeon knew because she had a huge hint. She easily connected the dot between Extra7 and what Kim Hajin secretly told her after curing Chae Nayun’s curse.

— Tell her an extra came to help.

“Gulp.”

She finally found the answer to the lingering question on her mind since that day. *So that's what he meant by extra.* Yi Jiyeon swallowed hard.

“Haha, sorry. I'm not sure. I'll try to find out later.” Jin Seyeon scratched her head and laughed.

“Ah, it's fine. He likes to keep his identity hidden, so it's not too surprising.”

Chae Nayun casually waved it off.

“...” Yi Jiyeon stared at them with a wry smile before heading out of the barracks.

— Ah, why don't you summon him now?

— Eh? Ah, no. That's a bit... *haha*. I want to, but we're in the middle of a top-secret mission.

— Of course, I'm kidding. What are you going to say when you meet him?

— Nothing much. I just have a few questions to ask him, but I want to thank him most of all. He saved my life.

Yi Jiyeon left them and went to find Shin Jonghak.

* * *

[England, Buckingham Palace]

Spectators gathered around the illusory prison trapping Toji as the sun rose from the east. The prime minister, vice-minister, their secretaries, Princess Rachel, Yoo Yeonha, etc. Everyone except Chae Joochul and Heynckes had arrived as they waited for Heynckes to kill Toji.

“Hey, who was that kid from yesterday? Why won’t you answer me?”

Yoo Yeonha nudged Rachel standing next to her. Rachel maintained a blank expression and shamelessly replied, “What do you mean?”

“What do you mean? Is that all you have to say? You’re joking, right?”

“*Huh?*”

Rachel’s innocent face dumbfounded Yoo Yeonha.

“Wow, look at you. Did you lose your memory?”

Honestly, Rachel didn’t feel like dealing with Yoo Yeonha right now. She already had a headache from Shin Yeohwa trying to make a nest in her bedroom.

“*Um...* I’m not sure what you mean?”

“Excuse me! Don’t you want to form an alliance?”

“*Ah!* Lord Heynckes is coming!”

Rachel quickly pointed into the distance. *Tak, tak*— As she said, Heynckes leisurely approached the crowd. Yoo Yeonha decided to place her suspicions aside and ran up to Heynckes.

“Lord Heynckes, I’m Yoo Yeonha. I introduced myself yesterday. How are you feeling today?”

Yoo Yeonha spoke in German. Heynckes seemed happy as his eyebrows danced.

“You’re Yoo Jinwoong’s daughter. I’m feeling fine and your German sounds excellent.”

“*Haha*, yes. I enjoy German culture.”

“Oh, do you now?”

“Yes, German beer is the best in the world.”

“*Hmmm...*”

Yoo Yeonha showed off the German skills she acquired through her crash course last night. Heynckes happily chatted with her as he walked towards the illusory prison.

“It’s time for business. We can talk later.” Heynckes ended their conversation.

“Yes, thank you.”

Yoo Yeonha backed off, satisfied with her results. *Crack, crack*—Heynckes loosened his neck and shoulders.

“Now, let’s do this.”

“Lord Heynckes, we’ve also prepared a buff magician.”

“That’s unnecessary.”

The prime minister made a suggestion, but Heynckes declined and took out his steel sword. He had already finished all his preparations. His body no longer felt like it did in the past, but he honed himself last night until his resonance with the steel sword became clear again. That would be more than enough.

Chwiik—

Heynckes swung his sword and unleashed his magic power. The illusory prison shattered and steel magic power spread in every direction to form a new prison that encased Hyenckes and Toji.

“What?” Toji woke up with a dazed expression and noticed his surroundings had changed.

“What...”

He curiously stood as Heynckes swung and pierced his chest.

“Ak.”

Toji screamed and stepped back. The pain angered him and he glared at Heynckes.

“You, kill.”

Rocks crumbled from Toji’s body and shot towards Heynckes. However, mere rocks couldn’t hurt Heynckes. His steel displayed an absolute superiority against Toji’s earth.

“You! Kill!”

Toji swung his fists after seeing that long-ranged attacks wouldn’t work.

Koong! Koong! Koong!

Hyenckes easily avoided the inexperienced attacks and perfectly countered them. Wounds began to cover Toji’s body.

“I, no pain.”

Even so, Toji remained unbothered. His body could endlessly regenerate, so he never feared.

However...

“...?”

Toji soon realized his body wouldn’t move as he wished. His arms felt heavy and his chest felt stuffy. The soil that made up his body gradually hardened. Toji had no choice but to stop attacking.

“What?”

“Dull little rascal, you just realized?” Heynckes grinned.

“Real... ize?”

“You’re experiencing my steel transformation. I injected my magic power into your head.”

Toji’s body consisted of earth and metal would always defeat earth.

“Now you’re also experiencing the symptoms that are killing my body.”

The steel transformation quickly took place and devoured Toji.

“This...”

Toji could no longer move. He stared as his body solidified and became metal.

“What an anticlimactic ending.”

Heynckes felt Toji’s final moments would be no different than his own. He knew he would meet the same fate one day.

“It’s hard to see it any longer.”

Heynckes raised his sword. Toji stood still with his head down like a wind-up doll that stopped working.

“Haaa...”

Heynckes sighed and swung his steel sword.

* * *

[Africa – Orden’s Territory]

I arrived in Orden’s territory along with Spartan on a winter afternoon.

“Black Lotus. I just arrived.”

The Hero Association had assigned a secret mission to the Chameleon Troupe.

— Yes, confirmed.

The commander of the mission, Yi Gongmyung, answered from the radio. I created him as a genius character in tactical warfare and strategy, so I felt confident about his abilities.

— I’ll signal the spy soon.

I didn’t know how, but he managed to plant a spy in Orden’s territory. The Chameleon Troupe had to safely retrieve this spy. They would reward us with an astronomical amount of money and cancel the bounty on us. We had no reason not to accept.

“What comes after the signal?”

— You can go to the underground fortress we prepared.

“Fortress?”

An underground fortress sounded quite grand and surprised me.

— Yes, we prepared a fortress as our base camp. I’m afraid I can’t tell you too much.

“...”

Well, nothing seemed impossible in this world. I wouldn’t be surprised if Atlantis existed too.

“Understood. Contact me after signaling your spy.”

— Yes, understood.

A signal began beeping after we cut off communications. The Morse

code relayed a coordinate.

Chapter 280

Commence (3)

Beep— Beep—

The association needed the strongest and stealthiest Chameleon Troupe member for this Orden spy retrieval mission codenamed Sunrise. Boss seemed like the most suitable member, but I volunteered in her place. A strange feeling overcame me and I simply worried about her. I could turn back time if anything happened, but she couldn't. I didn't want to see her getting hurt.

Beep— Beep—

Boss must've thought the same. We argued over who would participate until I eventually won. However, she probably still kept an eye on me from somewhere.

Beep— Beep—

I took out the *[Mysterious Magnifying Glass]*, which allowed me to identify other people's emotions and weaknesses. The emotions I saw from Boss that day still lingered on my mind.

“Haaa...”

I heaved a sigh and recalled that 8 years had passed since I woke up in this world. That amount of time equaled both middle school and high school. I spent more than half of those years with Boss.

Beep— Beep—

We gradually changed each other and shared laughter together. Boss and I grew quite close before I realized it.

“Yi Byul...”

I muttered her name and found the pun quite ironic. Her name could also mean farewell, but we only grew closer.

Beep— Beep—

My thoughts strayed as the Morse code finally stopped. I turned my attention towards the screen displaying a pair of numbers.

[7.273853, 20.141379]

I converted it into latitude and longitude coordinates: *[7°16'25.9" N, 20°08'29.0" E]*.

“What the...”

According to the map, these coordinates led to the center of Orden’s palace. To be fair, the rewards wouldn’t have been so great if this turned out to be an easy mission. I picked up the radio and whispered.

“I have the coordinates.”

— Roger that. Contact us after rescuing our agent. Please wear the camera we gave you. We’ll notify you of the underground fortress’ location after we confirm our agent’s safety.

The radio cut off and I took out the *[Book of Truth]* to make sure this wouldn’t be a trap. *Is this mission a facade for capturing the Chameleon Troupe?* The answer came back as a no.

“What a waste.”

It sounded simple, but this question took 2 streaks of stigma because it required understanding human psychology. Fortunately, it would take only 3 hours to fully recharge stigma thanks to the Orb of Regeneration.

“Mmm...”

I stretched before beginning the mission. Then I wore some armor and other equipment. First, I equipped my new *[Black Lotus Uniform]*, a carbon fiber armor reinforced with magic, rare ores, and enchantments.

[Black Lotus Uniform] [Masterpiece] [Composite Attribute] A masterpiece achieved from great dexterity. One can't help but admire the dwarves' craftsmanship when looking at this uniform.

[Defense — 7/10] [High Rank Shock Absorption] [High Rank Magic Power Circulation] [High Rank Physical Strength Enhancement] [High Rank Magic Power Reinforcement] [Pinnacle Rank Instant Acceleration]

This uniform weighed like a t-shirt, but its sturdiness matched a military tank. I also added 4 high rank and 1 pinnacle grade enchantment with my four colored enchantment skill. The last option, *[Pinnacle Grade Instant Acceleration]*, required some extra effort.

“I'll try it out today.”

Boss severed one of Kurukuru's wings a while ago. I ground it into powder and used it as material for the four colored enchantment. As a result, I could momentarily reproduce Kurukuru's speed.

Next, I wore the *[Black Lotus Robe]* over the *[Black Lotus Uniform]*. My creativity had reached its limit, so I ended up naming all my equipment after Black Lotus. Their names somehow made them feel more luxurious.

[Black Lotus Robe] [Luxury] [Multiple Attributes] A masterpiece achieved from great dexterity. One can't help but admire the dwarves' craftsmanship when looking at this robe.

[Defense — 5/10] [High Rank Shock Absorption] [High Rank Concealment – Stealth] [High Rank Anti-Magic Force]

This robe featured a stealth and anti-magic power function. It made me immune to most weak spells.

Furthermore, I also wore the *[Black Lotus Walker]*, which increased my speed, and the *[Black Lotus Wrist Protector]*, which increased the

power of my arrows.

Click— Click—

The complete set of Black Lotus attire covered me from head to toe. Lastly, I placed the invisibility cloak over Spartan, who sat on my shoulder.

“Are you ready?”

— *Pururu.*

Spartan had fully grown to the length of my forearm.

“Let’s go rescue that agent.”

— *Pururu.*

Spartan already knew the coordinates from earlier. He closed his eyes and began vibrating. Soon, his long-range teleportation authority activated.

I found myself in front of Orden’s palace when I opened my eyes.

“Spartan, you should head back now.”

— *Pururu?*

He shook his head, but this place would be too dangerous. One wrong hit and he could die. I didn’t want to risk losing Spartan, so I forcefully sent him away.

I turned on the camera from the association after making sure Spartan left. It hung around my neck like a necklace.

“This is Black Lotus. I turned the camera on. Can you see?”

— Yes, thank you for your cooperation. Please capture the palace as much as possible.

Aileen created her own island inside the underground fortress' commander tent. She built walls with boxes of snacks and placed cute stuffed animals here and there for decoration.

"Mm... Mmm..."

The combination of snacks, a penguin plushy, and a shark plushy looked beautiful.

"Aren't you all the cutest?"

Some might criticize Aileen for being so laid-back during a serious mission, but she always acted like this.

Aileen never experienced real fear because she had always possessed incredible power even as a child. She always took first place and everyone revered her. Most expected her to become the strongest hero in history.

However, Aileen only grew lonelier as she became stronger. She reached high rank at the tender age of thirteen and never had any friends. Aileen turned to stuffed animals to soothe her loneliness.

A penguin with glasses and a baby shark that could sing.

"Huhu..."

She stepped back to admire her decorations. Her satisfaction increased the longer she looked at them. *Now this is worth saving the world.* Aileen nodded when...

Tok, tok—

Someone knocked on her door and she flinched.

"Go hide for a minute."

Aileen whispered and her Spirit Speech immediately activated. Sssss... Her Spirit Speech descended from above like a powder and concealed the animals.

“Okay, come in.”

Aileen returned to her chair and took out her laptop as the door opened. She even pretended to work by typing.

“Oh, what are these? You have a ton of snacks here.”

Aileen recognized Jin Seyeon’s voice right away.

“I’m not going to give you any, so go awa...?”

Aileen turned around to reject Jin Seyeon, but another guest also came. Chae Nayun accompanied Jin Seyeon and awkwardly scratched her neck before bowing.

“*Haha...* How are you, Captain Aileen? It’s me, Chae Nayun.”

“Who are you? Where’s your team leader? What’s Yun Seung-Ah doing right now?”

“She’s training with Kim Suho.”

“She’s flirting during a serious mission?”

Tzzt— Tzzt— Aileen frowned and the radio began crackling. A window popped up on her laptop for a video call.

— I’ve been informed that you finished setting up the fortress.

Yi Gongmyung appeared on the screen.

“Yep, we did. What’s next?”

— Another mission is currently taking place. Soon, the person we hired will be rescuing our spy from Orden.

The association dispatched a spy into Orden's territory about 3 months ago. They won over a few people Orden tried to recruit.

“Hired?”

— Yes, he's skilled enough to break in unnoticed.

This didn't convince Aileen. The association deployed spies several times, but Orden always uncovered them.

“Are you sure that spy's trustworthy? What if he betrays us?”

— You can trust him.

The vow that all spies took had caused a problem. A vow served as a safety net to prevent spies from turning on the association. However, Orden possessed the ability to discern vows because of the magic power attached to them. This time, they sent a spy without any vow, oath, or even a seal.

“Well, I guess I have no choice. How's the mission going?”

— The rescue agent departed a few moments ago.

“Who is this rescue agent?”

— It's someone you all know well.

Yi Gongmyung sounded confident, but his answer didn't satisfy Aileen. She folded her arms and frowned.

“What's his name?”

She asked and Yi Gongmyung replied straightforwardly this time.

— Black Lotus.

“What! Black Lotus?”

“For real?”

Not only Aileen, but Jin Seyeon and Chae Nayun also felt shocked.

— Yes, we entrusted Black Lotus to rescue the spy.

“Are you serious?”

— Why would I lie?

“*Uh... Cough.* No wonder that old geezer from the association kept brimming with confidence.”

Aileen met Yi Yukho, the current association chairman, a week ago and that bald codger kept telling her not to worry.

“Black Lotus seems like a safe bet as long as he doesn’t betray us.”

She sounded calm, but felt quite surprised. She never imagined the association would hire Black Lotus. Once again, the present circumstances reminded her of their mission’s grave importance.

— Right, Black Lotus is currently heading towards... *Ah*, he turned the camera on.

“Camera? Please show us!”

Jin Seyeon shouted out in surprise. Chae Nayun also pushed her head towards the laptop screen.

“*Ugh*, all of you get out of my way! Hey, do you even know who Black Lotus is?”

Aileen placed her hand on Chae Nayun’s cheek and pushed her away.

“Of course I do, but I’ve never met him.”

“Then you don’t know him. Move!”

— I'll share the view from Black Lotus's camera.

Yi Gongmyung turned on the view connected to Black Lotus' camera.
Pat! The screen flashed and switched to Orden's palace.

— This is Black Lotus' point of view. Coordinates are being updated in real-time, so please assist him if the situation gets out of hand.

“Okay, okay.”

Aileen, Chae Nayun, and Jin Seyeon gathered around the screen. Black Lotus seemed to be aimlessly wandering the palace at first. Then he suddenly rushed towards the gate at the speed of light.

“Wow! Oh wow, he's so freaking fast. *Er*, I mean... he's really fast.”

Chae Nayun became awestruck at Black Lotus' speed, but realized her inappropriate language and covered her mouth in embarrassment.

“You're right. He's quite fast. He... seems to have gotten stronger.”

Jin Seyeon muttered. She didn't know that the increase in Black Lotus' speed came from his equipment. Aileen also nodded.

“He moves like lightning.”

“It's almost too pretentious for an archer.”

Suddenly, they heard an unfamiliar voice.

— I've entered Orden's palace.

It came from the laptop as Black Lotus spoke.

Black Lotus spotted a humanoid monster as he turned the corner. The monster seemed to be a guard on patrol and he quickly hid behind a wall.

“...!”

“Look!”

The trio flinched in surprise.

— A monster is coming this way. I’ll dispose of him.

Black Lotus remained calm and took out his bow. He readied an arrow. Then something mysterious happened.

Chwaaa—

The monster stood on the right side of the corner, but Black Lotus aimed straight ahead. The arrow flew in a straight line before suddenly warping to the right.

Crack!

An impossible attack from a blind spot. Naturally, the humanoid monster couldn’t avoid it and collapsed to the ground with an arrow piercing its neck.

“That arrow just bent on its own. I’ve seen him do that before.”

Aileen muttered while pointing at the screen.

“Oh, you’re right. He didn’t even use a magic arrow. Interesting...”

Chae Nayun also chimed in, but stopped when she felt a sense of déjà vu.

A self-bending arrow. Where have I seen that before?

“His skill is almost god-like.”

Black Lotus’ skill also intrigued Jin Seyeon. Then...

“What’s going on here?”

The door swung open and Yun Seung-Ah entered the tent. Kim Suho, her training partner, also arrived with her.

“*Shhh*. Be quiet. We’re watching Black Lotus right now.”

Yun Seung-Ah widened her eyes at Aileen’s remark and Kim Suho couldn’t help but shout in surprise.

“Black Lotus!”

“Yeah, we recruited him for the mission. He’s on our side for now. How’s that? Our connections are pretty amazing, right?”

Aileen smirked. Black Lotus might be fearsome as a foe, but more dependable than anyone else as a friend. Aileen knew how annoying Black Lotus could be from the time he blocked the bridge on the tower’s 8th floor. They didn’t need to fear anything this time since everyone worked on the same side.

“Oh, let me see. I want to watch too.”

Yun Seung-Ah and Kim Suho joined the trio. The tent grew a little cramped, but it still fit everyone.

“What? Black Lotus?”

However, the entire fortress started buzzing from Kim Suho’s shout earlier.

“Where?”

“Did you just say Black Lotus?”

More people kept pouring in until Aileen’s tent went beyond its maximum capacity.

“Dammit, I can’t see! All of you get lost!”

Aileen shouted in annoyance, but no one seemed to care and even

pushed her away as they all nestled in front of the screen.

“*Heh*, so this is from Black Lotus’ point of view? I actually felt quite curious about him. Let’s see how he plays.”

Nicholas, from the Temple of Justice, seemed especially excited. The Temple of Justice somewhat formed a rivalry with the Chameleon Troupe as the latter began to gain recognition among the public.

— I believe the spy is in a different building.

Black Lotus spoke again as he entered the palace. The spacious interior contained several buildings.

— I’ll head there right away.

Black Lotus rushed towards one of the buildings, but the scene on the screen looked absurd.

“*Huh...* that’s... a lot of monsters.”

Jin Seyeon muttered.

At least a hundred monsters on land and a dozen in the sky guarded that building.

— Can you make it?

Yi Gongmyung asked Black Lotus. He hadn’t expected so many guards.

—...

Black Lotus faintly laughed after a brief moment of silence.

— Piece of cake.

The screen quickly changed. Black Lotus moved fast as lightning, but silent as the wind. He appeared at a completely different location in only a second.

“Oh, look at him go.”

Nicholas licked his lips with a grin.

“He’s really, really fast.”

“And he doesn’t make any sound when he moves.”

Yun Seung-Ah and Kim Suho voiced their opinions. The audience gathered in the commander’s tent admired Black Lotus’ every move.

The first mission finally began.

Chapter 281

Commence (4)

Orden's mansion looked quite luxurious. I didn't know how he constructed such a building, but it impressed me nonetheless.

— Can you make it?

A worried voice came from the radio as I examined the mansion.

“Piece of cake.”

I activated the *[Pinnacle Rank Instant Acceleration]* attached to my suit.

“...!”

My body moved faster than expected at a speed far beyond sound. I couldn't control this speed, so I activated *[Bullet Time]*. The world around me instantly slowed. I moved like the wind and quickly entered the mansion.

— Successful infiltration confirmed.

Wow, that crazy speed surprised me.

I calmed myself and looked around. The walls became transparent as I took in the entire mansion at a glance. The number of humans totaled 33, including Park Hanho, the former Temple of Justice member, and his revived daughter. Park Hanho was currently reading a book with his daughter. It looked like a typical peaceful scene.

More importantly, where is the spy?

I slowly scanned the rooms one by one and discovered a likely candidate in the guest room on the 5th floor. The woman's eyes kept

nervously wandering. A machine used to send Morse code sat at the foot of her bed.

“I think I just found the spy. Please confirm.”

I used [*Pinnacle Rank Instant Acceleration*] again. Monsters filled each floor, but they didn’t sense me as I passed them like how I couldn’t sense Kurukuru in the past.

Chwaaaa—

I arrived at the guest room on the 5th floor and quite literally appeared like the wind.

“Ah!”

The woman shook in surprise from my sudden appearance. Her strawberry blonde hair and tall height stood out. She swallowed hard as she looked at me.

“...”

I silently waited for confirmation.

— Yes, she’s the one.

“Hello...”

The woman spoke.

“My name is Rumi.”

She calmed down and even offered me her hand. For some reason, I felt like I’d seen her before.

— You may use the [*Return Scroll*] now.

I didn’t have time to dwell on it.

“Do you have any belongings?”

“I have them with me already. I brought my inventory from the tower.”

Rumi nodded.

“If you say so.”

I took out the *[Return Scroll]*. As I prepared to tear it in half...

“Hi.”

An unfamiliar voice suddenly approached like a blade. I tore the scroll without looking back. *Chwaaak!* The sound of paper tearing rang out.

“*Huhu*. Where do you think you’re going?”

However, the scroll failed to activate due to magic power that obstructed it. I turned around and sighed in annoyance. A humanoid monster who looked like a giant peacock stood before us.

“Good thing I decided to act on my hunch. I knew you were a traitor.”

This monster seemed like a female from her appearance and tone.

“Who are you?” I frowned at her.

“*Mmm...* That’s none of your business.”

The humanoid monster began to sing.

“Here is the inescapable mystery...”

Her voice sounded mesmerizing with perfect rhythm and her melody spread an abnormal magic power into the surroundings. It melted the room and reshaped our surroundings into a concert hall. Everything grew dark and silent. The stage and the seats separated from each other and a spotlight shone over center stage. It felt as if classical

music would start playing as I looked around in a daze.

“What kind of ability is this?”

“She’s one of Orden’s elite monsters. Her name is Doloren and she can imbue her songs with magic power. It’s similar to Spirit Speech, but also quite different. We’re inside Doloren’s barrier right now,” Rumi quickly explained.

“Ah.”

So that’s Doloren, one of the four new monsters added to the setting. Does she shed her feathers because she’s a bird? She’s different from what I saw on TV.

“We... should’ve escaped before she set her barrier. It’s too late now.”

Despair filled Rumi’s voice. She bit her lips so hard they began to bleed. It seemed she had already given up.

“It’s just a barrier. Why are you so scared?”

“You can’t just simply escape from Doloren’s barrier. It’s more like a world of its own.”

As expected of the spy, Rumi knew a great deal about Doloren.

“Only two audience members, but that should be enough.”

Doloren muttered as she climbed the stage. She stood on the podium like a conductor and looked down at us. Rumi turned white with fear, but I felt confident in breaking through this situation.

“It’s fundamentally just a barrier, no?”

“Pardon?”

I pulled Rumi into my arms and took out the *[Mystic Key]*.

[Mystic Key] [Magic Artifact] — A mystical key.

○*Evolving Item — EXP [90000/10000]* ○*Lv.8 Unlocking (Has been converted into an effective good through the 8 star card, [Card Conversion].)*

I upgraded the mystic key using a ton of *[Item Experience Coupons]*. Even the most solid barriers should become powerless.

“The first number is Messiah by George Frideric Handel. *Cough...*”

Doloren began warming up. She seemed completely at ease because she already concluded we could never break out.

I thrust the key into the ground and its tip sunk until... *Click*— It reached the barrier’s core.

Woooong...

I imbued stigma’s magic power into the key to reinforce it. Then I turned it to the right with all my strength.

Koong!

It sounded as if someone pressed all the lowest keys of a piano at once. Doloren’s concert hall suddenly turned into gravel.

“What? What’s going on? Where did my concert go?”

She looked around in confusion.

“Let’s run.”

“Excuse me? What are you— *Kyak!*”

I picked up Rumi and retreated.

I used *[Pinnacle Rank Instant Acceleration]* for the third time, but moved just as fast as my first time. I could use it without limitation as

long as I possessed the Orb of Regeneration.

* * *

Meanwhile, everyone eagerly waited outside their tents at the underground fortress. They all witnessed Black Lotus' triumph from the camera around his neck. Their hearts sank when Doloren appeared since everyone knew she could match a master rank hero. However, Black Lotus defeated her quite easily and escaped with the spy. He perfectly executed the mission.

"I knew he would be a good bet."

Aileen nodded in satisfaction. Today, she witnessed Black Lotus' true strength.

"Right, I'm curious how he broke that barrier. What do you think, Aileen? That barrier didn't have any noticeable weaknesses. That monster looked confused too."

Excitement and curiosity overcame Nicholas.

"Hey Nayun, do you think he'd take a photo with me? I think I'll be able to get 300 million likes online."

That last remark came from Yi Jiyoona. All the heroes looked forward to meeting Black Lotus. They didn't expect him to answer their questions, but felt thrilled to finally meet him.

"Ah, he's here!"

Jin Seyeon spotted him first at the other side of the tunnel with her extraordinary eyesight. Everyone turned to where she pointed as two silhouettes appeared. The heroes went to greet Black Lotus and Rumi instead of waiting. Aileen stood in front of Black Lotus as the commander in chief.

"Oi, it's been a while."

Aileen greeted him.

Black Lotus remained silent and handed Rumi to Parma, who some called a saint. Rumi had fainted from Black Lotus' supersonic speed.

"Hey, don't you remember me?" Aileen frowned after Black Lotus ignored her.

"I do," he briefly replied.

"Then why are you ignoring me?"

"It's not my job to look after you."

"..."

Aileen's face turned slightly red and a few muffled laughter broke out behind her.

"I never asked you to look after me! Be courteous, you!"

"..."

Black Lotus looked past Aileen. He gazed over Kim Suho, Nicholas, Yun Seung-Ah, Shin Jonghak, Jin Seyeon, and Chae Nayun. His eyes lingered slightly longer on Chae Nayun, who also noticed this and tilted her head in confusion.

"I'm leaving now, but be sure to tell me what the spy discovered."

Black Lotus turned around, but Aileen's high-pitched voice stopped him.

"Do you have any other business to take care of?"

As an ally, Black Lotus would be more dependable than anyone else. Aileen wanted to keep him around until they defeated Orden. Black Lotus could secure the rear, attack the front, and even assist from behind. He would be the perfect addition to any team.

"..."

However, Black Lotus didn't look back or speak a word. An eagle flew from the distance and landed on his shoulder.

“Hey! Answer me before you leave!”

“Contact the Chameleon Troupe if you want to recruit me,” Black Lotus nonchalantly answered Aileen.

He didn't say anything else.

“Excuse me, can you maybe take just one photo with m— *Uup!*”

Chae Nayun and Kim Suho managed to stop Yi Jiyeon before she could finish. Then Black Lotus turned into a handful of dust and disappeared into thin air.

Silence descended in the fortress. The heroes all stared at the spot where Black Lotus just stood. The man came and left like the wind. Black Lotus should've been their enemy, but a sense of gratitude filled their hearts.

Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yi Jiyeon, Jin Seyeon, Chae Nayun and Yun Seung-Ah... Each task force member had their own version of the Black Lotus story to tell. Their stories would soon spread across the world as rumors.

* * *

[World of Wish, 8F Crevon]

Margrave Tomer had tea with a guest in her reception room on a starry night in Crevon. The atmosphere felt rather grave. Tomer sighed as she stared at the dark clouds outside.

“A lot has changed ever since the 30th floor crumbled.”

Crevon underwent a state of emergency after Kim Suho cleared the final floor. Cults heralded the end of Crevon and some sought to overthrow the current regime.

This period of turmoil only served to bring Crevon together. Araha, the fifth princess, declared herself king and finally unleashed her hidden ambition after all these years. She launched a series of innovative and radical policies to address the people's concerns.

Araha also recruited many skilled players and regularly sent them on expeditions to the 9th floor. Half of the 9th floor that once crawled with mythical monsters had now been cleared. It represented a triumph on her part.

“What do you think?”

Tomer asked the guest while sipping her tea. Recent changes had placed her in a rather tricky political position.

“I am worried.”

The clinking sound of iron resounded along with the low-pitched voice. The guest, a giant man, stared at the tiny cup in front of him before picking it up and placing it on his palm. Tomer smiled.

“So even you're scared, Lü Bu?”

“...”

Lü Bu didn't reply. He only grabbed his square sky halberd with his other hand. Then he raised his head again and stared into Tomer's eyes.

“I heard Earth will also transform into the demon realm.”

“Yes, that's what the prophecy states.”

The highest ranking administrators of the tower like Buddha, Jesus, and other saints already ascended to heaven. They left behind a single prophecy.

[Demonic energy shall invade the blue world. We hope you will all work together to overcome this ordeal.]

“The prophecy only applies to the outside world.”

Tomer muttered and glanced at Lü Bu.

She now referred to Earth as the outside world. Tomer recalled her parents. Earth had left nothing but scars on them. She never wanted to leave Crevon for this reason and cherished the peaceful life she found here.

“Do you wish to descend as well, General Lü Bu?”

Others held very different opinions. Not only the administrators, but also Lü Bu, Lancelot, and practically anyone who originated from Earth wanted to descend. Lü Bu slowly turned and glared at Tomer.

“I’m merely following my lord.”

“Right. Your lord resides in Crevon, yet you worry about Earth.”

“...”

Lü Bu clenched his teeth, which made him appear more threatening. Tomer stared back without being intimidated. As the atmosphere between them grew hostile...

Guooooo...

A strange vibration shook their surroundings. Tomer and Lü Bu stopped and looked around in confusion.

Soon, a message popped up in front of Tomer.

[The system has undergone a huge change.]

Only Tomer could see this message as an NPC and a player. Her eyes widened as she read it.

The sky grew dark without a hint of light as I returned to Pandemonium. I headed straight to Boss' office after a quick shower and gave her my report.

"You're back."

Boss greeted me with her usual nonchalant look.

"I already heard you succeeded."

"Did you get the reward already?"

"Yes, the Chameleon Troupe has officially been pardoned. I'm not sure how long that'll last though."

Boss chuckled and stood up to approach me.

"You did well."

She stared at me before leaning over and hanging a necklace around my neck.

"This is better than the one I gave you before when you first joined. I received it from the association in exchange for their request. You earned it, so you keep it."

[Heimdallr's Necklace], it sounded as priceless as its appearance.

"This is..."

I felt surprised she gave it to me since I knew from her official setting that she loved jewelry. I gratefully held up the necklace and examined it.

Guooooo...

A huge vibration echoed off the walls. Several windows popped up and blocked my view.

[Outline — The current narrative has caught up to the original story. The remake story will now fully take over.] [Problem — The last arc before the hiatus felt too dull.] [Settings Change — A huge system overhaul has been incorporated to minimize dullness.] [Original Author's Privilege — Your eyes may now see an individual's life force, among other stats...]

Chapter 282

Great Change (1)

[England, Buckingham Palace]

The English government provided Heynckes with the utmost hospitality after he subjugated Toji. Heynckes didn't want the public to find out about his return, so England did its best to stop the information from leaking. As a result, Heynckes stayed in England for two more days before returning to the Himalayas.

“Hmm...”

With Heynckes gone, today would be the last day that Yoo Yeonha stayed in Buckingham Palace. She checked her outfit in front of the mirror in her room. She wore a black dress designed by the world-class designer, Yi Yoojoong, along with a pinnacle grade artifact called Siren's Black Pearl Necklace and an ancient Silla artifact called the Bronze Necklace. The beautiful Buckingham Palace complimented her own beauty.

“Huhu.”

She couldn't help but thank her parents every time she saw her reflection. How did they pass down only the best genes?

She tried various poses full of confidence: smiling like a cute girl, biting her lips like a seductress, and looking stern like a CEO.

Yoo Yeonha knew the benefits of her beauty and experienced it firsthand in business. Her appearance exuded trust and evoked admiration, further boosting her guild's image. She became the face of Essence of the Strait for a reason. However, her appearance never garnered love from anyone.

“Tsk.”

A sense of doubt suddenly swept her. Yoo Yeonha clicked her tongue and turned away from the mirror, but the hopeless feeling didn't go away. She subconsciously thought of Shin Jonghak. She had liked him ever since a young age, but gave up after realizing he would never be hers.

How did I come to like him?

It happened a long time ago.

“Haaa...”

Yoo Yeonha sat on the corner of her bed and recalled her first meeting with Shin Jonghak.

They officially called it the Guild and Business Friendship Conference. A social gathering for corporate leaders and guild executives to network.

Adults attended with their children. The 5 year old Yoo Yeonha looked forward to the conference. She held the same ambitions back then as she did now.

That day, she tried on dozens of dresses with her mother. Her mother felt quite passionate, but Yoo Yeonha seemed even more heated. What dress to wear, what accessories to choose, she spent 7 hours worrying about her outfit.

— How do I look, father?

She finally picked a dress that resembled what she wore now. A black dress and a necklace that made her look more mature.

— You look adorable, Yeonha!

— *A-Ah*, stop! You're going to wrinkle my dress! Stooooop!

Her father hugged her with a hearty laugh and Yoo Yeonha recalled being angry at him for wrinkling her dress.

Her uncle Yoo Jinhyuk, a rising star at the time, also arrived after she picked out her dress. They all headed to the conference at the garden of Chae Joochul's grand mansion.

— Wow...

Classical music played in the background and beautiful flowers glistened under the sun. Yoo Yeonha's eyes widened at the scenic view. She came from a rich family, but the Immortal's grand mansion held a certain noble charm that couldn't be found anywhere else.

— Oh, if it isn't Air Blitz Yoo Jinwoong!

— *Haha*, leader Yoon Youngho. It's nice to see you.

— No need for greetings. Follow me. Shin Myungchul brought an amazing child with him. Her name is Aileen and she possesses an extremely rare gift called Spirit Speech.

— Oh?

Her father and mother disappeared with leader Yoo Youngho. Uncle Yoo Jinhyuk led her to the place where all the children gathered, a playground built just for kids. Yoo Yeonha puffed her cheeks unhappily.

— Uncle Jinhyuk, can't I say hi to adults too? Kids are boring.

— Nope, you can't.

— Why?

— The goal of this conference is to make connections. Your parents will take care of the adults and your job is to connect with the other kids. Your parents' connections will eventually become yours one day. Plus, you're only 5 years old. Don't go around calling kids boring when you're one too.

Yoo Jinhyuk's words made sense, so Yoo Yeonha went to the playground with no other choice. There, she spotted 10 or so other

kids her age.

Huu... huu...

Yoo Yeonha collected her breath before approaching them.

— Hello, my name is Yoo Yeonha.

She captured the hearts of the other kids in 30 minutes with her conversational skills and beauty. When she felt like she had become the main character...

— *Ugh*, annoying.

A boyish girl appeared wearing jeans and a t-shirt. The upset girl sighed and sat on a nearby chair.

Yoo Yeonha felt dumbstruck at first. How could someone come to such a noble meeting dressed like that?

She chose to just ignore that girl. Yoo Yeonha snorted and invited her new friends to eat some pudding.

— This pudding is great. Would you like to try... some?

However, most of them had already disappeared. *Where did they go?* Yoo Yeonha looked around in confusion. Then she saw them flattering the boyish girl.

— *Eh?*

The name Nayun entered her ears and she realized that girl's identity.

Chae Nayun, Daehyun's youngest daughter and the granddaughter that Chae Joochul adored.

Yoo Yeonha met Chae Nayun for the first time and also felt inferior for the first time. However, she refused to yield and believed in her superior appearance.

— Hello, how old are you? I'm five.

She tried her best to recapture the other kids, but the sons and daughters of these mid-sized guilds left for the nobles.

The nobles didn't include just Chae Nayun. Sons and daughters of more honorable guilds and corporations all seemed to possess something more important than appearance.

Yoo Yeonha realized she could never be the main character. She only served the role of an extra. The young and proud Yoo Yeonha felt sad about not being at the center of attention. She resented Chae Nayun, who stole the spotlight in only jeans and a t-shirt.

Yoo Yeonha held back her tears and glared at Chae Nayun, who seemed annoyed by all the attention.

— That girl... stupid, idiot...

Yoo Yeonha ate her pudding as she sobbed. Only the sweet pudding comforted her.

Then Shin Jonghak appeared in her life.

— Is that pudding good?

His voice sounded childish, but full of confidence. He didn't use polite speech either, but Yoo Yeonha didn't mind. *Someone came to me!* Just that one fact made her happy. Yoo Yeonha elegantly wiped her tears and turned around.

There, she saw a handsome boy who looked like a painting.

— Who are you?

She asked in a daze.

Shin Jonghak smirked and proudly declared.

— Shin Jonghak. My grandfather is Shin Myungchul.

— Shing Myungchul?

— It's Shin Myungchul, not Shing Myungchul.

Yoo Yeonha's eyes widened. Everyone in the world knew Shin Myungchul. Shin Jonghak liked her huge reaction and stayed to comfort her.

— Don't worry about those guys. They're only puppets for their parents.

Shin Jonghak must've spoken out of jealousy since he liked Chae Nayun for the longest time. He must've felt annoyed seeing Chae Nayun surrounded by other boys, but Yoo Yeonha didn't know that at the time.

— Those who chase after special people without trying to become special themselves only end up as trash.

He sounded just as arrogant back then.

— *Un*, okay...

He also seemed like the coolest and most wonderful person.

Her heart didn't thump like it used to when she recalled that childhood memory.

Yoo Yeonha met another man about 12 years later. A man who didn't have anything to his name, but continued to get on her nerves. She even ignored and reproached him, but he ended up saving her life. Not only that, but he forever turned her life around.

Kim Hajin.

Thanks to him, she became the noble person she always wanted to be. Essence of the Strait became the number 1 guild in the world and

entered the top 10 corporate entities. She achieved the ambition she always...

Tok, tok—

A knock interrupted her recollection and Yoo Yeonha shot up from her bed.

“Who is it?”

— *Um*, it’s Rachel. I heard you were leaving, so I came to see you off.

“Hmm...”

Yoo Yeonha straightened the hem of her dress and opened the door. Rachel stood in front of her and seemed tired from dealing with Shin Yeohwa. However, she still greeted Yoo Yeonha with a bright smile.

“You look great. Are you ready to go?”

“...”

“Yeonha?”

Yoo Yeonha silently glared at her. Rachel always acted subservient and modest. Yoo Yeonha knew why since she could now determine the fate of a country. Without exaggerating, she could literally end England if she wanted to.

“You.”

Yoo Yeonha felt displeased with Rachel’s attitude. The emotions towards Chae Nayun that day surfaced once again. She couldn’t hold back anymore and released the pent-up feelings in her heart.

“What relationship do you have with Kim Hajin?”

Rachel’s shoulders flinched. “Pardon? What do you mean—”

“Don’t act like you don’t know.”

Yoo Yeonha turned serious. “The child you ran off with two days ago. I saw her in Seoul. She wasn’t with you, but with Kim Hajin.”

“...”

Rachel didn’t say anything. That silence might as well be an answer.

“I’ll ask again.”

Yoo Yeonha looked serious as ever. She clenched her teeth and asked straightforwardly while sharpening a knife in her heart.

“Did you sleep with Kim Hajin?”

The moment she asked...

Guooooo...

Boundless magic power poured from an unknown place.

* * *

[Final Arc ▷ You Can’t Jump Off a Running Train] [Earth’s Demon Realm Transformation... 3% Complete.] [Calculating towers that have not been conquered.] [Tower of Miracles, Tower of Eternity, Tower of Beasts, Tower of Sorrow, Tower of Despair...] [A total of 13 towers have been found. The power of these 13 towers will be released to the outside world.]

“Hajin, magic power just—”

“Fuck, what now?”

“Eh... W-what?”

A sudden change to the system and a new arc. I couldn’t hold back my anger and ran to look out the window. Then I became speechless.

Chwaaa—

Thousands of shooting stars fell from the sky and illuminated the dark. A meteor shower and only I could see the writing that kept appearing.

[Enough time has elapsed since the destruction of the Tower of Wish's shell. During this time, humanity paid little attention to conquering the remaining towers because of the great enemy known as Orden.

Tower of Miracles, Tower of Eternity, Tower of Beasts, Tower of Sorrow, Tower of Despair... A total of 13 unconquered towers have released their powers because of the negative force from the Tower of Wish materializing. Their powers will serve as a catalyst to hasten Earth's demon realm transformation.

Meteorites will fall across the world. They contain hundreds of demonic monsters, demon merchants, and hungry demons. The demon realm transformation will now begin.

However, this demon realm transformation will not resemble the same phenomenon as found in the Tower of Wish. Not all demons will be enemies. The demon realm transformation will bring about a new age...]

“You piece of shit! The fuck does that mean?”

I cursed at the sky and looked at the words I couldn't understand. Then...

KWANG!

A few meteorites exploded as they landed. The earth rumbled and smoke filled the air.

[Rewards have been granted to all of humanity for clearing the Tower of Wish — Blessing of the Saints has been activated.] [A new system has been initialized.] [Your system has reached level 6, the only player to have surpassed level 4.]

I used *[Consolidation Coupons]* to level up my system as I climbed the Tower of Wish.

[Your stats have been condensed to 5 attributes.] [Your attributes are 1. Sharpness 2. Tenacity 3. Creativity 4. Materialization 5. Consolidation]

“Boss?”

I turned to Boss. She seemed to be experiencing the same phenomenon as she stared into the air.

Grrrk— Grrrk—

Strange roars resounded and I looked outside. *Grrrk—* Hundreds of demonic beasts crawled out from the meteorites that landed.

[Arc Progress – Demonic beasts from the demon realm have invaded humanity.] [Countless dungeons, mirror worlds, and other battlefields will be created.] [You will receive DP (Dark Points) every time a dungeon is cleared or a demonic beast is killed.] [DP can be gained by anyone and may be spent in demon towns or with demon merchants.] [Note: Demon merchants and demon towns are not your enemies. These neutral entities only seek to benefit from this war.] [You may convert SP to DP.]

Clang!

A black demonic beast jumped through the window and landed on me. I subconsciously swung my hand and cleanly slashed him in half.

“The hell?”

I looked at my palm, which suddenly became sharp.

[7 points of sharpness will be added to all your actions.] [You have obtained 5 DP from killing a demonic beast.]

“What just...”

“Hajin?”

Boss called my name as I murmured in bewilderment. I turned on the TV without answering her.

— Emergency report. The world is experiencing an unprecedented meteor shower. These meteorites are causing huge explosions. Civilians are recommended to stay inside...

“No, Hajin.”

Boss tapped on my shoulders like she felt frustrated.

“Yes?”

“L-Look over there.”

“Huh?”

I turned towards where Boss pointed. This vast field in Central Asia contained nothing 3 minutes ago. That no longer seemed to be the case.

General stores, clothing stores, weapon stores, magic stores, benches surrounding a pond, and a plaza with 4-story inns. Existences that looked like people. A meteorite struck and a new town appeared.

“What’s that?”

The system replied to my confusion.

[These demon merchants have come to Earth through the meteorites. Demon merchants behave fundamentally different from demons, devils, djinns, and demonic beasts. Demons are not a single race and only refer to those who originate from the demon realm. Demons possess different settings depending on their race.]

[Devils will employ djinns and demonic beasts to conquer Earth. Humanity must stop them. These demon merchants only desire to reap the benefits from this war.]

[They will sell anything including technology to annihilate their own race, weapons, magic, etc. As long as you pay the required DP.]

[How is it? Not so boring anymore, right?]

“You son of a bitch! Are you kidding me?”

I couldn't hold back my anger at the last sentence.

“Huuu...”

Anger wouldn't change anything. I calmed myself and needed to do something. I took out the *[Purifying Crystal]* from stigma's storage.

Boss suddenly discovered something else.

“Hajin.”

She pointed at the sky with a trembling hand. *What now?* I looked up, somewhat afraid of what I might discover. Immediately, my thoughts froze.

“A dragon...”

Boss murmured as we looked at the sky in a daze. Not the Human Dragon Aileen, but an actual dragon circling the moon. A member of the mystical race that no longer existed.

“Jesus Christ, is this fucking for real?”

I couldn't help but curse. I hadn't cursed in a long time, but this damned co-author just wouldn't let me be.

Chap—

“Uk!”

Boss covered my mouth with her hand and gave me a coy look.

“Don't curse.”

“Ah, okay.”

Chapter 283

Great Change (2)

[44 days left until the Advent of Calamity.] [You may access the development's outline as the original author with your gift, Observation and Reading.] [Don't forget, you may still ask me one question or favor.]

Boss and I ran to where the meteorite landed. After 3 minutes of running, we spotted the village that suddenly appeared. It looked similar to the one I saw in Akatrina with houses made from bricks like in the Middle Ages.

“What’s this?”

Pandemonium djinns and mercenaries also gathered at the village. A few noisy djinns anticipated a fight, but most calmly observed the demon village shrouded in dark fog.

“As I thought, you came too.”

A familiar voice called us and I pulled my hood down. Boss glanced at our business partner, Wicked.

“Do you know anything about the current situation?” Boss asked her.

“No, I don’t.”

Wicked shook her head and the 3 executives with her did the same. So far, I only released 3 of her 6 executives. I set aside the remaining ones in case we needed to negotiate with her. I intended to keep it this way for a while since Wicked’s gift made her stronger as her followers increased.

“This phenomenon seems to be related to the demon realm. How can you not know what’s going on? Aren’t you a djinn?” Boss probed

Wicked.

“Djinns aren’t from the demon realm and I only serve my lord devil. I have no idea what’s going on either. Let’s head inside and find out together.”

Wicked’s explanation made sense, so we headed to the village. It looked quite big with different sectors. We continued to walk and took in our surroundings until an Aileen-sized demon jumped out from a street corner.

— Hello!

I felt as surprised as Boss and Wicked, but my pride wouldn’t allow me to jump in fear. Wicked exchanged glances with her underlings and one of them stepped forward with a stern look.

“Who are you? Reveal yourself.”

— *Mmm*. So we can communicate. That’s good.

As expected, the demon spoke Korean. He looked quite small with big, curved horns growing out of his temples.

“Tell us about yourself and what you’re doing here.”

— My name is Kuong and I’m a merchant. I’m still trying to figure everything out myself.

I used my *[Original Author’s Privilege]* on the demon.

[Demon Realm Merchant Kuong] [Life Force 100/100] [Alignment – Neutral] [Realm – Stage 1 Average] [Job – Middle Grade Merchant] [Status – Speaking the truth.]

— I sell a lot of useful things. Please take a look.

Kuong showed us his shop's catalog.

*[Special Potion] [Protective Wall] [Artifacts From Another Dimension]
[Mercenary for Hire]... [Body Enhancer] [State of Existence Enhancer]*

— You can buy these items with DP, which is the currency we use in our world. You earn them by hunting demonic beasts. *Ah*, do you know about demonic beasts? Monsters contaminated in the demon realm become demonic beasts. I highly recommend this item here, *[State of Existence Enhancer]*. It's expensive, but worth the cost!

“The demon realm? Are you referring to the demon realm transformation?”

Boss frowned. Players from the Tower of Wish somewhat knew about the demon realm transformation.

— Yes, today's meteorites mark the beginning of the demon realm transformation. Earth will transform into the demon realm in no time if you fail to work together.

All three of us fell silent from the shock. I looked at the demon merchant Kuong and spoke in an intimidating voice.

“We get DP from killing demonic beasts, so what happens if I kill you?”

— Pardon?

“Can I earn DP by killing you?”

— Oh, you can't kill me because I'm only a hologram. My physical body is in the real demon realm.

[Status – Speaking the truth.]

I didn't plan on killing him, but not being able to do so irked me.

“I see.”

— You won't gain anything from killing us. We're willing to do

whatever as long as you pay the DP.

“Geez, another form of currency?”

All this DP, TP, and SP became a bit confusing. We had no reason to refuse and I did have a talent for making money. I could survive anywhere in this world even if I became stranded. Success only required a tiny amount of skills and a lot of luck.

“Do you have casinos here?”

— *Ah*, the higher grade merchants run them. I have lottery tickets though!

“Yeah?”

— Yep, they cost 20 DP per ticket and you’ll instantly get the results. The first place winner receives 1,500,000 DP, second place wins 150,000 DP, third place wins 15,000 DP...

I could make 1.5 million DP with just 20 DP. Of course, the chances of winning any lottery would be slim to none. Kuong proceeded to explain.

— The probability of winning first place is 1 in 30,000,000. Second place is 1 in 9,000,000 and third place is 1 in 300,000...

These numbers seemed insanely low. However, the corners of my mouth couldn’t help but twitch from joy. I tried to appear as calm as possible.

“That’s pretty bad.”

— The chances are low because we sell these tickets in other dimensions and worlds. I hope you understand.

“Well, that’s alright.”

I felt confident with my superhuman 9.1 luck stat no matter how low

the chances.

* * *

[Africa, Underground Fortress]

[VIOLET's Gossip – Black Lotus Q&A]

Q. Why does Black Lotus oppose Orden?

A. I don't know the details, but I think he has a reason for his hostility. Maybe Orden murdered his family or something.

Q. How strong is Black Lotus?

A. I can confidently answer this question. Black Lotus is as powerful as, if not more than, Chae Joochul. Chae Joochul is old, so I expect Black Lotus to take the lead as time goes on.

Q. Really? We know Kim Suho, the Swordsman of Wish, is also quite powerful. Fenrir killed Black Lotus once before too.

A. I heard Kim Suho acknowledged Black Lotus. He might be stronger than Black Lotus in a fair 1 on 1 fight, but no hero can stand against Black Lotus in a real battle. As for Fenrir, no comment. I still think Black Lotus is stronger than Fenrir.

Q. What kind of atmosphere did Black Lotus have?

A. He looked sad and acted quite cold, but I could spot a very human weakness in him. It felt like he carried a deep scar in his heart that couldn't be erased. Even his nonchalant attitude couldn't hide his sorrow. He seemed like a wounded beast or a fragile snowflake.

Q. If that's true, why do you think Black Lotus feels so hurt?

A. I'm not sure. Many reasons could exist like his battle against Orden, the duel against Fenrir in the Tower of Wish, or maybe the association's oppression. More than anything, I think it's because Black Lotus has the

world at his feet and leads the Chameleon Troupe. The higher you go, the colder and fiercer it gets.

Meanwhile, Yi Jiyeon continued to spread rumors about the Violet Banquet. These rumors only stemmed from her delusions, but she didn't feel guilty at all. In her mind, they wouldn't cause any harm to Black Lotus. Plus, she really believed in her analysis.

Tap, tap, tap—

She accumulated more Violet Banquet points as her typing grew louder. Yi Jiyeon possessed an astounding *[Blue Diamond]* Violet Banquet ID grade, so everyone believed her words without cross-checking the facts.

“Mmm. I should check my social media now.”

She turned off Violet Banquet after finishing the Q&A and pulled up her official social media account.

[Yi Jiyeon] [Posts 2,480] [Follower 36.3M] [Following 103]

“Huhu.”

Fellow members of the Orden Assassination Team treated the high-intermediate rank, grade 1 Yi Jiyeon as nothing but an immature supporter. However, she became an extremely popular celebrity online thanks to her excellent marketing strategy.

She gained worldwide popularity by posting photos of herself with other famous heroes like Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, Kim Suho, and Shin Jonghak. She also ran a secret website called *[VIOLET's Gossip]* on Violet Banquet where she posted gossip like the earlier Q&A. Initially, she only wanted to earn Violet Banquet points, but gained a lot of followers along the way.

— So all you do is sell?

“They're still not done?”

Yi Jiyeon turned off her smartwatch and stood up from her seat. She slightly opened the door and peeked through the gap. Aileen continued to interrogate the demon.

— Yes, all we do is sell goods.

“How do you expect me to believe that?”

The underground fortress went through a huge change after countless meteorites landed on Earth. One meteor passed through the ground and became a shop just outside the fortress.

— Look at us. We’re not built to fight. I’m shorter than you.

The demon twirled.

“You’re kidding, right? Well, it’s true you are shorter than me.”

Yi Jiyeon stepped out and stood next to Chae Nayun and Kim Suho.

“Nayun, Suho, is she still not finished?”

“*Hmm?*”

“No, but I think it’ll be over soon. *Ah*, right. What kind of stat did you get?”

Stat? Yi Jiyeon wondered what Kim Suho meant. Then she realized he meant the great change that happened last night.

“Oh, I received a buff. How about you two?”

“I got tenacity and extreme limit.”

“Mine’s amplification.”

“*Huh?* Why do you have two, Suho?” Yi Jiyeon asked.

“Um... I’m not sure.”

“Maybe because he cleared the Tower of Wish?”

Chae Nayun tapped Kim Suho’s chest and he retreated while covering his torso.

“Ah, that makes sense.”

The conversation between Aileen and the demon finally ended.

“So you promise not to tell anyone about our fortress?”

— Of course.

“We just want to kill Orden.”

— Sure. I don’t know who that is, but we can help as long as you have the DP!

“Whatever. Hey, come on out everyone!”

Aileen shouted and all 177 special task force members appeared from their tents.

“We’re going to start training!”

Aileen took out the [*Training Simulator*]. This device had been updated to reflect Rumi’s report on Orden’s Palace. It became even more realistic and accurate now.

“The mission’s date won’t change! We will strike in 3 weeks as planned and kill Orden!”

Aileen’s high-pitched voice echoed throughout the underground cave.

“Furthermore!”

The association told Aileen they would try and negotiate, but she decided to announce this beforehand to lift their morale.

“Black Lotus will be joining us on this mission!”

Thankfully, the members took the news well. Shin Jonghak widened his eyes, Chae Nayun seriously nodded, Kim Suho recalled the image of Black Lotus, and Yi Jiyeon hoped to finally take a selfie with him.

“Unni, is that true? I thought they were still negotiating.”

Only Yun Seung-Ah knew the truth and whispered in Aileen’s ear.

“I heard the cost is quite high. Rumors are saying the down payment is 50 billion won.”

“Whatever, that’s the old geezer’s problem. We need Black Lotus to end Orden for good.”

Aileen declared despite Yun Seung-Ah’s concerns.

* * *

[Demon Town in Central Asia]

I returned to the demon town after hunting exactly 100 demonic beasts with Boss and Wicked (she insisted on following us). Currently, the demon realm transformation only progressed to 3% and the demonic beasts felt as strong as intermediate rank monsters.

I greeted Kuong when we returned.

“I’ve got 1000 DP, so give me 50 lottery tickets.”

— Ah, we don’t sell them here.

With a smile, Kuong led us to the general store around the corner.

— Welcome! Come in.

I entered first and found all sorts of cool stuff inside. The shop owner looked like a giant as big as Cheok Jungyeong. I approached him and spoke.

“Hey.”

— Nice to meet you. I’m Deong.

“Do all of your names end in ong?”

— That’s right.

“Oh... Well, I’ll cut to the chase. Give me 50 lottery tickets.”

— You won’t win. It’s a 1 in 30 million chance. Humans never win.

For some reason, Deong didn’t want to sell me the lottery tickets.

“I’ll show you my luck is beyond a human. Just give me the tickets.”

—...

Deong seemed discontent, but eventually gave in as I continued glaring. He handed me 50 tickets.

— It’s not going to work out for you.

I scratched the 50 lottery tickets on the spot.

The first ticket won 6th place for 100 DP. The second ticket got nothing. The third won 6th place again for 100 DP.

Boss widened her eyes.

“Oh, it comes out pretty often for a 1 in 30 million chance.”

“*Huh?* Oh, it’s 1 in a 30 million chance for first place. Everything else has a higher probability.”

“Uh... I see. *Cough*. I’ve never bought a lottery ticket before.”

Boss cleared her throat in embarrassment as I scratched my tickets.

The fourth ticket won 5th place for 500 DP. The fifth ticket won 3rd place for 15000 DP.

— Wow! You won third place! Congratulations!

— 3rd place? That’s something.

“Oh, you’re quite lucky.”

Kuong, Deong, and Wicked congratulated me, but I didn’t feel satisfied yet. I scratched through my remaining tickets: 15th, 23rd, 33rd, and 50th. I didn’t win first place from my first 50 tickets, so I bought another 150 tickets with the DP I just won.

I started scratching through them again: 69th, 75th, 83rd... Finally, I saw a golden glimmer at my fingertips when I reached the 109th lottery ticket.

“Ah, this one’s first place.”

I felt this before as I confidently scratched the ticket.

[First Place]

As expected, I smirked and shoved the first place ticket at Deong.

“You see? Now give me that DP.”

* * *

[Seoul, Korea]

Ten days had passed since the demonic meteor shower and humanity quickly adapted to the sudden changes. They defined the differences between demon merchants and demons as the initial confusion settled

down. Heroes began purchasing useful weapons from demon merchants to hunt monsters and demonic beasts.

Articles about Black Lotus began increasing after last week. I didn't know why, but just let them be since they more or less worshipped Black Lotus. It probably had to do with my luck.

“When is she coming?”

I waited in Seoul for Yoo Yeonha to arrive. We planned to meet Oh Jaejin, a member of the Nine Stars.

Oh Jaejin's original setting only consisted of two simple sentences: *The only magician among the Nine Stars. He is also the only 10 star magician in the world.*

What should I talk about with Oh Jaejin today? Does he know about demon merchants and DP?

“Ah, here she comes.”

A limousine covered in bullet-proof material appeared in the distance.

“Hey, over here.”

I waved from the sidewalk. *Chweek*— However, the limousine coldly passed by.

“What the...”

Did that just happen or did I make a mistake? I asked myself in confusion when...

Chwaaa—

A gust of wind blew.

“Huh?”

The dwarven supercar I gave Yoo Yeonha appeared in front of me.

“*Phew.*”

Yoo Yeonha sat in the seat with a helmet on.

“Oh, you look nice today.”

I smiled as Yoo Yeonha took off her helmet. Her long hair fluttered in the air, but she seemed to be frowning for some reason. She glared at me with a vicious look and tapped on the seat behind her.

“What’s with the face?”

“Just get on. I have a lot of questions for you, but we won’t be able to meet Oh Jaejin if we’re late.”

“*Mm?* O-Okay. Sure.”

I got on behind her as she grabbed the handlebars and stepped on the accelerator. It only took 0.3 seconds for the dwarven supercar to start.

“Why can’t we meet him if we’re late?” I asked Yoo Yeonha as we traveled at 500 km/hr.

“It’s not that we can’t meet him. It’s more like we won’t be able to have a conversation with him.”

“What’s his side effect?”

I didn’t know since I never went into the details.

“Dementia.”

“*Ah...* What?”

I nonchalantly asked as Yoo Yeonha leered at me.

“His side effect is dementia.”

Chapter 284

Clouds of War (1)

Yoo Yeonha and I arrived in North Pyeongan Province. This place used to be abandoned when we attended Cube because of its arid land filled with monsters. The barbaric djinns from Manchuria also resided nearby.

“A lot has changed.”

North Pyeongan Province looked completely different as if we arrived somewhere else. They didn’t construct any tall buildings because of potential monster attacks, but magic engineering transformed it into a high-tech city. AI robots ran around the streets and soldiers carried magic lasers instead of guns.

“You told me to invest in abandoned land, so that’s what I did. More immigrants will come flocking here,” Yoo Yeonha curtly spoke.

“Oh, yeah. I did say that.”

I awkwardly scratched my cheek. I recalled texting her about a few business ideas, but I never expected the proud Yoo Yeonha to follow through with them. Maybe my luck caused this too.

“A lot of foreigners settled here.”

People from all over came because their home country grew too dangerous or they simply admired Korea.

“All the land here belongs to me. Not just North Pyeongan Province, but also North Hamgyeong Province, Chagang Province, and Yanggang Province. Essence of the Strait reclaimed all the land abandoned during Outcall.”

“Oh? Good job.”

“North Hamgyeong Province and North Pyeongan Province went through the biggest changes. They even have schools, academies, and hunter associations among their residential buildings now. It still can’t be compared to Seoul, but about 2 million immigrants live there. As you can see, we’re doing our best to contribute to society.”

“Yeah, that’s great.”

I listened to Yoo Yeonha’s self-praise as we walked past the immigrants speaking Korean. Then we arrived in front of a hospital surrounded by a magic barrier.

A nurse waiting for us led us inside. We followed her past an empty hallway and into an elevator.

Yoo Yeonha pressed the button to the 6F basement. Soon, the elevator door opened with a ding.

“Are we in the 70s?”

The 6th floor basement looked like we traveled back in time with traditional houses, old TVs, and even rotary phones. Yoo Yeonha explained as I looked around in confusion.

“They purposefully built it like this so Nine Stars Oh Jaejin wouldn’t go berserk. He used to live in an old village on Jeju Island and this floor is a replica of that village.”

“I see.”

I imagined the damage a 10 star magician could cause. It would be best to eliminate anything that could provoke him.

“Follow me.”

We entered a large house. Yoo Yeonha took off her shoes and stood in front of the main room’s sliding door. I followed after her.

Tok, tok—

Yoo Yeonha knocked and a woman's aged voice immediately replied.

— Come in.

“Excuse us.”

I walked into the room with Yoo Yeonha. Its warm, rural appearance reminded me of my grandparents' house. A husband and wife waited for us inside.

“Hello, I'm Yoo Yeonha. This is Kim Hajin.”

“Hello.”

We both bowed and the old couple smiled at us.

“Nice to meet you both. My name is Yi Yoon-Ok. Dear, you should say hello too.”

“I'm Oh Jaejin.”

Oh Jaejin briefly replied. As I expected from a magician, he seemed cold and sharp with long hair and a beard.

“Nice to meet you.”

“Let's cut to the chase since I don't have much time. I hear you have a way of curing my side effect?”

“Yes, it's possible.”

Yi Yoon-Ok's face brightened after my confident reply, but Oh Jaejin remained silent. He stared at me and blinked a few times. Then he turned to his wife.

“Mom, I'm hungry...”

“Ah, there he goes again. Don’t worry. Just tell me and I’ll relay the information to him later.”

“I’m hungry. I’m hungry. I’m hungry!”

The old Gandalf began to throw a tantrum.

“I’m hungreeeeeey!”

It caught me off guard, but I didn’t panic and took out the ingredients along with a mortar.

“Shamrock plant, otoren, pure light plant, essence of emerald, and the minotaur’s horn. They’re all medicinal ingredients from the Tower of Wish.”

“I’ll eat them!”

Oh Jaejin tried to snatch the ingredients, but I placed them in the mortar before he could touch them. I crushed the ingredients and forged them into a pill with astonishing dexterity and stigma’s magic power. Yi Yoon-Ok, Yoo Yeonha, and Oh Jaejin all observed my godly alchemy skills in a daze. Soon, a total of 5 pills came out.

[Miracle Pill]

The pills came with various effects, but I deleted them with settings intervention and added *[Dementia Side Effect Reversal]* as their only effect. Each pill took 70 SP and the ingredients cost 100,000 TP in total. Spending 350 SP and 100,000 TP would be worth it if I could win over Oh Jaejin.

“These pills will cure Nine Stars Oh Jaejin’s side effect.”

Yi Yoon-Ok looked at the pills in my hand with a shocked expression.

“However, I would like you to promise me one thing.”

He just had to take 1 pill every 2 weeks.

“He must help humanity once he’s cured.”

I handed Yi Yoon-Ok the pills and she firmly nodded.

“Of course, he will want to do that more than anyone even if I try to stop him. My husband is the most heroic person I know.”

Unsurprisingly, she held great trust in her husband.

* * *

Yoo Yeonha spoke as we left the hospital.

“That went better than expected.”

“Yeah.”

We didn’t need to convince them much. As expected, the Nine Stars possessed both strength and character. Only their side effects stopped them from helping humanity. Most of the Nine Stars would happily help if I solved that problem.

“By the way, do you know about this?”

Yoo Yeonha still had more to say.

“This is top-secret info, but I heard Black Lotus helped the Hero Association with their Orden Assassination Mission.”

Black Lotus. That name made me flinch every time I heard it, but I casually nodded.

“That’s interesting.”

“Right, so... are you not going to participate?”

“Me? I care about my life. What if Black Lotus kills me?”

“Pft... Right, you did kill Black Lotus in the tower. I guess you brought it upon yourself.” Yoo Yeonha giggled, oblivious to the truth.

“You’re quite amazing now that I think about it.”

“Thanks. By the way...” I quickly changed the topic before our conversation grew more difficult to navigate.

“What are you up to these days?”

“Busy as always. Even busier, actually.”

“Why?”

“You know, with the demon towns and demon merchants suddenly appearing... I have to think of ways to earn DP.”

“What are you going to do with DP?”

I won 1.8 million DP from the lottery, so Yoo Yeonha might give me some good ideas.

“Buy artifacts from other dimensions. Most importantly, DP acts like an instant currency. If you want a building, you can buy it. If you want gold, you can buy it. If you want a weapon, you can buy it. You can build an entire city in 3 seconds with enough DP.”

“Mmm, I see.”

“DP can become anything, which makes it revolutionary. We don’t have to wait for a project or for research to finish.”

“Ah...”

I nodded and took out the *[Anything Checkbook]*.

[Anything Checkbook] [8 star] Effective Good — A checkbook that will pay out anything. The person who receives this check must also carry out what was paid for.

I wrote down 1 million DP and handed the check to Yoo Yeonha.

“What’s this?”

She strangely stared at me.

“One million DP.”

“Come again?”

Yoo Yeonha took the check with a bewildered expression.

“You’ll have a million when everyone else only has a thousand. You should be able to control the market, right?”

“*Um*, what is this again?”

“It’s a check for DP. Just tear it and you’ll receive 1 million DP.”

“What are you talking about?”

Yoo Yeonha grumbled as she tore the check in half. My DP immediately fell into her hands and only 800,000 DP remained.

“...!”

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes popped out about 2 meters into the air. She looked even more shocked than when she found out I hadn’t died.

“W-What’s this?”

I grinned at the flustered Yoo Yeonha.

“I’m investing 1 million DP. I’m not giving it away for free, so use it to drive the market. You can do whatever you want, but half of what you achieve will be mine, okay?”

“That’s obvious, but how did you make 1 million DP? Hunting

demonic beasts shouldn't be enough to..."

No, wait. Am I dreaming? Yoo Yeonha shook her head and slapped her cheeks. She snapped out of it after her cheeks turned red.

"Wow... *hehe, hehehe.*"

Yoo Yeonha smiled after realizing it wasn't a dream. She felt pure bliss from being able to surpass her competitors.

* * *

A meeting currently took place within the Hero Association. Honestly, it seemed more like a debate than a meeting with only 3 individuals in attendance.

"I heard Heynckes has returned."

Yi Yookho, the current Hero Association's chairman, spoke. His bald head shone under the room's light.

"What do you think? Chae Joochul and Heynckes should be able to kill Orden if they work together."

Kim Sukho, the former Korean president, replied.

"It's not impossible, but I don't think Chae Joochul would be willing to risk any loss."

"It should be easier with Black Lotus and Kim Suho."

Kim Sukho flinched when he heard Yi Yookho mention Black Lotus. He even hired the Mountain Sage's group to assassinate Black Lotus, but lost contact with them. They clearly failed, so Kim Sukho didn't like the Black Lotus idea.

The third member of their meeting spoke up.

"Black Lotus is too expensive. Accepting their price would put the

association in a deep hole.”

He brought up their financial concerns.

“They’re skilled, but too expensive. Those dogs don’t know what they’re worth.”

“It’s better than losing to Orden. Didn’t you see the decree that arrogant fool sent? Feeding those hunting dogs won’t be a waste. The tougher they grow, the more you have to feed them,” Yi Yookho retorted.

This week, Orden threatened the Hero Association and various countries with an official decree. He would declare war if they didn’t publicly release his message.

The third member nodded in response to Yi Yookho.

“Then I guess we have no choice.”

Kim Sukho stared at their third member with anticipation. If each of them held 33% authority over the association, the final 1% likely belonged to the third member because of his strength.

“We’ll just have to put down the dog after the hunt.”

Kim Sukho liked that idea.

* * *

I returned to Pandemonium the next day and wore my Black Lotus uniform. The Chameleon Troupe would officially participate in the Orden Assassination Mission.

“Are you ready?” Boss asked.

“Yes, I am.”

“Oh, black does look good on you.”

Cheok Jungyeong commented from the side.

I shrugged and asked, “What happened to the assassins? Did you find out who hired them?”

“No, they wouldn’t spit it out no matter what we did.”

“*Mmm...* Well, that’s to be expected from the Mountain Sage. What about Jin Sahyuk?”

“She’s still imprisoned. She’s a tough one too. We even sent Droon to scare her, but she only grew feistier.”

Droon’s Mimyo possessed multiple abilities like an illusion spell called Illusory Death that specialized in torture. It probably didn’t work on Jin Sahyuk.

“She withstood the banshee’s curse, so it’ll be hard to crack her.”

Anything less than the banshee’s curse wouldn’t leave a dent against her top-notch endurance.

“*Mm*, I see... *Oi*, get over here you guys!” Cheok Jungyeong suddenly shouted.

The slower Chameleon Troupe members rushed over.

“Geez, stop being so loud. It’s unsightly,” Setryn muttered.

“You don’t need to roar for us to hear you.”

Khalifa, Jin Yohan, Droon, Jain, and Kaita (who managed to not die) followed her. Eight of us, including Boss and I, would participate in today’s mission.

“Quiet. Khalifa, open the portal now that everyone’s here.”

An oval portal appeared according to Boss’ command and a burning heat blew from it.

Then an emergency rang from my smartwatch after we stepped into the portal.

— Emergency news. The monster king Orden sent a video to news agencies all over the world along with a decree. He has threatened to declare war if his decree is not publicly released. As such, the government has decided to release this decree after careful consideration.

* * *

“Huu, huu.”

Click!

Jin Sahyuk barely managed to remove the magic power suppressors on her wrists after the Chameleon Troupe members left for Africa. She sweated all over and sighed in relief.

“Sigh...”

Fortunately, Jin Sahyuk gained 2 new stats from the recent incident. *[Nonobservance]* allowed her to partly ignore the magic power suppressors and *[Distortion]* strengthened her Reality Manipulation.

“Bastards, just you wait...”

Jin Sahyuk staggered up. The Chameleon Troupe imprisoned her for quite a long time, but she still heard about the changes outside. The demon realm transformation had begun and demon merchants appeared. Things progressed as Bell foretold, so Baal would descend next. It wouldn't be long until she could return to Akatrina.

“Huu, huu...”

Jin Sahyuk closed her eyes and transmitted her will after collecting her breath and recharging her magic power.

— Bell, you son of a bitch, where are you?

She hardly ever used mental transmission, but succeeded with sheer talent.

— Oh? You got released, Sahyuk?

— Shut it. Where are you?

— I'm with Rumi in an underground fortress.

— Underground fortress?

Jin Sahyuk frowned.

What the hell happened while I got locked up?

— It's an advance base built in subterranean Africa to kill Orden. Kim Suho's here too.

“What?”

I missed out on so much fun!

Jin Sahyuk thought to herself and frowned.

— I'm heading over too.

— *Mm?* No, you can't. Kim Suho will find out. Plus, something urgent just happened.

— What?

— Orden wants to talk to the public.

Talk to the public? The hell does that mean? Jin Sahyuk wanted to ask, but the mental transmission gave her a headache. She made a portal to escape this damned prison.

“No...”

Leaving this place would end her relationship with the Chameleon Troupe. Perhaps she should stay here for Kim Hajin. A lightbulb suddenly went off in her head.

“Oh, right.”

Jin Sahyuk materialized the inventory she made from Reality Manipulation and took out a card.

[Body Double] [6 star] Effective Good — Will create a puppet that looks and acts exactly like you. (Keyword – Actualize) — The puppet will last for 150 days and you may switch places with it at any time.

“Actualize.”

A puppet identical to her appeared when she muttered the keyword. Jin Sahyuk placed the magic power suppressors on the puppet and commanded it.

“Act like me as much as possible. Go crazy.”

The puppet blankly stared at her before nodding.

“Okay.”

“Good.”

Jin Sahyuk stepped through her portal with a satisfied smile.

Chapter 285

Clouds of War (2)

[Underground Fortress in Africa]

“He’s planning on building a nation.”

Rumi gave her last testimony as a spy.

“A nation?”

Aileen and Jin Seyeon wrote down Rumi’s words and tilted their heads.

“Yes, he’s already built several villages in Africa. Didn’t you say some people went missing after the recent monster incident?”

“*Huh?* Yeah, I did, but... that can’t be right.”

Rumi sipped her glass of cold water and sighed.

“You guessed correctly. Orden probably forced those missing people to his villages. Your drones couldn’t detect it because his hypervigilant monster birds destroyed them beforehand.”

Rumi’s explanation made sense. The government dispatched 1000 drones to Africa, but 990 of them had already been destroyed. They used the remaining 10 to plan their safe route. Unexpectedly, Orden kept the missing humans alive and even built a place for them to live.

“Trust me. I’ve seen his papers. They made me assign the categories.”

Rumi continued her testimony.

“Categories?”

“Yes, I ranked their monsters and villages.”

Rumi recited the settings of Orden’s kingdom. All monsters received a category between sacred bone and true bone and rank 1 to rank 9. Similarly, all villages received a low, middle, or upper rank.

“So you’re saying these villages exist?”

“That’s right. They’re human villages run by monsters since the number of humanoid monsters can’t compare to humans. However, Orden also has scientists researching ways to turn those kidnapped humans into monsters.”

Aileen frowned when their conversation reached that point. Yi Gongmyung also wore a similar expression on the laptop screen.

— We’ll hear about the details from the others.

Yi Gongmyung informed them.

“*Hmm?*”

Aileen and Jin Seyeon seemed confused. *Does he mean other spies besides Rumi?*

“What do you mean by others?”

— Oh, I just received some good news.

Yi Gongmyung sighed in relief and relayed the message from his superiors.

— Black Lotus and the Chameleon Troupe will also participate in this mission. They’re traveling by land, so they’ll run into those villages first.

We arrived in Africa. At first, we wondered if we arrived at the wrong place. A lot had changed since we last visited.

“Isn’t that a village?”

Jain muttered in surprise. The other members, including me, felt shocked as well.

“Yes, that appears to be a village.”

The land that once crawled with monsters became a suitable habitat for humans. No skyscrapers existed here, but several round buildings formed a rural scenery.

“Where are we exactly, Khalifa?” Boss asked the Chameleon Troupe member who transported us.

“I’d say we’re on the outskirts of Orden’s territory. We should reach Orden’s palace in 700 km.”

Orden would instantly notice a portal near his palace, so Khalifa created his portal on the outskirts of Africa. This village sat in the middle of the shortest route to Orden’s palace.

“Those villagers don’t seem to be monsters.”

Cheok Jungyeong narrowed his eyes and peered into the distance before tilting his head sideways.

“You’re right. They’re all humans.”

I possessed even better eyesight and noticed the moment we arrived. Only humans lived in this village.

“Ah, I heard the number of missing people skyrocketed after the recent monster incident. He must’ve brought all of them here. Looks like he even brainwashed them. How interesting.”

Jain chuckled. Monsters still infested the Middle East and Western

Europe. The number of missing people surpassed their casualties. It made sense for the village to be so big considering all the missing people.

“*Hmm*. Well, let’s see what Orden has to say first.”

I pulled up the live broadcast of his declaration on my smartwatch.

— First, I demand humans to be sent to Africa. Each country will send 200 million people. I promise to keep the hostages safe.

— Second, I demand official acknowledgment and respect for me and my servants as neohumans. Neohumans are superior to humans. Humans should be grateful we choose not to eliminate or forcefully rule over them.

Orden’s demands sounded quite absurd. No country would ever agree to send over 200 hundred million citizens to any entity, much less a hostile one.

— As a tolerant ruler, I am willing to offer humanity a grace period of 6 months.

“That’s enough crap for today. Seems like Orden built this village.”

I turned off the smartwatch and looked at the Chameleon Troupe members.

“Well, why don’t we build an outpost first? Like the underground fortress the special task force built.”

“Outpost?” Jain tilted her head.

“Yeah, this mission will take a while.”

“Why don’t we just use that village as the outpost?” Cheok Jungyeong suggested.

“*Mm*, that sounds like a good idea.”

“I guess even a bonehead like you can be useful once in a while.”

Not only Jin Yohan and Setryn, but even Jain agreed.

“Uh...”

“Why are you hesitating? We could wipe that place out in a second.”

I finally realized our party’s true strength. Honestly, Cheok Jungyeong and Boss would be enough to overwhelm most humanoid monsters.

“Okay then.”

With a smile, I pointed to the center of the village.

“How about that castle over there? Seems like the village lord would live there.”

The castle only stood slightly taller than the surrounding buildings.

“Good, let’s head there.”

We moved like the wind at Boss’ command.

* * *

[Crean, A Low Rank Village Located in the Far South Corner of Orden’s Kingdom]

“Hmm...”

The humanoid monster, Tenzuhar, served as lord of Crean. He looked like a small lizard and only became the lord because he could speak eloquently and possessed a rare ability called brainwash. The stronger humanoid monsters preferred to stay in the central palace rather than rule over humans.

“Hmm.”

Tenzuhar pondered while shaking his leg. *How can I win Orden's affection and acquire fame and fortune? I can't possibly satisfy my ambitions on the outskirts of a country like this.*

“Surely improving the village won't be enough. *Slurp.*”

Only humans resided in Crean. Some monsters lived in the villages deeper in the mainland. However, he'd have to be at least rank 1 to take over such a village.

“*Slurp.* All the ores end up going to the middle and upper rank villages even if I dig the mines.”

Crean was only a low rank mining village.

“I'll end up getting punished if I don't produce anything. *Slurp.*”

This village contained a large amount of premian, the most delicate magic ore on Earth. They kidnapped humans for this reason since monsters would crush the premian to dust with their sharp claws.

“I can't find any way to stand out... *Slurp.*”

Tenzuhar smacked his lips. Most small humanoid monsters possessed a great desire to succeed. They received this genetic predisposition as compensation for lacking strength compared to other monsters. Tenzuhar felt dissatisfied with the village even though he didn't deserve such a position.

“Damn it. Guard!”

He felt irritated and called in a guard to satisfy his hunger.

— *Krrrk!*

A rank 4 monster who couldn't speak or think complex thoughts served as his guard. He only received a rank 4 monster because that would already be strong enough to win against a high rank, grade 3 hero.

“Give me something to eat!”

— *Krrk!*

The guard nodded and left.

“*Tsk.*”

They only recently developed the criteria for classifying monsters. Most monsters fell into a class between rank 1 and rank 9. Only a select few could become a true bone or sacred bone.

“*Slurp.* What can I do with underlings that can’t even speak?”

The ability to speak served as one of the primary criteria for classifying monsters. You would only become rank 2 at best if you couldn’t properly speak. The next most important criteria included strength, intelligence, and any special abilities.

Tenzuhar didn’t possess much strength, but could be considered rank 3 because of his fluent speech. He also possessed a decent ability and an above average intelligence.

Crash—

Suddenly, he heard a ruckus downstairs and angrily stood up from his seat.

“*Slurp!* He can’t even do something as simple as bringing me food! *Slurp.*”

Tenzuhar stomped towards the door to scold his guard. *Kiik—* The door opened. No, someone opened the door. Confused, he looked at the human beyond the gap.

“...?”

The human appeared quite huge with muscles the size of his head and legs as thick as his waist.

Did we have a resident who looked like that? Tenzuhar pondered.

Ssk— A sharp blade touched Tenzuhar's neck and he gasped at the coldness.

“Quiet.”

“...”

Tenzuhar glanced at the enemy behind him. He couldn't see the intruder's face, but noticed the black robe with an embroidered lotus.

Black Lotus.

Orden's monsters knew this symbol well and Tenzuhar began drooling in fear.

“Do you have anything to say?”

Black Lotus asked and Tenzuhar replied under the overwhelming pressure and fear.

“Spare me... I know nothing. *Slurrrp. Slurp, slurp. Slurrrrrp...*”

He rapidly rolled his tongue until he lost consciousness. Kim Hajin glanced at his stats.

[Life force 33/100] [Name – Tenzuhar] [Alignment – Misdemeanors / Ambitionist] [Realm – Stage 1 Average] [Potential – Stage 3 Average] [Job – Low Rank Administrator] [Status – Unconscious from fear.] [Special Ability – Low-intermediate Rank Brainwash] [Potential to coax – Surprisingly high]

This humanoid monster didn't possess any abilities to remotely call for help, so Kim Hajin threw him on the floor.

* * *

We easily took over the castle. I tied up Tenzuhar and hung him

upside down. Then I settled down on a nearby couch.

“*Hmm*. The view looks surprisingly nice from here.”

“Now that we’ve taken care of the outpost...”

Boss looked outside the window as Jain muttered with a map in her hands.

“Only 4 villages remain from here to Orden’s palace.”

“...!”

Tenzuhar regained consciousness and opened his eyes.

“*Huuak!*”

“*Eh?* What the... You didn’t kill this guy, Lotus?”

“No, I thought we could use him later.”

“*Slurp*. Please spare me. Spare me, *slurp*. *Slurrrp...*”

Tenzuhar fainted again after briefly waking up. *What a strange monster*. I ignored him and summoned a demon merchant.

[You have spent 1000 DP to summon the demon merchant Kuong.]

— Nice to see you! I’m the visiting demon merchant, Kuong!

The only neutral demon merchant I met so far appeared before us.

“I need a communication device to contact an underground fortress. Do you have anything like that?”

— Yes, of course. One for you and one for the fortress. That’ll be 1250 DP including the delivery fee.

Kuong handed me a black handheld transceiver after I paid him 1250 DP through the system.

— Thank you. Is there anything else?

“Uh... Maybe?”

The demon merchant system turned out to be more useful than I thought. As Yoo Yeonha said, being able to get anything for a price felt quite convenient. I stroked my chin and spoke.

“Hey.”

— Yes?

“Is there a way to, *um*, make DP without doing anything?

— You already did with the lottery!

“Well, that’s true. However, you said the number of first place tickets is fixed. It’s also tiring to scratch all those tickets.”

The DP lottery consisted of different rounds with only 10 first place tickets per round. The chances of winning decreased along with the number of first place tickets. I didn’t know how many first place tickets might be left considering this lottery took place in multiple dimensions.

— *Mmm*. Then would you like to try the minigame?

“Minigame?”

“Hey, Lotus. Are you having fun with the merchant?”

Jain interjected, but I pushed her away.

“What is it?”

— Please look over here.

Kuong spread his palms and a video popped up.

[A dimension within a dimension. Your DP donation may save other subdimensions.]

It sounded like a line from a public service advertisement. A sphere appeared above Kuong's palms after about 5 seconds.

"What's this?"

— This is a game of luck similar to the lottery. This planet is called Lailos. It's a subdimension of Earth.

"Subdimension?"

— Yes, a dimension lower ranked than Earth. The difference between Earth and Lailos is like the difference between reality and a novel.

"Why would you compare it to a novel of all things?"

— It's just an example. Anyways, look here.

Kuong shook his hand to zoom in on Lailos and the sphere transformed into a plot of land. A group of knights stood there as Kuong spoke.

— Lailos is also fighting against a demon realm transformation. You, a being from a higher dimension, can help the people of Lailos.

"Why would I help them? I'm busy taking care of myself."

— By sponsoring an individual, you can earn DP every time that person kills a demonic beast.

"*Hmm*. Really?"

I looked closely at the knights.

One, two, one, two!

Hundreds of tiny knights continued training hard.

You won't kill a single demonic beast if that's all you're capable of!

Even the superior knight scolding them sounded cute.

— Why don't you give it a try? Be careful though! You can only sponsor up to 3 individuals. It's usually only one, but you get extras because you have 5 stats! Try picking someone with a high potential.

“Ah, so that's why you said this would be similar to the lottery.”

— That's right! You should pick the strongest and most diligent one! Time also flows faster in this dimension. A year in Lailos equals 30 days in this world. You'll be sitting on a mountain of DP in no time!

“I got it.”

The conditions seemed extremely advantageous. I didn't even have to use my luck as I looked over the knights. I didn't care about their current strength and only focused on their future potential.

One knight possessed a potential of *[Stage 3 Average]*, another had *[Stage 4 Rare]*, and the superior with the loud voice only seemed to be *[Stage 5 Rare]*.

Does anyone here possess actual talent?

I carefully studied the knights.

“Ah, found one.”

A woman hid behind a tree and watched the other knights train. She looked young and still had some baby fat, but seemed upright and determined.

*[Life force 100/100] [Name – Litrain] [Alignment – Good / Ambitionist]
[Realm — Stage 0 Below Average] [Potential – Stage 9 Extraordinary]
[Job – Squire] [Status — Feeling envious of her seniors] [Potential to coax*

– *Looking for a master to serve*]

She possessed an astounding potential of 9. I didn't know how good that might be in their world, but surely such a talent would bloom. I chose Litrain as my beneficiary.

[You have chosen to sponsor Litrain, a squire.]

— How much would you like to donate?

“100,000 DP.”

— Wow, you're so generous!

[You have donated 100,000 DP to Litrain. She has gained the feature, status window.] [Litrain will gratefully use your donation.]

Litrain's eyes widened and she looked confused at first. However, these donations appeared to be a well-known phenomenon as she clenched her fists and jumped in joy.

— *Hooray!* I was chosen!

She shouted and all the other knights turned towards her.

“What's this? She looks super happy.”

— *Ah*, the people of Lailos are quite familiar with donations. *Hmm?* Something strange happened during the donation process!

Kuong's eyes widened and several system messages blocked my view.

[Your interdimensional luck has activated.] [Litrain's physical ability has increased as a result of your luck!] [Litrain's growth has accelerated as a result of your luck!] [You will now receive 100% of the DP that Litrain earns from hunting demonic beasts.]

— Congratulation! This character will soon become very strong! You should recover your initial 100,000 DP donation in just 2 months.

“*Mmm*, that sounds great.”

I observed the joyful Litrain jumping up and down and turned off the minigame.

“Now then, shall we move on.”

I grabbed the transceiver that I just bought and turned around.

“Underground fortress, can you hear me?”

They quickly replied from the other side.

— Yes, we can. This is Aileen. Are you... Lotus? I received the transceiver. It's good to hear from you again, I guess?

Aileen sounded cheerful as usual and I spoke in Black Lotus's typical nonchalant voice.

“This is Black Lotus. We have taken over one of Orden's villages.”

Chapter 286

Clouds of War (3)

— Village? A village exists in Africa?

Aileen's tone went up in surprise. I looked at the map on the village lord's desk.

“Yes, the village is called Crean. We just took down the lord.”

— What? It even has a lord?

“His name is Tenzuhar, a humanoid monster that looks like a lizard.”

—...

Aileen went quiet as other voices buzzed from the other side.

“Ah, it's that kid again?” Jain grumbled unhappily. I smirked and turned off the transceiver.

“I'm curious, Jain. How do you know Aileen?”

“Me? *Mm*, it's nothing special. I used to act as a hero and she was my superior. That stupid brat is only 2 years older, but always acted all important because of her gift.”

Tzzt— The transceiver buzzed as Jain finished.

— Who's living in the village?

Yun Seung-Ah spoke instead of Aileen. Jain also had a bad relationship with her and frowned. I cleared my throat and changed my voice to Black Lotus.

“Humans.”

— Are they doing okay?

“They’re physically healthy, but look like they’ve been brainwashed. It doesn’t seem like they’ve suffered any abuse though. They think they’re miners who have been living here for a long time.”

—...

It became silent again. I didn’t hear any static either, so I assumed they turned off their transceiver to discuss among themselves. I checked the minigame as I waited.

[Half a day has passed since you chose Litrain. Many knights have congratulated her, but they obviously envy her. Litrain’s physical strength immediately improved and she received approximately 130,000 points. No one has ever seen such a sponsor before. The knights cannot fathom why such a rich sponsor chose Litrain.

They only considered her an uneducated squire who arrived in the capital without a plan. A country bumpkin who would only remain a baggage carrier.

No one knows if Litrain ever felt their dissatisfaction, but she turned her life around after being chosen. She set up a shrine for her sponsor in her small room and continues to pray before every meal. Being chosen has always been her dream. Her happiness knows no bounds now that she has achieved it.]

“Hmm.”

Things seemed to be progressing well. She didn’t need to worship me, but I watched her pray and contemplated.

[Buster Call] [High Rank] — You may summon loyal vassals from the Tower of Wish using stigma’s magic power.

I checked my only active gift, Buster Call. I felt like I could also summon Litrain if I added another word or two after the Tower of

Wish. For example, [... *from the Tower of Wish or another dimension...*].

“Oi, Kuong.”

I spoke to the demon merchant silently standing around.

— Yes?

“You said we live in a higher dimension, right?”

— Yes, compared to the minigame’s dimension.

“Then is it possible to summon a being from a lower dimension to a higher dimension?”

— *Mm*, I’m not sure since I’ve never tried. It might be possible. After all, you’re from a higher dimension.

“What’s the difference between a higher dimension and a lower one?”

— Simply put, higher dimensions are more stable. Beings from higher dimensions are like gods to those from lower dimensions.

Stable... I thought about this word when Kuong kindly explained.

— More stable dimensions have weaker humans. An individual would have the least freedom to interfere with nature in the most stable dimension.

I thought of my original world. The Earth I came from didn’t have any magic, gifts, or anything of that nature. Humanity created technology to overcome nature, but countless died during that process. My original world sounded like the one with the least freedom to interfere with nature.

I stared suspiciously at Kuong, but he only grinned without saying anything.

“Now then...”

Tzzt— The transceiver buzzed again and Kuong announced that he ran out of time before disappearing.

— This is Beetle. Can you hear me?

“Beetle?”

— It’s a codename. What do you plan to do now?

“We plan on using the village lord as our pathfinder.”

— Pathfinder? *Ah*, understood. Let us know when you reach the next village. I have a meeting to attend.

The transceiver went quiet and I looked at Tenzuhar dangling from the ceiling. His eyes remained closed, but I could see his status.

[Status – Nervous he might be discovered.]

He only pretended to be unconscious.

“Open your eyes. Otherwise, I’ll kill you.”

“...”

“Five, four, three...”

“I, I’m awake!”

His eyes shot open before I even reached two.

“Oh, he was awake?” Jain grinned and approached him.

Tenzuhar submissively smiled and rubbed his hands.

“*Slurp*. I, I just woke up... *Slurp*.”

“...”

I left him dangling in the air.

“Oi.”

“Yes?”

“Can you act as our pathfinder?”

“Pathfinder?”

“That’s right. We have to keep going.”

We could avoid traps with my excellent eyesight, but that couldn’t compare to a humanoid monster who already knew the area.

“O-Of course! *Slurp.*”

Tenzuhar briefly pondered, but quickly agreed. He must’ve realized his only option to live.

[How have you been, hyung?]

A message suddenly popped up.

[It’s Jajangman. Sorry, it’s been a while lol ^^]

“What’s this?”

[I stopped by the Tower of Wish to pull some cards. I’m messaging you because I pulled something cool. Hold on, let me see if I can send you the info.]

“The hell?”

Chae Nayun’s voice accompanied the message and gave me a slight headache.

[Look at this! I screamed when I pulled it. Lol It’s my first ever 8 star

card!]

The card info popped up in front of me.

[Infinite Communication] [8 star] Effective Good — You may select 55 players to infinitely communicate with. — Text and voice will be simultaneously transmitted. The receiver cannot reject your communication without the 7 star card, [Refuse Communication]. — This card's user will become immune to mental interference effects.

[Hahaha, how is it hyung? Have you pulled an 8 star card before? Ah, it's been a while since I quit the tower, but pulling cards makes me want to go back. I have an important mission right now...]

“Geez, so loud...”

Wasn't she supposed to stay in the underground fortress? Why did she return to the tower?

[Ah, oops, my bad. I put the sound too high.]

Chae Nayun finally noticed her voice sounded like a roar and decreased it to a whisper.

“Haa... haaa...”

[Ah, I set the communication to be bi-directional hyung. Just text me if you want to say anything.]

“What kind of a card is this?”

How did she pull an 8 star card with her horrible luck? I clutched my head and collected my breath.

* * *

Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, and several other heroes returned to the underground fortress after pulling some cards in the Tower of Wish. Aileen ordered them to in case they pulled anything useful for the

mission.

Kim Suho pulled an 8 star card and three 7 star cards while Chae Nayun pulled two 8 star cards.

[Ah, ah, Kim Suho, can you hear me?]

“Yeah...”

Kim Suho continued to suffer from Chae Nayun’s attacks.

[My voice isn’t loud anymore, right?]

“Yeah...”

[Isn’t this card amazing?]

“It is.”

Kim Suho sighed and replied.

[I got slightly mad when the first 8 star card I pulled turned out to be some communication nonsense, but I love how you can’t reject it!]

“Can’t you just talk?”

Kim Suho couldn’t stand it anymore and nudged Chae Nayun standing next to him. However, she remained silent and simply shook her head.

[No, I have to get used to this. It’s harder to use than you think.]

“Sigh, do whatever you want.”

Kim Suho could only shake his head.

The tent door opened and Aileen walked in as they tested their new cards. She glanced at Kim Suho and Chae Nayun before shouting.

“All members! Come out!”

Her voice carried a small amount of her Spirit Speech power and all 177 members walked out of their barracks in a daze.

“Everyone bought cards yesterday, correct?”

Aileen seemed satisfied as they lined up.

These elite heroes didn’t like serving others and unenthusiastically replied.

“Tsk, I’m sure you know what cards will be useful. Exchange them if you have to. Anyways, the reason I called you is...”

Aileen turned serious and continued, “...to tell you that villages exist in Africa.”

“Huh?”

Chae Nayun and the other heroes paused from taking out their cards and tilted their heads.

“Orden kidnapped humans and built villages. The association says it’s to deter us from dropping nuclear bombs, but who knows? We decided to form a reconnaissance team.”

The chief strategist, Yi Gongmyung, ordered them to form a reconnaissance team and scout the surroundings.

“Let me know if you want to participate. It’s going to be dangerous, so I’ll offer my three 7 star cards.”

“I’ll participate!”

Chae Nayun shouted and raised her hand the moment Aileen finished. She recently took a liking to dangerous missions.

“I’ll participate too.”

“Same here.”

“I’ll go as well.”

Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, and Jin Seyeon quickly followed. The reconnaissance team consisted of 4 people now.

“*Mm*, great.” Aileen nodded in content.

“I’ll be the pathfinder.”

The man who introduced himself as Rebé also spoke up. He stayed in the underground fortress after his mission and worked as their janitor.

“If there’s one thing I’m good at, it’s finding the correct path.”

Bell smiled at Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, and Chae Nayun.

* * *

Meanwhile, Jin Sahyuk established her own path.

“Fuck... shit... I’m going to burn to death.”

She cursed with every step through the African landscape. Jin Sahyuk toiled under the hot sun to find Bell, who cut off all communications.

“*Huu, huu... huu...*”

She walked through the desert without any equipment and simply killed any monsters or humanoid monsters with her magic power. More appeared as they smelled blood or detected her magic power, but she quickly killed these patrols as well.

Killing, walking, killing, walking...

She repeated this cycle for a long time before noticing a scent in the air. This person smelled familiar.

“This... *sniff, sniff.*” Like a dog, she sniffed the air in every direction.

“It’s Bell.”

Not just Bell’s scent, but at least four more.

“What is that son of a bitch planning this time?”

Jin Sahyuk closed her eyes and sent a transmission again.

— Bell, you better answer. I’m in Africa and I caught your scent. What are you scheming?

A reply came back 5 seconds later.

— Oh, you came to Africa? I’m scouting the area with my companions right now.

— Companions?

— Yep, I’m with Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak, and Jin Seyeon. You know them, right?

Jin Sahyuk detested Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak the most. Her face quickly distorted into a frown.

— What are you planning to do with Kim Suho? Get over here now.

— I can’t. I’m restricted by Spirit Speech. I have to obey them until Orden dies.

— Stop fooling around, you son of a bitch. I know you can easily get rid of that.

Jin Sahyuk kept sending mental transmissions, but Bell cut off all contact again after she began cursing. She could only stomp in anger.

“You motherfucking piece of shit! Wait until I get my hands on you!”

She wanted to ask about the demon realm, demon merchants, and Baal's descent. However, Bell kept avoiding her like he developed a new hobby for leaving people on cliffhangers.

"I'll kill you."

Bell, the eternal death you desire so badly. I'll personally grant it when I see you. Jin Sahyuk clenched her teeth and chased after Bell's scent.

* * *

The sun finally set in Africa and a freezing cold replaced the scorching heat.

I used this opportunity to leave Crean with Boss, Cheok Jungyeong, and Tenzuhar. We headed to the second village with Tenzuhar guiding us.

"Not all humanoid monsters are loyal to Orden, *slurp*. We instinctively desire and admire strength, *slurp*. Orden's humanoid monsters will naturally turn on him if a humanoid monster stronger than him appears, *slurp*."

Tenzuhar insulted Orden to gain our favor.

"This is a secret, but I never liked Orden. *Slurp*. Honestly, I'm on the humans' side. *Slurp*. I've been planning on taking Crean's humans and escaping from Africa, *slurp*."

He obviously lied, but I let him be.

"So what do you want us to do about it?"

Cheok Jungyeong seemed to think otherwise and placed his hand on Tenzuhar's head.

"Ah, *hahaha*, n-nothing. I-It's just that I, I wanted you to know that humanoid monsters like me..."

“I’m looking at a humanoid monster like you right now. Stop blabbering nonsense and explain where we’re going.” Cheok Jungyeong glared at Tenzuhar.

“Y-Y-Yes, of course. A middle rank village called Lupiton is up ahead. Lupiton’s lord is Pleron, a snowbird humanoid monster.”

Tirring— Boss received a text message from Jain.

“*Mmm*, Jain says she’s excavating ores.”

“Great.”

Premian, a treasured ore, could only be found in Africa. Most ores in Africa would be considered precious since I designed Africa to be a high-risk, high-return place.

“Looks like it’s time to upgrade my equipment.”

The delicate premian ore could be applied to an item’s surface and improve its toughness by several times. At this rate, I wouldn’t be surprised if I overgeared myself to victory.

“...”

Boss looked at me somewhat enviously. I smiled and found it cute.

“I’ll make one for you too, Boss.”

“*Mm*, I won’t decline.”

“Make me one too, kiddo. I don’t need anything grand, just shoes. Not many fit me and they always break when I find a pair.”

Cheok Jungyeong requested new equipment as well when Tenzuhar suddenly looked back. His lizard eyes sparkled and I curiously waited for him to speak.

“*Slurp*. I, I’m afraid I’ll be assassinated... *slurp*.”

“What? Did this lizard go mad?”

“Ah, *hehe*, I’m kidding, *slurp*.”

Cheok Jungyeong prepared to smack Tenzuhar when... *Chwaaaa*— A wind blew and shook the area.

“...?”

It had been quiet until now, so I easily noticed. Furthermore, the air contained a faint scent of magic power. I turned towards where the wind came from and infused magic power into my thousand-mile eyes.

Chapter 287

Clouds of War (4)

Kim Suho left the dark underground fortress and stepped onto the hot African soil. They had been tasked to investigate the villages and confirm the number of residents. Hopefully, they could figure out why Orden built these villages in the first place.

“Wait a minute.”

The reconnaissance team consisted of Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, and Jin Seyeon. Bell and Rumi also accompanied them as guides. The team had to move stealthily, so Kim Suho took out his collection of cards.

[Stealth Powder] [7 star] Effective Good — A powder that will erase your presence (200g) — The effect will last 24 hours per 3g.

This card he recently obtained would be perfect for their secret mission.

“Everyone, sprinkle this on your body.”

Kim Suho used it without hesitation. The powder concealed their presence as the team began their mission.

“Let’s go.”

They moved in complete silence and arrived at a rainforest after 4 hours. Bell led them through the dense forest with Rumi’s help. The monsters didn’t even notice them passing by.

[Hey. Hey, hey, Kim Suho.]

Chae Nayun sent Kim Suho a message as they pushed through the

forest.

[You received a quest too, right?]

Kim Suho knew exactly what she meant.

[Quest – Reconnaissance Mission] [Completion Reward – Gain DP. Tenacity stat will slightly increase.]

This quest alert suddenly popped up when he first received the mission. It seemed similar to quests from the Tower of Wish, but also somewhat different. Kim Suho replied without a word.

[Yeah, I received it, too.]

[Hey, what rewards does it say you'll get?]

[DP and a stat boost.]

[Oh, same here.]

Bell led the team from the front and suddenly stopped. Kim Suho also paused and looked forward.

“Looks like we’re here.”

Bell informed them as the rainforest ended at a certain point. The team approached and finally saw the view up ahead.

“...”

Their jaws dropped in shock. They knew this part of Africa contained vast fields with sunset-colored grass and tropical trees. Savannas usually looked like that.

“Wow.”

However, the scenery before them surpassed their expectations. It looked more like a city than a village. Only a trace of the savanna

remained where the tall buildings lined up. A 6 story building stood at the center of what seemed to be a shopping district. The downtown and the residential areas sat apart from each other as humans and humanoid monsters crowded the streets.

“This village is called Lupiton. It’s one of Orden’s biggest mid-rank villages. Most humans who live here have been brainwashed. The population is about 300,000-500,000 if you also include humanoid monsters. It’s basically a medium-sized city. The lord of this village is a true bone rank humanoid monster named Pleron.”

Rumi explained as they looked at the village.

A mid-rank village called Lupiton? Chae Nayun thought to herself. How big is an upper rank village if this is only mid-rank?

“Then how big is an upper rank village?” Chae Nayun couldn’t help but ask.

“Upper rank villages aren’t too big. They’re actually laboratories where Orden’s scientists transform humans into humanoid monsters.”

“What? Laboratories?”

“Yes, Orden has brainwashed these people into wanting to become residents of an upper rank village. First, they have to increase their rank through self-cultivation. However, they only become material for humanoid monsters when they arrive at an upper rank village.”

A vicious hostility descended upon them as Rumi continued explaining.

“I finally found you.”

The team turned towards the voice.

“You son of a bitch.”

They saw a single figure in the spotless African sky. Jin Sahyuk glared at Bell and Rumi with blazing anger.

Bell gulped and Rumi quickly hid behind Chae Nayun and Jin Seyeon. Her reaction suited a scared spy, so Chae Nayun and Jin Seyeon protected her without question.

“Jin Sahyuk.”

Kim Suho uttered her name, but Jin Sahyuk didn’t even care about him. She directed her anger towards the hooded man, Bell.

“You fucker—”

— Sahyuk. Can you please calm down?

Bell quickly sent her a message before she could finish.

“What? You—”

— I’m sorry. I really am. I never expected you to find me so fast. It seems you’ve grown again, Sahyuk. I’m proud of you.

Bell didn’t lie when he said Jin Sahyuk had grown. She probably had the highest understanding of the new stats, [*Nonobservance*] and [*Distortion*].

“Yeah, that’s why I—”

— Just let me go this one time. You’ll ruin everything if you cause a ruckus here. Can’t you see Chae Nayun and Kim Suho?

“Bullshit...”

Jin Sahyuk’s anger couldn’t be stopped like an erupting volcano. Bell had no other choice and dragged Kim Hajin into their conversation.

— Chae Nayun here has a history with Kim Hajin. Some of the things she knows don’t seem to match what you know.

“What?”

— You think Kim Hajin is your servant, right? Chae Nayun's memories tell a different story. You know about the skill I picked up from the Tower of Wish, right?

Bell learned an ultimate skill called *[Sea of Memories]*. It allowed him to explore other people's memories while they slept or remained unconscious. Bell peeked into a lot of memories during his stay at the underground fortress. Chae Nayun became one of his easiest targets. Her traumatic and emotional memories couldn't be overlooked.

“...”

— Sahyuk, it's possible Kim Hajin is lying. Shouldn't you make sure he isn't?

Jin Sahyuk knew Bell spoke the truth.

— Aren't you curious what Chae Nayun knows about Kim Hajin? I bet you'd be surprised if you knew.

Indeed, she also felt curious about Chae Nayun's memories and wondered what made Bell so confident.

— Just act like you don't know us, Sahyuk. Can't you tell from the fact that Rumi is here? We're doing all this for you?

“...”

Jin Sahyuk decided to let Bell trick her just this once.

“K-Kim Suho, you bastard. I've been looking for you for a long time.”

She pretended to target Kim Suho instead, but sounded so awkward even Kim Suho felt confused by her sudden change in demeanor.

“Me?”

“Yes, you traitor. You god damn traitor.”

“...”

“I’ve been looking for you. Kim Suho, you son of a bitch, you disloyal dog, brainless bull. You turtle look-alike, rodent eater. You’re so dead!”

She sounded a bit strange, but her anger felt real. Kim Suho gripped Misteltein and glared at Jin Sahyuk.

“Okay, but maybe try to hold it in? We’re right next to Orden’s village. If we fight here, we’d all disco—”

“What is that bitch saying?”

Kim Suho tried to appease Jin Sahyuk, but another member couldn’t gloss over her insults. Chae Nayun angrily stepped forward to confront Jin Sahyuk.

“Who the hell are you? Where did this crazy bitch come from?”

“What? What did you say? You vermin.”

“You’re the vermin.”

Chae Nayun and Jin Sahyuk scowled at each other and sparks seemed to fly between them. They began a staring contest when...

“What are you all doing here?”

A man appeared from behind the bushes and everyone turned towards him. No one knew him, not even Bell or Rumi. This man seemed to be in his 30s and held a basket and sickle in each hand. He seemed to be one of the brainwashed villagers and blankly stared at Kim Suho before stepping back.

“Are you people... outsiders?”

He grabbed his smartwatch and obviously intended to report them. Everyone nervously exchanged glances and Rumi spoke first.

“No, we’re also from the village.”

“Village?”

“Yes, Lupiton. We came to gather some crops and a fight broke out.”

“What kind of crop?” the man doubtfully asked.

“Laurail.”

This useful crop could be made into medicinal pills or used when forging weapons. It only grew in Africa.

“*Mm*. So you are Lupiton residents.”

The man smiled and hung his sickle around his waist.

“You should stop fighting and leave. This is a dangerous area. It’s under strict supervision because sacred bone Lord Tigris will visit in a week. You could be imprisoned if the police catch you.”

“*Ah*, I see. Let’s go together then.”

Rumi and Bell followed the man first.

“Chae Nayun, let’s go.”

Kim Suho grabbed her by the wrist and dragged her away.

“Jin Sahyuk, we haven’t seen each other since Akatrina. I see you’re also acquainted with Kim Suho.”

“Stop talking to me.”

Shin Jonghak and Jin Sahyuk awkwardly walked side by side as Jin Seyeon whispered to a radio in the back.

“We found a village called Lupiton. We’re heading inside.”

— Inside?

“Yes, the situation has deviated from our original plan. The people here don’t suspect us because of the high population, but Orden has already brainwashed all the residents.”

— Brainwashed? *Mmm...* Okay, but keep the reports coming. Send me some photos too.

“Yes, I’ll request help if anything happens.”

Jin Seyeon continued walking while observing Jin Sahyuk.

* * *

I faced the wind and focused on my thousand-mile eyes. My vision instantly expanded and reached the source of that faint magic power. I spotted... an insect the size of my hand.

“What’s that?”

The insect glowed golden and looked like a dragonfly scurrying away.

“It’s a golden dragonfly.”

“*Slurp*. Golden dragonfly?” Tenzuhar’s eyes widened.

“Do you know what it is?”

“*Slurp*. Of course.”

The dragonfly had already arrived when Tenzuhar nodded. It moved as fast as Kurukuru, but I activated bullet time and used [*Pinnacle Rank Instant Acceleration*] to catch it.

I looked at the dragonfly in my hand.

[*Second Golden Dragonfly*] [*Pinnacle Grade Lucky Item*] — A lucky item that’s hard to catch, but something good will happen if you keep it with

you.

[Will produce 50 DP per hour.] [Every stat, except for invariable stats, will increase by 1.] [Lucky Bonus — This dragonfly will boost certain attributes, so keep it safe.]

“What’s this?”

“Oh, *slurp*. Congratulations, *slurp*. This golden dragonfly is a very rare insect that all sacred bone and true bone humanoid monsters have been looking for. *Slurp*. They say you’ll become stronger if you catch the dragonfly. *Slurp*. It’s an insect that suddenly appeared along with demon merchants. *Slurp*.”

“*Hmm*.”

I threw the dragonfly into stigma’s storage without thinking about it. Suddenly, I felt a massive headache.

“*Agh...*”

The pain felt familiar, but less severe than previous times. I clenched my teeth and looked at my shoulder. A streak of stigma became partially engraved. It only looked like 0.4 of a streak in terms of length. I stared in confusion before realizing the cause. It must be from the lucky bonus effect since I placed the dragonfly inside stigma.

“Lotus, are you okay?” Boss worriedly asked.

“Y-Yes. I’m fine.”

The lucky dragonfly somehow became mine, but I wondered what this insect ran away from and stared into the distance.

“*Huh*, both humanoid monsters and djinns are together.”

They continued chasing after the dragonfly. The djinns wore robes embroidered with the symbol of Brutality, one of the Nine Evils. I also spotted a humanoid monster with a pair of bat wings.

“Hey, that monster over there has bat wings. Do you know him?”

“Pardon? *Ah*, I do, *slurp*. That’s Lacurdra, the youngest sacred bone lord.”

“I see where the name comes from, but... what’s this sacred bone thing?”

“Sacred bone refers to humanoid monsters very similar to humans, *slurp*. They have reached genetic perfection.”

Confronting them head-on didn’t seem like a good decision.

“Boss, Cheok Jungyeong, let’s take a detour.”

They couldn’t see what I saw and simply shrugged.

“Tenzuhar, lead us.”

“Of course, *slurp*.”

The humanoid monsters and djinns continued to rampage in the distance for the dragonfly that already became mine.

We finally arrived at the second village after 2 hours.

“*Ah*, finally. That’s Lupiton, *slurp*.” Tenzuhar pointed at Lupiton and we became speechless.

“What...”

The scenery before us—

“Isn’t that a city?”

It looked exactly like a human city.

The full moon hung above the night sky.

The reconnaissance team infiltrated Lupiton and divided themselves into two teams to explore the city. Kim Suho volunteered to partner with Jin Sahyuk in case she exploded.

“We just acquired some crucial information. Tigris, the one who attacked China, will be coming. Maybe we can assassinate him.”

Kim Suho spoke as he walked down the streets with Jin Sahyuk and Rumi. He hoped Jin Sahyuk would help them, but she didn’t even bother listening.

“*Yaawn.*” Jin Sahyuk only nonchalantly remarked.

“Whatever. More importantly, what’s your relationship with that woman?”

“That woman... You mean Chae Nayun?”

“Yeah.”

Jin Sahyuk nodded and Kim Suho thought for a moment.

“We’re friends.”

“Geez, you sure have a lot of friends. Maybe you should think twice before befriending someone so dumb.”

“She’s nicer than you.”

“*Tsk.*”

Jin Sahyuk clicked her tongue and looked around. This village of monsters featured several interesting facilities like an arena, a training ground, a magic power invigoration facility, and more.

Then Jin Sahyuk suddenly stopped and looked at Kim Suho. He walked ahead before also turning around to look at her.

“What now?”

“...”

What's the relationship between Kim Hajin and that woman? Jin Sahyuk wanted to ask, but she couldn't bring herself to speak. Instead, she turned to Rumi. Things felt a little awkward between them since they pretended not to know each other.

“Where's Kim Hajin?”

Jin Sahyuk finally uttered a different question. At that moment, Kim Suho also heard Chae Nayun's voice.

[Hey Kim Suho, we found a place to stay. I'll send you the address, so come over when you're done. Just ditch that crazy bitch.]

That sounded like Chae Nayun. Kim Suho smiled and replied.

[I'm keeping an eye on her. Please don't fight and try to talk instead.]

[I can't help it. The way she talks is so irritating...]

Jin Sahyuk frowned.

“What are you laughing about?”

“Mm? Nothing.”

Jin Sahyuk's face only further distorted.

“Yeah right. Tell me what you just did.”

“I said nothing.”

“You just spoke with Kim Hajin, didn't you? Did you send him a mental transmission or something?”

“I said it’s nothing.”

A huge shadow towered over them as they argued and Jin Sahyuk bumped into something firm.

“Ah, what now?”

She felt annoyed and looked up with a frown.

“...”

A tough-looking figure looked down at her. Both Kim Suho and Jin Sahyuk knew him. He left quite a lasting impression on Jin Sahyuk.

“Kuuuum...”

Cheok Jungyeong growled like a beast as Jin Sahyuk and Rumi widened their eyes at him.

“Why are you here?”

He sighed and asked. Cheok Jungyeon knew all three of them too and had a rather complicated relationship with Rumi.

Chapter 288

Society of Dead Humanoid Monsters (1)

“What are you doing here?”

Cheok Jungyeong’s voice weighed heavily on them. Kim Suho and Jin Sahyuk stared at him full of tension.

“Hmm.”

The giant pointed at Kim Suho and Jin Sahyuk while pretending not to see Rumi.

“I’ve seen you in the tower, and you...” Cheok Jungyeong sighed.

“You managed to escape.”

“So?”

Jin Sahyuk curtly replied. Her usual dignified manner disappeared and she slightly trembled. She didn’t fear him, but he couldn’t easily be dealt with. They fought before and she realized his physique had reached absolute perfection. It felt surreal when he destroyed her manipulated realities with only raw power. He reminded her of Kim Hajin, but slightly different.

“You lot are from that fortress, right?” Cheok Jungyeong asked Kim Suho.

“Yes.” Kim Suho nodded.

“Not this one though.”

Cheok Jungyeong pointed at Jin Sahyuk and Kim Suho shook his head.

“No, she’s also one of us.”

“Pft.” Cheok Jungyeong snorted.

“Funny, I beat her up not too long ago and locked her in a cell.”

The startled Kim Suho glanced at Jin Sahyuk after hearing this.

“Is he telling the truth?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t reply and only furrowed her brows.

“Boss would beat you to a pulp and cut off your limbs.”

Cheok Jungyeong grinned at Jin Sahyuk. He didn’t discriminate based on gender or wealth and only treated people differently based on their age. Only the young and old could be excused.

“However, I have no reason to fight you right now. It’s not the right place and we’re allied with you lot from the fortress.”

Cheok Jungyeong acted uncharacteristically rational. He didn’t want to start a fight as Rumi stared at him with a somewhat sad expression.

“I’ll let you go this time, Jin Sahyuk.”

Cheok Jungyeong remembered her name after acknowledging her strength.

Of course, Jin Sahyuk didn’t understand and contemplated attacking him to regain her dignity. Thankfully, Rumi pulled her back.

“He’s letting us go. Let’s just leave.”

“*Hmm.*” Jin Sahyuk reluctantly sighed, but recalled something as they left.

“Oh right. *Oi!*”

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong looked back at her. His eyes under the moonlight flashed with killing intent. Most people would tremble in fear, but Jin Sahyuk maintained her composure.

“I just want to know something. Are your friends here too?”

“...”

“I’m talking about Black Lotus.”

Jin Sahyuk already knew about Black Lotus’ real identity. Cheok Jungyeong didn’t respond.

Prrrrr—

The wind blew and a pair of wings resounded. They immediately looked up at the humanoid monster in the air. Soon, he descended between them.

Koong—

The humanoid monster landed with a heavy thud and seemed to be wearing a police uniform.

Tap, tap.

The humanoid monster shrugged and approached the group. Everyone’s expressions stiffened as they stared at the unexpected guest.

Kim Suho wondered if he should attack and didn’t sense any other presence nearby. If the humanoid monster suspected them, he would

immediately cut him down. As Kim Suho carefully gripped Misteltein...

“Only humanoid monsters may wander outside from 1 A.M. to 6 A.M. You have 10 minutes left, so hurry back. You will be punished if you’re found after 10 minutes.”

The humanoid monster informed them.

Prrrr—

The humanoid monster flapped his wings and flew away. They stared at him in a daze as Cheok Jungyeong smirked.

“Strange, isn’t it? Most humanoid monsters act like that. They won’t even check your identity unless they’re unusually picky. Maybe too many people live here.”

Cheok Jungyeong murmured and a voice suddenly rang in Kim Suho’s head.

[Hey, where are you? It’s an emergency!]

The voice grew louder before Kim Suho could even reply.

[Emergency! Emergency!]

[What?]

Kim Suho wanted to spare his ears and quickly replied.

[Answer faster next time! I’ll give you our coordinates, so come immediately. We’re together with residents who escaped the brainwashing.]

[What?]

[Some people here are no longer brainwashed!]

Kim Suho’s eyes widened.

[Hurry over with Rumi and lose that crazy bitch.]

Chae Nayun sent him their location and Kim Suho entered the coordinates into his smartwatch. They seemed to be about 20 minutes away.

“Did something happen?”

Rumi asked after seeing Kim Suho’s change in expression. He stared at Rumi, Jin Sahyuk, and Cheok Jungyeong. Chae Nayun told him to ditch Jin Sahyuk, but...

“Something urgent came up with the other team. Follow me.”

* * *

The coordinates that Chae Nayun sent led them to a grocery store. It didn’t look new or old, just a typical store with one floor.

Kim Suho carefully walked inside.

Shoong—

The automatic door opened and 3 human employees and 1 humanoid monster stared at him.

“I...”

A puppy-like humanoid monster hopped over before he could say anything.

“Are you with Jin Seyeon?”

“Ah, yes. I am. They are too.”

Kim Suho pointed at Cheok Jungyeong, Jin Sahyuk, and Rumi.

“Follow me.”

The four of them followed the humanoid monster. *Wag, wag*— The group arrived at a secret passageway after a few minutes of staring at the wagging tail.

“This is...”

“Go on in. Your friends are inside.”

A secret passageway peeked out of a manhole hidden under a shelf. A ladder leading underground could be seen. They stared at each other before going down one by one.

“Are you sure this isn’t a trap?”

Cheok Jungyeong asked once they arrived underground. They found themselves in an empty, dark room with nothing inside and stood around confused until the wall in front of them suddenly shifted to reveal a hidden room.

No one expected the scene beyond the wall.

The smell of rice and magic power flowed out. People swung swords and spears against dummies. Dozens of houses lined up along the huge training ground and Chae Nayun stood in the middle with a smile.

“You’re here.”

“*Uh...* W-Where are we?” Kim Suho became speechless.

“We’re at the resistance village. People who escaped the brainwashing secretly built this place underground.

Cheok Jungyeong walked past them and stood in the middle of the underground village.

“Now this is interesting... *Oi.*”

He shared his vision with Kim Hajin who watched from a distance.

“Can you see it?”

— Yes, I can. Looks to be around 300 people. Mostly heroes from what I can see. Continue looking around.

Kim Hajin replied.

“Sure.”

“Isn’t he a humanoid monster? He has to be, right? Can a human be that big? He must be an ogre humanoid monster.”

Cheok Jungyeong heard the muffled whispers around him as he spoke to Kim Hajin. His dignified stature seemed to have surprised the residents. Cheok Jungyeong grinned and announced.

“I’m human! One that crushes humanoid monsters!”

Jin Seyeon came out of the village hall with a blonde man after hearing Cheok Jungyeong’s voice.

“Suho?” Jin Seyeon’s eyes widened when she saw Cheok Jungyeong.

“Oh, it’s been a while, Jin Seyeon.”

The corners of Cheok Jungyeong’s mouth curled up. The unexpected encounter surprised Jin Seyeon, but she soon nodded with a smile.

“Yes, it has. You’re our ally, correct?”

“I wouldn’t say an ally. A temporary comrade is more like it.”

“*Mmm*, that’s perfect.”

Jin Seyeon called Kim Suho’s group over.

“This is the resistance village. Ellio here found us scouting the village upstairs and brought us over.”

Jin Seyeon explained and pointed to the blonde man next to her.

“Ellio, please introduce yourself.”

“Yes.”

The handsome Latino man greeted the new group. “Hello, I’m Spain’s high rank hero, Ellio. I have been leading the underground resistance in this place. It’s an honor to meet you, Kim Suho and...”

Ellio looked up at Cheok Jungyeong. The giant’s towering height and intimidating face made him seem like a tyrant.

“I’m Cheok Jungyeong.”

“Pardon? Cheok Jungyeong?”

Ellio’s eyes widened and Cheok Jungyeong smiled.

“*Haha*, you know my name?”

“Of course, Korean history is a required course.”

“*Hahaha*, right, that’s me! I’m Cheok—”

— Don’t get too excited. You’re not going to start talking about your past life, are you?

Kim Hajin interrupted him as he happily laughed. Cheok Jungyeong frowned and shut his mouth.

— You became a better listener. I like it.

“What did you say?”

Cheok Jungyeong wanted to snap back at Kim Hajin, but—

“Are you talking with Black Lotus right now?”

Jin Seyeon noticed something off and Cheok Jungyeong slightly flinched.

“What? Black Lotus?”

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened and Jin Sahyuk began grumbling.

“*Haa*, I knew you unfair cowards wouldn’t be walking around alone.”

Jin Sahyuk still recalled the 2-on-1 fight she endured.

— *Ah*, they found out because of you. Damn it.

“Why is this my fault?”

— Just make something up.

Cheok Jungyeong sighed as everyone looked at him.

“You bastard, what am I supposed to say in this situation?”

* * *

One hour later, Kim Suho’s group and Cheok Jungyeong sat inside the village hall. Ellio explained how the resistance village came to be.

“At first, we thought we always lived here and didn’t doubt our daily tasks. However, Yurang helped to undo our brainwashing.”

“Yurang? Is that the humanoid monster we met?”

Ellio nodded at Kim Suho’s question.

“Yes, Yurang served as the manager of this grocery store. He’s very supportive of humans and we don’t refer to him as a humanoid monster.”

Cheok Jungyeong sneaked a glance at Rumi as they listened to Ellio’s

explanation.

“Many people regained their memories with Yurang’s help. However, Yurang’s method requires magic power training, so we could only awaken intermediate rank heroes or higher.”

Jin Sahyuk looked around the village hall and only half-listened to Ellio. She searched for Bell, but he had already disappeared.

“So how did you make this village? The houses here look no different from buildings in Seoul.”

Kim Suho asked and Ellio nodded with a smile.

“That’s a good question. You see, we used DP to build this town. In other words, we received help from a demon merchant.”

“A demon merchant?”

“Yes, we found a dungeon nearby with demonic beasts that could be hunted for DP. The demon merchant agreed to help us with any trades that didn’t involve escaping.”

“What’s your plan now?” Jin Seyeon asked.

“...”

Ellio fell silent. He looked around the room and took a deep breath before answering.

“To assassinate Tigris, one of Orden’s four great generals.”

His voice sounded quite heavy. As Kim Suho prepared to say something...

— Captain! The demonic beasts are running wild!

A loud voice rang from outside. Everyone other than Jin Sahyuk immediately shot up.

“The dungeon is this way. Follow me!”

* * *

I came out to Lupiton with Boss the next day at 10 A.M. The village of humanoid monsters and humans bustled with activity. However, only humans seemed to be working.

Orden’s villages consisted of a clear hierarchy from my observations yesterday. They even divided humans between rank 1 and rank 3. Of course, a rank 1 human couldn’t compare to a rank 6 humanoid monster in terms of authority. Lupiton’s humanoid monsters lived like nobles and oversaw the humans who lived like peasants or slaves.

“They have restaurants, cafés, and even a bowling alley.”

“Right, how interesting.”

Humans carried out all sorts of jobs. Some harvested crops, mined ores, worked as chefs, sold smartwatches developed by humanoid monsters, and more. The brainwashed citizens went about the village in a perfectly natural way.

“Hajin, it’s an execution.”

Boss pointed into the distance. I turned around and— *Crack!* A humanoid monster resembling a crocodile chopped off a human’s head.

Humanoid monsters with the manager role could hand out immediate punishment to humans. Unsurprisingly, they resorted to executions.

“I expected something like this, but not as extreme.”

“Agreed.”

Tiring—

Jain messaged me.

[Hajin, I finished collecting the premium ores. What should I do now?]

Jain currently disguised herself as Tenzuhar, the lord of Crean. She ordered Tenzuhar's servants to gather all the gems and ores from the deepest parts of the mine.

[Come to Lupiton.]

Jain had to make physical contact with a target to use her gift. Many high rank humanoid monsters lived in Lupiton, so she could easily obtain a higher authority than Tenzuhar.

[Okay, I'll be there soon.]

"*Slurp*. What will we do now, Boss? *Slurp*."

Tenzuhar had grown used to calling me Boss before I realized it.

"Jungyeong wants to kill Tigris, but..."

Tenzuhar's expression paled when he heard that name. "Lord Tigris? *Slurp*."

"Yeah, have you seen him before?"

"N-No, not at all. He'll kill me if I do. *Slurp, slurp, slurp*."

Tenzuhar became tongue-tied for a moment. I placed my hand in his mouth and untied it myself.

"*Keheuk*. T-Thank you, *slurp*."

Honestly, I grew curious about Tigris since he caused such a mess in China and escaped unharmed. The rumors stated he might be even stronger than Chae Joochul, but I would have to see for myself before making any judgments.

"Boss, let's deal with the village lord first."

“Village lord?”

“Yes, we’ll take over this city like we did in Crean.”

Jain’s gift would be perfect to win without any bloodshed.

“Oi, Tenzuhar.”

“Yes? *Slurp*.”

“Are you acquainted with Pleron?”

“Uh...”

Tenzuhar hesitated. *Slurp, slurp, slurp*. I patiently waited at first, but began to frown when his slurping grew annoying.

“You don’t want to talk?”

“*Slurp*... You see... we... we have a senior and junior relationship.”

“Senior and junior relationship? What’s that?”

Tenzuhar scratched his head and mumbled in embarrassment.

“*Slurp*. Pleron used to be my junior at the Humanoid Monster Academy.”

“What?”

Boss and I became speechless.

“*Slurp*... However, genetic differences are impossible to overcome. *Slurp*. I ranked higher in theory tests, but Pleron quickly shot ahead as a mythical snowbird. *Slurp*.”

Tenzuhar seemed embarrassed that his junior surpassed him, but we didn’t care about that at all. Only one thing caught our attention.

“What the hell do you mean by a Humanoid Monster Academy?”

Chapter 289

Society of Dead Humanoid Monsters (2)

The reconnaissance team returned to the underground village after fighting the demonic beasts for 12 hours. The resistance members participated in such fights every day. They had to hold back their magic power, but the younger heroes like Kim Suho and Chae Nayun didn't even need to use magic power to defeat the beasts. The battle only lasted half a day because of the sheer number of demonic beasts.

They still couldn't rest after the fight. Jin Seyeon connected Ellio to Aileen over the radio. For the next 3 hours, Ellio explained their plan to assassinate Tigris.

Tigris would visit Lupiton on Friday. He held great influence over the central political system and led several factions as one of the most famous sacred bone humanoid monsters. They could create tremendous confusion by assassinating Tigris who oversaw the entire eastern region of Orden's kingdom. The resistance planned to take advantage of the resulting confusion to escape Africa or revolt against Orden.

Ellio's plan still contained many holes in its initial stage. Yi Gongmyoung joined their conversation and began planning in detail. They finally finished at 1 A.M. and only then did the reconnaissance team rest.

Chwaaa—

"Phew..."

They all had a brief free time before going to bed. Chae Nayun deeply sighed in the warm hot spring. A bath like this wouldn't be possible at the underground fortress. The warm water melted away all her

worries and fatigue.

“Huhuhuhu... this feels great.”

Chae Nayun spoke like an old man and wanted to stay here forever. Unfortunately, their mission would resume tomorrow.

“Mmm.”

She stretched and stood up. Suddenly, a warm languidness filled her.

“Ah, the water here feels so much better for some reason.”

She staggered back to the changing room.

“Hmm?”

Chae Nayun put on her clothes and prepared to head back when she noticed a mirror on the wall. Her hair used to be short during her Cube years, but it grew quite long now.

“So bothersome.”

Chae Nayun clicked her tongue. Long hair only annoyed her during fights. Her hair poked her eyes countless times during the most recent battle.

“Tsk.”

She gathered magic power around her hand. Her hair brushed against her arms and fell to the ground. Then Chae Nayun cleaned up the mess and left the hot spring.

“Bell, where are you?”

She heard a faint voice. The satisfying bath heightened her senses and even the smallest sounds couldn't escape her ears.

Chae Nayun frowned and slowly walked towards the voice. Even Yoo

Sihyuk and Heynckes praised her special stealth technique.

“Where the hell did you disappear to?”

Jin Sahyuk whispered to someone over a walkie-talkie in a remote corner. Just seeing her soured Chae Nayun’s mood.

That crazy bitch.

Chae Nayun turned around to leave, but a thought suddenly crossed her mind and she hid to eavesdrop.

“You blocked my mental transmission again! Where did you go?”

Jin Sahyuk kept speaking into the walkie-talkie with a red face. She looked somewhat funny trying to keep her voice down.

— I’m in the middle of a humanoid monster village. I would get discovered right away if I use any strange techniques like mental transmission. I had no choice but to block it.

Bell’s voice flowed from the other side of the radio. Chae Nayun recognized it as Rebé’s voice.

“Bell, don’t make me mad and explain.”

Bell? Who’s Bell?

“Why did you go into the village?”

— That’s none of your concern.

“The fuck...”

Jin Sahyuk pounded her chest and desperately held back her anger while Chae Nayun listened.

“Tell me what you saw through your ultimate skill. About that woman.”

— *Mmm*. Maybe later, but I can tell you one thing.

Bell picked up a non-combative ultimate skill called [*Sea of Memories*] from the Tower of Wish. Jin Sahyuk couldn't learn any ultimate skills, so Bell's choice seemed rather strange. However, that didn't matter right now. She only wanted to know what Bell found out.

— Kim Hajin might be deceiving you.

“About what?”

“...!”

Kim Hajin. That name popped out of nowhere and Chae Nayun froze.

— Kim Hajin might not have been your servant. I'll tell you the details later. I'm actually tailing Kim Hajin right now to confirm. I have to go.

“*Haa...*”

The call ended and Jin Sahyuk leaned against the wall with her head in her hands. She stayed like that for a while and slowly breathed in and out to relieve her anger. Chae Nayun continued watching her.

“Just what is he?”

Jin Sahyuk muttered. However, Kim Suho soon approached and handed her a key.

“What's this?”

“Your dorm key. Yours is 205.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk didn't take the key and only viciously glared at him.

“I see you're used to casually speaking to me now.”

“...”

Kim Suho didn't reply and only bitterly sighed at her. Then he dropped the key into her hand.

“I'm leaving.”

Kim Suho turned around and Jin Sahyuk also left in the opposite direction.

Chae Nayun pondered alone after they disappeared.

Jin Sahyuk definitely knows Kim Hajin. She called him her servant.

“What the hell does that mean?”

Maybe it's not servant, but serpent? Or maybe fervent?

So many questions remained, but she knew one thing. Jin Sahyuk and Kim Hajin had some sort of relationship.

“Well then...”

I don't want anything to do with her, but I guess I'll have to become closer.

Chae Nayun clenched her fists and checked her room number. Room 207.

It's 3 people per room and Jin Sahyuk is in room 205...

“I'll have to change rooms.”

Chae Nayun hurried to the village hall.

* * *

[Lupiton, Mid-Rank Humanoid Monster Village.]

“Mmm. I can see it now.”

I peered inside the village lord’s mansion from a hotel many miles away. The mansion’s structure resembled Buckingham Palace. It featured magic traps and humanoid monsters all above rank 3.

“What kind of monster is the lord? What does he look like?”

Jain asked with a smirk. She and Khalifa arrived only 3 hours ago. Khalifa left right away to take Tenzuhar back to Crean.

I didn’t worry about Tenzuhar since he valued his life and wouldn’t do anything rash with Droon, Jin Yohan, and the other Chameleon Troupe members around.

“I wonder.”

I searched for the most private and safest place in the mansion. Right away, I found a fancy room at the center with a humanoid monster that looked like Pleron.

“He looks just like a human, but with wings. He has pale skin and wings made of ice.”

“Is the lord a boy or a girl?”

“He... *ah*, it’s a she. Looks like the lord is a woman.”

“Is she pretty?”

“Why does that matter?” I frowned at Jain’s weird question.

“You know I had to be a lizard for an entire day. I’d much rather transform into a pretty humanoid monster.”

“Well, about that...”

I looked at Pleron again.

“You won’t have to worry this time.”

Pleron inherited the genes of a snowbird and looked undoubtedly beautiful. She appeared completely human except for pointy ears and wings. Her refined facial features also matched her pale skin.

“That’s a relief.”

Jain smiled mischievously and gazed at Boss, who stared into space while muttering something. She must be exchanging messages with someone through the Tower of Wish’s system. Players could use the system anywhere now after the tower opened to the public.

“Boss?” I called her.

“*Cough*. I just spoke to Wicked.”

Boss glanced at me and cleared her throat.

“We’ll strike when it’s dark. Our plan is simple. We go in, capture Pleron, and Jain will take her place.”

Quietly and gracefully like always. We nodded at Boss’ words.

* * *

— We’ll strike when it’s dark.

Meanwhile, Bell hid in the air and watched them.

— Our plan is simple. We go in, capture Pleron, and Jain will take her place.

Bell looked at Yi Byul. She had matured into a beautiful woman and he recalled how she only used to be a cute, pitiful girl.

“*Haaa...*”

Bell deeply sighed. Byul had changed because of the man standing

next to her. She finally found someone she could rely on.

“But Byul...”

He continued to mutter.

“He’s...”

Kim Hajin. His memories seemed to be disconnected from this world. Perhaps Kim Hajin might be the same as himself.

“He can’t be with you.”

He would leave one day and Byul would experience an even greater pain than when she lost that man she considered her parent.

“*Haa...*”

Bell also recalled when he killed his best friend. Even now, the pain felt unbearable.

He lived for hundreds of years and knew eternal death would be a thousand times better than eternal life.

However, he couldn’t die. This fact remained the same in reality, different dimensions, and even the Tower of Wish. His body would simply scatter and turn into magic power. Then a new body would reconstruct itself. Bell never feared death for this reason.

“*Mmm...*”

Bell stared at Kim Hajin. Honestly, he always considered that man worthless. Kim Hajin didn’t possess the ability to kill him as he confirmed it in the tower. More importantly, Kim Hajin had ruined Yi Byul. Bell considered her to be his masterpiece.

However...

Bell had glimpsed Kim Hajin’s memories through the *[Sea of*

Memories] and they showed a completely different world.

“Hmm. I guess I have no choice.”

Bell finally decided. “I’ll have to take him with me.”

He felt the need to explore Kim Hajin’s memories in detail. He managed to look into Kim Hajin’s memories for about a minute, but it would take at least a week to figure everything out about Kim Hajin. He had no choice but to kidnap Kim Hajin.

Whish—

A gust of wind blew and Bell entrusted himself to it. Soon, his body turned into dust and scattered in the air.

Chapter 290

Society of Dead Humanoid Monsters (3)

[England, Buckingham Palace]

Buckingham Palace's most famous guest, Ah Hae-in, stared outside the window. She looked like her usual calm self, but something felt different.

The number of stars inscribed on her robe now numbered nine. Last week, she had been promoted to a 9 star magician. Her ability to summon three of the four cardinal guardians gave her this honor. The 9 star realm had only been achieved by 30 people throughout history. As such, Ah Hae-In felt the world looked a bit different today and immersed herself in England's beauty.

Tak, tak.

A certain child skipped over to Ah Hae-In. Evandel curiously glanced at her and imitated her solemn expression. The two magicians stood side by side and stared out the window. Rachel had brought Evandel and tried to hold back her laughter.

"Congratulations on your portion, Master."

Evandel cutely spoke to the elder magician.

"It's promotion, not portion. Also, you don't need to congratulate me. You will become one soon enough."

"Eh? Me too?"

Evandel's eyes widened and Ah Hae-In gently smiled.

“Yes, you’re already at 8 stars.”

The quality of Evandel’s summons equaled an 8 star magician. The sheer quantity of her summons had already reached the 9 star realm. It wouldn’t be long until she also reached 9 stars and the 10 star realm wouldn’t be out of reach.

“Ah, thank you.”

Evandel bowed. Ah Hae-In found the child she watched over quite adorable. She also worried as well. The outside world would be cruel and full of schemers. Ah Hae-In wondered if such an innocent child could endure that.

“Evandel.”

“Yeees?”

Time couldn’t be stopped. Even the clearest water would muddy and generations would inevitably change. Evandel would eventually reveal her overwhelming power and countless people would try to take advantage of her.

“It’s time to train.”

Ah Hae-In decided to prepare Evandel for that inevitable day.

“Traiwing?”

Evandel nervously spoke and her pronunciation sounded a bit off because of her missing front teeth.

“Yep.” Ah Hae-In smiled.

“Evandel, it’s time to create your domain.”

One had to grow stronger to protect others. Connections and fortune wouldn’t be enough. One needed absolute strength to tower over all adversaries.

“Domain?” Evandel tilted her head.

“Yes, a domain.”

Most magicians possessed their own workshop regardless of their level. A workshop served as a fortress to develop their magic and keep outsiders away. Magicians conducted research there and frequently fought off intruders. Ah Hae-In also experienced countless battles before arriving at the 8 star realm.

Evandel would need more than a workshop. Even the higher concept of a workshop, a stronghold, wouldn't be enough to contain her talents. She needed a domain. Something no other magician, not even Ah Hae-In or Nine Stars Oh Jaejin, could achieve.

“It's going to take a long time and you won't be able to meet anyone.”

Evandel could definitely achieve it, but this technique required staying alone in one place for a long time.

“It'll be lonely and tiring, but this domain will be of great help.”

The strength to survive even if the world falls. The power to act as one wished without being used by anyone. Ah Hae-In wanted Evandel to develop such autonomy.

“Are you ready?”

Ah Hae-In turned around and Rachel worriedly stared at her. The process could take anywhere from 6 months to 10 years.

“Don't worry. Evandel is stronger than you think.”

Ah Hae-In only smiled at Rachel and looked down at the pondering Evandel. The image of Fenrir whimpering in pain from Toji's attack surfaced in her mind. He had fully healed already, but that deeply hurt Evandel and she felt powerless for the first time. Neither Fenrir nor her other summons would've been hurt if she possessed enough strength.

“...”

Evandel raised her head with determined eyes. “I want to get stronger.”

“Good.”

“B-But before then...” Evandel stuttered.

“I, I want to see Hajin.”

* * *

[Africa, Mid-Rank Village Lupiton]

The sun had set and darkness descended on the village. The human residents all returned to their homes as we prepared to invade the lord’s residence.

“Get ready.”

Boss spoke as we headed out. She would infiltrate the residence as a shadow, I would use my *[Pinnacle Rank Instant Acceleration]* to burst in, and Jain would disguise herself as a humanoid monster to enter through the front door.

“We’re ready.”

Just as our plan began...

— *Tirring.*

I received a video call on my smartwatch.

“Oh? It’s from Evandel.”

I would ignore it if Kim Suho or Yoo Yeonha called, but Evandel took priority over everything else. I asked Boss for some time and picked up the call.

— Hajin.

Evandel's smiling face came into view.

“Yeah, what's up?”

I smiled back and Evandel giggled.

— I wanted to see you.

“Suddenly? What happened?”

I'd been calling or texting at least once a day and often visited with Spartan before we arrived in Africa.

— No reason.

“Did something happen?”

I noticed the heavy atmosphere from her expression.

— *Mmm...* Well...

She briefly hesitated before dropping her head.

— I don't think I'll be able to see you for a long time.

My heart sank when I heard those words. I hadn't felt so flustered for the past year and quickly asked.

“W-Why?”

— *Ah... um...* I decided to create a domain with Master...

“Domain? *Ah.*”

Thankfully, nothing life-threatening had occurred. Evandel would only create a domain now like in the original novel.

— Yes, so I won't be able to see you. The domain will get weaker if anyone enters while I make it.

“Don't worry about that. We can meet whenever you want.”

The *[Black Lotus Uniform]* not only erased my presence, but also my existence. Not even Chae Nayun's supernatural intuition could see through it and it shouldn't affect Evandel's domain either.

— *Eeh?*

Evandel tilted her head.

“Don't worry about not being able to see me and work hard at creating your domain. Make it strong okay? I'll come by often.”

— Really?

Evandel looked surprised because she must've struggled to make such a difficult decision.

— Really, really?

“Of course. Have I ever lied to you? Listen to Master Ah Hae-In and work hard. I'll come see you next week.”

— *Un!* Okay!

Evandel smiled brightly and nodded.

“I'm a bit busy, so I'll call you when I'm done.”

— Okay!

Evandel's lively voice refreshed me.

“So cute.”

I smiled and hung up the call. Boss and Jain's gazes felt a bit bothersome, but I ignored them.

"Cough, alright. Let's go."

"You sure are close to her." Boss sounded a bit jealous.

"She's just a kid."

"Anyways, let's get going."

* * *

Ten minutes later, I entered the lord's residence and Boss followed as a shadow. Jain would casually walk in later, so we made our move first.

"Should we kill her or imprison her?"

"We don't need to kill her since it might alert someone. We'll imprison her as planned."

"Got it."

I took out two 8 star cards, *[Isolated Prison]* and *[Soundless Space]*.

[Isolated Prison] [8 star] Effective Good — Will imprison a target in an isolated space. — The imprisoned target will maintain their current physical condition. — The target may destroy the prison and escape.

[Soundless Space] [8 star] Effective Good — When activated, all sounds within a 1 km radius will be silenced. — This card may be destroyed by an impact above a certain level.

[Soundless Space] functioned quite easily compared to *[Isolated Prison]* and its unique mechanism.

— The imprisoned target will maintain their current physical condition.

A target with a fatal injury wouldn't heal or die after being imprisoned. We just had to beat up Pleron and trap her inside.

"Let's go."

We moved silently towards Pleron's bedroom on the highest floor. I easily maneuvered through all the traps with my eyes.

"..."

Then we hid behind the wall after arriving at the bedroom. Two guards kept watch outside as Boss and I exchanged glances.

I shot 5 arrows that pierced the eyes, heart, head, and leg of the guard on the left. Boss handled the right guard and sliced up his body with her shadow blade.

Then I immediately activated the 8 star card, *[Isolated Prison]*, to get rid of the two bodies.

"Hi."

Jain appeared at the perfect time disguised as a humanoid monster. The three of us entered Pleron's bedroom.

Pleron slept on a large bed as Jain carefully approached and touched her.

"Perfect."

"...?"

Pleron woke up from her touch and saw someone who looked just like her. Of course, Jain already transformed into her.

"*Pieek!* Who are you!"

Pleron exclaimed. Her magic power shot out and instantly cooled the surroundings. However, Boss quickly slashed Pleron's wings with

Kurukuru's scythe.

"Pieek!"

Pleron screamed, but *[Soundless Space]* prevented her voice from leaking out. Everything went according to plan.

"Pieeeek!"

Boss dealt a fatal injury and I activated *[Isolated Prison]*. It sucked Pleron inside and left behind no trace.

Suddenly, bullet time forcefully activated.

"...?"

The world slowed and I could feel the air's movement around me. I rolled my eyes and checked for any signs of danger. It didn't take long to spot the current of magic power descending from the ceiling. None of us would be able to easily endure this powerful magic explosion. I tried to activate *[Time Reversal]*, but a strange phenomenon occurred.

"What..."

A golden current erupted along with the magic power explosion. I knew very well what this meant. *Narrow Escape from Death*. My luck guided me towards the explosion and told me not to use time reversal.

[Narrow Escape from Death (6/9) – Special stat, accumulation of luck, has become partly unlocked!] [A momentary misfortune will lead to the ideal ending.]

I threw myself into the center of that golden current when I read that alert.

"Hajin..." Boss tried to grab me.

Boom!

However, the explosion erupted and I blacked out.

* * *

Tk, tk, tk...

A fire crackled in the dark.

“Ah...”

Boss regained consciousness after momentarily blacking out and a strange scene reflected before her eyes.

“Hey, Byul.”

Bell, the man she had been hunting for years, stood in front of her. Blood rushed to Boss’ head when she saw him carrying Kim Hajin over his shoulders.

“Be...”

“You won’t be able to move or talk. I made that explosion from a part of my body. Even you’ll be incapacitated for at least 30 minutes. You should know how strong I am, right?” Bell smiled bitterly as he spoke.

“I’m quite touched. He even tried to protect you two.”

Bell glanced at Kim Hajin on his shoulders. Kim Hajin reacted faster than anyone else and threw himself forward to protect them. Byul and Jain only ended up paralyzed thanks to Kim Hajin’s sacrifice.

“I’m tearing up.”

“Bell...”

Boss growled and glared at him. Blood flowed from her eyes as she eeked out his name. She clenched her teeth and unleashed her killing intent.

“I’ll take Kim Hajin with me. I need to discuss a lot with him.”

Bell acted as leisurely as always.

“Bell...”

Boss reached forward as her vision turned red, but she didn’t give up. She commanded her limbs with all her effort. *Move, move, move!*

“Don’t worry. I didn’t kill him. I don’t plan to either.”

“Let him...”

Bell already turned around as she reached out with tremendous effort. Humanoid monsters who noticed the commotion also flooded in.

“You won’t be able to stay with him forever.”

Bell continued talking as Boss moved her legs. She stepped forward with a broken ankle and forced her broken knees to stand. Boss awkwardly staggered up like a wooden puppet.

“Let him go.”

She demanded, but couldn’t muster anything else. Bell faintly smiled at her.

“Sorry that this happened again.”

Then he jumped out of the mansion. Boss tried to follow, but couldn’t move. Her body screamed for rest after taking Bell’s attack head-on.

“*Keruk!* What happened? *Keruk!* Who are you?”

The humanoid monsters also arrived. Boss continued to glare at where Bell disappeared.

Thud!

She finally collapsed.

Chapter 291

Looking Back (1)

Last night's attack on the lord's mansion caused quite a commotion. The higher authorities replaced most of the guards with stronger and smarter monsters. Even monster king Orden sent a personal letter to Pleron encouraging and praising her prompt countermeasures. Any servant would've been honored to receive such a letter from their king.

"Hmm. Yeah?"

Cheok Jungyeong entered the lord's mansion amidst all the chaos. No one stood guard to stop him as he walked down the hallway.

"Explosion? Geez, you're all nothing without me."

Cheok Jungyeong muttered as he looked at Boss lying in bed.

"It's not that we're weak," Jain bitterly remarked.

"Bell's just too strong."

The public considered either Chae Joochul or Heynckes the strongest of the present era. However, they didn't know about the relationship between Bell and Shin Myungchul, who everyone revered as the strongest in history.

"Anyways, this guy is pretty good at writing. Don't you think his servant wrote it for him?"

Jain faintly smiled as she read Orden's letter. She also momentarily blacked out after the explosion, but her disguise remained intact since she stood farthest from the impact and her gift couldn't easily be canceled.

“It’s Hajin, so I’m sure he’ll manage.”

Jain placed Orden’s letter away and transformed into Pleron. She felt quite fond of the ice wings and could freely control them.

“You’re calm.”

Cheok Jungyeong appeared discontent compared to her carefree demeanor and asked about the perpetrator.

“So are you looking for Bell?”

“Of course, everyone thinks Bell is the terrorist. I told them he came alone and even fluttered my wings for some authenticity.”

Jain smiled. Kim Hajin locked up Pleron in his card, so the entire village now belonged to Jain.

“I even ordered a composite sketch of him. My monster servants will find him in no time.”

“Uk...”

Jain confidently declared when Boss suddenly made a sound.

“Ah, Boss!”

“Boss, are you awake?”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jain checked on her. Boss tossed and turned before finally opening her eyes.

“...!”

Her upper body bounced up like a spring.

“Haa, haa, haa...”

Boss gasped for air as Jain worriedly approached.

“Boss, are you okay?”

“Is it you, Jain?” Boss frowned at her disguise.

“Yep, it’s me.” Jain reverted her face to normal.

“I see. *Huu...*”

Boss closed her eyes and recalled what happened before she lost consciousness. She quickly grasped all the events that led to their current situation. Their attack on Pleron, Bell’s subsequent ambush, and Kim Hajin’s abduction. She felt an unimaginable rage after remembering everything.

“Bell...”

Boss clenched her teeth and looked at Jain. The blood vessels in her eyes almost burst from anger.

“Bell, where is that son of a bitch?”

“We’re looking for him.”

“And Hajin?”

“Same goes for Hajin.”

Boss’ face distorted from sadness to fear and anger. She looked truly worried and Jain had never seen her like this before.

“Don’t worry. He’s the type to thrive no matter what.”

Jain tried to comfort her, but Boss’ expression remained the same. The situation only worsened when Boss began blaming herself. Jain felt sorry and reluctantly glanced at Cheok Jungyeong.

“Boss, Cheok Jungyeong says he found an underground village.”

Cheok Jungyeong flinched as Boss raised her head.

“Underground village?”

“Yeah, it’s a village made up of resistance members or something. Kim Suho, Jin Seyeon, and everyone else are there according to Jungyeong.”

Boss usually showed no interest in heroes, but everyone kept saying Kim Suho would become the youngest master rank hero in history.

“Do you want to visit them?” Jain asked. Boss frowned as she contemplated. They should grasp any straws available.

“Yes.”

She finally nodded.

* * *

[Lupiton, Underground Village]

“We’ve obtained information about Tigris’ travel route.”

Their mission proceeded as planned. Lupiton’s surveillance had increased after last night’s incident, but their number of resistance members also increased. They didn’t feel particularly worried.

“Tigris will be giving a speech in Doloren Square?” Aileen asked. She secretly arrived last night and stared at the document outlining Tigris’ route.

“Yes, but we’ll stay put while he’s giving the speech. We’ll strike afterwards when he’s leaving.”

Ellio explained the plan he devised with Yi Gongmyoung.

“The most important piece of this mission is Tigris’ horse.”

“Horse?”

“Yes, he’s called Horseless and is known to be violent towards everyone other than his owner. Tigris is extremely fond of this horse. Rumor has it he even loves him.”

Ellio showed Aileen a photo of the horse. Horseless looked beautiful with a white mane that contrasted with his pitch-black body. Aileen couldn’t imagine this horse being violent, so Ellio’s next words shocked her even more.

“Horseless eats humans.”

“What? Humans?”

“Yes, he literally consumes them.”

Ellio showed her more photos of Horseless chewing a human arm as Tigris watched in the background.

“He’s nuts.”

“Tigris rides Horseless wherever he goes.”

“And?”

“General Tigris is notorious for his temper even among monsters. He pretends to be kind, but can never hold back his anger.”

“Ah, I see where you’re going with this.”

Jin Seyeon nodded as Aileen looked confused.

“You’re planning to kill Horseless.”

“Yes, that’s correct. Tigris will definitely lose his temper if Horseless dies. He’s also known for killing his own comrades when things go wrong. Can you imagine what would happen if his beloved horse dies in front of him?”

Ellio slightly smiled.

“He’ll go berserk and won’t be able to tell right from wrong. Everything in his line of sight will be destroyed. We’ll jump in after he kills all his guards.”

This would be the best case scenario.

“Sounds like a good plan. Leave Horseless to me then.”

Ellio nodded at Jin Seyeon’s remark. Killing a horse would be simple for the Divine Archer.

“I’ll take on Tigris.” Kim Suho suddenly announced and looked around the village hall.

Aileen frowned at him. “Hey, I’m the commander, not you! And one particular person isn’t in charge of Tigris. We’ll all—”

“He’s invincible unless we fight him at close quarters. You’ve all seen the videos from the Chinese government.”

Kim Suho had witnessed the heinous crimes Tigris committed. He massacred countless civilians and heroes for pleasure. Kim Suho couldn’t understand or forgive such evil deeds.

“Please let me take him on.”

The Sword Saint wished to cut down Tigris’ madness. Aileen stared at him for a while before nodding.

“Okay, fine. Only because it’s better to minimize the heroes on this mission. I’ll be watching and we’ll intervene if things get out of hand.”

“Thank you.” Kim Suho nodded with a big smile.

KWANG!

The village hall door burst open and high rank hero Seo Youngji

rushed inside.

“Commander Aileen! The Chameleon Troupe is here!”

“What?”

“Please come on out!”

Aileen jumped to her feet and hurried outside. “Where, where?”

“Over there.”

Seo Youngji pointed to the entrance. Three individuals stood there, but not Black Lotus. Aileen tilted her head in confusion when the Chameleon Troupe’s boss stopped in front of her.

“What happened?” Aileen asked.

“We...”

Boss opened her mouth, but stopped when she sensed a certain gaze.

“That woman...”

“What? That woman?”

They planned on using that woman as bait to lure Bell.

“...!”

Jin Sahyuk shuddered when they made eye contact. Boss immediately moved and Jin Sahyuk watched her charge like a ray of light.

“I’m already used to this.”

Jin Sahyuk could only smile. She’d been beaten too many times to be surprised and gracefully formed a barrier to prepare for impact.

Crack—

“...?”

Boss’ punch easily pierced her barrier.

“What?”

Her punch landed square on Jin Sahyuk’s right cheek.

Whoosh—

Jin Sahyuk flew and slammed against the wall.

* * *

[England – Borand Forest]

Evandel, Hayang, Ah Hae-In, and Rachel arrived at a forest despite all the commotion in Africa.

“Wow!”

They had come to a rank 1 danger zone.

“Evandel, do you remember what you need to do first to establish a domain?”

Ah Hae-In asked inside the forest full of monsters above high-intermediate rank.

Evandel wondered for a moment in her training uniform before shouting.

“You have to grasp the nature within the domain!”

“*Mmm*. You’re wrong.”

Ah Hae-In shook her head. This confused Evandel, but she soon came up with another answer.

“Then... you have to befriend the nature within the domain!”

“How? How do you befriend it?”

“Um... That’s...”

Evandel glanced at Rachel for help.

“Hu... hu, hu...”

However, Rachel already lamented their imminent parting. Evandel gently held Rachel’s hand.

“You don’t have to try so hard. That answer was wrong too.”

Ah Hae-In smiled and stroked Evandel’s head.

“The first and foremost thing you should do before establishing a domain is...”

She raised her head and looked at the surrounding nature. The grass, trees, and streams all contained magic power. This land would make an excellent domain.

“...Buying the land.”

“Ehh?”

Of course, children wouldn’t know about such grown-up interests. Evandel blinked a few times in confusion.

“First, you have to legally make this land yours. Even magicians need to abide by the law.”

“Mm... Then...”

“Evandel doesn’t need to worry though.”

Ah Hae-In twisted her words again and Evandel slightly frowned.

“Kim Hajin has already purchased all the land from here to there.”

“Ah?”

Evandel wiggled her eyebrows and Ah Hae-In beamed. To be more precise, Kim Hajin’s money purchased this land. So far, he had paid her a total of 40 billion won for Evandel’s lessons. Ah Hae-In purchased this land in his name using that money.

“Are you ready to begin?”

“Yes!” Evandel nodded with a big smile.

“Good. Now, don’t hold back and summon your beasts.”

“*Whew...*”

Evandel closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she sat on the grass and emitted her unique magic power signature. She embedded a single message in her signature, *Come to me*.

“The next task is simple. You’ll strengthen this land with the help of your spirit beasts. Make this land acknowledge you as its rightful owner while you live here and create new spirit beasts.”

Evandel nodded with her eyes tightly shut. She focused on emitting her magic power signature for the next 5 minutes. Vibrations and noises could be felt from far away. Tens of thousands of spirit beasts she released began to return.

“They’re coming.”

“Yes.”

Ah Hae-In and Rachel waited for the spirit beasts to appear.

Uuuuu... The faint vibration soon turned into a roar and majestic footsteps filled the earth and air. The two adults felt overwhelmed by Evandel's approaching spirit beasts. They all surrounded Evandel. Rabbits, lions, tigers, horses, hippopotamuses, wolves...

One would be lucky to witness such a spectacle even once in their lifetime.

“Now, open your eyes.”

Evandel opened her eyes and mischievously smiled at the spirit beasts around her.

“Let them freely roam. Your spirit beasts will consolidate your domain for you.”

“Okay!”

Evandel set them all free.

Tudududu—

Hiiing—

Footsteps, roars, and fluttering wings resounded. Her spirit beasts jumped into the air and ran around. They left their marks all across the surroundings.

* * *

I woke up in a dark room and felt a soft mattress underneath me.

“...?”

I blinked a few times and assessed the situation. I felt confused and recalled being swept up in a huge explosion. However, I didn't sustain any injuries and my head felt clearer than ever. Perhaps the Orb of Regeneration helped, but I felt strangely refreshed. Did I just get a good sleep or did my luck cause this?

“You’re awake.”

A voice interrupted my train of thought. I slightly tilted my head and spotted the handsome man smoking a cigar.

“It’s you again.”

I couldn’t spot any hostility in Bell’s eyes. The way he wearily opened his eyes only made him more attractive.

“What’s your deal this time?”

I asked and he slowly spoke while rubbing the dark circles under his eyes.

“Ah, nothing much. I just looked into your memories... with my ultimate skill. For 10 minutes or so...”

“What?”

“I can’t keep it up any longer than that. Your memories are too complex. I only saw bits here and there. Ah, it’s not like I have a voyeurism fetish.”

“No, that’s not what I—”

I frowned and clearly recalled killing him once in the Tower of Wish. I fired directly into his head, so he shouldn’t have an ultimate skill.

“Didn’t I kill you once in the tower?”

“Ah, right. That did happen, but you can’t kill me. My body is made of magic power thanks to my authority, *[Magic Power Body]*. Yaawn.”
Bell stretched as he explained.

“No, but I did kill you.”

“Hmm? Ah, you’re right. Your anti-magic power did break my magic power, but it didn’t destroy my authority.”

“Mmm... Tell me more.”

“Hahaha...”

Bell laughed and continued explaining.

“You should just consider me as nature. This world has already recognized me as part of nature like how the wind blows, rain falls, and flowers bloom. Nature automatically rearranges my existence when I die. This phenomenon is only possible because I’m entirely made up of magic power.”

“...”

“In short, I can’t die. I’m bound to live forever.”

I became speechless. Magic Power Body did exist in my original settings, but I deleted it because it felt too overpowered. Still, I never included resurrection as part of it. He smiled when I doubtfully looked at him.

“By the way, aren’t you curious about the fact that I looked at your memories?”

“Huh?”

My heart sank. The fact that he looked at my memories meant he now knew all my secrets.

“Yeah, that’s how you should react.”

Bell smirked and sat next to me. “I never imagined there’d be another transmigrator other than Jin Sahyuk and Kim Suho.”

“Transmigrator?”

What Bell said sounded strange. I felt confused at first, but soon realized he misinterpreted my memories.

“Yeah, a transmigrator. Kim Hajin and Kim Chundong are the same, yet completely different. That’s why Jin Sahyuk thought you were her servant. You took over Kim Chundong’s body and Kim Chundong became Jin Sahyuk’s servant in Akatrina.”

“...”

“I understood that much. I also saw the world you originally came from, but I couldn’t figure out how you came here since that information is securely blocked.”

I remained silent and stared at him.

“Another Earth in a parallel universe. It turned out to be a boring, but fascinating story.”

Bell leisurely smiled as I looked into his deep blue eyes. This man didn’t exist in my original novel or my setting.

“Do you want to know who I am?” Bell muttered as if he read my mind.

“Will you tell me if I ask?”

“Of course, it’s a give and take. I figured out your identity, so you should know mine too.”

I looked at Bell as if to say, *Then tell me.*

“Okay. First, have you heard of Baal?”

I froze at that name. Baal ranked first among Solomon’s 72 devils. He boasted the most power and fame among all the devils along with Satan.

“So you do know. Then you also know a devil needs an incarnation body to descend on Earth, right?”

Bell smiled as I listened to him in a daze.

“You’ve probably figured out where I’m going with all this. I’m Baal’s incarnation body. I only have 6 months left at most. In 6 months, Baal will be born from my head.”

His sudden declaration would’ve shocked anyone else.

“So?”

Bell slightly frowned at my nonchalant reaction. “I said I’m Baal. The world is doomed when I become Baal. You’ll never be able to kill me.”

“And?”

I remained calm because I arrived here as a result of my *[Accumulation of Luck]*. I could still see the sentence that popped up during the explosion. *[This momentary misfortune will lead to the best ending.]*

This meeting with Bell resulted from the purest of luck.

“Sigh.” Bell finally gave up.

“Okay, I’ll get to the point.”

His gaze suddenly sharpened.

“Chundong...”

Bell became one of two people who knew about Kim Chundong.

“Kim Chundong.”

Only he had witnessed the root of Kim Chundong’s existence.

[Your synchronization with Kim Chundong has increased in response to being called.]

Something in my heart responded to his voice. I glared at him as he asked.

“Do you think you’ll be able to betray Byul?”

Chapter 292

Looking Back (2)

I raised my body without replying as Bell continued.

“The demon realm transformation is progressing as we speak. It’s still faint, but it’ll soon spread to the heart of Earth.”

My story’s final setting, the demon realm transformation, would erode this world. We headed towards the ending now.

“No one can stop the demon realm transformation. It’s the prelude to the descent of devils.”

Kim Suho had to eliminate the devils and save humanity for a happy ending.

“Trust me if you want to stop the demon realm transformation.”

I couldn’t help but doubt Bell. Somehow, he sounded even more confident about the ending than me.

“...”

I glared at him and he leisurely received my gaze in the dark.

“I want to make you a simple offer.”

Bell finished his cigar and burned it with his magic power. Then he spoke within the acrid smoke.

“Help Sahyuk kill me.”

“What?”

My eyebrows furrowed, but Bell smiled even wider.

“I know you have a complicated relationship with Jin Sahyuk, but she’s the only one who can kill me.”

I finally realized what felt so off about Bell. He didn’t have the desire to live that all humans naturally possessed. Did he want to die because he was Baal’s incarnation? I couldn’t understand.

“Can’t you just let Jin Sahyuk kill you? What’s so complicated?”

“Ah, if only it was that easy.” Bell wore a sad expression.

“I just want to die. I’ve lived too long, but my survival instinct still remains. This instinct stems from Baal who resides in my head.”

“Didn’t I easily kill you before?”

I only killed his body at the time, but I still didn’t sense anything from Baal.

“I told you. I won’t die even if I’m killed. Baal only reacts when my existence is at risk of annihilation. When that happens, Baal will shoot out of my head and lose control.”

Bell paused as if to recall something from long ago.

“I’ve killed many because of this instinct.”

His bitter smile disappeared as he continued in a leisurely tone.

“So I want you to help Sahyuk. She can become much stronger than she is now. Help her grow enough so she can kill me.”

“... ”

“If she doesn’t, Baal will destroy this world once he descends. That’s something neither you, me, nor that monster king wants.”

I still had many questions and doubts, but I could tell he mostly told the truth thanks to my newly upgraded *[Observation and Reading]*.

[Life force 100/100] [Name – Bell] [Alignment – Neutral] [Realm, Potential – Cannot Estimate] [Status – Being honest]

Of course, being honest didn't mean I could trust him yet. I changed the topic before digging deeper into his explanation.

“What do you mean by betraying Boss?”

“Mm? Oh, Byul?” Bell grinned.

“You don't have to if you can find a way not to betray her. However...”

Bell's expression turned serious.

“I doubt she'll accept the fact that you're cooperating with me. Byul resents me for killing Yeonjun.”

I frowned at the unfamiliar name.

“And who's Yeonjun?”

“Oh, that's the Chameleon Troupe's previous Boss. I guess Byul never told you. Well, it's not surprising given how sensitive the topic.”

Bell coughed and continued.

“Anyways, I told Byul she would end up betraying you for Yeonjun. I didn't know things would turn out this way, but it kind of makes sense. *Hahaha.*”

Bell proudly shrugged and tried to act cute. I would have found it disgusting if he didn't look so handsome. In any case, I understood what he meant.

He resembled me in his attempt to conclude this story. Bell chose Jin

Sahyuk for his ending and I chose Kim Suho. The growing main character and the growing final boss. Technically, the growing final boss also became a protagonist in the story's latter half.

“Think of yourself as a princess maker. After all, Sahyuk is a princess.”

Bell rested his chin on his hands and stared at me.

“I don’t think it’s a coincidence that Chundong became Sahyuk’s servant.”

“Don’t talk about Chundong in front of me.”

The synchronization increased every time I heard Kim Chundong’s name. It already reached 10.9% and my feet could be considered Chundong’s now.

“Okay, I won’t.”

Bell smiled and placed his hands on my shoulders.

“Will you do it? I’ll support you so Sahyuk becomes yours.”

I frowned at his words. “I don’t want Jin Sahyuk.”

“Just think of it as my dying will,” Bell casually replied.

* * *

[Underground Resistance Village]

The commotion finally settled after sunset. Cheok Jungyeong and Aileen managed to calm the berserk Boss. Jin Sahyuk shuddered at the unjust treatment.

“I’m leaving.”

The heroes prevented the fight from breaking out, but Jin Sahyuk had no reason to stay after Bell left.

“Here, take this.”

Only Kim Suho saw her off and handed her a bag filled with bento boxes and other dried food that would last 2 weeks.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk glared at him, but took it anyways. She knew the importance of food from her last experience.

“Sorry. I tried, but we’re currently allied with the Chameleon Troupe.”

“Chameleon Troupe.”

Jin Sahyuk turned around with the bag under her armpit.

“Don’t trust them. They’re worse than me.”

She grabbed the ladder and Kim Suho watched her leave. Eventually, he couldn’t help but shout.

“Oi!”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk turned around. Kim Suho once served her as a knight and still felt complicated feelings towards her.

“Didn’t you come for me? You’re just going to leave without fighting?”

“Bastard, do you have crush on me?”

Jin Sahyuk blankly stared at him before snickering. She didn’t say anything else and disappeared up the ladder.

“Sigh...”

Kim Suho still had mixed feelings. He already settled his past, but Jin Sahyuk hadn't and regarded him as a traitor. He didn't feel good looking at her back.

Aileen approached him as he fell in thought.

"Don't worry about someone like her. Tigris will be arriving in 2 days."

She crossed her arms and turned serious. "The rehearsal will begin soon, so follow me."

"Yes."

Kim Suho nodded and turned around. Then he trudged towards the village hall with Aileen.

* * *

"I will say this again. We will be victorious!"

Humans and humanoid monsters gathered at Doloren Square as Tigris's voice rang out. His roar shook the heavens and earth. Everyone applauded after his speech.

"Great! Lupiton feels quite satisfactory."

Tigris nodded in content before walking down from the podium.

"Lord Tigris, Lord Tigris." An ant humanoid monster walked up to him.

"Village Lord Pleron would like to invite you to a banquet."

"No need. She should be satisfied seeing my face here. I don't want to waste any more time. Rather than that, where's Horseless?"

"Ah, Lord Horseless is currently enjoying a nap."

Tigris's secretary didn't forget to respectfully address Horseless. He knew dozens of humanoid monsters had been beheaded for casually addressing the horse.

"We've been quite busy lately, so he must be tired. Thankfully, tomorrow is the last."

Tigris headed to the mansion where Horseless slept. Around 66 rank 1 humanoid monsters followed him. These elites all possessed equivalent strength to high rank, grade 1 heroes.

"*Mmm*, there he is."

Tigris arrived at the well-decorated stable built just for Horseless. It featured beautiful rare plants and flowers.

"Horseless!"

The horse instantly reacted to his voice.

— *Hiiiing!*

"*Hahaha*, you wanted to see me too?"

Tigris embraced Horseless, who ran into his arms. They had only been separated for 4 hours, but acted as though they had reunited after years. Tigris stroked Horseless' mane and listened to his whisper. He froze for a moment before nodding.

"Oi, did you feed this child?" Tigris asked the human in charge of the stable.

"Yes, we served him the best food available."

"And what did you feed him?"

"T-That's..."

The human didn't reply and Tigris didn't expect to hear anything

either. He immediately crushed the human's head and turned him into pulp.

"Fool."

Tigris glanced at the corpse and hopped on Horseless. The horse happily greeted his owner.

"Make sure to prepare proper meat in the next village. Otherwise, you'll be the next to die."

Tigris's solemn warning caused all his servants to bow.

"Let's go!"

Tk, tk. Tigris galloped away on Horseless as Lupiton's residents continued to clap.

"I can't get used to seeing humans all happy. Don't you think so? If it wasn't for King Orden..."

Tigris grumbled after he left the village.

"Yes, I am always amazed by Lord Tigris's patience and virtue."

The ant secretary eagerly played along with Tigris. Their group slowly headed to the next destination and soon reached a vast wilderness.

"*Yaaawn!*" Tigris yawned, but it sounded more like a roar.

"What villages are left?"

"Crean and Loren. Crean is a low rank village and Loren is a mid-rank
—"

An arrow flashed across the sky as the ant secretary recited their itinerary.

Paaaang!

A huge wind pressure also swallowed the surroundings. This came from Tigris' punch as he tried to deflect what came towards Horseless.

However, the Divine Archer's arrow couldn't be blocked so easily. It multiplied like a spider web and assaulted them.

Whish!

Jin Seyeon's magic arrow dug into Tigris' arm and pierced Horseless' heart.

“...!”

Tigris fell forward and safely landed, but the same couldn't be said for Horseless. The horse helplessly collapsed after being pierced in the heart.

“...”

Tigris' thoughts stopped as he ran up to Horseless in a daze.

— *Hi... iing...*

Horseless gasped for air and looked at his beloved owner with his final breaths.

—...

Soon, his breathing stopped and the horse died with his eyes open. Tigris stared at his beloved horse. Everything felt surreal and his brain refused to accept the current reality.

“This... what...”

The ant secretary slowly approached Tigris and could only see his trembling back.

“*Um... Lord Tig—*”

The ant secretary couldn't finish his sentence.

“—!”

Tigris roared with uncontrollable rage. He stood up and glared at his servants with tearful eyes that had already lost focus. Tigris turned into a beast that instinctively destroyed everything.

* * *

Jin Sahyuk traveled deeper into Africa. She came to find Bell at first, but now she possessed a new goal to become stronger.

She felt like she had grown complacent, especially after being so powerless against the Chameleon Troupe's so-called Boss.

Jin Sahyuk chased after the scent Bell purposefully left and simply killed everything that appeared.

“*Hmm...* Did Bell intend for this to happen?”

Thousands of monsters surrounded her.

Jin Sahyuk released countless weapons that shredded them and built a mountain of corpses. However, their numbers never seemed to end.

“Give up, Jin Sahyuk. *Kereuk*.”

A humanoid monster resembling a drake spoke and seemed to be the army's commander.

Jin Sahyuk's eyes widened. “You know my name?”

“*Kereuk*. Of course, you became the king's servant before betraying him and running away after one week.”

“Oh, you're talking about that?”

Jin Sahyuk had received Akatrina's crystal from Orden, but didn't

recall becoming his servant.

“Are you prepared to die, *kereuk*?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk checked her physical condition without replying. She had been pushing herself for the past month without any proper rest. The fight from 2 days ago also affected her.

“Are you ready to die?”

Jin Sahyuk pushed herself into a corner to overcome her limits. She felt confident in her potential.

“*Kereuk*, foolish human!” the drake shouted and spat out a fireball.

Kwaaaaa!

Jin Sahyuk jumped to dodge, but flying monsters also charged at her. She manipulated the air current and strangled them to death.

“How do you lot breed so quickly?”

The humanoid monsters continued attacking. She possessed limited magic power, but never thought about escaping. The endless fight left numerous scars on her body. The bleeding never ceased, her armor tore apart, and her hair became severed. Overcoming the situation seemed impossible and it only worsened as time passed.

As Jin Sahyuk continued fighting alone...

“*Kereuk*! Die, traitor...?”

An arrow pierced the roaring drake’s throat. Then the arrow flew up and pierced the drake’s head.

“*Kereeeuk*.”

The drake died, but the mysterious arrow continued.

Chwaaaa—

A total of 5 black arrows flew across the sky. They drew black traces in the air and moved like autonomous birds.

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk stared at the arrows in a daze. They moved at an incomprehensible speed and killed numerous monsters. The lines drawn by these arrows resembled modern art.

Kuak, keuk, guuuk!

Monsters fell one by one. The death toll reached two digits, three digits, then four digits. All this happened in less than 3 seconds.

“Who is it.”

The owner of the arrows appeared when she asked.

“Over here.”

The voice came from above. Jin Sahyuk looked up and saw Kim Hajin standing on a nameless mountain. She furrowed her brows as Kim Hajin spoke.

“Come up.”

“What?”

“For the next 6 months...”

Kim Hajin nocked another arrow. This pure white arrow contrasted with his previous black ones. Jin Sahyuk wouldn't know about the mythical [*Lv.11 Athena's Moonlight Arrow*].

“I'll be by your side.”

Kim Hajin finished his sentence, but Jin Sahyuk didn't understand him for a long time. Three seconds? Five seconds passed. Her eyes widened once the words sank in and Kim Hajin released his bowstring.

Kwaaaaa!

Athena's moonlight arrow, infused with stigma's magic power, shot towards the army of monsters.

Chapter 293

Looking Back (3)

The Greek goddess of wisdom's arrow released the purest light after being amplified by stigma. The *[Lv.11 Athena's Moonlight Arrow]* silently flew and devoured its surroundings. The world turned white and it burnt all the nearby monsters alive. Only its overwhelming moonlight shone in the afternoon sky.

"Come up here."

I gestured to Jin Sahyuk, who stared at me. She looked confused, but I didn't have time to spare.

"I'm going to leave if you don't move."

Guooo... Yet another army of monsters approached from beyond the horizon. Jin Sahyuk glanced at them and looked back at me. Then she jumped and landed on the cliff where I stood.

"What's with you? Why did you suddenly appear and..."

She continued to babble as I activated my spirit power. I set the coordinates in my head and mimicked Khalifa's portal gift. I barely had enough streaks of stigma left after that last attack.

Psssst...

My spirit power formed a portal and I pushed Jin Sahyuk inside. We arrived at a dark cave on the coast of Africa.

"You bastard! You kicked me out, so why did you come back?"

She suddenly grabbed me by the collar as I stared into her eyes.

“What, you’re just going to ignore me? *Huh?* Is that it?”

Bell told me a lot about how she lived on Earth after dying in Akatrina, what path she took to arrive here, and the pain she lived through.

“Hey, Kim Hajin! Kim — Hajin! Kim — Ha — Jin!”

I felt hopeful that maybe my novel’s ending could change after listening to Bell. In my novel, Jin Sahyuk acted like an unforgivable villain and a hopeless tyrant. However, she changed in this world after meeting Bell, a character who didn’t exist in my original story.

“Are you deaf or something?”

Of course, I didn’t completely trust Bell. I still harbored my doubts, but none of that mattered right now. I could always use the Book of Truth later.

“Answer me!”

Jin Sahyuk began shaking me from side to side. My body swayed like a doll from her enormous strength.

“It’s only natural for a servant to be with his king, right?” I nonchalantly replied and Jin Sahyuk froze. Her hands remained around my neck as she coldly muttered.

“That’s bullshit.”

“What do you mean?” I shrugged.

She looked extremely suspicious about me being Kindspring.

“I will replace Bell and train you for the next 6 months. Maybe shorter if possible.”

“What?” Jin Sahyuk tightened her grip. “Training? Cut the crap. You met Bell? What did you two talk about?”

“Well, can you let go first?”

I looked down at my collar. Frankly, I couldn't move at all because of the huge difference in our base stats.

“Why would I—”

“Let go.”

I scowled, but she still didn't loosen her grip. Not a single trace of fear appeared in her eyes.

She couldn't even properly speak to me a while ago.

“Do you think I'm a joke because I've been going easy on you for the past few months?”

“What?”

Jin Sahyuk clenched her teeth. Well, I should set the record straight. I only had one streak of stigma left, but I felt confident in winning. I would never lose to Jin Sahyuk with *[Fate]*.

“Let go of me before I count to three.”

I held three fingers up.

“One, two...”

My fingers gradually folded.

“Three.”

The last one came down, but Jin Sahyuk simply smirked with her hands still around me.

“Just come at me, bastard. You think I'll be scared of you forev—”

I immediately activated *[Fate]* and all my stats increased by 300%. The sensation of absolute power filled me. This time, *[Fate]* also included the *[Pinnacle Rank Instant Acceleration]* from my Black Lotus uniform. My blood began to rush as the world slowed to a stop.

Meanwhile, Jin Sahyuk...

“Y... o... u...”

I punched her in the stomach and her eyes widened. She coughed blood and pulled back while clutching her stomach. Jin Sahyuk seemed to be in the process of flying backwards.

“Ku... uek...”

I grabbed her by the shoulder and kicked her in the stomach. Tears flowed from her eyes as she tried to counter with Reality Manipulation.

Chwaaak—

A sharp blade of magic power left a scar on my cheek.

“Hm? Oh, wow.”

As expected of Jin Sahyuk, I couldn’t let my guard down even in my *[Fate]* state. I acknowledged her strength and—

“Uk! Uuek! Kuek!”

Proceeded to earnestly beat the crap out of Jin Sahyuk.

* * *

It only took Tigris 3 minutes to annihilate his own guards. He killed all the guards in the front before they could even do anything. The others who understood the situation tried to fight back, but miserably failed.

— Get ready, Suho. We'll cover you.

“Roger.”

Only Tigris remained and the best opportunity to strike finally arrived. Kim Suho dashed forward with Misteltein.

Pang!

However, Tigris swung his fist before Kim Suho could reach him. His special [*Formless Tiger Punch*] flew towards Kim Suho from 500 meters away.

Clang!

Kim Suho blocked it with Misteltein.

“...?”

Only then did Tigris show some interest. Kim Suho stared at the enemy and whispered into the radio.

“I'll prepare for a long battle.”

— Yes, it's better that way. We've got the Chameleon Troupe with us, so don't worry about any reinforcements coming to help him.

[*Formless Tiger Punch*] seemed almost invincible. It could instantly close any distance and attacked everything in Tigris' 320 degree field of view.

However, it still depended on magic power. Naturally, Tigris only possessed a small capacity for magic power as the descendant of a Himalayan mountain tyrant.

A chance would eventually arise if one could endure until Tigris ran out of magic power. Kim Suho planned on doing exactly that. His speed could evade the attacks and his gift could sever the [*Formless Tiger Punch*].

“Tigris!” Kim Suho shouted as Tigris slowly stood up. He glared at Kim Suho and the anger in his eyes seemed to have subsided.

Kim Suho shouted at him once more. “I killed Horseless!”

Constantly driving Tigris mad would deplete his magic power the fastest.

“—!”

It turned out to be a wise decision. Madness filled Tigris’ eyes once again and countless punches flew towards Kim Suho.

Pang! Pang!

They came from every direction with no distinguishable pattern and each felt equally life-threatening.

Despite this, Kim Suho managed to block everything. The Sword Saint slashed diagonally and severed the punches.

B-B-B-Boom!

Kim Suho closed his eyes amidst the endless attacks and heightened his other senses. He only relied only on his intuition to attack and displayed the peak of swordsmanship.

Koong!

Tigris continued using the 108 consecutive punches he took pride in. No one had ever survived.

Ssssk—

Kim Suho sheathed his sword and drew it again as he swung forward.

Chwaaa!

His sword drawing technique spread out like a wave and stopped

Tigris' 108 consecutive punches.

“Is this all you’ve got?”

Indeed, Kim Suho’s swordsmanship suited his Sword Saint title. His state of existence fully revealed itself now.

* * *

[Africa, Undersea Cave]

Our first training, a mock battle in grappling, ended in 3 minutes. Jin Sahyuk lay sick in bed while I sat on the chair next to her. Honestly, I also suffered from the side effects of *[Fate]*.

“Let’s not talk about all that king and servant stuff right now. Cut off the root of the problem. We’ll only get headaches if you keep bringing it up.”

“...” Jin Sahyuk silently glared at me with a threatening look.

“Wipe that scowl off your face.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk sighed and turned over in bed while muttering, “What are we doing for half a year?”

“First of all, we’ll conquer dungeons.”

“Dungeons?” She showed some interest.

“Yep, Africa is full of interesting dungeons. I even heard there’s one called the quiz dungeon. They’re quite dangerous, but feature amazing rewards.”

I needed to hunt for certain items. Clearing dungeons would help Jin Sahyuk and also allow me to secure the materials for new equipment. I planned to dismantle existing artifacts with *[Young Dwarf’s Dexterity]*

and recreate them with greater quality.

“Do you even know where those dungeons are?” Jin Sahyuk bluntly asked.

“Of course.”

I opened the Book of Truth and turned the pages. Then I recalled the name that Bell mentioned, Yi Yeonjun, the former Chameleon Troupe’s boss.

“What are you looking at? Show me.”

She seemed intrigued by my serious expression, but I closed the Book of Truth and returned it into stigma.

“What? What is it this time?” Jin Sahyuk flinched, slightly intimidated by my gaze.

“Hey, do you know Yi Yeonjun?”

I thought Jin Sahyuk might know.

“No.”

“I guess you wouldn’t remember someone else’s name. You’re too busy being snotty.”

“You bastard! There you go again with your insults!”

“Stop calling me names.”

I placed my hand over her head and she began trembling in fear because of the earlier incident.

“For now, let’s just eat in peace.”

I went to the fridge in the corner of the cave and took out some ingredients: beef, green onions, garlic, chives, rice, cooking wine, etc.

Something crossed my mind and I turned on my smartwatch.

“Maybe I’ll ask Yoo Jinhyuk.”

After all, he still ran a business. I might as well text Boss and let her know nothing happened to me. Bell said I would have to eventually betray Boss, but I disagreed.

“Mmm.”

‘Yeah, let’s do that.’

First, I texted Boss.

* * *

Bell returned to his shelter and sighed. Darkness surrounded him without a speck of light. This sanctuary existed in the deep sea and didn’t suit humans.

“Hmm...”

So the Chameleon Troupe arrived at the underground village. Rumi probably escaped. Did Kim Hajin meet Jin Sahyuk as planned?

Many thoughts filled his head.

Tssk—

Bell drew the blinds and sat on a chair by a small table. The deep sea’s dim light came through and he felt a little more comfortable.

...

Bell poured tea into his cup and turned towards the faint murmur.

“Are you awake?”

No one answered, but a disapproving sigh confirmed another presence. Bell smiled and sipped his tea.

“Why don’t you have some tea as well? I brought it from the tower.”

Bell spent an entire day revealing his secret plans to Kim Hajin. However, he still kept one thing hidden.

“Haaa.”

The sigh grew louder and Bell called his name.

“Yeonjun?”

Some loved this man and others loathed him. He died a long time ago, but came back to life after a long sleep.

“What,” Yi Yeonjun reluctantly replied. He kept glancing at the window and appeared uncomfortable.

“Would you like some tea?”

“No.”

He frowned and his brown eyes turned sharp. His overall expression stiffened.

“Mmm. How do you feel? It hasn’t been long since you woke up.”

“Three months is long enough.”

Yi Yeonjun stood up from the bed. *Creek, creek*. He limped with one leg and walked towards the chair facing Bell.

“Did you have time to think about what I said?”

“Thinking is difficult right now. I can’t think for long.” He sounded stern and rigid. The way he spoke resembled Byul.

“That’s why I said you shouldn’t stay here for too long. It’s been 10 years.”

Yi Yeonjun woke up from his deep slumber just 3 months ago.

“I couldn’t do anything else. My entire body had been destroyed and I didn’t want to wake up in such a state.”

“Sure. More importantly, aren’t you going to meet Byul?”

A lot of time had passed since they last saw each other and Bell didn’t know if Byul still felt the same about his friend.

“Pft, why would I meet Byul?”

Yi Yeonjun slightly smiled and shook his head. Bell looked at the characteristic dimples that always appeared when Yi Yeonjun smiled. He once thought Yi Yeonjun’s smile captured the purest form of evil. It contained a child’s mischievousness and innocence.

“She’s doing fine without me.”

Yi Yeonjun felt quite proud of Byul from the way he smiled. However, he didn’t take pride in her as a person. It felt more like how a swordsman looked at his sword.

“So you’re not going to ever see her?”

“I’ll see her when the time is right. Don’t rush me.”

Byul would probably never know that Yi Yeonjun had pushed her into the pit of despair.

Byul, Yeonjun deceived you with salvation.

He sighed when he thought of her.

“What do you plan to do now, Yeonjun?”

“I’ll take some time to recover before going after Chae Joochul.”

Chae Joochul destroyed Yi Yeonjun a long time ago. It hadn’t been Bell, but Chae Joochul’s schemes buried the truth.

“By the way, I’m surprised the Chae Jinyoon plan failed.”

Yi Yeonjun had planted the devil’s seed in Chae Jinyoon. He probably also incited the assassination of Chae Nayun’s mother.

“Right.”

Bell knew a real monster sat in front of him, but he had grown used to calling this person a friend. He smiled and placed his hand on Yi Yeonjun’s head.

“First things first, you should trim your hair.”

“Hair?” Yi Yeonjun frowned.

“No need. I’ll stay hidden for a while longer. It’ll also help with the disguise.”

“Tsk. Then I take it your next goal after killing Chae Joochul remains the same?”

“Yeah, it became even clearer the longer I slept. As if someone breathed the answer into my head.”

“Really? That sounds interesting.”

Bell also knew Kim Hajin would have to kill this man to reach his own ending.

I might feel a bit sad when that time comes.

Bell thought to himself.

Byul would betray Kim Hajin for that reason. She would never be able

to forgive Kim Hajin for killing Yi Yeonjun.

Chapter 294

Orden Annihilation Operation

(1)

[Africa – Desolate Wilderness]

The northern winds blew across the cold wilderness as the 4 hour long battle came to an end.

The enraged Tigris grew weaker over time, but Kim Suho maintained his initial prowess. Tigris couldn't overcome the Sword Saint's clean movements and splendid swordsmanship.

"I'll admit that Sword Saint is a fitting title."

Cheok Jungyeong observed and commented from afar.

Kim Suho's impeccable swordsmanship gave him a strong urge to join. However, he knew how disgusting it felt to be interrupted during a fight and held back.

"*Huhu*, how is it? He's stronger than you, right?" Aileen also stood by and spoke with her arms crossed.

"It's not a matter of strength, but a matter of circumstance. I wouldn't have forced Tigris into such a cowardly situation." Cheok Jungyeong glared at Aileen.

Tigris boasted remarkable strength, but he revealed his full strength too easily when Horseless died. He even killed his own comrades and their battle felt far from fair.

"Cowardly? Oh please, think about what they did to the abducted people. You shouldn't be one to talk either. I saw what you guys did

20 years ago.”

“We didn’t do that, dumbass.”

“Then who did?”

“...The old us.”

“Are you kidding?” Aileen frowned at Cheok Jungyeong’s vague words.

“*Cough.*” He dodged her gaze and seemingly ended their conversation.

“*Tsk.*” Aileen clicked her tongue and picked up her transceiver.

“Jin Seyeon, Kim Suho, it’s time to end this tiger hunt. We can’t wait much longer.”

They had waited a long time for Kim Suho to cut down Tigris. The Chameleon Troupe took over Lupiton and prevented any information from leaking, but they could only maintain that for so long.

— Yes, understood.

Jin Seyeon replied as Aileen formed a magic power spear. Jin Seyeon also nocked an arrow from 3 kilometers away.

“This is a tiger-killing spear.”

Aileen infused the special attribute into her spear. She stroked the shaft and murmured like a mother caring for her child.

“It will display great power against tigers and paralyze the target with a single hit.”

Aileen prepared her Spirit Speech while Cheok Jungyeong stared at her in disgust.

“You! Damn! Human!” Tigris roared and shot towards Kim Suho.

“A mere human!”

Kim Suho had been waiting for this moment when the *[Formless Tiger Punch]* weakened enough that Tigris had to close in.

He recalled a certain piece of information Kim Hajin told him a long time ago about the mountain tyrant’s vital point. A blue mark should be on the heel of its hind leg.

Kim Suho smiled when Tigris charged. The humanoid monsters hadn’t overcome their vital points and mountain tyrants likely didn’t know their own weakness.

“*Huup!*”

Kim Suho thrust forward with Misteltein. Tigris grabbed the sword without any suspicions as Kim Suho attacked his heel with the scabbard.

“...!”

Tigris’s legs immediately went numb. Aileen and Jin Seyeon used this opening to make their moves. Tigris had no chance of dodging.

Crack!

A spear and an arrow pierced Tigris’ heart and stomach. He suffered fatal injuries, but refused to let go of Misteltein.

“You... coward... my Horseless...”

Tigris furiously glared, but this didn’t faze Kim Suho at all.

“You should’ve known the people you killed also meant something important to others if you treasured that horse so much.”

“Shut your mouth. A mere human dares to... *kuhuk!*”

Kim Suho infused his magic power into Misteltein. A brilliant light

rose as Tigris clenched his fists.

“—!”

The Sword Saint's sword clashed with the tyrant's fist.

Kwaaaaa!

The burst of magic power shook the heavens and earth.

“...”

Their battle finally came to an end. Kim Suho sighed and looked at Tigris. The humanoid monster's breathing gradually slowed with Misteltein piercing through his heart. However, Tigris' eyes remained open and he glared at Kim Suho full of rage.

“Humans... I will curse you... even in death...”

Misteltein activated its effect and absorbed a portion of Tigris' gift after destroying his heart.

[You have acquired Tigris' gift – Formless Tiger Punch]

Thud—

Tigris' heavy body collapsed to the ground.

[Your close range attacks will also reach into the distance when you activate Misteltein's Formless Tiger Punch.]

Kim Suho sheathed Misteltein as a light breeze blew his hair.

“Haaa.”

He felt slightly bitter after winning. It hadn't been a fair fight, but he couldn't do anything about that.

Kim Suho couldn't help but wonder if he had the right to punish humanoid monsters. Until now, he killed countless monsters without guilt, but humanoid monsters could think and talk like humans.

Kim Suho gazed into Tigris' eyes with complicated thoughts.

* * *

[Africa, Nameless Dungeon]

Jin Sahyuk and I arrived at a nameless dungeon. The Book of Truth called it the *[Basilisk Dungeon with Puzzles and Quizzes]*.

"This is a dungeon?" Jin Sahyuk looked around with a scowl.

"It looks a bit odd."

I probably wore a similar expression. This place resembled more of an arcade with all sorts of games displayed on a black background.

"Looks like a stage type dungeon. We probably have to clear each game."

I used *[Observation and Reading]* and looked over the different games.

[Quiz Game 1, 2, 3, 4 – Test your intelligence. The numbers represent the level of difficulty.] [Puzzle Game 1, 2, 3, 4 – Test your creativity. The numbers represent the level of difficulty.] [Clearing all games will allow you to enter the final stage – Defeat the Basilisk.]

"How are we supposed to do this?"

"Wait."

I started the quiz game first.

— *Ding, ding!* The quiz game will now begin!"

"Ah, geez! That surprised me!"

A robotic voice rang out from the ceiling and Jin Sahyuk slightly jumped.

“Say something before doing weird stuff!”

“Shut up and follow me.”

“What’s happening?”

The quiz game began with a riddle.

What does a fire become when it dies? Why did the ice cream melt? I found most of them laughably easy, but each riddle appeared in ancient runic language. Of course, I had no problems translating them.

“Sapphire because it’s cold, scarecrow, and almond.”

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk furrowed her brows at me and I simply explained.

“I’m smart.”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense. Even in Akatrina, runic language is—”

Jin Sahyuk stopped talking and suspiciously glared at me. She should’ve realized by now that I wasn’t Kim Chundong. I focused on solving the quizzes and puzzles. It only took 30 minutes to plow through all of them.

— You have cleared all the quizzes and puzzles! You have now reached the basilisk stage!

Dududu... A secret passageway opened after some rumbling and a purple world appeared beyond it. The sky looked purple with crimson land. The basilisk also had black spider underlings around it.

“You’ll be the tank. I’ll support you from behind.”

“What? Do you know what kind of monster a basilisk is?”

“Of course.”

I created the basilisk in my original setting. A half-snake, half-dragon monster with sharp fangs and skin tougher than any qi reinforcement. Its eyes could also shoot out petrifying waves.

The basilisk could be considered a high rank to pinnacle rank monster and its spider underlings all seemed to be around high-intermediate rank. I also knew the basilisk’s fatal vital point.

“Just trust me and protect me. That’s all you have to do.”

“You bastard! Basilisks were calamity level monsters even in Akatrina. A single one of them required hundreds of knights.”

“I’ll do more than hundreds of knights, so just do as I say.”

First, I transformed the Desert Eagle into a machine gun. I had thousands of bullets and this gun fired at 2000 rpm.

The basilisk’s flaw lay in its defense. Honestly, this flaw only existed because of my settings.

[Basilisk’s Skin – Will reduce 90% of physical damage and 99% of magical damage.]

That meant it couldn’t avoid 10% of the damage and became the perfect target for my machine gun. It should eventually die as long as I kept attacking. Of course, I also knew about the vital point under its jaw.

“No, do it by yourself.”

“No, you’re coming with me.”

For the record, Jin Sahyuk’s attacks only caused magical damage and that wouldn’t work against the basilisk. She knew about this

unfavorable matchup and refused to fight.

“You...”

Tudududu! I began firing and the basilisk, who hadn’t noticed us, quickly charged over.

“You son of a bitch!” Jin Sahyuk cursed with no other choice left.

— *Kiaaak!*

“Dammit!”

The secret passageway closed and trapped us inside. Now she had no choice but to fight.

“Move faster! Think about all the equipment we can make from that guy’s corpse.”

A basilisk’s skin and fangs made for excellent equipment. Its flesh, eyes, and heart could also be used to make medicine. This dungeon should also contain a decent clear reward. I felt quite excited about clearing it.

“You bastard!”

Jin Sahyuk released her magic power and used her Reality Manipulation as I fired my barrage of bullets.

Tudududududu!

Hundreds of bullets killed the spiders before aiming at the basilisk next.

— *Kiaaak!*

The enraged basilisk spat out green, venomous flames. Thankfully, Jin Sahyuk took care of it.

“Huuup!”

She extinguished its poisonous breath by isolating its path from reality.

“I don’t know what you’re up to, but hurry up!”

She shouted, but I didn’t reply and only continued firing.

Tududududu...

I could feel the stress leaving my body like a real arcade game.

* * *

[Korea, North Pyeongan Province – Silver Essential Hospital]

Yoo Yeonha rushed over after receiving an emergency call at 3 P.M.

“Um, Chairman Yoo, about this...”

“It’s fine.”

The hospital employees worriedly flocked over as she got off the dwarven supercar.

“I’ll see what happened with my own eyes.”

Yoo Yeonha entered the hospital and soon arrived on the highest floor where Oh Jaejin stayed.

“Haaa.”

Essence of the Strait had turned this penthouse into a village from the 1970s for Oh Jaejin and his wife. However, this penthouse looked empty now and the wooden floor felt freezing cold after they turned off the heat.

“How long has it been like this?”

“He was still here when we checked last night.”

Yoo Yeonha closed her eyes and sighed. Something hot began to boil inside her.

“He ran away.”

They must’ve wanted to live the rest of their lives in peace after curing Oh Jaejin’s dementia.

“W-We’re deeply sorry!”

The hospital employees bowed to their waists, but Yoo Yeonha didn’t say anything. The couple’s betrayal angered her, but she couldn’t bring herself to curse out loud.

In the first place, Oh Jaejin received the honorable Nine Stars title after sacrificing himself to save the world. He had no reason to save the world again if he might die. Asking him to sacrifice himself twice always sounded unreasonable.

“It’s fine. None of us could’ve done anything if he wanted to run away.”

Yoo Yeonha bitterly turned around when a new alert popped up on her smartwatch.

[You have gained DP! You have obtained 12,328 DP!]

The character she sponsored, Lailos, helped her earn even more DP. The news brightened her up, but she maintained a stiff expression while ordering the present employees.

“First, change the floor back to VIP rooms. Don’t try to find Oh Jaejin. *Hmm?*”

She smelled the scent of kimchi stew.

“What’s this smell?”

“Ah... the esteemed Oh Jaejin and his wife made kimchi stew before they left.”

“Ha, how kind of them.”

Yoo Yeonha laughed and walked into the elevator.

It does smell nice. I guess I'll have kimchi stew for dinner. Kim Hajin's food tasted so good. I wonder if he'll cook for me again.

Yoo Yeonha swallowed her saliva and closed the elevator door.

* * *

Four days passed since Tigris' assassination.

A bloody wind blew in Lupiton. The village lord, Pleron, escaped in fear of being punished and Lupiton's residents had their curfews pushed to 9 PM. More importantly, the enraged Orden made a formal declaration to the world.

“Hmmm...”

A storm of war brewed and the underground fortress went through heavy construction to build a tunnel.

“Orden's palace is right above this place?” Aileen asked.

The special task force paid the demon merchant and arrived at the foot of the palace.

“Yes, we did it carefully. Not even Orden should've detected anything,” the demon merchant replied.

“Great, then what about what we asked for?”

“It's the same.”

Commander Yi Gongmyung had asked the demon merchant to dig 18 different entryways. The special task force's 177 members would split into teams of 10 and infiltrate the palace while Hyenckes and Chae Joochul dealt with Orden.

"Aileen."

"*Huh?* What's up?"

Yi Yongha followed Aileen and excitedly muttered.

"The Immortal and the Lord of Steel are working together for this operation. Isn't that amazing? I'm already getting goosebumps."

"Shut it, fool. We only have 4 days left until D-Day. Prepare yourself."

Hundreds of thousands of soldiers would gather in Africa for their dual-pronged operation. Orden would naturally focus on the large army as the special task force secretly struck.

"You're right. We only have 4 days left."

"Are you nervous?" Aileen turned around and faced Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, and Yun Seung-Ah.

"No, I'm okay."

"I'm fine too."

"I'm a bit angry."

Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, and Yun Seung-Ah responded respectively. Yun Seung-Ah kept sulking and Aileen sighed at her.

"Why do you look like you stepped on poop? Are you a kid?"

"Me? You're the one who didn't tell me Jain also came."

Jain told Aileen that she disguised herself as Pleron. Aileen only just

found out that Jain belonged to the Chameleon Troupe.

“It’s politics.”

“U-Unni! You know what she did to me in the past—”

“Think of the bigger picture. Leave the team if you can’t cooperate.”

“...”

Yun Seung-Ah bit her lips and glared at Aileen before turning around. *Koong, koong!* She openly expressed her anger by stomping away.

“She’s sulking. Kim Suho, you deal with it.”

Aileen shook her head and Kim Suho wryly smiled at her order.

“Oh, right!”

Chae Nayun’s eyes suddenly shot open. Aileen and Kim Suho tilted their heads at her as Chae Nayun took out the *[Invitation Letter to the Love Room]*.

“*Hm?* What’s that?” Aileen gave her a curious look.

“This? You see...”

Chae Nayun wanted to use it before the mission. She didn’t want to die without knowing Extra7’s identity.

“Well, it’s nothing.”

However, she knew she couldn’t just bring an outsider into their top-secret mission. Extra7 also told her to only call him when she experienced life-threatening danger, so she decided to save it for later.

“What, so boring.”

Aileen frowned. Kim Suho knew about the item's effect and placed his hand on Chae Nayun's head.

"Ah, what are you doing? Get over yourself." Chae Nayun struggled to push his hand away.

"Why?"

"Do that to Seung-Ah unni, not me."

"*Cough*, why do you all keep mentioning guild leader Yun Seung-Ah." Kim Suho cleared his throat with a flushed face.

"All of you should leave now. You too, Yi Yongha. I have something to do."

Aileen shooed them away and the tunnel became silent.

"Huuu."

Only 4 days remained until their mission to annihilate the humanoid monsters.

"This tunnel will be perfectly concealed so no one can discover it."

Aileen enhanced the tunnel with her Spirit Speech.

Chapter 295

Orden Annihilation Operation

(2)

Essential Armory made their magic bullets from tempered steel and condensed magic power. Each bullet sold for 100 million won and its destructive power equaled a low-intermediate rank hero's steel sword.

I further strengthened these bullets to high-intermediate rank, grade 1 by enhancing them with random consolidation and combining them with the Desert Eagle and aether.

Jin Sahyuk only relied on magic power, so she couldn't inflict any physical damage on her opponents. She could always alter the physical laws, but that also greatly used up her magic power.

[Basilisk's Skin — Will reduce physical damage by 90% and magic damage by 99%.] [Basilisk's Fang — Will shatter magic by directly biting it.] [Basilisk's Mystic Eyes — Gaze of Deceleration: Will slow down the magic power circulating in target's blood.]

These magnificent effects completely nullified magic power. Many also called the basilisk the scourge of magicians. This mystical beast specifically countered people like Jin Sahyuk. She could never win against a basilisk by herself.

I could easily win as long as I kept hitting its vital point. This basilisk would eventually collapse.

“Ah, fuck!”

Of course, it turned out much harder than I thought because of the co-author.

“Can't believe I wasted 3 days in this shithole!”

Currently, we hid in the cave to escape from the basilisk and Jin Sahyuk shouted in my ears.

“...”

I silently leaned against the wall and turned towards her. Jin Sahyuk continued yelling, but occasionally shuddered in fear when she thought the basilisk might've heard her.

“Cough...”

Honestly, the difficulty of this basilisk went off the charts. Its recovery ability became way more overwhelming than in my original settings.

[Stage Effect — The basilisk has been blessed by the stage's effect. Its recovery rate has increased by 300%.]

The basilisk hadn't changed, but it instantly recovered from my bullets thanks to this stage effect.

We could only clear this dungeon by defeating the basilisk. In other words, we remained trapped inside and couldn't escape.

“Why don't you say something?”

Jin Sahyuk hissed and I finally spoke.

“This is actually good.”

“...”

I sounded surprisingly calm. Jin Sahyuk became speechless and looked at me in a daze.

“What the hell do you mean? No, wait, why do you only use that weapon? Go beat that snake up like you beat me!”

Jin Sahyuk demanded. She overestimated me because of my fate skill. Contrary to her belief, I couldn't just go around beating everyone up.

“No.”

“Why not?”

Certain conditions had to be met to register a new target for *[Fate]*. With Jin Sahyuk, I only had to exchange dialogue with her at least 30 times. However, the conditions became harder the more I used it. The second target required me to exchange dialogue at least 50 times. Obviously, I couldn’t achieve that in these circumstances.

“I’m your trainer, not someone who clears the dungeon for you.”

I made up a simple excuse.

“What the fuck...” A look of despair crossed Jin Sahyuk’s face and she dropped to the ground with a sigh.

“Haa...”

Time continued to pass with nothing to do in this dark cave. I searched for a way to clear this stage with *[Observation and Reading]*.

Growl—

Suddenly, I heard a stomach rumbling. I looked at Jin Sahyuk, who closed her eyes in thought.

“Hey, are you hungry?”

“No.” Jin Sahyuk slowly opened her eyes.

“Oh, but I think you are.”

She frowned at my sarcasm.

“Don’t underestimate me. Hunger used to be my best friend. Have you ever survived by eating only grass?”

Her anger felt justified. Slightly embarrassed, I nodded and turned

away.

Hisss!

The basilisk ordered the spiders around. It probably said, *Find those two imbeciles and bring them to me! Hissss!*

I watched the basilisk for a while and suddenly recalled the mini-game.

[Extra's chosen Litrain has become the youngest high-intermediate rank knight in history. However, things haven't been going too well for her recently. She borrowed money to build a temple for Extra, but failed to capture the people's attention. She also ran out of DP and felt as if her growth had stagnated. That troubled her the most. She wanted to become a high rank knight as soon as possible to repay Extra's kindness. The other knights insisted her sponsor abandoned her ever since she stopped receiving donations. Litrain believed that if she tried hard enough, Extra would reach out one day and praise her. She felt like she would be able to do anything after hearing those words.]

“What the... Why is she so nice?”

I had been busy, so I left her alone for almost 2 months. That equaled 2 years in her world, but she still built a temple in my name.

I checked the amount Litrain made me so far: 53,271 DP. I added 46,729 DP and donated a grand total of 100,000 DP to her.

[You have donated 100,000 DP!] [You have successfully left a message — You did well. Keep it up.] [Litrain is surprised. She's moved to tears and the hard times have passed.]

“Hey, what are you doing?” Jin Sahyuk suddenly leaned towards me.

“*Huh?* Oh, I'm thinking of ways to kill the basilisk.”

I did have a 9 star card with me.

[Story Of A Legend On The Mural] [Individual] [9 star] Effective Good —

A legend will manifest to assist you.

I could easily defeat the basilisk with this card, but it would be a huge waste. I'd been saving it for the very last fight against Baal.

“How are you going to do that?”

“Well, I'm thinking about playing around with attributes.”

The basilisk possessed a poison attribute that required an even stronger poison to counter. I would have to apply poison to my bullets, then...

“Wait a minute.”

A brilliant idea crossed my mind.

What if I could extract the basilisk's poison and crystalize it?

Of course, even aether couldn't handle its poison. It would melt not only aether, but my entire body.

I should be able to crystalize it with *[Extraction and Permanent Materialization]* if Jin Sahyuk allowed only a small amount to pass through her Reality Manipulation.

“Hey, Jin Sahyuk.”

“What.”

The basilisk could become our gateway to mass-producing poisonous bullets.

“Just do as I say.”

The bullet made from the basilisk's poison would surely be lethal to all monsters, humanoid monsters, and djinns.

“The current situation in Lupiton is complicated.”

Yi Gongmyung briefed the three important individuals.

“Orden’s rage spread to Lupiton after Tigris’ death. He’s making life difficult not only for humans, but also humanoid monsters. The harsh living conditions have freed some of the humans from Orden’s brainwashing. It seems some monsters are also turning against Orden. The resistance is rescuing these residents and helping them escape Africa.”

Chae Joochul, Heynckes, and Yoo Yeonha listened attentively to Yi Gongmyung.

“We have decided to take advantage of the confusion with a second attack. Over 100,000 soldiers are currently on standby in the African fields. Surely, Orden’s elite soldiers will also gather there to confront us.”

Orden's palace would be empty when Chae Joochul and Heynckes attacked. It sounded like a simple and traditional plan.

“I see. That sounds fun.”

Heynckes nodded with a smile, but Chae Joochul remained emotionless. Yi Gongmyung handed the two men a velvet pouch.

“These contain pinnacle grade medicine and magic scrolls. I wanted to prepare some cards for you, but only players can use those.”

The conditions to use cards changed after Kim Suho cleared the Tower of Wish. Originally, only players who reached the 21st floor could use cards. Now, any player could use them.

“Anyways, queen of Seoul...” Heynckes smirked at Yoo Yeonha.

“Please stop joking.”

“Haha, but it’s no joke. That’s what the media calls you, *the Queen of Seoul*. Anyways, I heard Oh Jaejin ran away?”

Yoo Yeonha nodded with a long face. “Yes, I delivered the pills to cure his side effect. Afterwards...”

“I understand.”

However, Heynckes didn’t think lowly of Oh Jaejin.

“Nothing is scarier than losing yourself.”

Death would’ve been a better side effect. To lose yourself and forget all your values and beliefs over a lifetime. What could be more tragic?

“Well then, Joochul.”

Chae Joochul remained nonchalant despite Heynckes’s friendly demeanor.

“Let’s get ready.”

“...”

Chae Joochul only needed his folding fan while Heynckes took out his armor for the first time in forever.

“Come.”

His armor came to him with a single word.

Clunk— Clunk—

The breastplate stretched across his chest and the gaiters covered his legs. The chain mail, gauntlets, and other parts surrounded his body. Lastly, the helmet hid his face.

Each part came together precisely. It didn’t look like any old-fashioned or crude armor. Only armor like this could be seen in video

games. The silver armor and red cape felt quite classy.

[Steel Spirit Resistance — Will increase resistance to all attributes by 80%.] [Steel Spirit Rigidity — Will reduce all damage by 80%.] [Steel Spirit Regeneration — Will constantly heal as fast as time reversal.] [Steel Spirit Sword — A sword sturdier than any metal] [Steel Spirit Intuition — The collective intelligence of 23 invincible steel spirits.] [Steel Will — No metal in the world can defy Heynckes.]

Yoo Yeonha stared at Heynckes in a daze.

“I see your armor is still needlessly garish,” Chae Joochul flatly remarked.

“Really? Let’s turn that frown upside down, Joochul. After all, you’re on your way to see your granddaughter.”

“Why do you care about my granddaughter?”

“She’s a memorable one, that granddaughter of yours.”

“...”

“Let’s play another game of chess later. Unlike you, your granddaughter is terrible at chess.”

Heynckes continued to talk as Chae Joochul’s expressionless face turned into a small frown. He enjoyed the change in his friend’s expression.

* * *

[Underground Fortress in Africa]

All 177 members of the special task force gathered in the plaza under a tense atmosphere.

“Everyone, the entire coalition has gathered in Africa.”

The final operation they had been waiting for would soon commence.

“I believe we’re ready.”

Aileen stood on the podium and began her short speech. “The mission begins tomorrow morning before sunrise. Don’t be too nervous.”

Their anxiety, agitation, and fear slowly faded thanks to Aileen’s Spirit Speech.

“Kim Suho.”

Shin Jonghak approached him during the speech while carrying [*Xiang Yu’s Conqueror Spear*] that he purchased for 200 billion won. This legendary artifact ranked second only behind [*Longinus*] among spears.

“Wow, that spear is...”

“*Haha*, that’s right. The strongest warrior of ancient times wielded this spear. It has two effects named after his famous anecdotes, *World Covering Qi* and *Conqueror’s Farewell*. Lü Bu is nothing compared to him. *Hahahahaha*.”

Shin Jonghak burst into laughter. No one knew whether he wanted to relieve his own nerves or simply show off his new weapon.

“It’s beautiful inside out and perfectly captures a king’s supremacy.”

Indeed, it looked worthy of all the boasting in the world. This artifact originally belonged to none other than Xiang Yu, one of the most prominent warlords in ancient times. All the nearby heroes, including Chae Nayun and Yun Seung-Ah, looked awestruck at the Conqueror Spear.

“Congratulations. I’m jealous.”

“Enough with the formalities. Do you want to make a bet?”

“A bet?”

“On who will kill Orden.”

Shin Jonghak lightly chuckled and tightened his grip around the spear.

“...”

Kim Suho stared at Shin Jonghak beaming with confidence. The magic power surrounding his spear felt as courageous as its owner.

“Sure.” Kim Suho smiled.

“Let’s make a bet.”

The negative feelings they once harbored towards each other no longer existed. Shin Jonghak didn’t act like a cowardly and narrow-minded teenager anymore. Kim Suho also no longer considered him an arrogant noble. This butterfly effect had been caused by a man who wasn’t there.

“Everyone!” Aileen suddenly raised her hand and shouted.

“Don’t die! We’ll fight and win!”

Her words contained powerful Spirit Speech that filled the hearts of every hero with determination.

* * *

[Basilisk Dungeon]

I continued the extraction process with Jin Sahyuk. We made 55,000 *[Basilisk’s Poison Crystal]* in 12 hours.

Yoo Yeonha could make tens of thousands of bullets with this or I could just shoot the raw crystals. I would have to add an anti-poison attribute to the Desert Eagle to do that.

“When does this end?” Jin Sahyuk asked with a sigh. The overuse of Reality Manipulation wore her out.

“This is enough for now. The Orden Annihilation Mission will begin soon.”

I placed all the crystals in my spatial pouch and stood up. *Woong*—My spatial pouch sucked up all the crystals like a vacuum.

“Can we leave now?”

“Of course.”

I realized how to defeat the basilisk a while ago. Its troublesome resiliency due to the *[Stage Effect]* faintly glimmered green on its skin. The *[Mystic Key]* could easily nullify this effect.

“All I need is this.”

“...?”

I took out the *[Mystic Key]*. Now we had to get close enough, but Jin Sahyuk could solve that. I could simply blast my bullets after getting rid of the stage effect. I could also synthesize and condense the basilisk’s poison. Then enhance it with the *[Random Consolidation System]* and shoot it back. The stronger poison should work.

“Hey, Jin Sahyuk.”

“What.”

However, to do that...

“You go distract it.”

“*Haa...* Fine...”

Jin Sahyuk surprisingly stepped forward without any complaints.

Three hours later...

We obtained two amazing artifacts along with the basilisk's body.
Even Jin Sahyuk exclaimed in awe at the sight of them.

Chapter 296

Orden Annihilation Operation

(3)

“How should we split it?” Jin Sahyuk asked while I handled the basilisk’s corpse. I glanced back and saw her eagerly staring at the dungeon rewards.

“I don’t know.”

Killing the basilisk rewarded us with two items.

[Pinnacle Grade Dungeon Box] — What could it possibly contain?

[Alexander III’s Cape] [Pinnacle Grade] [Ancient Legendary Artifact] — The cape worn by Macedon’s conqueror. Its wearer will exude formless charisma. [2 Points Invariable Stat Increase – Charm (9 points max)] [Will ignore 50% of physical damage.] [Conqueror’s Boon — Will increase the growth rate of magic power and gifts.]

The random box had yet to be opened and Jin Sahyuk stared in awe at the other item. A well-known general’s ancient equipment boasted much greater power than the divine weapon of an unknown god. For this reason, weapons like Xiang Yu’s Conqueror Spear and Lü Bu’s Square Sky Halberd could be considered two of the strongest weapons.

Alexander the Great’s cape fell into the same category of legendary artifacts. An eastern influence dominated this world because of Korea, but the ancient Macedonian conqueror hadn’t been forgotten.

“Then this cape can be mine.”

Jin Sahyuk carefully picked up Alexander’s cape as I stared at her.

“W-Why? It’s okay, right?” She flinched with a guilty conscience.

“Do you even know who Alexander III is?”

“What? Don’t underestimate me. Of course, I do. Alexander the Great is one of the few people I look up to in this world.”

She surprisingly praised him. Well, he did possess great charisma, ambition, and character as a king. Jin Sahyuk likely viewed him as a senior who walked the same path.

“*Mmm*, I see. To think my king has respect for another king. I’m touched as your servant.”

I spoke sarcastically, but Jin Sahyuk reacted in a funny manner. She stared at me with wide eyes like a rabbit before stepping back and murmuring.

“Don’t do that. It confuses me.”

I shrugged and went back to butchering the basilisk. Then I placed the body in my spatial pouch and draped its skin over my Black Lotus suit with *[Synthesis]*.

[Basilisk’s epidermis has synthesized with the Black Lotus suit.] [The Black Lotus suit has gained the following effects: a 30% physical damage reduction and a 40% magic damage reduction.]

“What are we doing next?”

She asked and I looked back at her.

“What do you mean? We have Orden to worry abo...”

Jin Sahyuk already wore Alexander’s cape. The way she touched it with sparkling eyes made her look like a child on Christmas. It irked me for some reason.

“I’m letting you borrow it. It’s not yours.”

“What? What do you mean?” Jin Sahyuk immediately protested. She clenched the cape and glared at me.

“Why would it be yours? I did at least 80% of the work in clearing this dungeon.”

“Bullshit. You wouldn’t have been able to clear it without me.”

“Oh? Without you? I didn’t expect my king to say something like that. Anyways, the system thinks otherwise.”

I grinned since Jin Sahyuk should be able to see the *[Dungeon Clear Breakdown]* as well. According to the system, I contributed 83% while Jin Sahyuk only contributed 17%. The dungeon rewards would be decided based on a dice roll proportional to one’s contributions.

“I did what you said without any complaints, so you should at least give this to me...”

“Dice please.”

I called for the system’s dice roll without listening to Jin Sahyuk. Two 6 sided dice immediately appeared. The rewards would be mine if they added up to anything between 4 and 12. They would be Jin Sahyuk’s if the sum added up to 2 or 3. Dice would be rolled for each item.

Drrrr—

Unsurprisingly, the two rolls came out to be 11 and 12. The *[Pinnacle Grade Dungeon Box]* and *[Alexander III’s Cape]* both became mine.

“Ah...”

Jin Sahyuk turned all gloomy. Her expression looked like a mix between feeling cheated, annoyed, and sad.

“Here, you can keep wearing it for now. I’ll let you temporarily borrow it, but only if you listen to me.”

I consoled her and took out the basilisk's fang. I planned to grind it into dust for Medea's ceremonial robe. She would descend soon after I completed her outfit.

"Don't forget what you just said," Jin Sahyuk reluctantly muttered.

"I won't."

We left the dungeon and headed towards Orden's palace, where the long-awaited battle would take place. The third phase would soon end.

* * *

[Central Africa, Orden's Territory]

The special task force entered the 18 passageways in their respective teams when Yi Gongmyung sent the signal. The heroes would raid all the important parts of the palace except Orden's royal court. This included the garden, research center, housing facility, etc.

The chief officer of Essence of the Strait's Tower of Wish team, Kim Youngjin. Guild leader of Creator's Sacred Grace, Yun Seung-Ah. Swordsman of Wish, Kim Suho. Vice leader of Desolate Moon, Shin Jonghak. Essence of the Strait's elite member, Chae Nayun. Divine Archer, Jin Seyeon. Spirit Speech Master, Aileen. Hellfire Yi Yongha.

The special task force quickly infiltrated the palace.

"Is it there?"

Non-heroes also came to help on the African outskirts.

"*Hmm*, looks like it'll be fun."

Yoo Sihyuk, the Wolf of Valhalla, had been recently promoted to rank 10 among master rank heroes. He spent most of his time raising the future generation on Baekdu Mountain, but had returned for this special mission. He quickly crossed Africa with his incredible skills and arrived at Orden's palace after defeating numerous humanoid

monsters.

— *Krrr*.

— *Grrr*.

Eight white wolves stood next to him. These spirit sword beasts gave him the title, Wolf of Valhalla. They manifested from his swordsmanship as part of his gift. A single sword beast could match a high rank, grade 1 hero.

“*Mmm*, more humanoid monsters are coming. Can you feel them?”

“I can.”

Another man responded to Yoo Sihyuk’s question. He had black hair and well-defined facial features. Master rank hero, Yoo Jinwoong, also tagged along. They recently called him the abdicated king of Seoul because of his daughter’s success.

Only 30 of the 70 master rank heroes participated in today’s mission. The remaining 40 either died while trying to assassinate Orden, betrayed humanity like the Temple of Justice’s Park Hanho, or officially went missing for unknown reasons.

“At least 3 judging from their killing intent and unique auras.”

Yoo Jinwoong slowly released his magic power. *Pzzt! Pzzt!* Crimson electricity violently crackled.

“Agreed, they’ll be here soon.”

Yoo Sihyuk rubbed his chin and looked forward in anticipation. He could feel more than one source of powerful demonic energy approaching.

Three seconds later...

Whoosh! Three humanoid monsters appeared with a gust of wind.

“Kurahaha! Kurahahaha! You two must have big hearts!”

“Quiet, Croxus. They’re strong. Don’t underestimate them.”

“Humans will be humans no matter how strong. They can’t match us.”

All three humanoid monsters closely resembled humans. One seemed to be a male with a rhinoceros beetle’s outer shell, one looked like a nine-tailed fox, and the last appeared to be a mix between a giant ogre and a troll.

“Let’s see...”

Yoo Sihyuk recalled the information from Yi Gongmyung. The Hero Association’s spy had worked hard to obtain this information.

[Croxus] — Legendary beetle humanoid monster. — Threat level: [Master Rank] — The toughness of its back cannot be estimated...

[Nine-Tailed Fox] — Nine-tailed fox humanoid monster. — Threat level: [Master Rank] — An illusion and destruction magic user...

[Ogre Troll] — A monstrosity created from fusing an ogre, troll, and human. — Threat level: [Master Rank] — Possesses supernatural strength.

“They’re all master rank threats.”

Yoo Sihyuk smiled and always enjoyed fighting strong opponents.

On the other hand, Yoo Jinwoong’s expression heavily distorted. Not because of fear, but he always became enraged regardless of his opponents.

Guooooo!

An unexpected current of magic power suddenly shot up.

“What?”

Yoo Sihyuk, Yoo Jinwoong, and the 3 humanoid monsters momentarily stopped and turned towards the surge of magic power.

“Steel Spirit...”

A steel-colored magic power flickered above Orden’s palace. Yoo Sihyuk and Yoo Jinwoong had seen this before in their youth and undoubtedly recognized Heynckes’ Steel Spirit Aura.

The Nine Star’s magic power condensed into a single point before erupting and striking down on Orden’s royal court.

KWAAAAAAAA!

Steel descended from the sky.

“*Hmm...* Looks like old man Heynckes hasn’t grown too old yet.”

“Agreed.”

Heynckes’ juniors and Orden’s servants watched the Lord of Steel’s overwhelming display in awe.

* * *

Yun Seung-Ah’s team infiltrated Orden’s research center. Her team consisted of Yohei, Shen Yuan, Chae Nayun, Yi Jiyeon, and Shin Jonghak. They went to destroy all the research data to prevent the birth of more humanoid monsters.

“Humans! Don’t think you’ll be able to leave alive!”

Enemies quickly arrived in less than 3 minutes. The humanoid monsters resembled centaurs who charged with their spears.

“I’ll stop them! Everyone, keep going!”

Yohei stopped running and turned around to face the centaurs. He drank a potion and ran towards the mob before anyone could say

anything. He moved like the wind and managed to block their charge thanks to the potion and Yi Jiyeon's buffs.

"Keep running!"

Yun Seung-Ah continued leading the others according to their map. Another group of humanoid monsters soon appeared, but Shen Yuan stopped to fight them this time.

"We all have return scrolls, so I'll just escape if it gets too bad. Make sure to complete the mission and avenge our fallen comrades. Tigris might be dead, but all humanoid monsters are the same!"

Shen Yuan smiled before jumping into battle.

"Let's go."

The team continued to their destination. They had to complete this mission as soon as possible. The path to the research center resembled a maze due to the various illusions and barriers in place. However, Chae Nayun's incredible intuition managed to lead them in the right direction.

"Over there!"

The words *[Research Center]* soon appeared. *Kwang!* They burst inside.

"Haa, haa... Looks like they all escaped."

The researchers had left, but the team intended on destroying the facility anyways to prevent the birth of more humanoid monsters during the war.

"Destroying everything in sight! *Kuhuk!*"

Thwack! A powerful punch struck Yun Seung-Ah in the stomach. The sudden attack instantly broke her qi reinforcement and she fell to her knees.

“U-Unni! You bastard!”

Clang!

Chae Nayun released her magic power and lit up the dark research center. This revealed the humanoid monster who just ambushed Yun Seung-Ah.

“...!”

Chae Nayun’s eyes immediately widened.

— *Krrrr...*

Tigris stood in front of her. The humanoid monster who should’ve been dead glared at them while drooling from his mouth.

“Can you see it now? Death is only an obstacle to be overcome by King Orden.”

A deep voice rang out from the dark. *Tap, tap*— Footsteps echoed and they turned towards the voice.

“Park Hanho.”

Shin Jonghak muttered while clenching his teeth. The Temple of Justice’s former chairman, the traitor Park Hanho, approached them.

“You only succeeded thanks to my grandfather. Is this how you repay your debt?”

Shin Jonghak cursed as he pointed the Conqueror Spear at him. However, Park Hanho’s expression didn’t change the slightest.

“You are all heroes, but you do not know how ugly, dirty, and evil they can be. I am here not only because I owe the monster king, but also because I want to destroy the association.”

“Chairman... Park Hanho.” Yun Seung-Ah staggered up.

“I understand... your anger and sadness. I know you would’ve done anything to save your daugh—”

“There’s no need. You can’t convince me. Don’t expect anything and just die like a hero.”

“No, w-wait—”

“Tigris!”

Park Hanho shouted and ordered the humanoid monster to immediately attack. The revived Tigris lacked consciousness and his body creaked like a wooden puppet. Still, his strength remained.

Clang! Clang!

“Krrrrrrr!”

A fierce battle broke out as Shin Jonghak and Yun Seung-Ah faced Tigris. Yi Jiyeon merged into the surroundings with her *[Stealth]* skill and shot healing arrows. Only Chae Nayun remained to fight Park Hanho.

“Uk!”

Park Hanho also possessed steel magic power second only to the Lord of Steel. Chae Nayun fought against him at a huge disadvantage.

“Chairman, please snap out of it! Why don’t you just take your daughter and run away?”

“Shut up.”

“I don’t understand, *kuk!* Why do you want to... *kuk!* Raise your daughter among monsters?”

Clang— Clang— Their swords repeatedly clashed and Chae Nayun managed to stand her ground with Heynckes’ undefeated swordsmanship. She didn’t feel confident in winning, but didn’t think

she would lose either.

Unfortunately...

“Kuaaaaa!”

The others didn’t do so well. Tigris released his full strength and seemed like a death god in this confined area. Shin Jonghak and Yun Seung-Ah couldn’t counterattack at all.

“*Kyaak!*”

In the end, Tigris caught the hiding Yi Jiyeon and cut off her arm. She collapsed to the ground in pain.

“*Aaaah*, it hurts... It hurts!”

“J-Jiyeon!”

“Where are you looking?”

Park Hanho’s attack dug into Chae Nayun while she became distracted.

Chwaak!

Chae Nayun suffered a cut on her side and fell backwards. The hot pain spread through her body as Park Hanho quickly followed up with more attacks.

“*Aggh!*”

Chae Nayun blocked the attacks and couldn’t treat her wound. *Clang, clang, clang!* Sparks shot up from their clashes, but she gradually slowed due to the blood loss.

“You’re getting slower.”

Park Hanho didn’t give her any opportunities to rest and continued

attacking from every direction. The attacks she blocked at first began getting through and she suffered numerous cuts.

“Kuk...”

A strange alert popped up in the corner of her eyes as Park Hanho drove her into a corner.

[You have used the Lv.5 Invitation Letter to the Loveroom!] [Someone else has activated it, but ownership has returned to you.] [Please enter the player's nickname you wish to summon.] [Warning! A battle is currently taking place. A forced summon is not possible.]

“What?”

What happened? Wasn't the invitation letter in my pocket?

Chwaak—

Park Hanho's sword shot towards her thigh and she finally realized.

“...!”

It got torn during the fight!

Chapter 297

Orden Annihilation Operation

(3)

[Orden's Palace]

Two rays of magic power descended like lightning where the monster king resided.

Orden calmly studied the intruders from his throne. One wore silver armor and the other dressed in a simple martial arts uniform. The striking contrast between them, in addition to their superhuman strength, aroused his interest.

“Heroes, I presume?” Orden’s deep voice rang out.

“Correct.”

Heynckes nodded and clutched his sword. Chae Joochul also flipped open his folding fan. They had no intentions of talking, but Orden seemed to have a few questions.

“I heard a few select heroes are known as the Nine Stars. The name apparently refers to the nine saints. Are you members of the Nine Stars?”

“Three of the Nine Stars are already dead, one ran away, and the remaining four went into hiding. I’m afraid the Nine Stars no longer exist.” Heynckes shook his head at Orden’s question.

The public didn’t know about some of their deaths. The association only publicly announced Shin Myungchul’s, but concealed the rest who died from old age, side effects, and illnesses. The association wanted them to remain flawless in the public’s eye.

“Is that so?”

“That’s no reason to be disappointed. We’ll be enough to entertain you.”

Orden looked at Chae Joochul, whose eyes gleamed with dark magic power. The Immortal gathered all of Africa’s vital energy as Heynckes stalled for time.

“Looks like it’ll be fun.” Orden grinned.

Tzzzt!

A fierce whirlwind surrounded Orden’s throne. Flame blazed from within, but Orden dispelled it with his magic power.

Chweek—

Chae Joochul waved his fan and lightning rushed towards Orden. The attack came from every direction and forced Orden to stand.

Kwaaaaa!

Heynckes also unleashed his Steel Spirit and shot towards him. The monster king noticed the tremendous amount of magic power surrounding the Steel Spirit Sword.

Koong!

Heynckes’ sword clashed with Orden’s fist. Suddenly, something strange happened and the gauntlet around Orden’s fist disintegrated after being absorbed by the Steel Spirit. The Lord of Steel prevailed over every metal in this manner.

Orden only smiled and had never felt such pressure before. The thrilling sensation from his hand crawled to his arm. His heart pounded and he felt like he would truly enjoy this fight.

[Please enter the player's nickname you wish to summon.]

She somehow managed to activate the item, but couldn't possibly type in the middle of combat. Chae Nayun busily defended against the ruthless Park Hanho. His sword reinforcement contained an indestructible attribute that complemented both offense and defense.

“—!”

Her chances of winning would decrease as the fight prolonged. For that reason, she gathered all her magic power to her sword and activated her gift, Sea of Magic Power. It eliminated all the limitations on her magic power and could be considered one of the strongest sword-related gifts.

Chae Nayun gathered the boundless magic power to her sword and even gave up her qi reinforcement. Park Hanho couldn't help but hesitate, and Chae Nayun didn't miss this opportunity.

Clang!

Her magic power turned into a huge pillar of fire that quickly spread throughout the laboratory. The magic power explosion destroyed all the lab equipment and sent Park Hanho flying across the room.

Then Chae Nayun quickly activated the invitation letter.

*[Extra7] [Warning! You may not forcefully summon in a battle zone.]
[Asking the target for permission...]*

Crack!

She heard the cracking of bones.

“Ah...”

Something struck her side, but she didn't feel any pain yet. That meant her entire nervous system had been damaged along with her spine. Chae Nayun flew in the air with a numbing sensation. *Boom!* She crashed into a wall and collapsed to the ground.

“...”

Her arms and legs wouldn't move. Blood spurted from her mouth after receiving a critical injury. Chae Nayun looked at the figure across the room with hazy eyes. She saw Tigris, the humanoid monster who attacked her, amidst the crimson flames and black smoke. His eyes gave off a horrid glow.

— You have managed to achieve your goal.

A voice seeped into her consciousness, but she didn't know where it came from. The fire began to melt the floor tiles and she could feel the heat on her skin. She felt as if her consciousness would also melt away.

— Die with pride.

Park Hanho raised his sword. Shin Jonghak and Yun Seung-Ah tried to rush over, but Tigris blocked them.

The sword descended and she felt as if the entire world stopped. Everything happened in slow motion. It all felt surreal. Suddenly, a question rose in her mind.

Shouldn't my life flash before my eyes? It's not, which means I'm not destined to die here. I still have so much to do... No. More importantly, I can't help but be angry at myself. This is all I can do even after all that training. I spent so long with Yoo Sihyuk and Heynckes to become stronger and endure everything. I can't fall at a place like this...

Chae Nayun recalled the promise she made to herself. She clenched her fists without giving up and an intense anger rose from her heart.

Wooong...

A mysterious magic power responded to her will and gathered around her fists. It glowed in all sorts of colors until it only burned white. This white magic power enveloped her entire body and formed the brightest and strongest qi reinforcement.

At that moment...

Woooong— A portal appeared in the center of the flames with a strange vibration. Chae Nayun, Park Hanho, and Tigris all turned to the portal.

Two people emerged, but Chae Nayun couldn't see their faces due to the thick flames and heavy smoke.

However, she felt sure about one thing...

Kwang!

She heard an explosion and smelled the combustion of magic power.

— *Kuek!*

Park Hanho screamed at the same time.

Tap, tap— The sound of footsteps disrupted their fight.

Someone paused in front of Chae Nayun and she barely managed to look up.

There, she saw Kim Hajin.

* * *

[Basilisk Dungeon Exit]

I gathered everything that could be useful and left the dungeon. *Maybe I should head over to Orden's Palace*— Something unexpected happened as I thought that. *Guoooo...* A strange energy, neither magic power nor spirit power, appeared before me and formed a 2 meter ellipse.

“What the heck is this?”

It looked like a portal. I frowned and scrutinized it. Suddenly, a

system window popped up.

[Lv.5 Invitation Letter to the Love Room — Nayunjajangman wishes to invite you.] [Warning! NayunJajangman is currently in an extremely dangerous battle zone.] [This portal will disappear in 5 minutes.]

I subconsciously flinched when I read the name Nayunjajangman. I glanced over at Jin Sahyuk and proceeded to read the rest.

“...”

— Nayunjajangman is currently in an extremely dangerous battle zone.

This sentence weighed heavily on my mind. It seemed like Chae Nayun tried to summon me using an effective good from the Tower of Wish. I looked at Jin Sahyuk still swooning over *[Alexander III's Cape]*.

“Hey.” I tapped her shoulder.

“What do you want... Wha, What's that?”

Jin Sahyuk widened her eyes and finally noticed the portal.

“Why don't we go in together? I think this is connected to Orden's palace.”

I told her while pointing to it. Jin Sahyuk carefully studied the portal as its blue glow reflected in her eyes.

“No, I can't.” She shook her head.

“Why not?”

“I can tell from the direction of magic currents. This is a one-way portal only designed for one traveler. Two people can't go through it.”

“Wow, you analyzed it that fast?”

“I’m more amazing than you think.”

Jin Sahyuk relished in her moment as I activated my authority. With the last update, I could now activate *[Settings Intervention]* without any medium like my smartwatch.

[Portal to the Love Room] [Special] — A portal created by Nayunjajangman to summon Extra7. Only Extra7 may use this portal.

I only needed to change the second description to: *[Only Extra7 and his companion may use this portal.]*

[35 SP will be required to change this setting.]

I modified the settings and the portal’s shape immediately changed.

“What the...” Jin Sahyuk noticed and raised her eyebrows.

“How did you do that? The fundamental structure of magic power just changed.”

“How’s that? Now two people can use it, right?”

“Yeah, but this doesn’t make any sen—”

“Geez, you sure talk a lot.”

I checked my remaining SP.

[SP 7,045]

I accumulated quite a sum before realizing it. My recent accomplishments included infiltrating Orden’s palace, rescuing the spy, and defeating the basilisk.

I decided to create a new gift before entering. It made sense to prepare before entering enemy territory. It wouldn’t take long. I thought of this gift a long time ago before *[Buster Call]*. I just had to copy and paste it from my head.

[Constraints and Amplifications] [Intermediate Rank] — Constraints: Will apply temporary constraints to the user's body. — Amplification: Will temporarily increase the user's strength in proportion to the applied constraints.

This gift functioned quite simply. Lose your left arm and strengthen your right. Lose your eyesight and heighten your other senses.

I came up with this gift because I only relied on weapons. My hand could break, but I couldn't risk breaking the *[Desert Eagle]* or *[Temujin's Bow Blessed By Horus]*. With this gift, I planned to sacrifice my left arm to enhance the *[Desert Eagle]* and exchange my sight to strengthen *[Temujin's Bow Blessed By Horus]*. This gift would enhance my weapons instead of me.

[This gift will require 4000 SP.] [Would you like to proceed?]

That amount only represented the bare minimum. I invested all my remaining SP to further enhance it.

[You have spent a total of 7045 SP to create the gift, Constraints and Amplifications.] [Congratulations! You have been blessed with good luck.] [10% of your investment has been returned. Your gift's rank has drastically increased.]

[Constraints and Amplifications] [High Rank] — Constraints: Will apply temporary constraints to the user's body. — Amplifications: Will temporarily increase the target's strength in proportion to the applied constraints. — Profitable Exchange: Will increase amplification's performance by 77%. — Side Effect Alleviation: This gift's side effects, including its cooldown, will be slightly improved.

“Good.”

I felt happy with the results. I also made some *[Basilisk's Poisonous Shotgun Shell]* with the refunded SP. Then I took out the *Desert Eagle*, transformed it into a shotgun, loaded it with the new bullets, and activated *[Constraints and Amplifications]*.

I placed the constraints on my left arm and my left eye to amplify the *Desert Eagle*. I could feel my field of vision shrinking, but I only

needed one eye to activate the thousand-mile eyes. Not being able to use my left arm felt slightly uncomfortable, but using only one arm didn't decrease my power at all.

"Let's go."

I held the shotgun and pointed at the portal with my chin. Jin Sahyuk only stared at me with a strange look.

"What's that?"

"What do you mean?"

"What happened to your left arm?"

"Ah, this?"

My left arm went limp and also turned completely black because of the constraints.

"I can't use it right now."

"What? What does that mean—"

"*Shush.*" I aimed at Jin Sahyuk.

"Just go in. It's going to hurt if you get shot."

"Psycho."

Jin Sahyuk wore a sour expression, but jumped in anyways. I followed behind.

Whoosh—

I expected to arrive on a heated battlefield, but the sight still managed to surprise me. Flames surrounded us in a laboratory filled with the scent of blood.

“...!”

However, the flames trying to devour us didn't concern me. I spotted Park Hanho pointing his sword at Chae Nayun on the ground.

Immediately, I activated *[Bullet Time]* and *[Pinnacle Rank Instant Acceleration]*. Even the flames stopped moving as the world slowed. Then I infused all my remaining streaks of stigma into the shotgun.

...

The shotgun glowed green from the *[Basilisk's Shotgun Shell]* loaded inside. I didn't hesitate to pull the trigger at Park Hanho.

Click.

Kwaaaaaa! The poison bullet blasted out from the muzzle and the massive wind pressure knocked both me and Jin Sahyuk back.

“Uwoaah—”

Jin Sahyuk shouted before disappearing from view.

“Aah!”

Even I hadn't expected so much power. Fortunately, aether protected me from the recoil.

The bullet completely swallowed Park Hanho like the basilisk's breath attack.

Chapter 298

Orden Annihilation Operation

(5)

“...”

I searched for the right words, but Chae Nayun seemed quite confused. I wanted to make fun of the look on her face, but this situation didn't feel appropriate.

Tigris' [*Formless Tiger Punch*] flew towards me, but I didn't need to dodge. Jin Sahyuk's Reality Manipulation neutralized it.

“Snap out of it.”

She muttered after protecting me.

I nodded and picked up the Desert Eagle. Then I took out a pinnacle grade potion for Chae Nayun. I opened it and placed it beside her on the ground.

Park Hanho groaned as he healed himself and Tigris glared at me with bloodshot eyes.

“Kim Hajin?”

Yun Seung-Ah called my name and Shin Jonghak also stared at me. Tigris began raging again when I turned towards them. I had to activate bullet time, but Tigris still moved quite fast. I chased him with my eyes and aimed. I made the [*Basilisk's Poisonous Bullet*] from over 100 poison crystals. I even enhanced it with both the [*Random Consolidation System*] and [*Constraints and Amplifications*]. Tigris wouldn't be able to keep a straight face from a clean hit.

I exchanged glances with our two new comrades and we all moved together.

First, Shin Jonghak swung his spear at Park Hanho. Yun Seung-Ah blocked Tigris. Jin Sahyuk protected Chae Nayun while putting out the fire and I aimed at the humanoid monster.

Click—

I calculated the bullet and the target's trajectory. Then I pulled the trigger at the perfect moment.

Pang!

The bullet traveled in a straight line before curving towards Tigris' heel. Shooting curve shots felt as easy as breathing.

Tigris tried to block, but Yun Seung-Ah didn't allow him. Her white flower sword split into different branches and restrained him.

— *Kuaak!*

The bullet struck Tigris in the heel and he collapsed to the ground.

“Whew.”

I deactivated [*Constraints and Amplifications*]. I only fired two bullets, but my right arm suffered an injury.

“Jin Sahyuk, I'll leave the rest to you.”

“...”

She glanced at me and Chae Nayun before hesitantly making her way towards Tigris and Park Hanho.

Tirring—

An unexpected notification rang from my smartwatch.

— Lotus, where are you? We're with your people.

It came from Wicked. She probably meant the Chameleon Troupe.

— Stay with them. I'm taking care of some business. I'll head over soon.

I activated *[Buster Call]* after replying and made up for the lack of stigma with *[Overclock]*. *Jiiing...* The magic power from my smartwatch penetrated the ceiling and reached the sky.

[This is Horner from Genkelope. I'm responding to the commander's request!]

I turned around after contacting the vessel. My heart immediately sank at the familiar figure in front of me.

“Hey.”

I used to hear this clear, high-pitched voice all the time at Cube. For a brief moment, I felt as if I'd become a student again.

“What the hell is going on?” Chae Nayun asked, obviously confused.

I silently looked at her.

“What, you're Extra7?”

She asked again and I nodded.

“I can't believe this. You even lied about your age? You're really something.”

Chae Nayun brushed a hand through her hair and already began tearing up. Her eyes contained countless emotions like embarrassment and sorrow.

“...”

She didn't say anything else. I could tell everything that happened between us weighed on her mind from her expression.

"Have you been well?" I spoke first.

Her face contorted into a frown and I immediately regretted asking. I should've just kept my mouth shut since I always found it difficult to maintain my composure in front of her.

"Have I been well?" Chae Nayun came closer and looked at me.

"What do you think?" She grabbed me by the shoulders.

"How could I have been well?"

She rested her head on my chest as she spoke those words. It felt slightly heavy and painful.

"How could I?"

She muttered and condensed hundreds of words into one question. I didn't need to hear anything else. We simply stood there despite the circumstances and stared at each other.

"Get a room."

Getting a room... No, wait, that's not right.

It felt as if someone poured a bucket of ice on me. We turned towards the voice and found Jin Sahyuk, Yun Seung-Ah, and Shin Jonghak staring at us after taking care of the situation.

* * *

[Orden's Palace]

"You won't be able to escape."

Meanwhile, Kim Suho entered the palace before anyone else and

became trapped in Doloren's barrier. This same barrier, Doloren's concert hall, once trapped Black Lotus.

"I perfectly fixed it after the last breakout."

"It won't matter if I win." Kim Suho glared at Doloren while clutching Misteltein.

Doloren only smiled. "You won't escape even if you win."

"We'll see."

Zombies rose from the ground and surrounded the concert hall.

Ssss...

The zombies emitted a cold air, but Kim Suho realized they concealed something much more dangerous. His heightened senses discovered the invisible humanoid monster that resulted from the mutant combination of a ghost and human. Xphil, another one of Orden's four generals, also appeared.

"Don't you think there's too many of you? It's almost 1 against 300. Seems a little extreme."

Kim Suho raised his magic power with a smile. The Sword Saint's magic power glowed blue and enveloped his entire body.

"So what if it's extreme? It's my motto to always try my best."

Kim Suho simply nodded at those words. "Actually, that doesn't really matter. I'm not alone either."

"What?"

Doloren frowned as Kim Suho took out the *[Summon Ticket]* he acquired from the Tower of Wish. This ticket allowed him to summon an NPC as his ally. It turned to ashes as he injected his magic power.

“Wait, that’s cheating—”

Kim Suho summoned the witch who once served as the demon king’s secretary. She would be the perfect opponent against Doloren as someone who excelled in magic and spells.

Tzzzzt!

The ticket emitted a powerful magic power that transcended space and time. The witch immediately responded and appeared on Earth.

Kwaaa!

Kim Suho looked at the NPC who appeared from within a whirlwind. She had pale skin, dark hair, and an ominous aura.

“It’s been a while.”

She smiled and he nodded.

“I can skip the explanation, right?”

The witch looked around the strange barrier and understood the situation. She turned towards the humanoid monster and Doloren flinched at her distorted smile.

“Yes, rest assured. It’s my specialty to educate people like her.”

Vicious demonic energy gathered around the witch’s hands.

* * *

[Outside the Palace, African Fields]

“I think we’re about done.”

Yoo Sihyuk and Yoo Jinwoong’s battle came to an end. They already defeated the master rank humanoid monsters that included Croxus, the nine-tailed fox, and the ogre troll. These humanoid monsters

sorely lacked experience compared to the two veteran heroes.

“Should we head to the throne room now?”

Yoo Jinwoong nodded at Yoo Sihyuk’s question. Orden wouldn’t be an easy target even for Heynckes and Chae Joochul. The monster king possessed more strength than Jörmungandr, long considered to be the strongest monster in history.

“When will we get through that though?”

Crack, crack— Yoo Jinwoong mumbled as he loosened his neck. Thousands of monsters flooded the field in front of them.

“*Hmm...* Maybe a bomb will fall from the sky?” Yoo Sihyuk muttered.

Perhaps god heard his wish.

Guooooo...

A portal suddenly appeared from above. It covered half the sky and Yoo Sihyuk had seen it before in the papers. They called it Genkelope’s Battle Cruiser.

As expected, the battle cruiser looked even more powerful than before. Its engines roared and the people on board shouted.

“It looks like they’ll help us.”

The battlecruiser immediately responded to Yoo Sihyuk’s words.

Kwaaaaaaa!

Their bombardment began as hundreds of combat planes departed from the deck. Thousands of Genkelope soldiers also descended.

Yoo Sihyuk chuckled while watching this unimaginable scene.

“Let’s head to the throne room.”

“ ... ”

Yoo Jinwoong silently nodded as the two men rushed away like the wind.

* * *

[Orden's Throne Room]

Humans can be so different. Orden thought as he fought against the two individuals.

One came at him at full strength while the other concealed theirs as much as possible. The man in armor poured his soul into each swing, but the man in the martial arts uniform did the opposite. The former proudly displayed his conviction and the latter operated solely on logic. Their contrasting qualities amazed Orden.

He wanted to define human nature. Some humans acted loyal while others became disloyal. Some agonized over righteousness while others blindly chased fame and money.

Humanoid monsters acted differently from humans in that regard. They always acted according to their instincts and their genes determined everything about them.

For example, humanoid monsters created from the DNA of rattlesnakes and lizards possessed high intelligence, but tended to easily betray others with their safety at stake. Humanoid monsters created from the DNA of mountain tyrants possessed great physical strength, but always acted violent and oppressive.

Monsters could never become humans, but Orden didn't want to give up. He wanted to prove that humanoid monsters and humans might be the same.

However...

How can we be so different?

Orden felt profound grief and recalled when he first realized his own intelligence. Both humans and monsters couldn't understand him and he suffered from endless solitude. He cursed his own existence.

Monsters can't become humans and humans are not monsters.

What a tragic proposition. Orden emitted his magic power with great sadness. Only his magic power possessed the chaos attribute, something he gained in the midst of self-reflection.

Kwaaaaa...

As Orden's chaos almost exploded...

Krrr!

Eight wolves jumped at him and bit his limbs. Crimson lightning also enveloped his waist. The attacks came from someone else other than Chae Joochul and Heynckes.

They didn't affect Orden at all. He nonchalantly shoved the wolves aside, crushed the lightning, and gathered magic power into his hands to destroy everything.

Chwaaaaa...

However, golden sword qi suddenly flew towards him. It destroyed everything in its path and slashed Orden's abnormally dense chaos in half.

“...”

Orden had never been so shocked before as his chaos disappeared. He turned to where the sword qi came from.

A man engulfed in golden energy stood at the throne room's entrance. Kim Suho finally arrived with the witch after defeating two of Orden's four elite generals, Doloren and Xphil. Others had also arrived besides Kim Suho.

Chweeek!

A magic arrow flew from somewhere and pierced Orden's shoulder. It belonged to the Divine Archer. Not just one, but thousands of arrows made from the purest magic power fell from above. Even Orden couldn't remain indifferent against such an attack.

“—!”

He dispelled all of them with a single cry. However, another voice resounded.

“Orden!”

A roar shook the palace and Orden slowly raised his head at the giant man who descended from the ceiling.

“I, Cheok Jungyeong, have come!”

Cheok Jungyeong swung his fist.

KOOOONG! It slammed directly into Orden's forehead and a huge shockwave spread out.

“*Uhahaha!* He's a lot weaker than I thought...”

Cheok Jungyeong burst into laughter, but Orden grabbed his arm and smashed him into the ground. *KWAAANG!*

“*Uwa...*”

Cheok Jungyeong couldn't even react. Orden threw him out of the room after he just arrived.

“...”

The monster king rose from his throne and looked around. Only then did he recognize all the heroes: Aileen, Yi Yongha, Kim Youngjin, Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, Yun Seung Ah... He hadn't noticed any of them

while engrossed in his fight.

Dozens of heroes who infiltrated his palace now gathered in front of him.

Chapter 299

Orden Annihilation Operation

(6)

I can't recall when it started, but I began seeing memories of the past whenever I closed my eyes. My mom embracing me with a smile, the garden we used to stroll around, and the sight of her body covered in blood. The rain that poured during her funeral, my older brother holding my hand as he held back his tears, and my younger self who pledged in front of her grave.

I decided to become a hero and entered the Military Agent Academy. One day, heroes I didn't recognize came to visit. They wore black uniforms to mourn the loss of a comrade and told me oppa fell into a hopeless coma.

Shock and sorrow overwhelmed me, but I didn't give up. The enemies still roamed out there. I believed oppa would recover. He would wake up and hold me in his arms if I worked hard enough.

I entered Cube with determination and hope. Then I met him for the first time. He acted rather strange and picked a fight by bringing up oppa during our first meeting. He called me a hopeless archer and told me to switch to a sword. I hated him to death and wanted to beat him to a pulp.

Time passed and I came to not dislike him. In fact, I found myself constantly staring at him and wanting to be by his side. I still never figured out why.

Kim Hajin, a man of mysteries, the bastard who killed oppa without any explanation. Now I knew why he remained silent and bore the pain in my place. If someone asked if I still hated him, well...

Yes, I probably still hate him to death. I might also love him to death

too.

“...”

I glanced back as we ran. Kim Hajin moved a bit slower, but didn't run away this time. I sighed in relief and wanted to ask several questions, but we agreed the situation didn't seem appropriate.

Eventually, we arrived at Orden's throne room. Terrifying energy undulated from inside and we stopped nearby.

“Can you continue?” Kim Hajin asked. His voice sounded softer than usual. Then a question suddenly crossed my mind. What did Kim Hajin normally sound like?

“Of course, don't you run away.”

He bitterly smiled at my reply and his expression slightly stung my heart. “I can't run away. You used a card on me.”

“Oh, yeah.”

I included him with my 8 star card, [*Infinite Communication*], a while ago. I suspected Extra7 had some sort of connection with Kim Hajin, but they turned out to be the same person. In other words, Kim Hajin had saved me in the Tower of Wish. My heart slightly ached again.

“Hey, you—”

As I prepared to say something...

— *Uwoaaaah!*

A huge body shot out of the throne room. He rolled like a bowling ball and crashed into a pillar.

“Who's that?”

I furrowed my brows at the figure and noticed Kim Hajin flinch.

“Isn’t that him? The crazy bastard who calls himself Cheok Jungyeong?”

“Uh, yeah, it is.”

“You know him too?”

“Um, I’ve seen him a few times in the tower.”

Then Kim Hajin’s calm demeanor suddenly changed. His face distorted like someone who saw a horrible scene.

“Hey, Jin Sahyuk!” He yelled at the woman who appeared with him earlier.

“What now?” Jin Sahyuk frowned.

“Can you make a bunker with Reality Manipulation?”

“A bunker?”

“Yeah, something that can withstand a nuclear bomb.”

I didn’t know why he asked, but I happened to have something like that.

“Bunker? I think I have one.”

I took out the 8 star card that I obtained along with *[Infinite Communication]*.

[Miracle Bunker] [8 star] Effective Good — Will construct a miracle bunker in the designated area for 48 hours. This bunker can ignore one huge impact. ○ Forceful Summon – You may forcefully summon up to 30 allies in danger. ○ Advantageous Time Flow – 10 seconds inside the bunker will equal 1 second outside.

“What do you suddenly need a bunker for?”

“...!”

Kim Hajin’s eyes widened and he snatched the card out of my hand. Then he immediately activated it and spoke with a smile.

“I just saw the future with my unique skill.”

* * *

[Throne Room]

Steel Spirit Heynckes, Immortal Chae Joochul, Spirit Speech Master Aileen, Wolf of Valhalla Yoo Sihyuk, Blitzkrieg Yoo Jinwoong, Divine Archer Jin Seyeon, Sword Saint Kim Suho, Weapon Master Kim Youngjin...

Many heroes gathered in the monster king’s throne room. They all shared a common goal to kill Orden.

“Monster king Orden.”

Heynckes called him before the final battle began. Orden permitted him to speak by remaining silent.

“Why do you seek to conquer humans?” Heynckes asked his first question.

“Because they cannot coexist with me,” Orden lightly replied.

“And why would that be?” Heynckes asked his second question.

“Can you humans live in a world ruled by monkeys? Can you give up your living space to them and watch them blabber in conceit?”

Orden replied after a brief silence. He still couldn’t define his feelings towards humanity, but he knew coexistence would be impossible. Orden couldn’t stand the world ruled by humans and they undoubtedly considered him a threat.

“So there’s no room for negotiation.”

A somewhat childish voice rang out this time. It belonged to the special task force’s commander, Aileen. She walked up and stood at the center.

“Indeed.” Orden nodded.

“Humanoid monsters and humans cannot coexist. That is how we were created.”

Orden resolutely concluded. The heroes raised their weapons at him in response. He looked down at them from his throne and fell in thought.

Humans acted extremely individualistic, but could achieve a powerful will when they came together under a common goal. This might be the biggest difference between humanoid monsters and humans.

“I understand now.”

“Understand what?”

The monster king looked at the humans with a sharp look. He felt something boiling inside his heart. It could be rage, sorrow, resignation, or excitement. He gathered these squirming emotions and spat them out.

“My name is Orden!” His roar shook the earth and rang across the sky.

“I am the king of monsters!”

A wave of magic power burst from his body. *Guooooo!* The resonance destroyed the ground and caused the sky to change colors. Kim Suho swung his sword at the chaos, but a gust of wind struck down his attack.

“...!”

“*Kururu...*”

A humanoid monster resembling a praying mantis appeared. Orden's most loyal servant, Kurukuru, shot towards Kim Suho and swung his front leg.

"Kururu!"

Hundreds of scythes slashed in less than a second. Kurukuru gave his all to hinder Kim Suho.

"Who are you? Screw off!"

Aileen's Spirit Speech pushed Kurukuru away, but not in time.

"Tsk."

Orden's magic power of chaos flickered and Kim Suho had no choice but to watch the explosion.

Chwaaaaaa—

An overwhelming light swallowed the world.

* * *

"..."

Kim Suho slowly opened his eyes and saw a white ceiling. He didn't know what happened, but two familiar faces soon popped up.

"You're awake?"

"There you go again with your cool act."

Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun spoke to him.

"Huh?" Kim Suho shot up like a spring.

"W-What are you two doing here?"

“We can discuss that later. How’s your body?”

“B-Body? I think it’s okay.”

Kim Suho snapped out of his shock and looked around. Several heroes lay unconscious in this bunker.

“What happened?”

“We saved everyone before Orden’s magic power went off, but it looks like being exposed to it caused some mental damage. Everyone else is still unconscious.”

Chae Nayun answered his question.

Kim Hajin explained that an 8 star card created the bunker. They summoned most of the important personnel here where the flow of time would help them recover faster. The rest had been sent to Genkelope's vessel.

“What’s happening outside?” Kim Suho asked with a dumbfounded expression.

“It hasn’t even been 5 minutes, so don’t worry. The operation is still underway.”

Heynckes, Chae Joochul, Aileen, Yoo Sihyuk, Yoo Jinwoong, and Jin Seyeon all survived the explosion and continued fighting Orden.

“Then I should also—”

“Before that...” Kim Hajin handed him a recovery and strength potion.

“Ah, thanks.”

Kim Suho drank the potion without hesitation. The hot liquid coursed through his body and he felt his strength returning as he closed his eyes.

“Haa...”

“How do you feel?”

“Good.”

Kim Suho furrowed his brows. “Where did you come from?”

“Me?”

“Yes you, Kim Hajin.”

“Uh... well, let’s just say I was in the middle of training.” Kim Hajin grinned and placed his hand on Kim Suho’s shoulder.

“We can talk about that later. I awakened another gift during that training.”

“Gift? Again?”

“Yep, and this one will be useful when you fight Orden.”

“Me? How will your gift help me?”

“Here.”

Kim Hajin displayed a holographic window with his smartwatch.

[Constraints and Amplifications] [High Rank] — Constraints: Will apply temporary constraints to the user’s body. — Amplifications: Will temporarily increase the target’s strength in proportion to the applied constraints. — Profitable Exchange: Will increase amplification’s performance by 77%. — Side Effect Alleviation: This gift’s side effects, including the cooldown, will be slightly improved.

“I jotted down my gift’s effect.”

Kim Suho stared at the window in a daze. A buff-type gift strengthened with luck. It seemed like a high-risk, high-reward type of

deal. Kim Hajin began explaining after Kim Suho read the gift.

“You know how people say words have different meanings in Korean? Think about the word target here.”

Kim Suho’s eyes fell on the sentence Kim Hajin pointed to.

[Amplifications: Will temporarily increase the target’s strength in proportion to the applied constraints.]

“The constraints will be placed on me, but the target for amplification doesn’t have to necessarily be me.”

Kim Suho quickly understood what Kim Hajin implied.

“The amplifications can be used on you.”

Kim Hajin smiled. “I’ll leave Orden to you, Kim Suho.”

* * *

I couldn’t replicate the Sword Saint’s unique ability and already used *[Time Reversal]*, but Kim Suho could still fight.

I placed myself under a week’s worth of constraints and wouldn’t be able to do anything for that period of time. However, Kim Suho received an explosive amplification.

Golden magic power, the Sword Saint’s authority, and Misteltein which carried the power of wish. I felt confident Kim Suho wouldn’t lose against Orden now.

— See you later. I’ll be sure to win.

Kim Suho left with those words.

— Wait for me. You and I have a lot to talk about.

Chae Nayun also left with him.

I felt my heart rate slowing down after they left. I closed my eyes and my breathing grew faint. I would fall into a deep slumber for a week.

“Pft.”

I couldn't help but smirk. If all goes to plan, everything should be over by the time I wake up. Kim Suho would've defeated Orden and Chae Nayun could potentially learn more from her master, Heynckes. Sleeping and having the main cast clean up all the trouble? Finally, it sounded like an extra-like progression. I didn't feel bad at all after doing my best.

“Hajin...”

A familiar voice rang in my ears and woke my mind.

“Boss?”

“Yes, it's me.”

I could hear her voice, but couldn't see anymore. I raised my hand towards her voice and felt a soft, cold sensation. I probably touched Boss' cheek.

“It's been a while.”

“Yes, where were you this entire time? What happened to Bell?”

“Well, you know how I counter Bell. I fought him, won, and escaped.”

“Really? *Haha.*”

Boss happily laughed and I also smiled.

“But Boss...”

“*Hmm?*”

A soft sensation touched the back of my head. It felt like being in Boss'

arms. I wanted to enjoy this feeling a bit longer, but it wouldn't be long until I lost consciousness.

“Um... I'm getting sleepy.”

“I know. You look tired.”

“Are Cheok Jungyeong and Jain okay?”

The bunker felt too quiet. Everyone should be asleep, so asking about them shouldn't arouse any suspicions.

“They're both safe inside the bunker. *Ah*, well, Cheok Jungyeong left a while ago after saying he wanted to fight Orden.”

“Then... I'm going to sleep.”

Soon, the rest of my senses disappeared. I couldn't move anymore and my hearing slowly faded.

“I'll be asleep for a little longer than usual. About a week. Think of it as a winter hibernation.”

“Yeah...” Boss' warm hands stroked my hair.

“See you later Boss.”

“Yeah, see you later...”

I relaxed and let myself go. My consciousness scattered away in Boss' warm embrace. However, before my consciousness fully disappeared...

“...I missed you.”

Her final words flowed into my ears.

Bell arrived in Africa with his comrade. Honestly, he wanted to stay inside his sanctuary until Orden died, but Yi Yeonjun persuaded him otherwise.

“Do you really need to watch in person?”

“Trust me. The monster king’s corpse will have immense value for us.”

Yi Yeonjun didn’t bat an eye at Bell’s grumbling. He only wanted Orden’s corpse, but Bell had no idea what he would do with it.

“What are you going to do if you meet Byul?”

“Then we’ll just meet. Why should I worry about that?” Yi Yeonjun brushed off Bell’s worry.

“*Sigh*, fine.”

Bell gave up since he knew Yi Yeonjun all too well. The man wouldn’t be satisfied until he obtained what he wanted. One could call it greed or an extreme mental illness.

“Let’s go down, Bell.”

“Yeah.”

The two men landed on the African soil. Orden’s magic power explosion just swept through and cleaned everything of impurities.

“What’s our plan Boss?”

Bell called him Boss for the first time in a while. Yi Yeonjun seemed to like it and replied with a grin.

“Simple. We’ll wait until Orden dies and snatch his corpse.”

Chapter 300

Orden

The soil burned purple and the sky turned crimson. Shattered rocks filled the air and sparks crackled from residual magic power. Even breathing could be lethal because of the severe contamination in the atmosphere. This all resulted from Orden's magic power explosion.

"These spears will penetrate your body!"

The fight continued above the devastated field. Hundreds of spears from Aileen's Spirit Speech flew towards Orden. Yoo Jinwoong's electricity also clung all over Orden's body.

However, Orden dispelled all these attacks with a simple swing of his fist wrapped in magic power.

"Turn into a vacuum!"

Aileen used her Spirit Speech again and attempted to disrupt Orden's breathing. She flipped the ground he stood on and even created a tiny black hole. This black hole only succeeded in sucking in Orden's cloak.

Meanwhile, Chae Joochul drew in the nearby natural energy and formed an avatar. It stood 3 meters tall like Orden and wore a white martial arts uniform. Orden attacked the avatar while Yoo Sihyuk rushed towards Orden to assist Chae Joochul. Jin Seyeon continued firing her crystal arrows from a distance.

Orden's chaos attribute could easily neutralize human magic power. He only needed to gather and emit it all at once.

Clang!

Orden's chaos disrupted the heroes' magic power.

“—!”

Then he roared at the most troublesome enemy, the archer who kept shooting from a hidden spot.

“*Uk!*”

The supersonic soundwave paralyzed Jin Seyeon. Next, Orden dashed towards Aileen and reached the dwarf in a single step.

“Stop—”

Orden resisted the Spirit Speech and swung his claw. It should've ripped Aileen to shreds.

Clang!

However, a sword blocked his attack. The Steel Spirit Sword didn't look like anything special, but it embodied Heynckes's noble determination.

“Move along little one.”

“Thanks...”

It felt humiliating to be called little, but Aileen quickly retreated with her *[Blink]* skill.

Kiiik—

Orden's claw and Heynckes' sword clashed. Orden kept his right arm up and smashed Heynckes with his left arm. However, Heynckes blocked that punch with another steel sword.

Clang!

The claw and steel swords continued to clash.

Orden outmatched Heynckes in every aspect except combat experience. The Steel Spirit fully utilized all the experience, skills, and techniques Heynckes accumulated over an entire lifetime. His sword penetrated the gaps between Orden's fingers and left a scar on the monster king's chest. His swift and efficient movements also disrupted Orden's balance.

Heynckes knew he couldn't maintain this stalemate for long.

He continues to grow as the battle prolongs.

Orden would soon surpass all the skills Heynckes accumulated over 60 years in a mere 6 minutes. Heynckes had to admit a real monster stood before him.

"You've grown old."

He heard a nonchalant voice and glanced over with a smile. Chae Joochul approached Orden with an expressionless look and smacked Orden's forehead with his folding fan.

Chwaak!

It sounded loud, but did little physical damage. Orden didn't know that these two men had been preparing this attack all along.

"You're the one who's grown old, Joochul. What took you so long."

Chae Joochul's folding fan served as a medium to control all of nature. Every drop of the Immortal's magic power traveled into Orden when the fan touched his forehead.

"...!"

Orden buried his head into his hands as the particles of nature collided with each other in his head.

"It should hurt quite a bit. I've briefly experienced it before."

The cold-blooded Chae Joochul developed this technique for the sole purpose of annihilating an existence. It caused the worst type of pain and Heynckes had experienced it in the past too.

“KUAAAAA!”

Orden roared in agony and his cry ripped through the heroes' ears. It disrupted their qi reinforcement, but others besides the heroes also responded.

Tudududu...

A huge vibration shook the earth and a fierce whirlwind filled the sky. The monster king's loyal servants returned from the front lines to protect their king.

No good would come out of a prolonged battle. The heroes all rushed towards Orden. However, he blocked all of them with a torrent of magic power.

“Y-You b-bastards!”

“*Hurorororo!* Get away from the king!”

The humanoid monsters also overlooked that the heroes had reinforcements.

“*Hiya!*”

A giant sword appeared and seemed to reach the sky. Chae Nayun confidently swung this giant magic power sword and wiped out an entire mob with one swing.

A black spear also swept through like a tornado. Shin Jonghak's black flames synergized quite well with Xiang Yu's Conqueror Spear.

Yi Yongha's hellfire devoured the earth, Cheok Jungyeong hailed blows on the humanoid monsters, Nicholas showed off his daggers, and Droon's Mimyo chomped on the enemies.

Then...

“Orden!”

A flash of light raced forward and golden magic power shone in every direction. Kim Suho charged and cut down every humanoid monster in his path. His speed far exceeded the maximum human potential and he seemed unstoppable.

“You!”

Orden shot out a pillar of magic power from his palms, but Kim Suho easily sliced it in half. Heynckes also continued attacking as Kim Suho’s sword almost reached Orden’s heart.

At that moment, Orden suddenly realized Kim Suho’s weakness. Kim Suho could only neutralize external magic power. Therefore, Orden just had to contain his magic power and smash it directly into Kim Suho like Chae Joochul’s previous attack.

Orden refined his magic power and waited for Kim Suho. A look of firm resolution flashed across the hero’s face. He didn’t have the slightest idea as he ran into the arms of death.

Orden reached for Kim Suho and the Sword Saint jumped into his arms.

No, he tried to reach out.

Orden felt time slow to a thousandth of a second. His gaze wandered to the side during this inflated sense of time. Park Hanho’s daughter stood across the crumbled throne room. She held the doll her father made and looked at Orden with big, round eyes.

Orden knew the child couldn’t have been there. He had already evacuated her to somewhere safe, so it had to be a trap. Nevertheless, he couldn’t help but hesitate. Kim Suho and Heynckes didn’t miss this opportunity.

Crack. Two swords pierced Orden. The Sword Saint’s magic power and

the Steel Spirit's aura intertwined to penetrate the monster king's heart. Orden felt an unbearable pain as a question rose in his mind.

Why did I hesitate?

He slowly lowered his head and looked at Kim Suho. The Sword Saint's blade contained an unstoppable conviction and determination.

Then he looked at Heynckes' sharp, cold blade.

Lastly, he turned towards the child who made him hesitate. Of course, she had already disappeared. Did he just fall for an illusion or a trap? Orden couldn't tell.

Crack—

Soon, he felt the Sword Saint's magic power thrust into his heart and the chaos inside him exploded.

Chwaaaaaa.

The wave of chaos burst from Orden's body and spread throughout the world.

* * *

“...!”

Kim Suho opened his eyes as the buildings crumbled. Debris littered the ground everywhere with Orden at the center. Various wounds covered his body, but he hadn't died. He hadn't even fainted. Orden looked straight at Kim Suho.

“Are you awake, human child?”

Orden spoke slowly, but clearly. Kim Suho nodded and couldn't even speak anymore. However, he still raised his sword to continue fighting.

“Rest assured. You have already destroyed my heart. I don’t have much time left.”

Orden began to cure Kim Suho’s wounds and the burning pain enveloping his body subsided.

Still, Kim Suho doubtfully looked at the monster king. He could only see unwavering honesty in Orden’s eyes.

“I wanted to find an answer, so I brought you here.”

“You brought me here?”

A giant insect appeared from behind Orden and made strange sounds.

“Kururu, Kururu...”

“I can tell you’re not from this world.”

Kim Suho’s heart began to race at those words. Orden stared directly at the root of Kim Suho’s existence.

“How did you know?”

The monster king faintly smiled.

“I tried to devour you to prolong my life, but you destroyed my heart to an irrecoverable state. I couldn’t heal my injuries, but I looked into your mirror of memories. I’m sure of one thing.”

“...”

“You are not a human of this world and you have died once before.”

Kim Suho didn’t confirm or deny Orden’s claim. He never once considered himself a stranger in this world.

“Which made me wonder about our similarities. The only difference between us is that I’m a humanoid monster and you’re a human.”

They stood apart from everyone else on Earth. Orden gained intelligence, but lost everything. Kim Suho lost everything, but gained a new life. The two of them knew solitude at one point in their lives, but diverged onto different paths.

Is it because I'm a monster and you're a human? Is that really the only difference?

Orden needed to know.

“What made you want to live in this world?”

This might be Orden's last question on Earth. Kim Suho felt the weight of his curiosity and earnestly pondered why he became so attached to this world. The reason Kim Suho could betray his country and king...

“At first, it was because of my family.”

Kim Suho never had a family in Akatrina. He lived as an orphan and only had the sword as a friend. He became obsessed with the sword and only wanted to become a knight that protected the king.

However, things changed here on Earth. Kim Suho had friends and family who loved and believed in him.

“Family?”

“Yeah, I have a family as well.”

Orden looked at Kim Suho in a daze. *What a silly reason.*

“Haa...”

The monster king wryly smiled and recalled a certain child's face. Park Hanho's daughter, Park Yeonhee, who he brought back to life.

Why did I see her at the most crucial moment and why did I foolishly hesitate?

Orden almost felt his crushed heart beat again.

“What a... a foolish reason.”

He deeply sighed and understood his emotions now. What he wanted and longed for when he looked at that father and daughter pair. He didn't need to stray far to find such a simple answer.

“That was it for me at least.” Kim Suho shrugged in mild embarrassment.

“I see.”

The king smiled.

“They say life has no right answers, but if what you're saying is correct...”

Orden bitterly smiled and admitted defeat.

“Everything was inevitable in the end.”

“What?”

Everything was inevitable? Those irresponsible words angered Kim Suho after millions died. Kim Suho grabbed Misteltein, but soon placed his sword back down with a sigh.

“What was inevitable?”

Instead, he chose to ask for the answer Orden found.

“Don't you know humanoid monsters can't make families?” Orden muttered in a low voice.

“Uh... *Cough.*”

Kim Suho sunk into silence as Orden waited for death. Everything finally made sense. He became the first monster to obtain intelligence

and called himself a humanoid monster out of admiration for humans. He combined humans and monsters to create artificial beings. However, an individual couldn't preserve an entire species. Only death ever offered an escape from his pain.

"Kururu, Kururu."

Perhaps Kurukuru realized his king's thoughts. The servant extended his front leg full of scars.

"Kurukuru."

The king called Kurukuru's name. He knew his exact condition. His heart had been destroyed, his blood had stopped circulating, and his organs began to shut down. Death waited just around the corner.

"Kururu..."

Kurukuru flapped his wings in disapproval at the king's next words. The king didn't worry at all and knew Kurukuru would never defy his orders.

"Kurukuru, a mantis cannot stop a wagon."

Orden had read about the story behind this proverb when he first created Kurukuru. The story spoke of a foolish and reckless mantis who tried to stop a moving wagon. Still, its boundless courage impressed Orden and he hoped his servant would be as loyal and brave as that mantis.

"Live on."

"..."

The king gave his last order. Kurukuru understood and trembled in sorrow.

"I have no regrets."

The king slowly closed his eyes and Kim Suho staggered up.

The servant stared at the king's lifeless body for a long time. Insects didn't possess the ability to cry, so Kurukuru only kneeled in front of the king and kowtowed.

The lonely king's tale finally came to an end.

* * *

[Africa]

Boss deactivated her shadow armor after the colossal explosion. She could see the blue sky and vast grasslands just beyond the horizon. Orden's palace had been completely destroyed by none other than Orden himself.

"Boss."

A childlike voice called her from behind. Boss turned and her long hair fluttered in the wind. Jain disguised herself as Park Hanho's daughter and waved.

"What's this? Everything is over, right?"

"Seems so. Did it work?"

"It surprisingly did."

Jain secretly met with Rumi two weeks ago and learned that Orden admired humans. She didn't understand at the time, so she disguised herself as a humanoid monster and infiltrated the palace. She finally understood after seeing Orden in person.

"I think he's into small and cute humans."

Unfortunately, her assumption missed the mark.

"Small and cute humans?" Boss frowned and disapproved of the

implication.

“Yeah, but how’s Hajin?”

“He’s in the bunker, so he should be fine.”

“Yeah? Then let’s go find Orden’s body.”

The Chameleon Troupe originally functioned as a group of thieves. Of course, they wanted Orden’s corpse.

“Yeah, let’s go.”

The two walked down the street while tracking Orden’s scent.

Whish—

The wind carried a particular scent.

“...?”

Boss froze after noticing this scent. The same happened to Jain. They both exchanged glances and turned towards the scent.



PbF by: traitor/SEN



The Novel's Extra



WUXIA
WORLD



The Novel's Extra

- 소설 속 엑스트라 -

- VOLUME 4 -

**-AUTHOR-
Ji-gab-song**

[Wuxiaworld]

Chapter 301

After the War (1)

A familiar scent blew through the air. Boss would never forget this magic power scent.

She found it impossible, but ran towards it anyways. Her heart pounded as the scent grew stronger. She stopped at a certain point after running like crazy. Jain caught up and also stopped. The two of them looked forward in a daze.

A certain man stood on top of the crumbled throne. He calmly sat on the rubble and seemingly waited for someone.

“...!”

Boss’ eyes widened when she saw him. He had his back towards her, but it looked all too familiar. She couldn’t believe her eyes and glanced at Jain standing next to her. That meant the man in front of her couldn’t be Jain in disguise.

It all seemed too real to be an illusion. She questioned whether she might be dreaming. That man should’ve been dead, so did this person just look like him?

Whish—

A gust of wind blew the man’s hair and fully revealed his face. Boss became speechless.

“Ah...”

She subconsciously yelped. The man on top of the rubble also sensed her presence.

He tilted his head and slowly turned around. Boss carefully examined his appearance. His well-defined facial features came into full view as the wind blew his hair.

She would never forget the Chameleon Troupe's former boss, Yi Yeonjun, whom she considered her father.

* * *

My body sunk into a bottomless ocean. I couldn't open my eyes or breathe, but I already grew used to such pain. I knew this illusion would end as long as I endured.

"Chae Nayun..."

A voice seeped through the water's surface. The echoes took the form of a devil and swallowed me. The devil wore my mother and brother's face before entering my heart as despair.

"Chae Nayun!"

The sharp voice pierced my heart. I gasped for breath as if someone strangled me. The loved ones I could no longer see appeared and my heart trembled.

Why do I have to be the only one who feels such pain? Why do I always have to send off my loved ones?

Chak!

A fiery pain woke Chae Nayun.

"Huu!"

Her eyes shot open and she coughed. Shin Jonghak and Yun Seung-Ah appeared right in front of her.

"Uwuaaak!"

“Woah!”

“Kyak!”

She screamed in surprise and Shin Jonghak and Yun Seung-Ah also screeched. Chae Nayun pushed them away and shot up.

“Haa, haa, haa...”

She clutched her chest and took several deep breaths.

“Geez... huu...”

Her nightmare felt worse than usual perhaps because Orden’s magic power swept through her.

“Are you okay?” Yun Seung-Ah approached and patted her on the back.

Chae Nayun nodded and asked, “I’m okay. What’s the situation?”

“It’s mostly taken care of,” Shin Jonghak replied. He looked around with the Conqueror Spear resting on his shoulders.

“Orden’s magic power disappeared without a trace. The master rank heroes also took care of the humanoid monsters with the Genkelope Vessel’s help.”

“So everything is over?”

“No,” Yun Seung-Ah replied.

“Many humanoid monster villages still exist in Africa with even more brainwashed people. We’re just getting started.”

“Ah...”

Chae Nayun scratched her neck and looked around. Orden’s palace had completely crumbled and revealed Africa’s vast wilderness.

Heroes sat or lay on the ground while agents from the Genkelope vessel treated them.

“Ah, where’s old man Heynckes?”

She suddenly recalled Heynckes at the heart of the magic power explosion.

“...”

Yun Seung-Ah’s expression turned grim and Chae Nayun’s heart immediately sank.

“W-What? What happened?”

“Well...”

Yun Seung-Ah pointed to her right without any explanation. In the middle of the wilderness where she pointed stood a man frozen like a statue. Chae Nayun’s heart dropped. The man’s silver armor beautifully shone. The star had finally turned into steel.

“...!”

She didn’t have time to think and quickly ran over. However, she could only stand there and dumbfoundedly stare at his silver helmet.

“What...”

She touched the helmet and muttered. Her voice trembled with sadness.

“This is a lie, right? Old man?”

She choked with tears in front of the reality. The days she spent on the cold Himalayan mountain exchanging swords with him flashed before her eyes. Then...

“I told you not to call me old man!”

“*Aaak*, Jesus!”

The helmet came off as Heynckes shouted. The startled Chae Nayun fell backwards on her butt.

“*Uhahahaha*, that was fun.”

“A-*Ah*, my heart... Old man, you...!”

“Why am I your old man? Your old man just left after treating you.”

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened at Heynckes’ words.

“*Eh*? Grandfather did?”

“Yep. Well, that happened 30 minutes ago. Don’t be too harsh on him. Joochul is a busy man.”

“Grandfather has always been like that.” Chae Nayun nodded without complaints.

“What about you, old man? Are you feeling okay?”

“I’m not sure, but I seem fine for now,” Heynckes replied.

Kim Suho appeared from the distance with a Genkelope agent helping him walk. He clearly looked exhausted.

“Oh, here comes the Sword Saint.”

“Kim Suho!”

Everyone ran over to him. Kim Suho smiled after seeing his friends all seemed fine.

“It’s nice to see all of you again.”

“*Ah*, but rather than that—”

“Did Orden die?”

Heynckes cut off Chae Nayun and asked. His expression turned more serious than Chae Nayun had ever seen.

“Yes, Orden is dead.”

Kim Suho nodded. He had witnessed Orden’s death. The monster king peacefully closed his eyes and passed away.

“Did you confirm his corpse?” Heynckes asked again.

“Yes.” Kim Suho nodded. “It scattered to dust.”

“Dust? It turned to dust?”

Kim Suho smiled without answering him. Kurukuru had taken Orden’s corpse. The king’s servant would surely take care that no one ever find it.

“Yes, it turned to dust.”

“*Hmm...*”

Heynckes’ Steel Eyes could discern the truth from lies. However, he simply wore a gentle smile and tapped Kim Suho’s shoulders.

“Well done! As expected of a Nine Stars candidate.”

“You overestimate me.”

“*Ha!* Nine Stars candidate?” Shin Jonghak’s jealous interjection made everyone laugh.

Tirring— Tirring—

“Ah, geez.”

An emergency alert rang from their smartwatches. Every hero present looked down at their wrists.

[Disaster Alert. A large group of humanoid monsters have invaded England at 3:13 P.M.]

“It’s England this time?”

Chae Nayun frowned, but Yun Seung-Ah stared at the message and shook her head.

“No, this is from earlier in the day. We must have gotten it late because of Orden’s signal interference.”

The message had occurred during the middle of their operation. A follow-up message arrived to prove her conjecture correct.

[Update on England’s Disaster Alert. The situation has been taken care of with the help of Princess Rachel and the 9 star magician Ah Hae-In.]

“Rachel and the 9 star Ah Hae-In...”

Chae Nayun shrugged. She didn’t know exactly what happened, but...

“I guess it was an easy fight.”

* * *

Treatment of humanoid monsters became a major issue across the world five days after the Orden operation.

— I recently received a strange request.

Yoo Yeonha became so busy she couldn’t even sleep, but still made time for Yoo Jinhyuk’s call.

“Request?”

— Yep. I want to take care of it alone, but you know how busy I am. I

thought I'd ask my beloved niece for help, *hahaha*.

Yoo Jinhyuk had never contacted her first for more than 20 years, but now asked for help. She felt curious more than anything.

“What’s the request?”

— Looking into someone. It sounds simple, but we haven’t been able to crack it.

Yoo Jinhyuk sent a file over the call. It contained the target’s picture and personal information.

[Yi Yeonjun (real name unknown)] [183 cm 77 kg] [Male] [Birthday unknown] [Ability unknown] [Place of birth unknown] [Family relations unknown]

“Yi Yeonjun? Everything’s pretty much unknown?”

— Yep, we don’t even know if that’s his real name. He’s a dangerous one for sure since he’s the Chameleon Troupe’s founder.

Yoo Yeonha flinched. “The Chameleon Troupe?”

“Yeah, I received a request to investigate Yi Yeonjun’s past about a month or two ago. I put it off, but the client kept increasing the price.”

“*Hmm...*” Yoo Yeonha rubbed her chin and sighed.

“Won’t it be too dangerous?”

— I’m the one in charge of the investigation, so I’ll be the only one in danger. You just have to look into his past whereabouts.

“Past whereabouts?”

— Yep.

Yoo Jinhyuk nodded with a smile.

— Find out where he was a few years ago. I want you to narrow down the range of his past that I need to experience.

“*Hmm...* Your gift seems lively as ever.”

— I’ve saved it for times like this. The payment is the highest I’ve seen in the past 20 years.

Yoo Yeonha glanced at what the client offered and almost choked. A cool 7.7 billion upfront and 22.3 billion after completion. Just the grand total of 30 billion won would’ve made it hard to refuse, but the client even offered two pinnacle grade artifacts. Which maniac would pay so much?

— So? Want to help? I’ll give you 20%.

“*Hmm.*”

Yoo Yeonha fell in thought, but quickly concluded. Investigating the Chameleon Troupe felt like a duty she had to fulfill. *Yoo Jinwoong and Chae Joochul. Chae Joochul and the Chameleon Troupe. The Chameleon Troupe and Kim Hajin. Kim Hajin and me.* She knew the Chameleon Troupe held the key to unraveling these complicated relationships.

“Okay, I’ll help.”

A bell rang in her head when she replied. It came from her unique sixth sense skill. She didn’t know whether it signaled danger or an opportunity because of its low level, but it always turned out to be important.

— Perfect. Do you know what to do?

“Of course. I can track him down if he used the internet even once.”

In the Falling Blossom guild, a man named Kim Hosup had risen to number 1 in tracking. No one in the digital age lived without using the internet. Kim Hosup could find anyone born after the 1980s when

he linked to a supercomputer worth billions of won.

— Great, then I'll wait for the good news. Be careful.

“Okay, talk to you later. I have a meeting now.”

— *Ah*, wait. How's the guild business doing?

“Guild business? *Pft.*”

Yoo Yeonha laughed. Essence of the Strait had become the undisputed number 1 in the world after the recent Orden incident. Creator's Sacred Grace skyrocketed to rank 2 because of Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah, but the gap between them remained huge. Essence of the Strait also made great achievements thanks to guild leader Yoo Jinwoong, vice leader Yi Jin-Ah, and the rising star Chae Nayun.

The guild aside, Essence of the Strait's subsidiary businesses simply couldn't be surpassed. Essential Pharmacy, Essential Dynamics, and other conglomerate-scale businesses achieved record high revenues in their respective fields.

“It's going great. At this rate, people might start calling me the queen of Korea instead of the queen of Seoul.”

— *Ooh...* Well, that's great to hear. Looks like I can live off my niece when I grow old.

Yoo Jinhyuk playfully laughed.

— Then see you later.

“Yes, see you uncle.”

Tkk—

“Let's see... Falling Blossom team, answer.”

Yoo Yeonha relayed the mission to Falling Blossom after she hung up.

[You have completed the third phase with high contributions.] [A streak of stigma has been added.] [Master Sharpshooter's proficiency has increased.] [You have gained a significant amount of SP.] [Young Dwarf's Dexterity...]

Several sentences entered my faint consciousness. I also heard Chae Nayun's voice.

[Kim Hajin, are you awake?] [You didn't run away again, did you?] [I heard from old man Heynckes that you'll get stabbed by his knife if you don't reply to me.] [Message me when you wake up.]

Humanity seemed to have won. I tried messaging Chae Nayun.

[I'm up.]

The constraints on me began to loosen. I couldn't move yet, but I could reply to her *[Infinite Communication]*.

[...]

Chae Nayun didn't reply no matter how long I waited. She must be busy with something.

“...”

I tried to focus on my eyes and needed to see before anything else.

“Huu!”

Thankfully, it didn't take long to open them. A white ceiling filled my vision.

Ssk— Ssk—

Next, I focused on my fingers and toes. It took a bit longer, but I eventually regained control of my body after 10 minutes of struggling.

“Sigh...”

I turned towards the ruffling sound of papers.

“Huh?”

An unexpected scene greeted me. Jin Sahyuk lay on a couch while reading a comic book.

“Hm? Oh, you’re awake.”

She spoke with her eyes still fixed on the comic and I blankly stared at her.

“Why are you here?”

“What do you mean?”

Tak— She closed the book and stared at me. Then she muttered something I couldn’t comprehend.

“I’m protecting you.”

Chapter 302

After the War (2)

I couldn't understand Jin Sahyuk, but she didn't seem to be joking. Honestly, we weren't close enough to exchange jokes, so I simply asked.

"You're protecting me?"

"Yep, you heard it right."

She even placed down the comic book and seriously looked at me.

"I'm going to need more details."

"I don't know much either. Bell just told me to." Jin Sahyuk shrugged.

"Bell?"

"Yeah, he said Yi Yeonjun planned on killing you. I know you're not the type to go down easily, but the people Bell warns me about are usually strong."

"...?"

Is it because I'm still drowsy? I feel like I just heard something crazy.

I frowned and she shook her head.

"I already told you. I don't know much. I just took you out of the bunker because Bell said it would be dangerous for you to be around the Chameleon Troupe. I saved you in a sense."

"Wait, did you just say Yi Yeonjun?"

Yi Yeonjun used to be the Chameleon Troupe's former boss who died because of Bell. At least that's what Boss told me.

"Yeah."

"Isn't he dead?"

"*Hmm...*" Jin Sahyuk stroked her chin while sorting out her thoughts.

"I don't know the details, but I heard he came back to life."

"How's that possible?"

"How would I know? More importantly..." Jin Sahyuk placed her index finger on my chest.

"It's your turn to speak."

"About what?"

"You said Bell confessed to you."

"Confessed? What the hell are you..."

Then I recalled what Bell told me about being Baal's incarnation and that I'd have to kill him to reach a happy ending. Jin Sahyuk brushed her hair and looked at me.

"Bell said he told you all his secrets."

"*Ah*, so that's what you meant. Well..."

I shrugged and told Jin Sahyuk everything I heard from Bell. Her expression grew more intense as I continued. She even started biting her fingernails when I told her Bell might become Baal.

"That's all he told me."

I finished and turned on my smartwatch. Lots of messages arrived from various people, including Kim Suho and Evandel. Boss' message caught my attention first.

[Hajin where are you?] [Where are you?] [I have someone I'd like you to meet. Where did you go?]

[Don't worry. I'm on the Genkelope Vessel.]

I replied and got out of bed. Then I took a quick tour around the place. The kitchen and bathroom looked clean. I could see the East Sea beyond the windows and the ocean waves danced in the dark. It felt as if the final arc I didn't know about also lurked in that darkness.

"What are you looking at?"

Jin Sahyuk came up to me. She gazed outside at the sea as I asked.

"Do you still think I'm Kindspring?"

I smiled wryly at her misunderstanding. Sorting it out with Jin Sahyuk would cost me a lot. Bringing up Kindspring just now raised my synchronization by 0.3%.

[Current Synchronization — 13%]

Jin Sahyuk didn't look too upset. Perhaps Kim Chundong's emotions also affected her. She looked me in the eyes and slightly chuckled.

"Not anymore, but I'm sure you have something to do with Kindspring."

I smiled in silent affirmation.

"I'll be by your side until I figure out your relationship with Kindspring."

"Is that also an order from Bell?"

“Yeah, so just tell me one thing every month.”

We turned back to the sea. The unknown still danced in the shadows, but something suddenly crossed my mind.

“Do you still plan on returning to your homeland?” I carefully asked.

“Of course.” Jin Sahyuk nodded without hesitation.

“Why?”

“Because people are waiting for me there.”

“Akatrina has already fallen.”

“No, you never know. Akatrina is stronger than you think.”

“...”

I knew Akatrina had fallen for good as the original author. Not to mention, 30 years had passed since Jin Sahyuk’s death. Akatrina wouldn’t have survived for that long.

“What if Akatrina doesn’t exist? Are you still going back?”

I coldly asked. I felt somewhat sympathetic towards the king who hoped for something impossible.

“It doesn’t matter.”

I thought Jin Sahyuk might get mad, but she calmly shook her head.

“I have no reason to live without Akatrina.”

“...”

She carried the most resolute determination in the world. Jin Sahyuk lost many things, but still held on to this hope.

“I’ll gladly meet my death in my homeland.”

Akatrina meant everything to her.

[Someone inside you has responded to the king’s conviction.]
[Synchronization has increased by 2%.] [Current Synchronization — 15%] [Warning! Be careful not to lose yourself.]

It seemed Kim Chundong also held genuine loyalty towards Jin Sahyuk.

“...”

I turned away and distracted myself by calling Spartan. He appeared out of the void and landed on my shoulder.

“What’s that?”

I ignored Jin Sahyuk’s question and looked at my smartwatch.

[Hajin, I miss you. π-π] [I’m bored.] [This is the spirit beast I made today. Cute kitty, do you like it?] [π π Why won’t you reply?] [I miss you.] [π π]

All these messages came from Evandel. I couldn’t answer because I’d been unconscious. They made me forget all about synchronization.

“Spartan?”

— *Piek?*

“Let’s go see Evandel.”

— *Prrr.*

“What? Where do you think you’re going—”

With a nod, Spartan immediately teleported.

We arrived in a dense forest filled with spirit beasts. This forest belonged to Evandel and most humans could never enter because of the magic power inside their bodies. I could thanks to my *[Magic Dysfunction Physique]* and the *[Black Lotus Uniform]*.

I walked towards Evandel's cabin with Spartan on my shoulder. My gift, *[Master Sharpshooter]*, had increased to grade 1 and I knew where to find her the moment I arrived. I completely understood the forest's structure at a glance.

[♥ Evandel's Cabin ^-^ ★]

Soon, I arrived at a cabin with a cute door plate. I smiled and knocked. Then I heard a noise inside and couldn't wait any longer, so I peeked through the door. Evandel rubbed her eyes in bed and just woke up.

"Evandel, it's me."

I whispered and her eyes immediately widened. She sprung out of bed and bolted to the door.

"...!"

Her eyes became even bigger when she saw me.

"How have you been?"

"Aaaang!"

The tearful Evandel jumped into my arms after being alone for months. She repeatedly called my name and made me tear up as well. *Hajin! Hajiiin!* I hugged her and patted her head.

Our reunion felt quite touching. We toured around the cabin and went outside to play with the spirit beasts. Evandel introduced me to all of them one by one and we went back inside after 4 hours.

“Do you want to meet Rachel now?”

“Rachel?” Evandel squealed with joy.

“Yes, but we can’t meet her in person. We’ll just call her.”

“Ah...”

She seemed a bit disappointed, but soon smiled. I opened the hologram app for a more vivid experience. Then I sent Rachel a text asking her to video call me.

Tirring—

My smartwatch rang and I picked up Rachel’s call.

[Entering Hologram Chatroom]

A hologram of Rachel appeared in front of us. It looked so realistic as if Rachel arrived in person.

“Hi.”

— What’s going on? How did you get in there, Hajin?

“I have my ways.”

“Rachel.”

Evandel spread out her arms and went to Rachel. She wanted a hug, but passed right through the hologram.

“Ah.”

— Hold on a little longer, Evandel. We’ll see each other soon.

Rachel gently smiled and Evandel nodded. The heartwarming atmosphere didn’t last for long. *Beep— Beep—* Several messages

popped up accompanied by alarms.

[Administrator will now enter the chatroom through admin permission.]
[Code:1231]

An administrator's interference? A different hologram appeared in the cabin.

— *Hmm.* So it was you two after all.

“What the...”

My heart skipped a beat from the surprise. Yoo Yeonha had hijacked our chatroom as the administrator. She looked at Evandel, Rachel, and me before smiling.

— She's that child?

Yoo Yeonha pointed at Evandel.

“*H-Huh?* What do you mean?”

I quickly hid Evandel behind me, but Yoo Yeonha frowned like a demon.

— I already heard everything from Rachel.

“What?”

I turned to Rachel and she nodded with a bitter smile.

— She's right, though we more or less got caught. However, she promised to become Evandel's patron. I left you a text because you didn't answer. I guess you didn't see it.

Yoo Yeonha grinned and held out her hand towards Evandel.

— Hi, it's nice to meet you.

“Ah, yes. Hello...”

Evandel seemed a bit shy, but courteously responded.

— *Hmm...* What a cute girl.

“How did you even manage to enter this room?”

Yoo Yeonha proudly folded her arms.

— My company made this app. More importantly...

Tadadak— Yoo Yeonha began typing on a keyboard and sent a private message to me.

[You're the one who asked Yoo Jinhyuk to investigate Yi Yeonjun, right?]

“...!”

I flinched and quickly glanced at her. She seemed convinced that I made the request. I really couldn't get anything past her. At this point, she wouldn't believe me even if I denied it.

“*Cough.*”

I cleared my throat and slightly nodded.

[I knew it. We're currently putting our all into the Yi Yeonjun investigation. The whole thing seems a bit shady. Why are you looking for a dead man?]

So she already figured out Yi Yeonjun had already died. I felt impressed and sent her a private message.

[Rumor has it he's alive.]

— Pardon?

Yoo Yeonha frowned even deeper.

[Oh, then maybe...]

She didn't finish, but I knew she wanted to ask about the Kwang-Oh Incident.

[Yeah, Yi Yeonjun led the Chameleon Troupe during the Kwang-Oh Incident. Back then, the Chameleon Troupe acted even crueler than now.]

[I see.]

Her expression looked somewhat sad.

[I get why you want to catch him.]

Tadadak— She continued typing.

[I get it, but don't do it alone. I know how much you resent the Chameleon Troupe. Just promise me you'll work with me this time.]

Regret, sadness, determination, and resolve... All those emotions could be seen in Yoo Yeonha's expression.

[Okay, I'm counting on you then.]

I replied with a faint smile. However, Rachel had been left out and suddenly narrowed her eyes.

— What are you two doing?

— It doesn't concern you. It's something important.

Yoo Yeonha waved her off as if shooing a fly. Rachel shut her mouth in embarrassment and tweaked a few settings to take revenge. She shrank the size of Yoo Yeonha's hologram.

— What the... What are you doing? Can't you tell I'm in the middle of a conversation?

— No, I'm the one on a call with Hajin. You're the intruder, Yeonha.

— What? Are you kidding me? Wha—

Yoo Yeonha's voice suddenly became high-pitched. Rachel not only altered her size, but also her voice.

— What do you think you're doing? Change me back! We didn't make this feature so you could do something like this!

— *Hahaha*. You're quite cute when you're small, Yeonha. Would you like bunny ears as well?

Rachel tapped on the screen a few times and Yoo Yeonha's nose turned red. A pair of bunny ears also popped up on her head.

— Hey! Are you crazy?

Yoo Yeonha couldn't let such things slide. She used her administrator privileges to make Rachel even smaller than Evandel.

— *Ah*, what is this? Change me back!

— You started it.

— Stop being childish.

— You're one to talk.

Yoo Yeonha and Rachel became 130 cm tall and glared at each other. Evandel watched them like a play as I called Spartan.

“Spartan?”

— *Prrr*.

Spartan and I didn't require any words. He could read my mind and always did what I wanted.

“Nothing's wrong with the invisibility cloak, right?”

— *Prrr.*

“Good. Be careful. Return immediately if you get caught.”

I asked Spartan to monitor Yi Yeonjun and Boss. I wanted to see what Yi Yeonjun might be planning and also protect Boss.

— *Kiaaaa!*

Spartan flapped his wings and disappeared into the sky.

— You’re holding your head too high just because the media is calling you the Elemental Swordsman.

— Don’t you know it’s a crime to use company admin rights to spy on a private chatroom?

Meanwhile, Rachel and Yoo Yeonha continued arguing. They kept shouting and pointing at each other, but I couldn’t understand half of it because of their voice alterations. It didn’t look like they would settle down anytime soon.

“Evandel, do you want to go play outside?”

“Yeah!” Evandel grinned.

“Okay, let’s go.”

The two holograms continued quarreling as we left the cabin.

The view outside came straight out of a fairy tale. Evandel’s spirit beasts filled the forest. A unicorn flew in the sky, a cat and squirrel raced each other, and a hare and tortoise scratched each other’s backs. Everything felt peaceful and heartwarming.

* * *

[Pandemonium, Chameleon Troupe’s Hideout]

Yi Yeonjun looked down from the rooftop at Pandemonium. This city once belonged to the Chameleon Troupe. The greed in his dark eyes could completely devour Pandemonium.

“You did well, Byul. I’m proud of you.”

Yi Yeonjun patted her on the shoulder. She looked at him in confusion because she always believed he had died. Yi Yeonjun had become her father after she killed her own parents. She couldn’t accept the fact that he returned alive so easily.

“Um... Boss.”

“No. You’re the boss, Byul. Don’t call me that.”

His voice, scent, the way he talked, and even his magic power felt the same.

“I’m no longer a Chameleon Troupe member. The Chameleon Troupe belongs to you and I don’t plan to take it away.”

Yi Yeonjun replied as they stared at each other.

“However, the seat of black you took in... Was it Kim Hajin?”

Yi Yeonjun suddenly said something unexpected.

“He’s dangerous.”

“Pardon?”

“It’s not a surprise you don’t know, Byul. He teamed up with Bell. The same Bell who killed me.”

A voice flowed into Yi Yeonjun’s ears as he spoke.

— You’re selling my name already?

This mental transmission came from Bell. Yi Yeonjun replied with a

straight face.

— Byul thinks you're the enemy. If I can use you to turn her against him, then I will. You need to understand.

— *Hmm*. I'm not sure that'll work.

As Bell expected, Yi Byul quickly shook her head.

“No, you're wrong. Hajin would never do that.”

Yi Yeonjun stared at her and faintly smiled.

“Really? I hope so. *Mmm*, I should go back now.”

“Pardon? To where?”

“My body isn't completely recovered yet. Don't worry. I'm not mad at you.”

“Boss, I mean... Wait.”

Yi Yeonjun tried to leave and cited health reasons, but Boss worriedly chased after him.

— See? I told you. Kim Hajin ruined Byul. She's completely different now. You'll have to get rid of him yourself.

Bell sounded cheerful as he made fun of his friend's failure. Yi Yeonjun remained silent with a nonchalant expression.

Meanwhile, a bird watched them from the dark.

“*Prrr—*”

Spartan delivered not only the conversation between Boss and Yi Yeonjun, but also the mental transmission between Yi Yeonjun and Bell.

‘Yeah, I’m listening. Go after them, but come back if it looks like you’ll get caught.’

Kim Hajin ordered Spartan as the bird chased after Yi Yeonjun in the night.

Chapter 303

After the War (3)

I woke up on a small bed in Evandel's cabin. The temperature inside felt quite pleasant as Evandel slept on my arm. I could hear her calm breathing and felt all sorts of emotions as I looked at her: pride, gratitude, sadness... She wasn't my real daughter, but I treated her as such.

"Sigh..."

I felt sorry and ashamed. This feeling would only grow stronger in the future. A long time had passed since I came to this world. The farewell that seemed so far away steadily approached. I would most likely return to Earth after the final arc and this world would continue without me.

"..."

I looked at Evandel sound asleep. The morning light shone and gently caressed her face. An unknown feeling rose in my heart.

I don't want to leave.

That thought surfaced in my head for the first time. Just like that song I once heard in my original world... I feared not being by their side.

"Sigh..."

I couldn't sleep anymore. I picked up my smartwatch from the drawer next to the bed. Then I searched through the social media accounts of those who participated in the Orden mission.

[Yi Jiyeon] Jiyeon2Nayun, Suho, and team leader Yeonha came to visit me at the hospital. #ImFineNow #OneStepStronger [♡ 9,154,352]

Yi Jiyeon, the social media addict, just recently posted last night. Tigris had torn off one of her arms, but she managed to avoid being permanently disabled thanks to quick treatment.

*[Chae Nayun] IM_Chae_Na_Yun To protect. My final sword.
#EssenceOfTheStrait #ChaeNayun [♡ 6,104,952]*

Chae Nayun posted a picture of two greatswords she recently bought.

“Huh?”

My eyes widened when I saw them and my gift, *[Observation and Reading]*, activated.

[Unknown Greatsword] [???] [???] [Crusader's Zweihander]

I didn't know which one Chae Nayun used as her main weapon, but even *[Observation and Reading]* couldn't see through that *[Unknown Greatsword]*. It must be a high rank artifact at the very least. She got quite lucky if she bought it or Essence of the Strait didn't know its true value if they lent it to her.

[Kim Suho] Saver_KIMI Love you all. Thank you and sorry. I will continue living my life to the fullest. [♡ 53,953,112]

Kim Suho only had a post comforting the Orden incident's victims. As expected of the Swordsman of Wish, he received more than 50 million likes.

[Temple of Justice] Justice_Temple Spirit Speech Master Aileen has been appointed as the Temple of Justice's 5th chairman. "I will do my best to atone for my predecessor's sins and proudly march forward." [♡ 14,003,112]

Temple of Justice, Essence of the Strait, Yun Seung-Ah, Creator's Sacred Grace, Shin Jonghak... I looked through social media posts for about 20 minutes before carefully getting out of bed. Then I walked to the window and looked through Spartan's memories. The conversation between Boss and Yi Yeonjun and the secret message between Yi Yeonjun and Bell played again in my mind.

“Yi Yeonjun...”

I calmly muttered the most mysterious character’s name. I didn’t know his motives, but I knew he wanted to kill me.

“Bell, you bastard...”

I understood why Jin Sahyuk cursed at Bell 24/7. He knew about Yi Yeonjun, but purposefully kept it a secret.

“*Hmm...*”

A bitter aftertaste lingered in my mouth. Killing Yi Yeonjun before he killed me seemed to be my best option, but that would make Boss sad. She might even hate me. I knew how much she longed for Yi Yeonjun from the rare instances she talked about him. I didn’t want to kill him since being hated had tired me out.

“...?”

Several messages popped up as I stood in thought. They looked like the previous ones I received from the co-author.

[★ Announcement ★ The final phase will begin soon.] [The demon realm transformation will resume.] [As the original author, you may view a map of the regions undergoing the demon realm transformation.] [It is recommended that you visit these sites.] [Don’t forget. You still have the right to ask me one question.]

“Yeah, thanks.”

The co-author didn’t even make me mad anymore. His messages simply passed by like water. After all, getting mad wouldn’t change anything.

I felt slightly sad the final phase had arrived.

“*Mmm...*”

Evandel tossed and turned in bed. She pulled on the blanket as if searching for me. I grinned and turned on the smartwatch to message Yoo Yeonha.

[Hey, let's meet in two days.]

[In two days?]

She replied quite fast.

[Yeah, I need to tell you something about the demon realm transformation.]

Yoo Yeonha's guild and businesses stood at the forefront of humanity's battle against the demon realm transformation. I suddenly grew curious about something else.

[By the way, did your guild give Chae Nayun those two swords she uploaded on social media?]

[Yeah, we bought them and permanently lent them to her. They were the only greatswords on the market.]

"Mmm."

I nodded and typed back.

[She's using both?]

[No, Nayun said she'd only use the Crusader's Zweihander. We lent both of them so she could decide which one she liked best. We'll lend the other one to another hero once she returns it. For some reason, we couldn't appraise that one. It's probably damaged.]

Damaged? Yoo Yeonha surprisingly misjudged the weapon. To be fair, 95% of artifacts that couldn't be appraised usually turned out to be trash.

[Don't give it to anyone else. Bring it with you when we meet. I'll see you

in North Hamgyeong Province...]

* * *

I spent two days with Evandel, made her pretty clothes, crafted comfortable furniture, and installed various equipment so she could talk to her friends.

“I’ll drop by once a week.” I knelt in front of Evandel and smiled.

“Okay!”

She teared up, but didn’t cry. Instead, she cheerfully replied and I realized how much she had grown over the past 8-9 years. I warmly hugged her one last time before calling Spartan.

“I’m leaving.”

“Ah, so are you coming next Tuesday or Wednesday?”

“Mmm, Tuesday.”

“Yay!” Evandel smiled and nodded.

“Then I’ll see you Tuesday.”

“Okay! I’ll be waiting.”

I waved goodbye and gave Spartan a location. He nodded from my shoulder and we teleported away.

— *Prrrr!*

Like that, I arrived in North Hamgyeong Province. A high rank monster danger zone existed nearby and Evil Society also resided not too far away in Russia’s Vostok region. However, this area had undergone great development through national defense weaponry and magic engineering.

“Keep your eyes out for any strange occurrences! Private citizens will be in danger if anything gets through!”

The demon realm transformation had already begun at the northernmost border of North Hamgyeong Province. The Korean military, along with heroes from the association, currently monitored the situation beyond the *[Essence Barrier]*.

“When are the hero reinforcements coming? There’s a battle every hour. Shouldn’t they send at least 4 more heroes?”

I glanced at the grumbling soldier. He seemed to be the captain in charge from the symbol on his chest.

“My apologies. We’ve notified the association, but they seem to be busy taking care of the recent incident’s aftermath.”

“Who cares about the aftermath? We need to find out what that thing is and do something about it! Those damned association bastards.”

The captain shouted and pointed at the field burning black. About 200 meters of land had already transformed into the demon realm.

— *Kuek, kuek.*

Four giant boars stepped onto the contaminated land.

“Ah, damn it! I told you to kill them before they touch that land!”

Immediately after the captain shouted...

— *Kueeeeeeeek!*

The boars’ flesh melted and they became undead monsters that charged at the soldiers.

[Undead Wild Boar] [Intermediate Rank, Grade 2]

The wild boars turned into intermediate rank monsters just by

touching the land. The captain took out a sword and I also walked towards them with my Desert Eagle.

“Get ready!”

The army prepared for battle.

“Fire on command!”

Each of their magic bullets cost a million won, but bullets without attributes couldn’t kill undead monsters. They only planned to weaken the boars for the captain who could use magic power. I decided to help them out.

Click—

I fired my Desert Eagle. My magic bullet flew along with their bullets, but it displayed a beautiful white color instead.

— *Kuek!*

My magic bullet pierced each boar one by one.

“...?”

To the human eye, it looked as if all the boars just suddenly fell. The soldiers expressed their shock when a golden snowmobile appeared in the air. Yoo Yeonha arrived in the dwarven supercar I gifted her.

“You’re already here?” She descended with a smile.

“I just arrived.”

We shook hands while countless soldiers looked at us. Soon, the captain recognized her and rushed over.

“This is Captain Yi Joonkyung. I heard you were coming, but never expected you to appear from the sky!”

“Keep standing on the lookout. Don’t mind us.”

“Yes! Understood!”

The captain took the hint and quickly left. Yoo Yeonha and I observed the contamination spreading across the land. The ground had turned reddish-black and ominous flames flickered above it. It looked like a powerful enemy would rise from the ground.

“Why did you want to meet here?”

“I think something will happen here today. I just wanted to see and plan accordingly.”

Once again, I read the system message in front of me.

[North Hamgyeong Province’s demon realm transformation is currently underway. A special change will occur in 20 minutes.]

I figured I should witness the first special change on Earth.

“Really? I don’t have much time. Oh right, here.”

Yoo Yeonha handed me a long piece of metal.

“What’s... Oh, that’s the greatsword.”

“Yep.”

“It didn’t look like this in the picture Chae Nayun posted.”

“I infused magic power into it to see if anything would happen and it changed into trash. We really shouldn’t have paid 3 billion for it.”

Yoo Yeonha shrugged.

“Hmm...”

I infused stigma's magic power into my eyes and appraised it again with *[Observation and Reading]*. Seeing it in real life should make a big difference. I blankly stared at the window that popped up.

"You can have it if you're interested." Yoo Yeonha offered.

I flinched. This had to be the work of my luck.

"Really? You're giving this to me?"

"Yeah, I don't see why not."

"If you say so. I'll gladly take it." I placed the sword on my back without hesitation.

"Do you know what this is?"

"I told you, we couldn't appraise it. Why? Do you know what it is?"

I pitied Yoo Yeonha for the first time in a while.

"Yeah, I do."

"You do? Well, I don't really mind."

Yoo Yeonha didn't pay much attention and handed me an envelope full of documents.

"This is what we found on Yi Yeonjun."

"Ah, thanks." I stored the envelope away.

"Also, have you heard?" Yoo Yeonha continued.

"A riot broke out in Pandemonium."

"A riot? What happened?"

“It’s because of the demon town that appeared there. Something seemed to have happened between the djinns and demons. It’s still a big secret for now. Here.”

She took out another envelope and I received it while furrowing my brows.

“You sure have a lot.”

“It’s a request for a mission.”

“Mission?”

I took out the documents inside. The first few words read, [*Escort Mission Contract*].

“I’m going to Pandemonium too, so could you be my escort?”

Yoo Yeonha brightly smiled at me.

“...”

I glanced at her before placing the documents away. I should probably participate in the major plot points since I didn’t know the future anymore.

“I’ll think about it.”

“Think about it positively. It’ll help us with future disasters if we can excavate the mineral there.”

“Mineral?”

“Yes, but... *Ssh*—” She suddenly placed a finger on her lips.

“Looks like you haven’t heard, but I can’t tell you anything until you accept.”

“What?”

“You have until next week.”

“*Hmm...* Okay.” I nodded.

“Good.”

She smiled leisurely and glanced at the sword hanging on my back.

“So, going back to that. You know what it is?”

“Oh, yeah. I do.”

“I didn’t know you had a hobby for appraisal.”

“It’s more like my eyes are that good rather than a hobby.”

“Ah, you’re right. So, what is it?”

Yoo Yeonha playfully asked and I seriously replied.

“It’s Balmung.”

“Ah, Balmung...?” Yoo Yeonha answered with a smile that soon faded and her expression stiffened.

“C-Come again?”

“Balmung. You’ve heard of it, right?”

“Pardon?”

Yoo Yeonha tilted her head. For the record, I told her exactly what I saw with *[Observation and Reading]*.

[Unknown Greatsword] [???] [???] — A greatsword of unknown origin.

[Observation and Reading] along with stigma’s magic power has unlocked a portion of this item’s description.

— *Balmung*. — *The treasure of the Nibelungs acquired by Siegfried. Golden mithril envelops the huge blade like silk. — It can reflect magic power and its strength will be amplified when used. — One must infuse 500 ml of blood and receive the sword's qualification to become its master.*

— *More details will be unlocked once the item awakens.*

“Haha, you’re funny. Balmung, *haha*.”

“I’m not kidding.”

Yoo Yeonha tried to escape reality, but I didn’t let her.

“If you’re not kidding then that sword... It’s really the Balmung that I know?”

She asked with a stiff face and stared at the sword on my back with a strange gaze.

“Yeah, it’s the one written about in the song of the Nibelungs.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha swallowed hard. I grew curious about her thoughts, but didn’t have the time to find out.

[The contaminated land will undergo a major change.]

The moment the system message popped up...

“*U-Um*, c-can you return that to m-me...” Yoo Yeonha asked while stuttering.

KOONG!

The contaminated land in front of us erupted.

“*Hmm.*”

Jin Sahyuk looked over the items Kim Hajin left behind. A magnifying glass, a robe, the basilisk’s leather, colorful crystals, etc. They all seemed inadequate for the time and effort she spent protecting him.

“What’s this?”

She tilted her head and picked up the magnifying glass. Prihi, the little king, had gifted this to Kim Hajin in Akatrina’s recorded past.

“Since it originally belonged to me...”

Jin Sahyuk placed it in her pocket without any guilt. She also took a few pieces of the basilisk’s leather and tried on the robe Kim Hajin left behind. It felt excellent.

Then...

Koong! A strange vibration rumbled through the East Sea.

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk felt quite comfortable in Kim Hajin’s robe, but stopped and raised her head. Soon, more vibrations occurred.

“What now?”

She snickered and longed for such excitement. Finally, she might be able to relieve her boredom.

“*Yaawn...*”

Jin Sahyuk stretched and activated her Reality Manipulation. A portal appeared in front of her with another space inside it.

“Let’s go.”

She stepped into the portal without hesitation.

Chapter 304

Lawless Zone (1)

The explosion turned over the land and crimson pillars of flame shot into the air. The flames penetrated the protective walls and stretched in every direction.

Aether moved before I could think. It stretched towards the flames and transformed into a thick barricade that stopped the fire from spreading. The explosion ended, but the chaos continued.

Koong!

The earth violently shook and shifted beneath us. Everywhere I looked, the ground slithered like a snake. Suddenly, a giant door appeared at the center of the contaminated land. It looked like a rectangular, metallic door.

“Uaah, uuk!”

Yoo Yeonha leaned against me as we swayed back and forth from the earthquake. I created a foothold with aether to stand on. She coughed in embarrassment and turned around as we regained our balance.

“What is that?”

“I have no idea.”

Runic language that I couldn’t understand floated around the mysterious door. They looked rather strange as I carefully studied them.

[Interpreting the runes with your gift, Observation and Reading.] [This is the first step in the demon realm transformation — Erosion.] [30 days until the door to the demon realm opens.]

“Looks like bad things will happen when that door opens.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke with a frown, “Although I’m not exactly sure what that is—”

“Be quiet while I interpret these runes.”

“What?”

Her face distorted into a scowl. I ignored her and continued working.

[This demon realm gate will increase the surrounding land’s rate of transformation.]

“This demon realm gate will increase the surrounding land’s rate of transformation.”

I spoke out loud so Yoo Yeonha could hear. Her expression returned to normal as she listened.

[The Door of Challenge will open in 30 days. A total of 200 people may rise to the challenge.]

“The Door of Challenge will open in 30 days. A total of 200 people may rise to the challenge.”

[This door will disappear forever if the challengers win.] [However, the door will completely open and a devil shall descend if the challengers lose.] [Entrance is first come first served.]

Demons suddenly rose from the transformed earth as I finished interpreting. They looked similar to humans, except for their horns like the demons in the Tower of Wish.

“The demon realm gate...”

It sounded strangely familiar. *The demon realm gate, the demon realm gate...* I kept repeating it in my head. Then I suddenly remembered.

“Ah, this is—”

One of the settings I discarded. It differed from the regular erosion and I went on hiatus before using it. A new world with challenges for a memorable ending.

“This is— What?”

“*Huh?* Oh, it’s nothing.” I shook my head at Yoo Yeonha’s question.

“Be sure to keep all the information I just told you a secret. I don’t want any djinns to enter that gate in 30 days.”

“Of course, you didn’t think I’d know that?” Yoo Yeonha shrugged, slightly offended.

“I already heard everything.”

Jin Sahyuk suddenly spoke up. Startled, I turned to the side and spotted her smirking at us.

“I’ll definitely be one of the 200 challengers.”

“...”

I felt self-conscious because of Yoo Yeonha. I had to pretend not to know Jin Sahyuk at all.

“I’ve seen her before. She’s Crevon’s former knight commander,” Yoo Yeonha remarked.

“Ah, you’re right.” I nodded at her words.

“This is ridiculous.”

Jin Sahyuk dug into her pockets as loud footsteps approached from a distance. Heroes finally made their way to the disastrous scene.

“What is she doing?” Yoo Yeonha stared at Jin Sahyuk with slight

suspicion. Jin Sahyuk pulled out a magnifying glass and peered through it at me.

Wait... a magnifying glass?

“Hey, hey! Stop!”

I stretched aether towards the magnifying glass, but... *Boom!* It shattered before I could reach it. *Chwaak...* The shards of glass fell on the ground.

“Damn it.”

I had no idea why it suddenly shattered. Maybe Jin Sahyuk caused it or it naturally broke.

I knew one thing.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk definitely saw something. Her eyes widened and she wore a dazed expression.

I didn’t have time to react.

“Hey! What happened here? I’m high-intermediate rank hero, Kim Wajung, from Creator’s Sacred Grace!”

Soon, hundreds of heroes and reporters poured in. I took my eyes off Jin Sahyuk for a split second.

“Damn it.”

She disappeared.

* * *

[Heart of Pandemonium — Chameleon Troupe Building]

“A request, you say?”

Boss received a call from Kim Hajin. He informed her about accepting Yoo Yeonha’s request as Jeronimo’s Fenrir.

— Yes, they want to hire me as a bodyguard.

It made sense considering Pandemonium’s dangers. Ordinary civilians could never imagine this place’s vastness and brutality.

“Are you heading to the west?”

Initially, Pandemonium began in the Mongolian plains. However, the territory stretched beyond Xinjiang into Kazakhstan as djinns gained more power.

— Yes, to Kazakhstan.

Boss nodded with her gaze still fixed on the TV screen.

[The demon realm gate at North Hamgyeong Province’s border has forced the association to call for an emergency meeting...]

Reports of the demon realm transformation in North Hamgyeong Province already spread. Boss focused more on Kim Hajin and Jin Sahyuk than on the news. She briefly saw the two of them together on the screen.

“Are you going alone?”

— Yes, it’s highly confidential.

“...”

She said nothing, but her imagination ran wild as Kim Hajin continued.

— I’m sorry I’ve been so busy lately, but my gift should’ve arrived by now. Boss, did you not get it yet?

“Gift?” Boss raised her eyebrows.

— Yes, some new clothes and a robe.

“I didn’t get any—”

Boss shook her head when she suddenly recalled last night's strange incident. Jain wore a dress and a robe she had never seen before. Then when she asked about them, Jain feigned surprise and dismissed her questions.

Did she really...?

Boss felt anger welling up in her heart.

“It appears Jain stole them.”

— *Ah*, Jain? Again?

“Again? I can’t believe this.”

So Jain did something like this before. Why didn’t I notice? Soon, Boss realized Jain must’ve disguised as her several times in the past.

“Jain...” Boss muttered.

“How dare you insult me, your boss.”

She clenched her fists.

— Boss?

“I’m hanging up.”

She hung up and immediately called Jain. Her hands shook with rage, but she tried to remain calm. She knew even the slightest hint of anger would drive Jain away.

— Hey Boss. What's up?

Thankfully, Jain picked up right away.

“Jain, where are... *Cough.*”

Boss nervously cleared her throat and smiled. She feigned kindness to lure in Jain.

“Where are you?”

— *Huh?*

Jain had never seen Boss smile and speak so warmly. Slightly bewildered, she began to stutter.

— *Um...* I'm in Paris for a party. Why did you call?

“*Ah*, nothing. I just wondered when you were coming home?”

—...

Jain felt wary of Boss' overly friendly demeanor. As the old saying goes, *Too much water drowned the miller*. She carefully asked from the other side of the smartwatch.

— Boss... did you, *um...* by any chance... find out?

* * *

Yoo Yeonha left her mansion under the full moon and concealed herself with a robe and mask. Only two people accompanied her on this top-secret mission: her secretary Jin Sechan and master rank hero Jin Seyeon. The two already arrived in Pandemonium and just sent her a message that they found a place to stay.

Once again, Yoo Yeonha scrutinized the most crucial piece of information before departing.

《Dimensional Entropy》 — ★★★ x 300,000,000 The most important item right now. — A source of unknown energy buried somewhere in Pandemonium's lawless zone. — Rumor has it the djinns and demons are fighting over it.

She made this her first and foremost goal. They only gave it a temporary name since no one knew whether it was actually an ore or something entirely different. However, she knew with certainty that this new energy would span across the entire globe. Therefore, she couldn't risk it falling into the hands of djinns or other entrepreneurs. Yoo Yeonha believed that only she, the Queen of Seoul, could handle such an item.

"With this, I'll have the entire world in my palm."

She clenched her fist when a man appeared from the garden's shadows. Yoo Yeonha crossed her arms at Kim Hajin.

"You're here."

"Yeah, where's the dwarven supercar?"

"Wait a second."

She approached the pond in the corner. The water looked crystal clear and carp happily swam inside. Yoo Yeonha pushed a button on her smartwatch and... *Shooong*— A huge platform rose from the bottom of the pond.

"Woah... You did a good job hiding it."

The dwarven supercar, sleek and shiny, sat on the platform.

"It's become a hobby to go out for a ride whenever I'm too stressed. I can't risk having it stolen."

Yoo Yeonha smiled.

"Let's get going then."

“Right.”

Kim Hajin sat in the front with Yoo Yeonha in the back. Immediately, he activated the *[Random Consolidation System]* and something amazing happened. Not only did the vehicle become sturdier and more efficient, but the seats also became wider and cozier.

“You’re really mysterious,” Yoo Yeonha muttered in awe.

“I’ll drive slowly, so you can take a nap. It’ll take at least an hour.”

“I’m not sleepy. More importantly, did you finish reading the Yi Yeonjun files?”

Kim Hajin nodded.

“I did. He’s more dangerous than I thought.”

Yoo Jinhyuk was still exploring Yi Yeonjun’s past based on Kim Hosup’s reports. However, what he found so far already confirmed Yi Yeonjun’s numerous evil deeds.

“He is.”

Yi Yeonjun always got what he wanted at all costs. Yoo Yeonha acted similarly in a sense, but Yi Yeonjun didn’t care about rationality or practicality. He only relied on violence to meet his needs.

“Ah, right.”

Yoo Yeonha casually brought up the subject that kept her awake these days. She had been wanting to ask for a while now.

“You lied about Balmung, right?”

He must’ve lied. How could he recognize Balmung so quickly when even professional appraisers couldn’t?

“No, I didn’t.”

Kim Hajin sounded unwavering and Yoo Yeonha felt the confidence in his voice. It made her heart heavy.

“Then give it back.” Yoo Yeonha pulled his sleeve.

“Give it back.”

“Give what back?”

“I planned on giving it to Nayun anyways...”

“Pft.”

Yoo Yeonha sounded pitiful, but Kim Hajin only smiled.

“Okay, how about we make it a lease? I want more shares.”

“You have plenty already.”

“No.” Kim Hajin bitterly shook his head.

“I need a lot more to prepare for the future.”

* * *

[Pandemonium — Kazakhstan’s Lawless Zone]

Most Central Asian countries declared a dissolution of state because of the recent monster invasion. Kazakhstan did the same, but its legacy lived on as humanity continued referring to the lawless zone as Kazakhstan.

“We’re here.”

The sky began to fade when we arrived in Kazakhstan’s notorious lawless zone.

“Huh?”

The flight took exactly an hour. I woke up Yoo Yeonha, who had fallen asleep while working in the backseat. Then I placed the dwarven supercar in her vehicular spatial pouch.

“Are you sure we’re in the lawless zone?”

Yoo Yeonha doubtfully muttered. Everything seemed too peaceful for a land infested with over 3 billion monsters.

“Just because this is the lawless zone doesn’t mean everyone is fighting 24/7. It’s because of the circles here.”

“Ah, I get it.”

“The circles—”

“I researched it in advance. I don’t need your explanation.”

“*Hmm.*”

A circle referred to a group of djinns similar to Satan’s servants. All djinns living in the lawless zone belonged to a circle. It looked peaceful for now because of the power balance between different circles. One hasty move could lead to a full-blown war since insulting a circle member meant insulting the circle itself.

“*Huh?*”

Yoo Yeonha pointed into the distance. “Look over there. Looks like they even sell food here.”

I turned towards where she pointed.

[Skewered Pork]

The stall featured skewers of meat on display. No ordinary meat could make Yoo Yeonha drool like that. The meat came from an intermediate rank, grade 5 monster called the *[Effellie Boar]*. Effellie boars only lived in Central Asia and couldn’t be found in Korea.

“Should we get some?”

“Well, if you insist.”

We approached the stall with a grim-looking djinn roasting the meat.

“How much?” I asked.

The djinn glanced at me. “300,000 won or 300 DP.”

It seemed they used both won and DP in Pandemonium. However...

“Fuck that.”

“*Eh?* W-What?”

Yoo Yeonha seemed surprised at my cursing. Of course, I could easily pay 300,000 won. However, all these djinns belonged to a circle. The other members would undermine me if I let this one off. Djinns considered weakness a sin.

“Fuck that?”

The vendor glared at me. His threatening appearance didn’t scare me.

“Yeah, fuck that.”

“Then get lost.”

“I would, but you haven’t sold me the food yet.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha seemed confused.

“What’s wrong with you? I told you we have to keep a low profile,” she whispered, but I ignored her.

“Are you gonna pay in DP or won?”

The djinn finally gave up.

“Won.”

“It’ll be 70,000 won each.”

That sounded much more reasonable. I paid 250,000 won for 4 skewers.

5 minutes later...

“It tastes even more amazing because of the discount. Let’s head to the hotel now.”

Nom, nom— We walked to the hotel while eating.

“This place is far more dangerous than you think. Remember to keep your robe on at all times.”

“Yes, I know. *Ah*, there it is.”

Finally, the hotel came into view. The wooden building looked more like a pub than a hotel and its name also sounded quite cheesy, [*Djinn Days*].

“Let’s go.”

“Yeah.”

Kiik— We entered the hotel.

“*Mmm?*”

“Wow, this is surprising.”

Our eyes widened when we opened the door. The hotel appeared

shabby on the outside, but the huge lobby even had a bar. Lots of customers walked around as well.

“Let’s get going.”

“Okay. They said room 303.”

Yoo Yeonha quickly passed through the lobby when I spotted a man sitting alone in the corner. He stood out with his disheveled hair and bushy beard.

Then the morning sunlight seeped through the window and shone on his face.

“...!”

Immediately, my hair stood on end.

I couldn’t tell whether he looked drunk or sleepy as he leaned against the window. I had seen him before through Spartan’s eyes and also in the composite sketches. Yi Yeonjun suddenly appeared.

Chapter 305

Lawless Zone (2)

Yi Yeonjun sat at a table in the lobby. I certainly saw the same man through Spartan's eyes.

At first, my thoughts suddenly froze. Spartan would've told me if Yi Yeonjun came close or planned anything suspicious.

I made sure not to stare for more than 3 seconds. Yi Yeonjun should know my face, so it would be bad if he spotted me.

— Spartan, where are you?

I transmitted my thoughts and quickly climbed the stairs.

—...

Soon, my connection with Spartan returned. Of course, he had been sleeping. It slightly dumbfounded me, but I understood. After all, Spartan possessed fairly low stamina.

— Did you sleep well? You know Yi Yeonjun is right there, right?

—...!

Spartan's consciousness spiked and he gave an excuse. *I planned to chase him after a quick nap. I only slept 6 hours.*

— Don't worry about it. From now on, just tell me if you're going to sleep. Seeing Yi Yeonjun startled me. Anyways, continue following him once you're refreshed.

I ordered Spartan, who began washing his face at a nearby lake. He would probably eat something before heading over.

“What are you doing over there?” Yoo Yeonha asked while leaning against the guardrail.

“Nothing.”

I glanced at Yi Yeonjun one last time. He sipped on alcohol while exchanging mental transmissions with Bell.

“Do you want to grab a drink? We don’t have much time,” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“No, it’s nothing.” I shrugged and continued moving.

We met the two people waiting for us in room 302.

“It’s been a while, Hajin.” Jin Seyeon greeted me with her usual gentle smile.

“Nice to meet you. We’ve met once before. I hope you remember me.”

Jin Sechan respectfully reached out his hand.

“Ah, yes. How can I forget? I’m still using the Desert Eagle you gave me.”

I shook his hand and took off my robe. Jin Seyeon took it from me and smoothly hung it on the hanger. Then Yoo Yeonha sat at the head of the table and began our meeting.

“*Cough.*” She put on a serious expression.

“I’m sure you all know why we’re gathered here.”

She projected a holographic video from her smartwatch. It took place deep underground. Faint lights hung from the ceiling and lit the dark surroundings.

“One of our agents took this. He infiltrated Pandemonium 5 years ago as a djinn.”

Koong— Koong— Koong—

Something large rumbled and the agent marched towards the source. Yoo Yeonha sped it up until the agent arrived at the end of the mine shaft.

“Here.”

Yoo Yeonha wanted this item.

“I call this transcendental energy, [*Dimensional Entropy*].”

Dozens of djinns surrounded a spherical ore emitting a dark-green glow.

— What are we going to do with this? The demons in the north are demanding it.

— I’d hand it over to Terror before those bastards.

Yoo Yeonha paused the video.

“As you can see, the djinns and demons aren’t getting along. At least not with the demons in the north. Not only do demons look more grotesque, but they also serve a different devil. Furthermore, these demons don’t have any money. Only demon merchants possess DP.”

Demons and demon merchants appeared throughout the world a few months before we defeated Orden. They both came from the demon realm, but received completely different treatment.

— I don’t know about that either. Who knows what Terror will do with this? Wouldn’t it be better to give it to Wicked?

— No.

The djinn who seemed to be in charge shook his head.

Yoo Yeonha paused again and explained.

“By the way, this djinn is called Vicious. The original Vicious died and a new djinn took his place. He’s currently the lowest ranked member of the Nine Evils, but he holds substantial influence over this lawless zone after uniting several circles. Now, let’s keep watching.”

Vicious spoke as the footage resumed.

— This ore has enough power to destroy the balance of djinn society. We’ll have to submit to the demons if it falls into their hands. However, we also don’t know what will happen if it falls into Terror or Wicked’s hands. Unfortunately, we can’t have it for ourselves since we can’t protect or use it.

Several system windows popped up in front of me.

[Information has been added after witnessing a special settings change.]
[Dimensional Entropy – Clusters of condensed energy created when demons crossed over dimensions.] *[Co-author’s opinion – Properly using it will help you.]*

The co-author seemed to be more talkative as the ending neared. I sighed and smiled. I wanted anything helpful regardless of the co-author’s intentions. I had to thoroughly prepare for the final arc. That way, everyone could reach the proper ending.

— Instead, we’ll sell it to humans for money and artifacts. *Oi, Licros!*

The camera moved towards Vicious when he shouted. That seemed to be the name of Yoo Yeonha’s agent.

— Go to Essence of the Strait and tell them I, Vicious, will sell them a life-changing item.

With that, Yoo Yeonha stopped the video.

“That’s how this mission came about. You get the gist, right?”

Jin Seyeon and I both nodded.

Yoo Yeonha continued with her arms crossed. “That ore can’t be

transferred through normal means. Its size is too noticeable and magic power will cause it to explode. We need a special case and vehicle to move it.”

Yoo Yeonha paused and Jin Sechan stepped up. He placed a case on the table.

“This is a tilonium case. Lightning magic has already been applied and we built it to withstand the dimensional entropy according to Vicious’ information.”

“*Mmm...* So we’re going to store the ore in this case and transport it with the dwarven supercar?”

Yoo Yeonha shook her head at my question.

“The dwarven supercar runs on magic power. It still wouldn’t be 100% safe with the case protecting it, so we prepared another vehicle to return to Korea.”

“Is there a reason you personally came? It’s a bit dangerous to return to Korea from here.”

I worried about her safety. Yoo Yeonha had only reached high-intermediate rank, grade 2. Her growth speed could be considered quick for her age, but nowhere near geniuses like Chae Nayun or Kim Suho. Despite that, Yoo Yeonha wore a resolute expression.

“This is my job, so I’ll do it. Plus, only the five of us can know about this.”

Five of us... Ah, including the agent. I thought to myself.

“According to international law, mysterious items transcending common sense must be turned over to the association. We can’t let anyone else find out, knowing how corrupt they are.”

“I agree. Yeonha is far more trustworthy than the association,” Jin Seyeon quickly replied.

“Huh? You really think so?” I asked because the Hero Association loved Jin Seyeon more than any other hero.

She answered with a bitter smile. “I’m quite disappointed in the Hero Association because of recent incidents. Park Hanho, the girl of authority... they all seemed to have lost their founding principles. That’s why I decided to follow Yeonha.”

“Ah...”

The association kept the girl of authority’s kidnapping a secret. Only after Park Hanho’s betrayal did the entire world find out and it caused a huge uproar. It slightly stung my conscience as the person who abducted her.

“Oh right, did Park Hanho’s daughter actually come back to life?”

“Pardon? Ah, I don’t know much about that.”

“No.” Yoo Yeonha answered my question.

“That girl isn’t Park Hanho’s real daughter. It was a chameleon humanoid monster with Park Yeonhee’s transplanted brain. I guess it could be debated since the humanoid monster really believed she was Park Yeonhee.”

“Ah... I see. Yeonha, do you know what the association will do with senior Park Hanho?” Jin Seyeon bitterly asked.

“My guess would be execution.”

The atmosphere turned grim at her words and a cold wind carrying the scent of blood and magic power seeped in from the window.

Chak, chak!

Yoo Yeonha clapped to lighten the mood. Then she spoke with a smile.

“Let’s stop talking and get some rest. We’ll have to wake up early tomorrow.”

* * *

[Vicious’ Mine Shaft]

We went underground early in the morning and quickly moved without any sightseeing. I carried a spatial pouch filled with 50 billion won and Jin Seyeon carried 6 high rank artifacts that would all be traded for the *[Dimensional Entropy]*.

“Hand over the items and money first.”

Vicious and his comrades stood before us in a dark underground space. They showed no signs of compromise.

“Here’s 50 billion won, cash. The artifacts will be given once we retrieve the item and leave.”

Yoo Yeonha took the spatial pouch from me and threw it over to Vicious. One of his comrades checked the contents.

“50,000 won bills and 100,000 of them. It’s 50 billion won, alright.”

“Great, you know us djinns hate checks.”

Yoo Yeonha smirked at Vicious’ words.

“The spatial pouch will be a gift. It’s a pinnacle grade one that’ll easily fetch 3 billion won.”

The djinn holding the spatial pouch flinched and glanced at it in shock. Vicious stared at Yoo Yeonha before taking a deep breath and nodding.

“Good. We’ll open the way. Follow me.”

He turned around and we followed. *Tak, tak*. The path became

narrower as we walked and the soot in the air stuck to our skin. Even qi reinforcement didn't help here.

“Haaa...”

Yoo Yeonha's breathing grew rough and Jin Sechan worriedly looked at her.

After 5 minutes of walking...

“...!”

A fierce gust of magic power suddenly blew and pressured us. I held back from vomiting and walked over.

“It's here.”

Vicious announced as we looked forward in a daze. *Chwaaa...* A mysterious, spherical ore pulsed with dark green magic power.

[Dimensional Entropy] [Durability 10/10] — A transcendental stone with the condensed power of multiple dimensions. — Will release magic power until its durability runs out.

“Take it. If you can, that is.”

I stepped up and grabbed the dimensional entropy with aether. The ore seemed to be as big as a baseball, but weighed over a ton. Aether burned from the ore's searing magic power.

“Whew.”

I carried it over and placed it in the tilonium case. The case gently hugged the ore and sealed it inside. The dark green light in the mine shaft immediately disappeared along with the queasy feeling in my stomach.

“Oh? As expected of Essence of the Strait, that's an interesting piece of equipment. Is it light?”

“It’s enchanted with weight-reducing magic.”

I picked up the case and Yoo Yeonha turned around without a word. She seemed to be in a hurry to leave. Then again, most girls wouldn’t want to stay in this mine shaft. Jin Sechan quickly followed her while Jin Seyeon handed over the 6 artifacts.

“Here you go.”

“*Ohoho*. Oi, Lilac! Appraise them.”

“Go ahead, Hajin. I’ll finish the trade.”

I trusted Jin Seyeon and left the mine shaft. Two identical cars waited outside. They seemed to be made from adamantium, the strongest known metal in the modern world. The jet-black windows also couldn’t be seen through. These two sedans could be compared to war tanks.

Tok, tok—

Someone knocked from inside the car parked in front. I opened the passenger seat with the tilonium case in hand.

“*Hmm?*”

Yoo Yeonha sat in the backseat and a man I didn’t know sat in the driver’s seat. She explained after seeing my dazed expression.

“You saw him in the video, right? This is our agent, Licros. I hired a separate driver, so you could focus on guarding the item.”

Licros nodded at me. “Nice to meet you.”

“*Ah*, yes. Nice to meet you too.”

I sat next to him after our greeting.

“We’ll leave once Jin Seyeon comes back.” Yoo Yeonha informed us.

Jin Sechan and Jin Seyeon would ride in the other car in case anything happened.

Soon, the Divine Archer came out and got in the other driver's seat. Jin Sechan waited in the back seat, so they immediately took off after Jin Seyeon started the engine.

“Let's go.”

Licros nodded and stepped on the accelerator. *Vroooooom*— The gas engine sounded rather nostalgic as I often teleported now.

Suddenly, Yoo Yeonha began acting strange in the back seat. She moaned, struck her chest, and bit her nails.

“Are you okay?” I asked as she massaged her temples.

“Yeah... I'm fine. I just hate confined spaces.”

“Oh... you have claustrophobia?”

“It's claustrophobia, not clausticphobia. I'm a bit embarrassed about it, but it's quite severe.”

“I see.”

I obviously knew since I created her background setting. She also had germaphobia, paranoia, coulrophobia... Yoo Yeonha lived with countless mental illnesses that would only worsen as she experienced constant threats due to her position.

“Just sleep. I'll take care of the rest.”

“*Heh*, okay.” Yoo Yeonha laughed and nodded.

The sedan left the heart of the lawless zone and finally reached the outskirts. I looked outside with my heightened senses and didn't sense any threats.

“We’re about to leave the lawless zone.” I reassured her.

“Got it.” Yoo Yeonha seemed to be feeling better and smiled.

“Oh right, the association finished deciphering the runic language around the demon realm gate. They should begin gathering heroes in a few days.”

“Gathering heroes?”

“They need 200 to enter the demon realm gate. You’ll participate, right?”

“Why would I? I can just sneak in.”

“*Pft*, I won’t help if you get caught.”

I shrugged and Yoo Yeonha leaned back. She looked comfortable, so I didn’t worry too much.

I faced forward when— Something sharp flew towards us.

“...?”

It broke through the window before I noticed. Bullet time also didn’t activate. Something simply pierced the window and the driver’s head suddenly exploded.

“*Eh?*”

A dazed voice rang out. I turned to the side and saw the arrow that replaced Licros’s head.

Then I checked on Yoo Yeonha covered in Licros’ blood and brain fluids.

“What...”

She blankly muttered as another arrow flew towards us. I formed a

shield with aether and slightly veered the arrow off course. It pierced Yoo Yeonha's shoulder and missed her head.

“Kyaak!”

Yoo Yeonha screamed, but I shouted even louder.

“DUCK!”

She didn't listen and kept panicking. Yoo Yeonha probably never witnessed such a gory death before.

I couldn't reverse time either because of the skill cooldown, so I quickly strengthened the sedan with aether and stigma.

Chwaaak—

Aether enveloped the car. A mere arrow wouldn't be able to break through anymore, but I couldn't do anything about the shattered window.

I shouted again.

“Duck! Duck, Yoo Yeonha!”

“Ah, aah, aah...”

She struggled to breathe and clutched her arms while whimpering.

Another magic arrow flew towards us. As expected, it couldn't break through.

I moved over to the back seat. Yoo Yeonha suffered from a panic attack and violently shook. First, I pushed her head down.

“Calm down. Calm down.”

Then I caressed her head with stigma's magic power.

“It’s me. Look at me!”

Yoo Yeonah slowly raised her head and stared at me with eyes full of fear. Tears flowed down her cheeks.

“*Kuhuk!*”

She suddenly coughed and a piece of Licros’ shattered skull came out of her mouth. She saw it too and must’ve subconsciously swallowed it. Immediately, her eyes rolled and her body swayed.

“Hey, snap out of it!”

“T-This...”

“Just keep your head down. We just have to keep out of the shooter’s line of sight. The arrow can only come in through the broken window. It can’t do anything about the car.”

“...”

“Got it?”

Yoo Yeonha nodded.

“Geez, talk about a surprise.”

Is this how people feel when they face Black Lotus? I muttered and sent a mental transmission to Jin Seyeon.

“Jin Seyeon, where are you?”

— Hajin! We’re—

She quickly responded, but...

Tzzt— Something cut her off and they seemed to be under attack as well. Without a choice, I called Spartan over and took out the Desert Eagle. I couldn’t do anything inside the car, so I prepared to leave.

“W-Wait!” Yoo Yeonha firmly grabbed my hand.

“A-Are you leaving?”

“You wait here. It’ll be safer.”

“No, no! I don’t want to!”

I shook off her hand and opened the door. She reached out and desperately shouted.

“Don’t go! Don’t go!”

I left and an arrow immediately greeted me. Bullet time didn’t activate this time either. Instead, a system window popped up explaining why.

[Warning! You are facing a sharpshooter with a similar level of gift. Master Sharpshooter’s sub-gift will be temporarily sealed.]

“Similar level my ass...”

I gritted my teeth and took out the Desert Eagle. I just had to strengthen my gift with stigma if we stood on the same level.

“Ah...”

I suddenly realized something important. I needed aether to transform the Desert Eagle into its sniper form, but aether currently fused with the car to protect Yoo Yeonha. As such, I could only use my bow and arrow.

Chapter 306

Lawless Zone (3)

I hid behind the car and commanded Spartan. He quickly appeared in the sky and looked down at us.

Whoosh!

Another arrow flew towards us at the car tire. Aether tried to block it, but the tire couldn't withstand the attack. *Kwang!* It popped like a balloon as Spartan shared his vision with me. I spotted the enemy about 5 km to the east. The shooter made their location even clearer when they shot at Spartan.

—...!

Spartan flapped his wings and dodged, but the arrow turned and chased after him. *Chwaaaaa...* The arrow flew quicker than Spartan and he would die at this rate. I ordered him to escape as the arrow grazed his feathers. Spartan teleported away just in time and the arrow shot through the air. An unpleasant system alert popped up.

[Spartan's wing has been injured. He can no longer use his authority.]

I bit my lips as my field of vision returned to normal. I looked around the lawless zone and spotted a few pubs and inns nearby. Fights frequently occurred here, so no one would help even if we asked.

"Tsk..."

Only the sedan enveloped in aether protected me, but it wouldn't be able to withstand more of those terrifying arrows.

Without any other choice, I took out *[Temujin's Bow Blessed By Horus]* and *[Athena's Moonlight Arrow]*. I didn't hesitate to save myself and

Yoo Yeonha. I needed to do this.

Master Sharpshooter's senses heightened the moment I grabbed an arrow. I looked to the east and my vision quickly stretched until it reached the target 5 km away.

I finally saw a clear view of the sharpshooter attacking us.

The woman held a black bow and her dark eyes seemed to be staring directly at me. No, she most certainly stared at me. We exchanged glances 5 km apart.

Kiik—

She drew her bowstring, but I felt like I knew her. Blue hair flowed down her black leather armor. Slightly tanned skin and fair facial features... This sharpshooter looked exactly like who I imagined while writing.

“Leraje...”

That should be her name. One of the ten devils I thought of using for the story's final arc, Leraje the Green Devil.

The color green represented her, but she hated that color so much she dyed her hair blue. Leraje possessed more moderate views than most devils. She still seemed to be in her incarnation body by the looks of it. Still, I couldn't easily deal with the only archer among the devils.

“*Sigh.*”

Why did the 14th ranked devil appear here? I felt annoyed by the sudden turn of events, but complaining wouldn't do me any good.

I took a deep breath and nocked [*Athena's Moonlight Arrow*]. Then I poured everything into it: stigma's magic power, the [*Random Consolidation System*], and [*Constraints and Amplifications*]. The moonlight arrow emitted a terrifying magic power with brilliant rays of light. The moon's holy power enveloped the earth and heavens as I aimed at the devil.

However, I didn't fire due to Leraje's strange reaction.

—...

She placed her bow down and stared at me. Her gaze held no hostility or killing intent. Her expressionless face only showed off her cold beauty. Leraje finally muttered something after a long time.

— My name.

A fleeting voice escaped her coy lips as she placed away her bow and arrows. I couldn't understand why, but she no longer intended on attacking. As such, I also placed my weapon down. Then Leraje disappeared like a mirage.

“What?”

I felt quite taken aback.

“Did my arrow scare her away? No, I doubt it.”

Regardless, the current situation benefitted us. Not only did I conserve my strength, but I also didn't have to risk my life fighting her.

[A huge luck has erupted!] [A Single Word Pays Back A Thousand Gold Debt – Your thoughtless mumbling has saved your life!] [The great rank 14 devil Leraje has taken an interest in the human who recognized her.] [Information regarding Leraje has been added to your gift, Observation and Reading.] [You have obtained 333 SP!] [Narrow Escape from Death (7/9) – Special stat, Accumulation of Luck, has partly unlocked!]

[Narrow Escape from Death] popped up again.

“My luck caused that?”

I exclaimed in surprise and suddenly recalled someone.

“Ah!”

I ran to the sedan and opened it. Yoo Yeonha sat in the corner with a pale face while trembling.

The car's interior had been completely cleaned. Licros' corpse had disappeared and a current of electricity crackled inside.

Yoo Yeonha had burned everything away.

* * *

[North Pandemonium – Undeveloped Area]

A temple no human knew about existed in Russian territory north of Pandemonium. Monsters swarmed the area and a coniferous forest shrouded the temple. Countless djinns and demons gathered to worship the rank 14 devil in this dark temple.

"She should be fine on her own, right?"

The djinn assigned to this temple, Destruction, worriedly spoke. Many djinns and a few demons also waited for their lord's return.

"The outside world is dangerous. Remember what happened to Plucas."

Destruction had carefully helped the rank 14 devil descend more than anyone else when the demon realm transformation began. He also made sure no one would ever find out after what happened to Plucas.

"Don't worry. Lord Leraje is a noble among the strongest in the demon realm."

The devil's henchman seemed more carefree. Corte, the most human-looking servant among the demons, spoke with a smile.

"Lord Leraje isn't someone a mere human can injure."

Leraje suddenly returned to the temple. Her ability allowed her to freely change her body's composition. She took the form of wind and

quickly arrived at her throne. The servants all respectfully bowed.

“...?”

However, Corte noticed something off. Leraje didn't return with the *[Dimensional Entropy]* that she personally left to obtain.

Corte made eye contact with Leraje and flinched. The devil gave them a simple command.

— Rise.

She didn't speak, but projected letters using Earth's technology known as a smartwatch. The constraint placed on her caused her to expend life force every time she spoke, so Destruction gave her a smartwatch to express her thoughts.

— I didn't bring the object you mentioned.

Corte and Destruction stared at the words in the air.

— A mysterious human knew my name.

Leraje leaned against her throne. Her youthful look and soft figure shone seductively. Corte felt displeased. They required the *[Dimensional Entropy]* for devils to descend, but Leraje gave up on it because of a mere human.

“Lord, you are a renowned noble across the demon realm. It wouldn't be strange for tales of your strength to spread on Earth, so—”

Leraje furrowed her brows and cut him off.

— Humans don't know me. This isn't the demon realm.

Tadadak— Leraje typed on the holographic keyboard and looked around.

— He knew my name.

“Is that so?”

— Of course, I never lie.

Leraje yawned and slept often since her descent hadn't been completed.

— I'm sleepy. Wake me if those old devils contact us. Also, look into the human who recognized me. He seemed quite interesting.

Leraje fell asleep after giving them such orders. Corte stared at her sleeping figure and turned towards Destruction.

“Destruction.”

“Yes sir.”

“Look into this human Lord Leraje has taken an interest in. You'll also have to bring back the *[Dimensional Entropy]*.”

“...?”

Destruction widened his eyes before smiling. He had been longing for such a mission.

He recently learned the human who took the *[Dimensional Entropy]* was none other than Yoo Jinwoong's daughter.

“Understood. Please leave it to me.”

Destruction happily replied and laughed.

* * *

[Central Asia]

I threw the car away. It could be repaired, but its tattered state would pose a huge risk if someone attacked us again. I summoned Sannuri, whom I turned into a card, and rode on her with Yoo Yeonha. Sannuri

ran fast as ever despite also carrying the *[Dimensional Entropy]*.

Click— Clack—

I checked Yoo Yeonha's condition as Sannuri sped forward. She trembled sporadically, her body felt freezing, and her breathing remained rough. All the strength had left her body like a bird drenched in rain. Yoo Yeonha needed some rest.

I spotted a natural cave surrounded by greenery and headed there.

"Get down."

"..."

Yoo Yeonha got off Sannuri without a word. She staggered, but didn't fall and simply sat against the cave wall. Then she stared at me and pretended to be fine. I took this moment to message Jin Seyeon.

"Jin Seyeon, are you okay?"

—...

Tzzt. Static rang out a few times before she replied.

— Yeah, we survived. The car broke down, but we escaped. Where are you now?

As expected, a master rank hero couldn't die so easily. She even managed to protect Jin Sechan.

"I'll send you the coordinates. Tell me if you're too far."

I sent her our current location and she replied with a troubled voice.

— Yeah, we're quite far. About two days away on foot. We went in different directions...

"Send me your location. I'll pick you up."

— Pick me up?

I looked at Sannuri. She immediately understood and unhappily snorted.

“Yes, I have a horse. She’s incredibly smart, beautiful, and kind.”

Sannuri’s expression brightened as Jin Seyeon sounded confused.

— A horse?

“Yes. Anyways, send me your coordinates first.”

— *Ah... yes.*

Soon, my smartwatch beeped and I showed their location to Sannuri. She stared for about 10 seconds before neighing. She seemed to be in a good mood now.

“It’s pretty far, so you can run as much as you want.”

— *Hiiiing.*

“Yep, you don’t have to carry anyone on your way there. Run as quickly as you want. Feel free to kill any monsters or demons.”

— *Hiiiing!*

Sannuri cheerfully cried before bolting out of the cave. *Whoosh!* She disappeared like lightning and black soot flickered where she passed over.

“*Haha.*”

I chuckled and sat as well. Yoo Yeonha kept staring at me from the side. Her face looked pale like a patient on the brink of fainting. I met her gaze and asked.

“Are you okay?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha nodded. *Did she lose the ability to speak?* She hadn't said a word since we got on Sannuri.

“You look like you're going to die soon.”

I mischievously joked to lighten the mood and make her talk.

“...”

Still, she didn't say a word and only stared. After a long time, she gulped and finally spoke.

“I saw it.”

“Saw what?” I nonchalantly asked.

“You using a bow.”

A gust of wind blew and a strange humming echoed off the walls. I couldn't properly hear her.

“You saw?”

“Yeah.” She nodded resolutely.

“Your bow, arrow, and the huge magic power you aimed at the enemy.”

“...”

“I feel like an idiot for never suspecting it. You possessed extraordinary skills with the bow even at Cube. I still remember the curve shot you showed at the festival.”

I didn't say anything and simply scratched my head. I hoped she wouldn't notice while panicking, but that didn't turn out to be the case.

Yoo Yeonha sighed.

“I know what that bow is. No, anyone with decent information would recognize Black Lotus’ bow.”

I sat still and contemplated a response. *Should I admit it or deny it?* I couldn’t think of any excuses.

When I heard Yoo Yeonha’s next words...

“You’re willing to go that far to take revenge on the Chameleon Troupe?”

My head turned blank. I just stayed silent and allowed her to continue.

“You’re willing to dirty your hands and hurt yourself to—”

Yoo Yeonha paused and pitifully looked at me. I had no idea why. The only reaction I could give...

“...?”

I simply tilted my head at her.

Chapter 307

The Stories That Become Bridges

(1)

Blood, flesh, and the shattered pieces of a skull covered her. Cranial fluid splashed into her eyes and brain matter flew into her mouth. The incident from a couple of hours ago replayed in Yoo Yeonha's mind. *Chwaaak!* An arrow flew into the car before anyone realized and the driver's head exploded like a balloon. The sickening texture, smell... everything disgusted her. She still felt sick after emptying her stomach. The stench of death clung to her like a leech and she couldn't get it off.

“...!”

Yoo Yeonha tossed and turned in her nightmare before waking up. She sweated all over and only darkness greeted her. Yoo Yeonha grew nauseous and staggered up while leaning against the wall. She couldn't help but throw up again.

“Ah...”

She collapsed from sheer exhaustion. What happened today traumatized her. Death felt much more horrific than she expected, especially up close. She thought she would be indifferent and believed she had become tougher. Yet...

Is it because I stayed away from real battles for too long? Am I still too young?

Yoo Yeonha clenched her teeth and blamed herself. She recalled Licros and personally selected him as a Falling Blossom agent. The brave Mexican volunteered to be a spy despite having a wife and two children. Today, he disappeared without a trace. Yoo Yeonha had cremated his body herself.

“I’m sorry.”

He died because of her selfishness and she vowed to remember him forever. His family would be taken care of with all her efforts.

She wiped her tears and looked around. Kim Hajin had disappeared even though he stayed beside her until she fell asleep.

“Where did he go?”

She instinctively turned on her smartwatch out of fear.

[T-The number you have c-called cannot be reached at t-this time—]

Her broken smartwatch refused to work, so she walked to the cave entrance without a choice. She didn’t want to be alone.

“Haaa...”

Yoo Yeonha cautiously approached with her whip, but sighed in relief when she spotted Kim Hajin sitting by the entrance. He must’ve been standing guard until he fell asleep. She smiled and placed her whip down. Then she staggered towards him.

“...”

She recalled her nightmare again after seeing him asleep. Kim Hajin had held Black Lotus’ bow and arrow.

“You poor thing...” she pitifully murmured.

Just how much weight did he carry? Yoo Yeonha couldn’t imagine the pain and pressure he bore. Kim Hajin refused to comment, but she felt certain he joined the Chameleon Troupe out of revenge. He walked straight into the monster’s mouth to earn its trust and bring it down for good. He even willingly dirtied his hands for this goal.

“He who fights with monsters must take care, lest he becomes a monster himself.”

If you gaze long enough into the abyss, the abyss also gazes into you. Yoo Yeonha recalled Friedrich Nietzsche's famous quote and her heart grew heavy. She slowly stretched out her hand and smoothed Kim Hajin's ruffled hair. He looked like a child in his sleep, which made him all the more pitiful.

A person can't bear so much weight alone. You can ask your friends for help, so why won't you?

"..."

Yoo Yeonha sat next to him since the area around him felt warm. Perhaps this heat came from his clothes.

"Yaawn..."

The warmth made her sleepy again. This time, she felt positive she wouldn't have a nightmare.

"Uhm... Ahmm..."

Yoo Yeonha slowly dozed off. She leaned against Kim Hajin's shoulder and used it as a pillow for pleasant dreams.

5 minutes later...

The cave slightly shone from moonlight. A breeze blew and the wide-awake Kim Hajin opened his eyes. He stared at Yoo Yeonha leaning against his shoulder.

"Why does she always misunderstand?"

Kim Hajin grumbled, but couldn't deny her sleeping face looked quite adorable. He covered Yoo Yeonha with a blanket made from aether. She fell deeper asleep from the warmth and smiled.

* * *

A new day dawned and the sun rose. Sannuri brought back Jin Seyeon

and Jin Sechan. I could only imagine the hardships they faced from their appearances. We celebrated our reunion with a simple hug.

“An archer ambushed us. We managed to escape, but our car was destroyed and djinns kept chasing us.”

“You too?”

Leraje had attacked both cars at the same time. A truly impressive feat.

We began a strategy meeting to safely return. The association couldn't be relied on for reinforcements. Fortunately, we could use Sannuri for transportation.

Our meeting concluded, but Sannuri hated being around the *[Dimensional Entropy]*. I had to chop some trees and carve some stones to make a carriage. Thankfully, Sannuri didn't mind pulling a carriage.

“Hop inside.”

I led them to the newly made carriage. I only invested 3 hours, but it could comfortably fit four people thanks to *[Young Dwarf's Dexterity]*.

“It's surprisingly cozy in here.”

“I agree.”

Yoo Yeonha and Jin Seyeon exclaimed, but I still had more to show off. I placed my hand on the carriage and activated the *[Random Consolidation System]*. The number 60 appeared and the carriage grew even bigger and lighter. The interior could now fit four people laying down after being enhanced by 60%.

“Enchant.”

Lastly, I activated my *[Four-Colored Enchantment]*.

“Black, flow, isolation.”

I muttered these keywords as stigma seeped into the carriage and blended it with the surroundings. I used this enchantment for *[Concealment]*.

“Let’s go.”

I climbed inside and the trio stared in awe before climbing in as well. Sannuri began moving after everyone boarded. I kept an eye out for any possible ambushes.

“I’m glad I chose you to be my bodyguard.”

I simply smiled at Yoo Yeonha’s compliment and still felt a bit awkward because of her misunderstanding.

Sannuri raced across the grasslands at about 400 km/hr. The view outside quickly changed as we headed towards Pyeongan Island in Korea. We should arrive in two days at our current speed.

I suddenly recalled that cold, yet beautiful voice.

— My name.

Leraje had muttered as she stared at me. I checked the new information from our encounter.

[Leraje] [Current Power 9.3 / Potential 9.85] — Rank 14 Devil — Invasion Alignment – Neutral & Moderate — Has taken an interest in you. — Likes archers like herself. — Loves board games such as chess...

I came up with some of those settings, but not all of them. I carefully went over the list when...

[Sorry, I turned off my smartwatch during training. Just saw your text.]

I received a text from Chae Nayun.

Jin Sahyuk returned to Seoul and visited the Hero Plaza alone.

The large domed stadium sat at the heart of Seoul. Heroes used it for ranking battles and grade promotion battles. Heroes, managers, and reporters currently filled the stadium that could accommodate 60,000.

— We'll now begin the second preliminary round for the Gate of Glory!

Only the winners of this tournament could enter the Gate of Glory, formerly known as the demon realm gate. The association avoided all the horrors and only publicized wealth and fame. They dealt with the issue in stereotypical fashion.

— A total of 10,000 candidates remain. Today, the judges will handpick 1000 and 500 will advance to the next round!

Jin Sahyuk looked down at the stadium filled with hopeful heroes. She spotted Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Bell, and Rumi among them. They had to complete a maze for the second round. Two heroes would be randomly paired and had to proceed through the gigantic maze built in the stadium's basement.

"Haaa."

Jin Sahyuk deeply sighed. Not because of the maze, but something else bothered her.

"I don't understand."

She took out the magnifying glass from her pocket. The glass had shattered, but the frame remained. She recalled the words that appeared. They represented Kim Hajin's true feelings towards her.

"..."

She waved the magnifying glass from side to side while contemplating Kim Hajin's emotions.

[Pity]

She would've simply been mad if that was all there was. However...

[Sympathy] [Mild Animosity]

Those two seemed to contradict, but still didn't confuse her. The countless words that appeared afterwards truly baffled her. They overflowed and shattered the magnifying glass.

— *The following emotions will increase along with synchronization (Currently at 15%)* — [Loyalty] [Faith] [Happiness] [Reason to live] [Guilt from being unable to help] [Desire to be together] [Desire to protect]
...

Jin Sahyuk's heart grew chaotic and she couldn't understand these emotions. The word, synchronization, confused her the most.

What in the world is synchronization? What happens when it increases and how do I increase it?

"Haaa..."

She sighed and looked below. A certain man made eye contact with her. Kim Suho's expression stiffened and he hurried up the stairs. *Tong — Tong— Tong—* A hollow sound rang out as he climbed up and stood next to her.

"Are you here as a candidate?"

"Why would I miss out on the fun? Isn't it obvious? Idiot."

Kim Suho only smiled despite her insult.

"You should stop if you plan on doing anything rash. This is important."

"Who do you think you are?" Jin Sahyuk frowned.

“...”

“Who do you think you are to order me around?”

She repeated and they silently stared at each other for a minute. Suddenly, Kim Suho smiled and playfully remarked.

“Or else I’ll tell Hajin.”

“What did you say?” Jin Sahyuk’s face stiffened.

“*Mmm?* So I guess you don’t want Hajin getting mad at you.”

“I dare you to say that again, bastard!”

Jin Sahyuk grew angry. No, not angry. She actually became flustered. *Did Kim Hajin tell Kim Suho? Does he know about the things on the magnifying glass?*

“I’m just kidding.”

Kim Suho shook his head, but Jin Sahyuk still suspected him. She glared at him with flames in her eyes. Unfortunately, she ran out of time to interrogate him.

— Next up is the candidate you’ve all been waiting for, the Swordsman of Wish Kim Suho! He turned down a special offer from the association and chose to participate in the preliminary rounds! Kim Suho will participate in this mission with intermediate rank hero Yi Yijin!

The host declared Kim Suho’s turn.

“I have to go now. Try not to cause a commotion, okay?”

Kim Suho left with a faint smile. Jin Sahyuk continued glaring at him until... She noticed someone else staring at her. The mere sight of Chae Nayun annoyed her, but she recalled Bell’s words.

Aren't you curious about the relationship between Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin? I assure you it's much more scandalous than you think.

It might be related to the synchronization matter. Bell acted like an asshole, but he never lied about such things.

Jin Sahyuk glared at Chae Nayun and activated Reality Manipulation. Her magic power altered reality ever so slightly. Now, the next team would be Chae Nayun and Jin Sahyuk.

Chapter 308

The Stories That Become Bridges

(2)

Jin Seyeon looked out the carriage window. The steppes of Central Asia looked quite different from textbooks. Weeds grew to knee-length, trees reached towards the sky, and small djinn groups even formed villages.

“It feels like I’m in a fantasy world,” Jin Seyeon muttered in a daze.

Jin Sechan also looked out, but couldn’t see the same view with his eyesight. He turned back to Yoo Yeonha.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha stared at the tilonium case in her hands and seemed to be deep in thought. Jin Sechan worried about her, but couldn’t bring himself to say anything. He could only watch from the sidelines as her secretary.

“Are you okay?”

Jin Seyeon smiled at Jin Sechan before moving next to Yoo Yeonha.

Yoo Yeonha glanced at her and nodded. “I’m fine.”

“Don’t keep that case too close. It’ll have bad effects on you. We can still call a demon merchant if you want.”

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled. They had already considered calling demon merchants who would do anything for DP.

“No, demon merchants are still demons. They’ll desire it as well.”

She didn't trust them with no guarantee that they wouldn't want something other demons desperately sought. Yoo Yeonha deeply sighed and looked at the case containing the *[Dimensional Entropy]*.

"Is it that important?" Jin Seyeon asked.

Yoo Yeonha nodded and replied without hesitation. "Yes, I can tell from the skills I obtained in the Tower of Wish. My *[Basic Skill – Lv.9 Law of Thoughts]* amplifies my thinking and my *[Special Skill – Lv.9 Appraisal Eyes]* allows me to appraise items."

The analysis of *[Dimensional Entropy]* continued in Yoo Yeonha's head. Essential Dynamics possessed the best technology in the world at extracting magic power from crystals and mana stones.

"This item will save countless people."

"..." Jin Seyeon smiled at her.

"I hope so too." Yoo Yeonha feebly smiled back.

"Hmm..."

Kim Hajin observed them and couldn't understand. They shouldn't have any special connections. When did they develop such a sister-like bond?

"How did you two get so close?" He couldn't help but ask.

They glanced at him and leaned against the carriage without saying anything.

"What the..." He pouted and furrowed his brows.

"I'll tell you later." Yoo Yeonha found this side of him quite cute and replied.

"Tsk."

Kim Hajin unhappily nodded before his eyes suddenly widened. He began scanning the air.

[Where are you? I'm taking the test for the Gate of Glory.]

Chae Nayun messaged him, but Kim Hajin simply smiled and shook his head.

[I can't tell you.]

[What? Why not? Actually, that's probably for the best.]

[Huh?]

Chae Nayun gave up surprisingly quick and Kim Hajin tilted his head.

[I don't think I'll be able to talk in front of you. I'm not ready yet... you know what I mean?]

Heh. Kim Hajin smirked.

[Yeah, I guess it's still a bit awkward. So?]

[Right, so... I thought we could just talk a couple of times a day like this to get familiar with each other. We can also play games. Did you know a new version of Gladiator of the Century came out?]

[No.]

[Download it. It's popular among heroes because it helps with image training. They added a bunch of skills, so it's super popular. Tournaments regularly get over 900,000 viewers...]

As expected of an avid gamer, Chae Nayun began talking about the latest news. Kim Hajin just listened with a smile while Jin Seyeon and Yoo Yeonha stared at him like he had gone crazy.

[Ah, wait. The heck? I'm paired up with Jin Sahyuk.]

[What? Jin Sahyuk?]

[Yeah, I'm hanging up now.]

"What are you doing?" Yoo Yeonha asked after Chae Nayun hung up.

"...!"

Kim Hajin's expression stiffened. Not just him, but Jin Seyeon felt it too with their supernatural perception. An outsider observed them from far away.

"..."

"..."

Kim Hajin and Jin Seyeon silently exchanged glances. Soon, she sent him a mental transmission.

— We should just let this person keep watching. I don't know who it is, but I don't sense any hostility. Let's act normal.

Kim Hajin nodded.

"By the way, everyone's raising a sponsored character with DP, right?"

Jin Seyeon brightly smiled at everyone.

Anyone who hunted demonic monsters received the DP system. Those who earned more than 50,000 DP could play something called the minigame. Sponsoring the people of Lailos grew quite popular recently.

"Of course, you'll be surprised to know who I'm sponsoring," Yoo Yeonha proudly declared.

"Oh, really? Show me."

Jin Seyeon asked and Yoo Yeonha displayed her individual with a

grin. She sponsored the high rank knight Gimitos.

“Wow, Gimitos the Berserker! You sponsored him? The Lailos community is always praising him.”

“Lailos what?” Kim Hajin asked in surprise. He didn’t know an online community had developed for Lailos sponsors. The site already boasted more than 200,000 members.

“There’s a post every time Gimitos buys a new armor or weapon. Didn’t he recently buy the black flame dragon armor?”

“Well, I don’t want to brag. What about you?” Yoo Yeonha shrugged and changed the subject.

“I’m raising an archer. Look.”

Jin Seyeon sponsored an intermediate rank archer named Lekio. Yoo Yeonha and Jin Sechan looked at him with sparkling eyes.

“That bow looks like it’s made from emetos ore. Ah, his armor is made from quality leather as well.”

Kim Hajin decided to check on Litrain as they talked.

[Litrain became the youngest master rank knight and obtained the title, Starlight Knight. She didn’t stop training even after becoming knight order commander. The once small Extra Temple receives over 1000 visitors per day and dozens of apprentice knights serve under her. An order of knights called the Starlight Knights also formed and Litrain holds great influence in the kingdom. However, she still worries about one thing. Recently, her disciples and the Extra Temple followers have grown suspicious of Lord Extra. Over a year has passed since he last sponsored Litrain...]

Litrain had grown tremendously since Kim Hajin last saw her. He had earned over 200,000 DP from her and immediately sent back a third of it.

“Who are you sponsoring, Hajin? Show us,” Jin Seyeon finally asked.

“Well, it’s her.”

Kim Hajin slightly hesitated before answering. He casually displayed Litrain’s information, but everyone else’s jaws dropped.

“Wait, Litrain... She’s the most famous in the community... My Gimitos...”

Yoo Yeonha’s jealous voice rang out.

* * *

Leraje specialized in watching others from afar and didn’t have any trouble following them. She carefully observed the man known as Kim Hajin. He knew her name and hadn’t thoughtlessly muttered it. Leraje could discern someone’s state simply based on their voice.

“What are you up to lord?”

Her henchman, Corte, suddenly asked.

— Bored. Being alone here is boring. Did you get in touch with those old devils?

She simply replied.

“Yes, three devils have obtained incarnation bodies: rank 3 Prince Vassago, rank 29 Count Astaroth, and rank 62 Valac.”

Leraje immediately frowned after hearing this.

— The old man hasn’t escaped his curse yet?

She meant Baal.

Corte smiled and shook his head.

“No, King Baal has yet to escape the curse. The demon realm’s gate will soon open, so he will eventually descend.”

— How long will it take?

“Three months and not a day more.”

That sounded too long. She might wander around out of boredom, but Corte wanted to hide her identity as much as possible. He took out the electronic device he had prepared.

— What’s that?

“It’s called a game console. Humans like to entertain themselves with it. You’ll never grow bored with this.”

— Is that so?

Leraje seemed interested. Corte knelt and offered her the virtual reality gaming console.

— How do I use it?

“You just have to wear the helmet and turn it on by moving your fingers.”

—...

Leraje did as he said and her vision briefly turned black before a blue screen popped up. A strange feeling like being transported to another world enveloped her.

[I will explain how to use this console. Please follow my instructions.]

A message popped up in front of her before she could get used to the sensation. Leraje furrowed her brows.

— Who are you to tell me what to do?

[Try moving your fingers.]

— I don’t want to. Introduce yourself first.

[Try moving your fingers.]

— Impudent.

Leraje moved her fingers and intended on destroying this impudent being. However, the world suddenly changed after she moved her fingers. The blue room transformed into a vast grassland.

Leraje widened her eyes in surprise.

[Here is a list of popular games. Please click the one you wish to play.] [1. Gladiator of the Century] [2. Reolesk] [3. Grand Theft Auto]...

She stared at the messages before clicking on Gladiator of the Century.

*[You already own the game. Accessing Gladiator of the Century...]
[Welcome to Gladiator of the Century.] [Please set your ID.] [Your ID will be your name inside Gladiator of the Century.]*

— You're kind, unlike the one from before.

Leraje nodded in satisfaction before typing her ID.

[Lijengy]

She misspelled her own name, but didn't notice.

[Welcome, Lijengy.]

— What? Lijengy? You...

She expressed her anger at the machine for calling her the wrong name.

* * *

[Essence of the Strait's rising star, Chae Nayun, and the tournament's black horse, Jin Sahyuk!]

Chae Nayun and Jin Sahyuk ended up on the same team at Seoul's Hero Plaza. They entered the maze side by side.

"Screw off."

Of course, Chae Nayun didn't intend on working together. She bolted away in the opposite direction as they entered the maze. No one recommended randomly running in the maze, but Chae Nayun's intuition gave her an undeniable edge. She believed she would soon find the exit.

"..."

Jin Sahyuk had no intention of letting that happen. She activated Reality Manipulation and changed the maze's structure.

Kiiik— Kiiik—

The exit disappeared, but Chae Nayun thought the maze just shifted as part of the trial.

"She really is an idiot."

Jin Sahyuk sneered since Chae Nayun would no longer find an exit. She just had to wait until Chae Nayun grew tired and came back.

Plop—

Jin Sahyuk sat on the floor and sent Bell a mental transmission to pass the time.

* * *

[Central Asia]

The carriage raced through Central Asia as Jin Seyeon, Yoo Yeonha, and Jin Sechan glued their eyes on Litrain. They watched her every move and exclaimed once in a while at her beauty, strength, and kindness. They had become avid Litrain fans by the time they fell

asleep.

The carriage reached China after we slept for about 3-4 hours. The safe zone neared, but we kept our guard up.

“The gaze went away,” Jin Seyeon said.

“Yeah.” I nodded.

Clack, clack. The carriage peacefully continued as I turned to Jin Seyeon. She also looked at me and must’ve felt the unusual presence approaching us.

“Yeonha, we should prepare for battle.”

Jin Seyeon’s words startled her, but Yoo Yeonha courageously took out her whip.

“We’re surrounded with no way to break through. We should go out and face them rather than being ambushed,” Jin Seyeon suggested.

“I agree.”

It would be annoying if they destroyed the carriage. I opened the door and walked out. The other three followed. Immediately, we felt the hostility and killing intent. The wind carried demonic energy as the enemies drew closer.

“Don’t worry. We’ll win for sure. I’m 100% certain.”

Jin Seyeon took out her bow and reassured Yoo Yeonha. I also took out my Desert Eagle.

Guooooo—

Demonic energy suddenly filled the air like a storm as a shooting star shot down from the sky.

KWANG!

The shooting star landed in front of us and turned out to be a living being.

“*Haha*, how are you all doing on this fine day?”

“...”

I recognized him from the mask covering half his face. Destruction appeared with dozens of djinns surrounding us.

“*Uhahahaha*.” He burst into laughter and Yoo Yeonha clenched her teeth.

“It’s been a while, Yoo Jinwoong’s daughter.”

“You know him?” Jin Seyeon asked.

“A little bit. He lost to my father back in the day.”

“Pardon?”

“He went crazy from his inferiority complex and ended up losing half his face to my father.”

Destruction’s face heavily contorted after hearing her words. He angrily glared at Yoo Yeonha.

“It seems the daughter is just as trashy as the father.”

Then he stepped forward with a grin and all the djinns released their demonic energy to transform. Unsurprisingly, Destruction’s subordinates seemed quite skilled.

“Where’s the dimensional entropy? Inside the carriage? I’ll let you die peacefully if you hand it over.”

However, Yoo Yeonha shook her head and Destruction furrowed his brows.

“Trust me. I’ll cleanly chop off your head and send you mostly intact to your dear father if you hand it over. Otherwise—”

“Shut it. Your breath stinks.”

“...”

Destruction’s expression turned ugly as I transformed the Desert Eagle into a machine gun.

“Huuu...”

He deeply sighed and scratched his head with his long nails, which began to turn black. Without a doubt, he partially used his devil transformation.

“Looks like I’ll have to go back on my words.”

A giant horn protruded from his head and his body turned black with demonic energy. Destruction bent his body like a track runner at the starting line and shot forward like a bullet. No, he tried to.

“Stop.”

A child-like voice rang out from the sky and magic power shackled his body. Not just Destruction, but the entire world responded. Even Destruction’s subordinates and the wind froze.

“Ku... uk.”

Destruction desperately turned his head towards the voice. A small individual floated 10 meters above the ground. Her symbolic white hair beautifully shone and her proud eyes glared at him. The hero who defined a generation had arrived.

“Why did you come so late?” Jin Seyeon smiled at her.

“I came as quickly as I could. You told me to come secretly, but I’m the chairman of the Temple of Justice. You think it’s easy to leave

work without anyone knowing?”

Aileen grumbled and hopped down from the puff of cloud she stood on. *Tadat*— She lightly landed inside the area frozen in time.

“Look at all the trash here,” she said with a sneer.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha snapped out of her daze and glanced at Jin Seyeon for an explanation.

Jin Seyeon smiled and whispered.

— I told you we would win. I secretly called for backup.

“*Kuuu... uuuuk...*”

Destruction tried to resist Aileen’s Spirit Speech and forcefully twisted his neck.

“You’re... Ai...”

“Shut your mouth.”

Aileen silenced him, but his eyes still glared with killing intent.

“You’re annoying. Just get crushed!”

Her voice rang out in the empty field.

“*Uk, uuuuuuak!*”

Destruction’s body folded on itself before exploding. It simply ended like that.

“...”

“...”

We stared at the scene in a daze. Aileen had grown far more powerful than the last time we saw her. She almost reached the level of a transcendent now. *Just what happened?*

“Pft, impressed? I found an amazing unique skill from the Tower of Wish. This is nothing to me now.”

Aileen strutted her chest and looked around. The leader of the djinns had died, but the remaining ones couldn't move because of Aileen's Spirit Speech. She ignored them and approached Jin Seyeon.

“Anyways, why are you here?”

“Yes? Ah... about that.” Jin Seyeon scratched her neck and placed her hand on Yoo Yeonha's shoulder.

“Let me introduce her first. This is Yoo Yeonha, the chief officer of my guild.”

“Chief Officer? What do you mean? You're not in a...” Aileen's eyes suddenly widened.

“Wait, you mean...?” Yoo Yeonha also realized what Jin Seyeon meant.

“Ah!”

Jin Seyeon finally responded to the offer she made a long time ago. Yoo Yeonha looked at her, Aileen, and then me.

“Y... Yes!”

She jumped in excitement.

Chapter 309

The Stories That Become Bridges

(3)

[Seoul, Korea — Hero Plaza Maze]

Chae Nayun realized something had gone wrong after 3 hours. Her intuition told her this maze didn't have an exit, but how could that be? They designed this test to pick out 200 challengers for the Gate of Glory. She explored for 2 more hours to confirm her doubt.

Meanwhile, Jin Sahyuk grew restless as she watched Chae Nayun. She assumed Chae Nayun would give up, but had misjudged. Chae Nayun's tenacity went beyond her expectations.

“Sigh.”

Jin Sahyuk stood up to intervene when...

— Sahyuk.

A voice flowed into her ears. She widened her eyes and turned around. There, a semi-transparent fog glimmered in the air. Without a doubt, Bell came to see her.

“Bell, you bastard—”

Had they been apart for too long? She jumped at Bell with excessive force and grabbed his gaseous state by the collar. Bell smiled and looked down at her grip.

“Where have you been—”

— *Shh.*

He placed a finger to his lips.

“*Shh?* Are you crazy?”

— Hey, keep it down. I’m only here because it seemed like you might be eliminated from the tournament.

“Eliminated my ass...”

— You’ve accomplished nothing in the last 6 hours. Don’t you want to enter the demon realm’s gate?

“Is there a reason why I should enter?” Jin Sahyuk flatly remarked. She felt the need to revolt because Bell pissed her off.

He smiled and found her attitude quite cute.

— Of course, you do. You have to kill me inside the gate.

“What?” Jin Sahyuk’s face stiffened, but Bell appeared comfortable as always.

— I know you’ve already heard most of it from Kim Hajin.

“...”

She remained silent as Bell solidified and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Please continue to work hard. I believe in you, Sahyuk.”

His voice, clearer than before, rang in her ears.

“I’ve repeated the past countless times and finally found you.”

Jin Sahyuk looked at him. She couldn’t understand his unwavering trust and the earnest hope in his eyes.

“My death...”

Bell placed his hand on her head and recalled their first meeting. Back then, they couldn't even see eye to eye when Bell crouched. Now, she had grown into an adult.

“You can do it, right?” A broad smile spread across his face and Jin Sahyuk nodded.

“Of course, I'll kill you if that's what you want.”

Jin Sahyuk confidently smiled. Death seemed like a fitting gift for this frenemy she'd known for 20 years.

“The end is finally near.”

“But...” Jin Sahyuk interrupted him.

“I have one condition.”

She needed to know one last thing before killing Bell.

“Do you know what synchronization is?”

* * *

[East Asia]

Aileen didn't ask much. She seemed confused as to why we couldn't use portals or skills, but still provided us with top-grade protection.

“Are you sure you can leave for this long?”

“I'll take this as a vacation. Honestly, I've been so annoyed from all the work.”

Aileen shrugged at Jin Seyeon's question.

“And this is the first time I’ve ever been in a carriage. Oh right, what are you going to do with this carriage afterwards? Can I keep it if you’re going to throw it away?”

“*Huh? Ah*, of course. You can keep it, Aileen.”

“Really? Wow, thanks!” Aileen beamed at my reply.

“*Cough.*”

Her smile quickly faded as she looked at Yoo Yeonha with her usual expression.

“Anyways, I won’t ask what you did. I’m sure you’re careful enough not to do anything illegal.”

“Of course.” Yoo Yeonha nodded and suddenly pointed outside.

“*Ah*, it’s Pyeongan Island!”

We all sat up like meerkats. As she said, I could see the Korean border in the distance. Yoo Yeonha didn’t hide her joy and I texted Boss after our reception came back.

— Boss, I’ve completed the mission.

— Good job. Rest well.

She quickly replied.

Clunk— The carriage stopped and Sannuri threw a tantrum. The border guards approaching us with guns and swords startled her.

“I’ll deal with them.” Yoo Yeonha stepped out first.

“Who are you?”

One of the guards spoke before they all recognized Yoo Yeonha and immediately bowed 90 degrees. Then they escorted us back to the

mainland.

Yoo Yeonha led us to Essential Dynamics' non-divisional unit in South Pyeongan Province. The base looked even bigger than most universities. She had been preparing this place ever since hearing about the *[Dimensional Entropy]*.

“This is where we'll open the dimensional entropy.”

Only Jin Seyeon, Jin Sechan, Yoo Yeonha, and I remained in this enormous base.

“And this is the celestial extractor, the culmination of magic engineering to activate the dimensional entropy.”

Yoo Yeonha walked towards a large machine with the tilonium case. The machine's center contained the energy heart, a place to lay the crystal or magic ore. Several mechanical discs revolved around the heart and reminded me of the solar system.

We stared at the magnificent scene in awe. Even Yoo Yeonha, the architect, seemed fascinated by the machine.

“The energy extracted with this machine can be used for bullets, artillery, engines, barriers, power... basically everything. Essence of the Strait will take humanity to the next level and we'll stand against all threats from now on.”

The energy glowed green and I continued to stare at the miniature solar system before turning around with a smile. Yoo Yeonha looked slightly confused at me.

“Are you leaving?”

“Yeah, I'm busy.”

I had to deliver the last dress to Medea in the Tower of Wish. I also had to visit Evandel as promised.

“Sure, thanks again for the hard work. You can always come back if

anything happens—”

“Just remember to send me those shares,” I said and turned towards Jin Seyeon.

“Do you really plan on joining Essence of the Strait?”

The Divine Archer gave me a big smile. “Yes, it’s finally time I start considering politics.”

“...”

I smiled and looked at Jin Sechan next, but didn’t have much to say. He noticed my gaze and bowed first.

“We only survived because of your efforts. Thank you.”

“N-No, thank you for the hard work.”

Our mission finally concluded.

“I’m leaving now. Take care.”

“Yeah, see you later.”

I said goodbye to Yoo Yeonha and left the base. Then I immediately headed to Evandel’s forest with the completely healed Spartan.

[♥ *Evandel & Hayang’s Cabin* ^^ ★]

One more word had been added to the adorable door plate. I entered the cabin without knocking.

“Evandel.”

She had been playing house with Hayang in the living room and widened her eyes. Then she looked at me in a daze and dropped her doll on the floor.

“Hajin!”

She jumped into my arms with a radiant smile.

* * *

I lay in bed with Evandel at 11 P.M. and surfed the web.

[The Gate of Glory’s second preliminary round has ended.] [What lies beyond the Gate of Glory?] [The Future Road of Korea, Chae Joochul’s speech received a standing ovation...]

The internet only featured news regarding the Gate of Glory. Everyone seemed excited instead of panicking, probably because the association changed the gate’s name.

“Mmm?”

I spotted the virtual reality helmet on the floor. I brought it in case Evandel wanted to play.

“Hmm.”

She fell asleep and I felt a bit bored. I stretched and grabbed the helmet.

“Scan.”

I wore the helmet after enhancing it by 59%. *Jiing*— It usually took 2 minutes to boot, but finished in 10 seconds after my enhancement. I looked over the list of games.

[Popular Games] [1. Gladiator of the Century] [2. Reolesk] [3. Grand Theft Auto]...

Gladiator of the Century caught my eye. Chae Nayun asked to play with me, so I should practice.

[Purchasing Gladiator of the Century... Purchase completed.] [Accessing

Gladiator of the Century...] [Welcome to Gladiator of the Century.]
[Please set your ID.]

Of course, I registered as Extra7.

[Your username is Extra7.] [Welcome. Would you like to view the tutorial?]

“No.”

I skipped it and checked the *[Current Rankings]*. Games could only be fully enjoyed against strong opponents.

[Current Rankings] 1. Fralo (161 matches: 130 wins, 31 losses) 2. BritishSpirit (146 matches: 121 wins, 25 losses) 3. Lijengy (70 matches: 70 wins) 4. Wolf (150 matches: 103 wins, 47 losses)...

“Let’s see...”

First, I sent a match request to the No.1 player.

[Failed to request a match from Fralo. This user automatically declines requests from strangers.]

“Ah, right.”

Most rankers only turned on match requests from their friends. Otherwise, newbies would always pester them.

Should I just play ranked games? I thought to myself when I noticed Lijengy, the only ranker who didn’t turn on their *[Automatically Decline Match Request]* option.

“70 matches and 70 wins...”

She looked strong. I sent a request after briefly thinking about it.

[You have sent a match request to Lijengy.] [Lijengy has accepted your match request.]

“Oh?”

I teleported to the arena when Lijengy accepted my request.

[Map – Gladiator Colosseum]

The crowd’s cheering filled the arena along with dust. My opponent stood on the opposite side with a strangely short sword that almost looked like a dagger. I chose a baseball bat after some thought.

[You have chosen the baseball bat, a beginner weapon.] [3, 2, 1] [Begin!]

The duel began. *Taat!* I charged with the baseball bat and swung as hard as I could. *Whish—* Lijengy tried to evade, but I relentlessly swung.

— Quadruple Baseball Bat Swing!

I shouted. *Whoosh— Whoosh— Whoosh— Whoosh—* My bat moved back and forth 4 times and the battle ended.

— *Kyaaak!*

Lijengy couldn’t withstand the attack and died.

“What the...”

It made sense once I thought about it. I had enhanced my console by an astounding 59%, so my character existed in an accelerated world like a speed hack.

“This is bad.”

I should probably turn off the [Random Consolidation System]. It trivializes the entire game.

As I prepared to turn off the game...

[Lijengy has requested a rematch.]

I accepted, but the results remained the same.

— Quintuple Baseball Bat Swing!

— *Kyaak!*

[K.O.] [Winner – Extra7]

The match ended in less than 3 minutes, but Lijengy persisted.

[Lijengy has requested a best of 3 rematch.]

“Someone’s competitive.”

I accepted her request and appeared in the Colosseum. Then I jumped and swung my bat at her. Lijengy lost, but immediately asked for another rematch.

[Lijengy has requested a best of 3 rematch.] [Lijengy has requested a best of 3 rematch.] [Lijengy has requested a best of 5 rematch.] [Lijengy has requested a best of 5 rematch.] [Lijengy has requested a best of 7...]

I kept winning after 50 rounds and Lijengy continued requesting rematches.

[Lijengy has requested a best of 9 rematch.]

“Let’s not...”

Best of 9 is just excessive. I thought to myself when I received a text from Jin Sahyuk.

[Kim Hajin, where are you? Let’s meet.]

I declined the rematch request and replied to Jin Sahyuk.

[You have declined Lijengy’s match request.] [Lijengy has sent you a message.]

“What’s wrong with her?”

[Why did you decline my request, Extra7?] [You’re the strongest human I’ve ever met.] [Accept my request.] [Don’t decline.]

“Is she crazy?”

[Accept my request right now. I haven’t completely lost yet.] [Answer me. Don’t test my patience.] [Don’t make me wait.]

I took off the helmet without replying. Then...

Whish—

I received a signal from the Tower of Wish. It came from *[Tomer’s Crystal Ball]* that I stored in stigma.

* * *

[Tower of Wish – 8F Crevon]

I spent some time with Evandel and returned to Crevon with Jin Sahyuk.

“Why did we come here again?”

She asked as we walked down the hall of Tomer’s mansion.

“I think Tomer wants to talk about something.”

I also planned to deliver the finished robe to Medea.

“Ah, why did you text me yesterday?” I asked back.

Jin Sahyuk leered at me. “You said you’d stay by my side for half a year. It hasn’t been half a year yet.”

“Yeah?”

I felt surprised she kept track and quickened my pace to arrive at Tomer's office. *Tok, Tok*— Tomer replied as soon as I knocked.

— Come in.

I opened the door and entered. *Kiik*— The wooden door screeched open and Tomer sat all alone in her modest office.

“Welc— Oh? Well, if it isn't the former knight commander!”

“She's with me. Is that okay?”

“Yeah. Sit down.” Tomer gestured towards the chairs and we sat.

“So?”

“So what?”

“Why did you call me?”

“Ah.”

Her face stiffened at my question. She looked at us before speaking in a low voice.

“I wanted to talk to you about the descent and the prophecy.”

“Prophecy?”

“Yeah, it came from Crevon's administrator.”

Tomer showed me a piece of paper with only two sentences on it.

[An enormous calamity shall descend upon the outside world.] [The inside and outside must unite to overcome this ordeal.]

I widened my eyes and Tomer's mouth slanted upwards.

“The queen wishes to speak with you... about the prophecy.”

“Queen? You mean Araha?”

“Hey, watch your mouth.” Tomer frowned and I bitterly smiled.

“What does Her Majesty wish to speak about?” I rephrased my question.

“The second sentence sounds quite tricky. It says the inside and outside must unite.”

An idea naturally crossed my mind. A temporary descent of everyone from the Tower of Wish to fight against the devil and demon realm transformation.

“Yeah, but why did the queen pick me? I’m not famous here or anything.”

“How should I know? Listen to me carefully though. Araha is a tyrant.”

“Araha? Are you sure you can call the queen by her name?”

“I’m allowed to.”

Tomer replied and took out a pen.

“Now, listen carefully. I’m about to tell you what you can and can’t do.”

Chapter 310

The Stories That Become Bridges

(4)

“Araha hates black clothes. She also hates arrogant people and being ignored even more. She has an inferiority complex because she wasn’t the first in line to become king.

“She probably called you because of Prestige. After all, you’re the master there.”

“I don’t know what she thinks about the prophecy, but I assume it’s a mix of interest and displeasure.”

We visited the royal palace after receiving all of Tomer’s advice. Everything looked much grander than before.

“By the way, did I kill you once or twice?”

I asked Jin Sahyuk as we walked. She frowned without replying. It must’ve hurt her pride to recall.

“I’m not making fun of you. I’m just asking how many skill slots you have left.”

“Five...”

“Five? Three basic and two special? You didn’t learn any?”

Jin Sahyuk nodded.

“You’re more prudent than I thought. Well, you’ll be learning some today.”

The royal palace should have a few passive skills to buff her. I would be surprised if they didn't have anything.

"No, I don't need any." Jin Sahyuk shook her head and grumbled.

"I can't learn any ultimate or unique skills because of you, so I don't need trash skills."

"What? No."

I had to make her stronger now that she became redeemable.

"Synthesized basic skills and special skills that take up two slots are worth learning. We'll look through the vault to see what's available."

"The hell does that mean?"

"It's fine if you don't understand. Let's go."

We entered the palace and showed our royal invitation letter to a guard. Then a knight came down to greet us.

"My name is Wilhelm Tell. Follow me. Her Royal Highness is waiting."

Most may have forgotten him on Earth, but his story remained a small legend. We followed Wilhelm past a huge garden and passed countless knights lined up along the hallway. I didn't know if they came to greet or threaten us.

"Go in."

Eventually, we arrived in front of a fancy door.

"Yes."

I turned the doorknob and slowly pushed. The door smoothly opened and I could see Araha sitting at the head of a long table. She smiled with Lancelot and Lü Bu beside her.

“Welcome, master of Prestige and former knight commander, Shin Jahyuk,” Araha greeted us.

“We’re humbled to be in your audience.”

I greeted her the way Tomer instructed. Jin Sahyuk, on the other hand, simply nodded. It seemed to be a matter of pride since she also used to be a king.

“I see you haven’t changed, knight commander. Please sit.”

Araha didn’t seem to mind and guided us to our seats. I tilted my head at her reaction. It seemed different from what Tomer told us.

“Hajin?”

A woman who sat near Araha called me. The knight had blonde hair and sparkling eyes.

“Rachel?”

We exchanged curious glances.

“*Hm?* You two know each other?” Araha showed some interest with a smile.

Rachel looked back and forth between me and Jin Sahyuk before asking. “How did you two...”

“*Ah*, Jin Sa—, *er*, knight commander Shin Jahyuk came as my companion. Her Royal Highness called us here.”

“Please sit, or do you plan on keeping me waiting?” Araha interrupted us with a cheery voice.

“*Ah*, yes.”

We sat down while Rachel looked confused. Araha clapped and several servants walked in with plates of food.

“Go ahead. I heard there’s a saying in your world that one should fill their stomach before enjoying the mountain view.”

We began to eat. I munched on a king crab leg and Jin Sahyuk cut up a premium steak.

“You’ve heard about the prophecy from Margrave Tomer, correct?”
Araha asked us.

“Yes.”

“I’ve called to talk about that. We discovered a pathway that leads to your world, Earth.”

My eyes immediately widened.

Araha slowly continued as she munched on an escargot.

“However, this pathway seems quite dangerous and requires a huge amount of energy to open. Crevon isn’t capable of providing such energy.”

Energy... That shouldn’t be a problem with the *[Dimensional Entropy]* in our hands.

“I should be able to take care of the energy. Where’s the pathway?”

I asked and she stared at me before deeply sighing.

“The 9th floor.”

“Pardon?”

“The pathway to the outside world...”

Araha paused and muttered in a heavy voice after collecting her breath.

“It’s deep within the 9th floor filled with mythical monsters.”

[Desolate Moon Guild Building – Vice Leader Shin Jonghak’s Office]

Desolate Moon’s new vice leader, Shin Jonghak the Conqueror, currently decorated his office. He placed his spear, the main reason why he gained his title, on a shelf beside a sculpture of himself.

“Hahahaha.”

Just looking at the sculpture he received a long time ago brightened his mood. It suited the interior design and perfectly represented him.

“Sigh.”

He smiled in satisfaction until he recalled that Kim Hajin sculpted this piece.

“That guy, why don’t I ever know where he is?”

Shin Jonghak clicked his tongue and sat in his chair. Then he opened a newspaper with every page talking about the Gate of Glory.

*[The 3rd round of selections will begin for the Gate of Glory. Rising star Chae Nayun, Kim Suho the Sword Saint, Shin Jonghak the Conqueror]
[Norwegian hero Bjornmoj steps up to the challenge... High-intermediate rank hero Leitlison fails at 2nd round...]*

— Vice leader, urgent news!

“Uwoah!”

A loud shout startled him as he read. Shin Jonghak ripped the newspaper and sighed.

“What is it?”

— I’ll send it over right now!

He received the news on his computer and it mentioned Essence of the Strait.

[Breaking News! Master Rank Hero, Divine Archer Jin Seyeon Joins Essence of the Strait!] [Essence of the Strait Stocks Skyrocket... Up 19% in 5 minutes!]

“Pft.”

Shin Jonghak laughed while reading the report. Jin Seyeon joining Essence of the Strait certainly shocked him since she had remained independent for a long time. However, it felt nice seeing a long-time friend like Yoo Yeonha do so well. He didn’t feel happy about Essence of the Strait far surpassing Desolate Moon, but he knew Yoo Yeonha couldn’t match his battle prowess. He continued reading with a smile. Then his gaze subconsciously landed on the frame next to his monitor.

“...”

The young Shin Jonghak happily smiled with his grandfather, Shin Myungchul.

“Haaa...”

He picked up the frame with a sigh. Shin Myungchul, the brightest of the Nine Stars, whose name will be forever remembered. Shin Jonghak still couldn’t understand why Shin Myungchul sacrificed himself. Wasn’t his life worth more than a few million ordinary people? Didn’t he know that, or did he sacrifice himself regardless?

“Grandfather...”

Shin Jonghak recalled an old memory of him crying in his grandfather’s arms. Just being by his side consoled him. Shin Jonghak felt prouder of him than anyone else and considered him humanity’s eternal hero.

He bitterly muttered as he looked at his younger self in the frame.

“I still resent you.”

Calls continued to flood Essence of the Strait. Yoo Yeonha summoned Chae Nayun, one of the guild's most famous heroes.

Chae Nayun shouted as soon as she entered Yoo Yeonha's office. "Is it true? Jin Seyeon is joining our guild!"

Yoo Yeonha grinned and nodded.

"Wow..."

Chae Nayun's jaw dropped since most master rank heroes who didn't serve as guild leaders rarely belonged to guilds. Jin Seyeon joining Essence of the Strait truly deserved all the buzz, but the surprises didn't end there.

"Anyways, Nayun."

"*Hmm?*"

Yoo Yeonha lightly smiled and took out Balmung that Kim Hajin had returned. Chae Nayun tilted her head.

"Take it."

"What's this? A baseball bat?"

Yoo Yeonha expected such a reaction since Balmung currently looked like a long stick.

"This artifact is perfect for you."

"This? Is it the stone club Beowulf used?"

"No, just try holding it."

Yoo Yeonha wanted to surprise her, so she handed over Balmung without any explanation. Chae Nayun held it full of curiosity. *Whoosh!*

Yoo Yeonha formed a small whip with her magic power and slightly slashed Chae Nayun's arm.

“Ow!”

Blood flowed from the cut and seeped into the sword. *Tk, tk—*

“What was that for?” Chae Nayun angrily stared at her.

“Just watch.”

“I’m bleeding, geez.”

“Right.”

Yoo Yeonha shrugged. Balmung required 500 ml of blood to awaken, so she had to make the cut a little deep.

“Right? Look at my arm! It’s bleeding a lot!”

“Look at what’s in your hand.”

Chae Nayun looked down while seething.

“...!”

Her body shook as the stone lump sucked her blood.

“H-Hey, what’s...”

She didn’t have the time to ask. Balmung emitted a bright light once it absorbed enough blood. They both instinctively covered themselves in qi reinforcement.

Kwaaaaa— The erupting light soon returned into the stone.

“Uh...”

Silence descended until Chae Nayun made a faint sound. The lump of stone in her hand had transformed into a sword with a navy blue blade and a golden hilt. Like in the myth of Siegfried, both light and dark coexisted in this 1.8 meter greatsword.

“That’s Balmung.”

Yoo Yeonha finally told her.

“Bal... this... holy...”

Chae Nayun remained dumbfounded while Yoo Yeonha took out a contract for the weapon’s permanent lease.

“You want it, right? You can have it if you sign here.”

“*Huh?* Oh, yeah. Of course.”

Chae Nayun signed it without even looking.

“What’s happening?”

Yoo Yeonha’s door burst open and several heroes who detected Balmung’s magic power rushed in. Their gaze turned to the odd object once they confirmed Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun’s safety.

“Wow.”

“The heck...”

Balmung, the legendary sword from countless stories. Yoo Yeonha smiled at the heroes’ dazed expressions.

“This is Balmung. Our major shareholder, XJ, lent it to us.”

XJ stood for Extra Hajin. Everyone knew the well-known nickname of this major Essence of the Strait shareholder, but no one knew his real identity.

“Cool, right? Feel free to take pictures and brag to your friends.”

Having such a valuable weapon boosted a guild’s image. The heroes could only blankly stare even after Yoo Yeonha’s explanation.

* * *

[Tower of Wish – 8F, Crevon]

It began raining in Crevon as I sat in the royal palace’s reception room in thought. Araha said a pathway existed on the 9th floor, but I didn’t know if she told the truth or not. I could probably leave it to the Chameleon Troupe. After all, Cheok Jungyeong always itched for a fight.

“Why haven’t you responded to my messages?”

I heard Rachel speaking to Jin Sahyuk.

“Do I have a reason to?” Jin Sahyuk replied.

“I see.”

Rachel nodded without the slightest change in expression, but anyone could tell this blunt response hurt her feelings.

“Hajin?”

“Yes?”

I turned to Rachel and we exchanged smiles.

“It’s been a while.”

“Ah, yes.”

“...”

Meanwhile, Jin Sahyuk looked back and forth between us. Rachel felt her gaze and also turned to face her. Like that, a silent battle began between them.

“*Haha... huh?* What’s that?”

I spotted a pool table in the corner of the room. From what I heard, players had spread all sorts of trendy sports in Crevon.

“*Um*, do any of you want to play some pool?”

“*Huh?* Pool?” Rachel’s eyes brightened.

“I’d be happy to. Are you good, Hajin?”

“*Uh...* It’s hard for me to be bad at it, I guess?”

After all, I possessed Young Dwarf’s Dexterity.

“*Pft.*”

Rachel only snorted and I’d never seen her sneer before. It must’ve came out subconsciously as she immediately fixed her expression. Still, it surprised me.

“*Ah*, sorry. It’s just that I’m... quite good at pool. I even won a tournament.”

“*Ah...* I see.”

I thoughtlessly nodded at Rachel’s proud comment, but that ended up triggering Jin Sahyuk’s competitive spirit.

“What pool are you talking about?”

“English billiards, straight pool, carom, eight ball? It doesn’t matter to me.”

“Yeah? Then let’s go with carom.”

“Sure.”

Rachel seemed full of confidence and Jin Sahyuk didn't like that. She stomped towards the pool table and grabbed a cue. Rachel also grabbed one with a grin.

“Shall we begin?”

“Ah, it's a bit boring if we don't bet anything. What should we bet?”

“A bet... What about a wish?”

“Sounds good.”

Everything happened in the blink of an eye, but as the match began...

“...?”

Spartan contacted me from outside the Tower of Wish.

— Yoo Jinhyuk messaged that he completed his investigation on Yi Yeonjun. Yi Yeonjun seems to be up to something. It doesn't seem urgent. Currently on lookout.

I stood up to return to Earth after receiving Spartan's thoughts.

“I'm leaving now. Have fun.”

“*Huh?* Where are you going?”

“She's right. Kim Hajin, you're playing too.”

They both grabbed me and Rachel even handed me a cue.

“Don't run away. You're playing for a wish too.”

“Me too?”

“Of course.”

They prepared to go all out.

“Uh... okay.”

I agreed to quickly stomp them and leave since Spartan didn't seem to be in a hurry.

“Then I'll go first.”

I chalked my cue tip, but they didn't even pay attention to me.

“I'm curious how good you are, former knight commander.”

“I'm curious too.”

“Please teach me.”

“I don't know if you're good enough to be my disciple.”

“Annoying. Is that a tactic?”

“Please, why would I need to stoop so low against a beginner?”

“...”

Little did they know, they wouldn't even have the chance to show off.

“I'm going.”

I planned on ending it in one turn.

Chapter 311

Virtual Reality Containing the Truth (1)

“...”

“...”

Rachel and Jin Sahyuk sat in the royal palace’s reception room in shock. They never got to use the pool table or cue sticks in front of them. The game had instantly ended.

Neither of them could remember how many points they played for. They didn’t even want to think about how the game unfolded.

Kim Hajin, the man responsible for this mess, instructed Rachel to give Jin Sahyuk some skill books and told Jin Sahyuk to follow Rachel. Then he left the royal palace without looking back.

Everything felt futile.

“This game shouldn’t be that easy.”

Jin Sahyuk muttered and placed her cue stick on the table.

Hit too hard and the ball breaks. Hit too weak and the ball loses its course. They couldn’t use magic power, so pool became even more difficult for superhumans who possessed above average strength.

Tak!

She properly posed and struck the cue ball. The ball hit the first target, bounced against the wall, and hit the second.

“I’m in good condition today. Can’t believe the game ended before I got to play. *Oi*, you...?”

Jin Sahyuk casually turned to the side only to be shocked by Rachel. The princess looked as if her soul had left.

“Are you crying?”

“*Eh?* N-No.”

Kim Hajin didn’t know, but Rachel took great pride in this game as the three time winner of Crevon’s pool tournament. Rachel had reigned as queen of billiards for a long time with her delicate technique developed from dealing with spirits.

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Please follow me.”

The shocked Rachel beckoned to Jin Sahyuk so they could check the skill books as Kim Hajin instructed.

“Sure.” Jin Sahyuk willingly followed her.

“Special and basic skills, right?” Rachel walked ahead and asked.

“Yeah, something that will be useful in real life. Got anything good?”

“There should be since this is the royal palace.”

They walked down the hallway and arrived at the library that only royal family members or close associates could access.

“Come in.”

“Oh...”

Jin Sahyuk expressed awe at the huge library and its high ceiling. Every single carefully carved bookshelf looked like a masterpiece. Of course, they couldn’t compare to Plerion.

“Why don’t you look around and see if anything catches your eye?”

Jin Sahyuk did as Rachel instructed and slowly walked around while skimming books. Skill books, history books, magic books, educational books, etc. This library contained everything.

She spent some time studying various skills and thought most of them would be useless, but they all seemed interesting.

“Excuse me, Shin Jahyuk.” Rachel suddenly called her.

“*Mmm?*”

Jin Sahyuk responded with her eyes still on a book.

“*Um...*” Rachel hesitated.

Jin Sahyuk found it strange and raised her head at Rachel. Like that, 10 seconds passed.

Finally, Rachel asked with a small sigh.

“What kind of relationship do you have with Hajin?”

“*Hmm? Uh...* nothing, I guess.”

Jin Sahyuk already knew Kim Hajin’s secret. She had learned about synchronization from Bell. Kim Hajin would change once she managed to increase his synchronization rate.

“For now.”

She added with a meaningful smile.

* * *

I returned to the Genkelope's Vessel roaming above the Genkelope zone on the 16th floor. They continued their mission to recapture the zone.

"Welcome back commander."

Horner came out of the commander's office where he had been observing the land below. I welcomed him with a smile.

"Good to see you. And my guest?"

"She's waiting in the VIP lounge."

Today, I would deliver the [*Ceremonial Descent Robe*] to Medea. She would be my last guest in the Tower of Wish.

"Okay, thanks."

I headed to the VIP lounge as the crew warmly welcomed me wherever I went. I held a beautifully adorned box and opened the door. As expected, Medea waited for me inside.

"You're finally here."

She looked at me with a surly expression. I didn't mind since I went past the deadline. I smiled and held out the gift box.

"I put in a lot of effort to make this."

"Well, even though you're late..."

Medea stomped up with her face glimmering in joy. She couldn't hide her desire.

"Give it."

I had to ask one last thing before handing this over. "Are you planning on descending soon?"

“Probably?” Medea nonchalantly nodded with her arms crossed.

“And you haven’t forgotten our promise, right?”

“Promise?”

I took out the copy of *[Heynckes’s Dagger]*.

“Oh, that?”

We swore an oath over this dagger to never betray humanity and help humans at all costs. I couldn’t risk having Medea run away like the former Nine Stars, Oh Jaemin.

“Of course, I haven’t.”

Medea nodded with a smile. I felt glad since Greek mythology mentioned Medea several times as a great sorceress.

“I don’t want to see the world I’m going to live in fall apart either.”

A person of such caliber would be of great help.

* * *

I left the tower after delivering the robe. Spartan informed me that Yi Yeonjun went to France, so I teleported to Paris. More precisely, I went to the Champ de Mars where the iconic Eiffel Tower stood. I planned on observing Yi Yeonjun from there. However...

[★ Hosting the Gate of Glory’s 3rd preliminary round ★] [Welcome to Paris.] [Essence of the Strait’s Paris branch welcomes you!] [Heroes, please join us at the Eiffel Tower!] [We love you Kim Suho ♥] [Hero discount...]

“What’s going on?”

Paris seemed to be in the middle of a celebration. The city remained brightly lit late at night. Parades and carnivals happened everywhere.

They seem excited to host the 3rd preliminary round and big banners in Korean could be seen everywhere.

“Is it worth getting this excited?”

This qualification tournament’s global attention felt excessive as if Paris would host the World Cup. I began searching for Yi Yeonjun under the bright lights.

“Where is he?”

I couldn’t spot him and relied on Spartan’s vision again. Then I found him underground.

“What the...”

The man next to Yi Yeonjun looked familiar. No, more than just familiar. He always switched sides on a whim and acted notoriously fickle. However, he never accomplished anything like Team Rocket.

“Team Rocket? I mean Lancaster?”

I eavesdropped on their conversation.

— I offer you England.

As expected, Lancaster wanted to scheme against England again. He sure kept at it.

— I have top-secret information about British national security as well as other confidential documents. With this, you can turn England into a second Pandemonium. The class 1 security codes can neutralize the entire British system and disable all their shields.

Yi Yeonjun silently stared at him. Lancaster thought he sensed greed in Yi Yeonjun’s nonchalant expression and offered a proposal.

— I only want one thing. Please destroy the British royal family.

Lancaster claimed to know top-secret information, but only Yi Yeonjun concerned me right now. I took out my smartwatch and opened the Violet Times.

*[Violet Times] [Investigator Yoo Jinhyuk has completed your request.]
[Here is the flash drive containing information about Yi Yeonjun's past.]
[Please pay the complete amount in two weeks.]*

A small portal appeared above the smartwatch and I placed my hand inside to pull out Yoo Jinhyuk's flash drive. Then...

"What are you doing here?" A familiar voice struck my eardrums and I looked up in shock.

"You scared me."

Cheok Jungeyong smirked and placed his hand on my shoulder.

"It's been a while."

"You're right, but why are you here Cheok Jungyeong?"

"Me? They're hosting the 3rd preliminary round or something. That's what I'm here for."

"Alone?"

"Yep, fun things should be done alone."

"Mmm."

I nodded and turned back to the flash drive and Yoo Jinhyuk's message.

[Yoo Jinhyuk: I've put together the most important information regarding Yi Yeonjun's past. I even included it in a flash drive as a gesture of goodwill for such a VIP customer.]

[Directions: Infuse your magic power into the flash drive and insert it into

a virtual reality capsule or virtual reality helmet.]

[I recommend a whole body capsule instead of a helmet for a more engaging experience.]

[Yoo Jinhyuk's Flash Drive] — A flash drive containing the extracted past.

"Mmm."

So he could do something like this.

Yoo Jinhyuk delivered it as a flash drive so his customers could experience the same things.

"Oi, what's that? Looks sort of fun." Cheok Jungyeong shoved his head towards me.

"Nothing. It's just..."

I prepared to change the subject when an idea suddenly crossed my mind. No one said this flash drive would only work for one person. More than two people could simultaneously play a game or watch a video with the party option in a whole body capsule.

"Cheok Jungyeong?"

"Hm? What?"

"Do you know Yi Yeonjun?"

Cheok Jungyeong slightly frowned. "No, not really. I just know he used to be the Chameleon Troupe's former leader and also Boss' savior."

Cheok Jungyeong honestly replied as I looked down at the flash drive. He didn't have any prior relationship with Yi Yeonjun and even seemed disgruntled by the former leader's presence. Then...

"Cheok Jungyeong, follow me."

“Eh? Why?”

“This...” I held up the flash drive.

“You said it looked fun, so let’s look at it together.”

“*Hmm.*” He folded his arms and pretended to be uninterested, but soon smiled and came closer.

“Where can we look at it?”

“Right over there.”

I pointed at [*Capsule de Mars*], the largest capsule cafe and one of the most famous tourist attractions in France.

“Capsule? So that thing runs on a capsule?”

“That’s right. Let’s go.”

“I’ve never used a capsule before.”

I headed to the capsule cafe with a confused Cheok Jungyeong.

“Welcome.”

I paid the cafe owner and borrowed two capsules. An extra large one for Cheok Jungyeong and a medium one for me. I sent Cheok Jungyeong a friend request after we went online.

“Cheok Jungyeong, are you ready?”

— *Uh...* wait... this is so damn complicated... *Ah*, there. I accepted your friend request and party invitation. Am I all set?

“Yeah, give me a moment. I’m putting in the flash drive.”

I infused stigma’s magic power into it.

“Here we go.”

Then I plugged it into the capsule.

Chwaaaa—

“What the...”

A mysterious light shot out from the capsule and enveloped my entire body.

* * *

Meanwhile, Kim Suho and Chae Nayun busily played games in the capsule cafe. They made up the excuse to relieve stress and relax before the 3rd preliminary round, but actually came because of Chae Nayun. Such an avid gamer couldn't pass up the opportunity to visit [*Capsule de Mars*], a world famous capsule cafe.

“*Uhahaha*. Kim Suho, you sucker! You're terrible at games. I can't even keep track of how many times you've lost!”

Chae Nayun teased him inside the virtual world after he lost again. Kim Suho scratched his neck in embarrassment.

— *Ah*, this is kinda hard.

“Who's up next?”

Currently, they played a game called *Gladiator of the Century*. Chae Nayun won against Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, and Yun Seung-Ah. She ranked number 1 for a reason.

— Nayun, can't we just play something else?

Yi Jiyeon suggested after their duel wore her out.

— Good idea. We should play something else. I'm getting tired of this.

Shin Jonghak agreed.

“Something else?”

Chae Nayun looked at her friend list. Her online friends included Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yun Seung-Ah, Yi Jiyeon, and... Yoo Yeonha?

[Yoo Yeonha – Playing at Capsule de Mars, Paris]

“What the... Yoo Yeonha is here?”

— Yoo Yeonha? The Yoo Yeonha?

Yun Seung-Ah widened her eyes as a hologram.

“Yeah, it says she’s playing at Capsule de Mars. She must be here in Paris. Unni, can we include Yeonha and play GTA 3 on 3?”

— Sure, anything but Gladiator of the Century.

Kim Suho and the others nodded in agreement.

“Okay then.”

Chae Nayun invited Yoo Yeonha to her party. Yoo Yeonha briefly hesitated before accepting. Five holograms appeared in Chae Nayun’s common area.

“Hey, Yeonha.”

— Hey, so you came too Nayun.

Yoo Yeonha looked at Chae Nayun with her arms crossed.

“Of course, but why are you here?”

— I came to Paris as an association member. I have some documents to go over regarding the capsules.

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled and showed Chae Nayun the stack of documents. Chae Nayun felt sick at the mere sight of them.

“Damn, put that down and let’s play.”

— Sorry, I’m busy.

“Hey, this is your chance to rest. There’s more to life than just work! You don’t have to take care of that right now.”

Yun Seung-Ah, Kim Suho, and Shin Jonghak also chimed in.

— Why don’t you rest a bit, chief officer? I’m a guild leader and even I’m slacking off. You’re making me feel guilty.

— Exactly, take a break.

— They’re right, Yeonha. Just play one game.

— What did you say?

Yoo Yeonha glared disapprovingly at Shin Jonghak, but heaved a sigh and nodded.

— Fine, I’ll play just one game. I need to talk to Jonghak anyways.

“Yay! Okay, wait a second.”

Chae Nayun pulled up their next game, Grand Theft Auto XS.

“Let’s go.”

[Asking party members to join...] [All members have entered.] [Accessing Grand Theft Auto XS.]

Their game began to load up when—

Chwaaaaa...

A giant ray of light swallowed them and Chae Nayun closed her eyes.

“...?”

Chae Nayun, Yun Seung-Ah, Yoo Yeonha, Yi Jiyeon, Kim Suho, and Shin Jonghak found themselves in an unfamiliar area.

“Wow... Nayun, what’s this game called again? It feels so real. *Ah*, my eyes still hurt.”

Yi Jiyeon remarked.

Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha also turned to Chae Nayun for an answer.

“...”

Chae Nayun became speechless. She had played *[Grand Theft Auto XS]* for an astounding 200 hours, so their current situation confused her.

“Where are we?”

[Grand Theft Auto XS] definitely didn’t look like this.

Chapter 312

Virtual Reality Containing the Truth (2)

“What the...”

Chae Nayun looked around in awe. They stood over a barren field at night, but she could see neon lights and tall buildings in the distance.

“This is some amazing technology. It feels so real.”

Yoo Yeonha’s remark startled Chae Nayun.

Did they go through a major update or something? No, I would’ve known if they did.

“Right, but are we in the slums?”

Her comrades continued talking as Chae Nayun tried to make sense of the situation.

“Slums?”

Kim Suho widened his eyes and Yun Seung-Ah nodded with a smile.

“You guys wouldn’t know, but neon cities like this used to exist on the outskirts of Seoul and Suwon. Most of them were in the slums.”

“Of course, you’d know since you’re in your thirties.”

Yoo Yeonha caught her off guard.

“W-What?” Yun Seung-Ah hissed like a cat, but the younger girl

simply shrugged.

“It’s true.”

“Sure, but... You don’t have to point that out, chief officer.”

“Pouch!”

Chae Nayun suddenly shouted and everyone glanced at her.

“*Phew.*”

She sighed in relief and held a pouch in her hand.

Yun Seung-Ah tilted her head. “*Hm?* What’s that Nayun?”

“*Ah*, this is the inventory in the form of a pouch. It’s common for open world games like GTA, I mean Grand Theft Auto, to call their inventory something else.”

Chae Nayun smirked and checked inside her pouch. “My level is high, so this pouch should be able to hold 300 kg.”

However, the maximum capacity of her pouch only reached 3 kg. Chae Nayun became silent.

“Pouch! Wow, it really works!”

“Pouch.”

Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah also summoned their pouches. They examined it in detail, mesmerized by the technology.

“Enough with the chitchat. We should get going since I don’t have much time. I have to finish this quickly and go back,” Yoo Yeonha announced.

“...”

I have to finish this quickly and go back. Yoo Yeonha's words instilled a sense of unease in Chae Nayun.

"Okay, let's get moving. How do I take screenshots? I want to upload some photos on social media."

"You should seriously take a break from social media, Yi Jiyeon."

The party moved towards the neon city. Chae Nayun began walking with Shin Jonghak by her side.

"So we just destroy things and fight when we get there, right? At least that's what everyone does on YouTube."

"*Huh?* Oh... N-No, be quiet and stay calm."

"Isn't that what this game is about?"

"*Ugh*, just leave me alone."

She deserted Shin Jonghak and Yun Seung-Ah approached her.

"Nayun, how do you level up in this game? I'm having trouble controlling my magic power. I think my level is too low."

"*Huh? Um...* give me a second."

Logout, logout, logout, logout... Chae Nayun muttered to herself dozens of times, but the logout window and the settings page wouldn't appear.

"Dammit. I'm totally screwed."

She grumbled and finally gave up.

"Oh? Look, it's a sign." Kim Suho led the way and discovered it first.

[Suwon Area A]

“Suwon Area A... It’s just as you said, guild leader. This is Suwon.”

“Really? Interesting. This map must be based on Suwon before the administrative changes if they’re still calling this Area A.”

The party passed the sign and entered the city.

Neon lights lined the street along with market stalls, pubs, red lanterns, and motels. The city appeared quite enigmatic up close.

Yoo Yeonha gazed across the unfamiliar cityscape.

“Nayun, what year does this game take place in?”

“*Huh?* Oh... we might have to visit the PC cafe or motel over there to find out.”

“How about money? How do we make money?”

“*Eh?* Money...?”

A group of men suddenly jumped out of the back alley. They held knives, baseball bats, and wooden sticks.

“*Uhahaha!* You!”

A man wearing a bandana seemed to be the leader and came forward.

“Hand over everything you have if you value your life!”

The party silently stared at him and Chae Nayun pointed at the thugs.

“There it is. Money!”

* * *

I opened my eyes to a faded ceiling and felt a bit hazy. An unbearable pain suddenly struck the right side of my body.

“...!”

It came from my right arm and fully woke me up. Only then did I realize what happened.

First, I delivered the robe to Medea at the Tower of Wish. Then I teleported to Paris where I received a flash drive from Yoo Sihyuk containing Yi Yeonjun's past. Next, I went to [*Capsule de Mars*] to check the contents. The flash drive suddenly absorbed stigma's magic power when I plugged it in. It happened so quickly I couldn't control the flow of magic power.

“You're finally up?” Cheok Jungyeong's deep voice rang out.

“Huuu.”

I sighed and examined my arm. It looked so bruised I couldn't recognize stigma's symbol or move my arm at all.

“Oi, you okay?”

“I'm fine. By the way, where are we?”

“I don't know. Some sort of shrine or church. Why are we here?”

Shrine? Church? I tilted my head when a sharp pain shot through my right arm again. The familiar magic power inside stigma grew faint.

“Ugh... Logout!” I shouted to escape from the pain, but nothing happened.

“Video information, pause, connection status...”

The other system functions also failed as if they had been intentionally blocked.

“What's going on?”

“That's what I'd like to know. What are you doing?”

Something felt off. A recorded video definitely wouldn't feel like this. Yoo Jinhyuk's flash drive and stigma must've caused some sort of reaction when they fused. Overclock had also been activated judging from my arm's condition. That must be why Cheok Jungyeong also got swept up in this.

Was I too naive? Should I have been more careful before plugging in the flash drive? No, I never would've imagined something like this could happen. More importantly, I believed in my luck. I still didn't know if my luck saved me or caused this turn of events.

"Oi, you hurt your head or something?"

Cheok Jungyeong frowned. *Beep*— The message Yoo Jinhyuk left popped up in the air.

Yoo Jinhyuk's Message: [Dear customer, I noticed a strange relationship between Yi Yeonjun and the current Chameleon Troupe's boss while investigating Yi Yeonjun's past.] [I believed you might be interested, so I focused on those two.] [My messages will arrive in the order I intended.]

"Oi?"

I turned to Cheok Jungyeong and got up. The surroundings resembled a church more than a shrine.

"Looks like we're in a church lounge. Follow me Cheok Jungyeong."

We stepped outside. A chapel, a nursery, and a lounge surrounded the large, barren field. I could hear kids laughing and talking in the nursery from where I stood.

"Hey, over there."

Cheok Jungyeong suddenly slapped my shoulder as I examined the nursery. He pointed at the field with a serious look and I turned towards that direction too.

"Ah..."

I couldn't help but exclaim. A child sat alone in the bleachers at the corner of the field.

"She's the one, right?" Cheok Jungyeong asked while stroking his chin.

"Yeah." I nodded.

Disheveled black hair and dull eyes. She stared straight ahead as if waiting for someone to come back. My heart ached just looking at her all alone in the cold.

"That's Boss."

* * *

Chae Nayun and the others arrived at a motel somewhere in Area A. The room could barely fit 6 people, but it felt less stuffy after Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah left for a walk.

"This place has a lot of robbers, but only in the alleys. The main street has shops and pubs, so it's not as bad as Pandemonium. I wouldn't say the level of difficulty is too high."

Yoo Yeonha analyzed the game while looking down at the street from the window.

"Nayun, shouldn't we run around the city to receive missions? Like main quest and side quests?" Yi Jiyeon excitedly asked.

"*Huh?* Oh, y-yeah. Sure, but the thing is..."

"Oh, right."

Clap—

Yoo Yeonha suddenly clapped. "Do you think this computer works?"

"*Uh...* I-I don't know. Try turning it on."

Yoo Yeonha examined the dusty computer full of curiosity. “This is so old. How do I even turn it on?”

A desktop felt quite unfamiliar. She managed to find the power button after carefully investigating the computer case.

“*Woah*, it’s on.”

Vroom— The screen lit up after a buzzing sound. The others stood next to her and watched. *Vroom— Vroom— Vroom—*

“...”

“*Yaawn*.”

“It’s so slow.”

They all stared at the screen for 3 entire minutes. Finally, it finished booting and Yoo Yeonha checked the date.

“December 18, 2006?”

Yoo Yeonha hadn’t even been born yet.

“*Woah*, so we’re in the 2000s?” Yi Jiyeon exclaimed with a big smile.

“Yeah, but the mid-2000s is... a weird setting for a game.”

Superhumans began appearing in the 70s and 80s after the tumultuous 60s. Korea recaptured its stolen territories in the 90s with the help of superhumans and first established the hero system. In the early 2000s, Korea experienced major growth in technology as the population of heroes also grew. However, the period between 2000-2010 simply served as a transition. The gap between the rich and poor widened with technology’s rapid advancement. The slums increased beyond government authority and many considered it a shameful era.

“At least the details seem accurate...”

Yoo Yeonha turned off the computer after surfing the web. Then she looked around for Shin Jonghak and found him training.

“Jonghak, do you want to go for a walk?”

“A walk?”

“Yeah, we can look around the neighborhood and see what there is. We still have some money from the robbers, so we can buy things too.”

Shin Jonghak seemed reluctant until Chae Nayun intervened.

“Sounds fun! Go, go!”

Chae Nayun pulled him towards Yoo Yeonha and acted strange, but they left without saying much.

Only Yi Jiyeon remained with her. She looked at Chae Nayun with her big, round eyes.

“*Haaa...*” Chae Nayun sighed and fell onto the bed with her hands over her head.

“Nayun?”

“I think I need some sleep. Why don’t you go outside and play?”

Yi Jiyeon nodded, but sat in front of the motel computer instead of leaving. She had never seen this type of operating system before, but quickly got the hang of it.

Like that, 3 hours passed.

Chapter 313

Virtual Reality Containing the Truth (3)

“Mmm.”

Yi Jiyeon pulled away from the computer and stretched. Yoo Yeonha and Shin Jonghak returned at that precise moment. They brought back a dagger, spear, sword, and other weapons.

“Here, this weapon is for you Nayun.”

She received the *[Typical Iron Sword]* without putting up a fight. *Kiik* — The door opened again and Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah also came back. They handed out snacks and food to the rest of them with a smile. Then the group spent some time eating snacks and chewing gum.

15 minutes later...

Yoo Yeonha chewed on some dried squid legs while pretending like it didn't suit her taste.

“Nayun, how do we log out of this game?” she finally asked.

“...!”

Logout. The word surprised Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha asked again.

“What's wrong?”

“*H-Huh?* What?”

“I said, how do we log out of this game?”

“Um... Uh...” Chae Nayun glanced at her friends all looking at her.

“I don’t know... How did I do it before?”

Yoo Yeonha frowned. “Stop joking and tell me. It’s already been 4 hours. I have to attend an event soon.”

“R-Really? It’s been 4 hours already? Time sure flies.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha glared at her and Chae Nayun shuddered in fear.

“So? How do I log out?”

“...”

“Nayun?”

“Huh? Oh... that’s...”

“Say it.”

“...”

Chae Nayun shut her mouth as Yoo Yeonha scowled at her. Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yi Jiyeon, and Yun Seung-Ah all focused on her.

“T-That’s... uh...”

Her heart pounded and her breathing grew heavy. Cold sweat trickled down her back and her head spun. She began to feel dizzy. *Gulp*. Chae Nayun swallowed her saliva and... *Kooong!* She smashed her head on the floor.

“Sorry! I have no idea where we are! I don’t know how to log out of this thing!”

A cry of despair filled the motel room.

* * *

[Nameless Nursery]

“She’s not doing anything,” Cheok Jungyeong noted.

“You’re right,” I replied.

“Are you sure that’s Boss?” Cheok Jungyeong asked.

“Yes, I’m sure,” I replied again.

We silently stared at the girl. About 3 minutes passed and Cheok Jungyeong leered at me.

“So you’re here to spy on the young Boss?”

“No, I’m here to investigate Yi Yeonjun.”

“Yi Yeonjun?”

“Yeah, he doesn’t seem to like me for some reason.”

“Really?”

“Yes, but I didn’t expect this to happen.”

“*Hmm.*” Cheok Jungyeong stroked his chin.

“So you’re saying that flash drive and your magic power responded to each other and created a whole new world?”

I spent the last 3 hours explaining this phenomenon to Cheok Jungyeong.

“It’s not an entirely new world. It’s just a fully manifested virtual

reality based on data of the past. You got most of it right.”

“Uh, so how do we get out of here?”

“That... we’ll have to see.”

I stared at Boss as she waited for someone. Yoo Jinhyuk probably only wanted me to see the most important events, so something would eventually happen.

“Oi, but what if we spend so much time in here that everyone outside ends up dead?” Cheok Jungeyong worriedly asked.

“Don’t worry. We’re inside a virtual reality, so the concept of time only applies to our brains.”

“What the heck does that mean?”

“It means time flows differently here. It’s okay even if we stay for a long time.”

I could somewhat tell based on my connection with Spartan. I couldn’t pin down the exact ratio, but time passed a lot quicker here than in the real world.

“I’ll kill you if you’re lying.”

“Sure.”

A luxury sedan suddenly appeared and Boss reacted to the headlights. She stood up with a faint smile.

“Hide.”

We hid as best as possible. The sedan glided across the field in the dark. Soon, a man and a woman got out. Boss nervously walked up to them.

Then I received Yoo Jinhyuk’s message.

[Yoo Jinhyuk's Message] [The man and woman are the girl's parents.]

The man approached Boss first. He stopped in front of her and frowned.

— I told you not to come outside.

I already knew this part of her past since it came from my original settings.

— Why are you here?

Boss weakly smiled despite her father's cold demeanor. She seemed happy just to see him.

— *Um*, this.

She took something out of her pocket. A bracelet made of flowers and shadows. She probably made it herself. However, her father suddenly clenched his fist and... *Tak!* He smacked the bracelet away.

— I don't need anything made with that cursed power of yours, you little freak.

“That bastard—”

I grabbed Cheok Jungyeong's wrist and tried to calm him down.

“*Shh*. It's all just a virtual reality.”

Her mother also came forward with eyes full of disdain and clicked her tongue.

— You really are a cursed child. Haven't I told you not to pick flowers? Don't you feel bad for the flowers?

Their cruelty made me doubt whether they really gave birth to her. The couple trampled on Boss' bracelet and headed towards the nursery. Boss stared at their backs as they left, but didn't cry. Her

expression didn't change as she picked up her bracelet and... *Grumble*
— She began walking towards the nursery.

“*Hmm.*”

“Those bastards. I'm gonna tear their stomachs open and jump rope with their intestines.”

“*Ugh*, be quiet.”

I placed my hand over Cheok Jungyeong's mouth and stood up. I felt bad, but these events had already happened. Another message arrived.

[Yoo Jinhyuk's Message] [Find out where her parents came from and you'll find Yi Yeonjun.]

Yoo Jinhyuk left quite useful messages. *Ssssk*—

“...?”

Sssk— I felt a presence behind the bushes across the field. No, not just a presence.

[User]

They had a marker above their head that read, *[User]*.

“User?”

What's that?

I widened my eyes and activated my gift, *[Observation and Reading]*.

[User ID: GreasyPaper] [Play Time: 7236 hours]

“Why is there a user here?”

A realization struck me like a hammer to the head. The thought that

crossed my mind gave me goosebumps.

“*Mmm*. I see a couple of people over there. They don’t look hostile.”

Even Cheok Jungyeong’s voice sounded distant. I began to think. Like regular PC cafes, the *[Capsule de Mars]* used a shared public network. The number of customers at the cafe reached over 1000 at the time. Maybe when I connected the flash drive to the capsule, everyone at the cafe...

“*Uh*, wait. I think we have a huge problem.”

I scratched my neck. The other information marker also bothered me. That user’s play time read: *7236 hours*. A problem with the time axis might’ve also occurred.

“*Uh*, I—”

I only just realized the scale of the disaster I had caused. I got up while ruffling my hair.

“Cheok Jungyeong?”

“Yeah.”

“You see those people over there?”

“You want me to catch them?” Cheok Jungyeong grinned and I shook my head.

“No, don’t catch them. Just politely ask them to—”

Cheok Jungyeong already raced across the field like a beast before I finished.

* * *

[Suwon Area A, Motel]

The sky glowed a dim blue in the early morning. The sun would rise, but the motel's atmosphere still felt dreary.

"I have to leave... I have to leave..."

"*Sigh...*"

Yoo Yeonha scratched the wall in agony while Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah sighed at the thought of the 3rd preliminary round that would begin in 3 days. Shin Jonghak tried to comfort Chae Nayun.

"..."

Chae Nayun couldn't face her friends. She still didn't know what caused this situation, but she had forced them to play. Chae Nayun sighed again and her gaze drifted to Yi Jiyeon in front of the computer.

"Jiyeon, did you find anything?"

"*Mmm?* Oh, no. I'm just looking at blogs and stuff."

"*Ah...* yeah?"

Blogs? So she's just killing time.

Chae Nayun suddenly recalled something as if lightning struck and she widened her eyes. *Blog*. The words her precious person once said a long time ago still lingered in her heart.

— I'm going to take lots of pictures of you and your brother and post them on my blog.

She could still clearly hear that voice.

"*Ah!*"

Chae Nayun jumped to her feet and ran to Yi Jiyeon.

“Show me. Show me!”

“You scared me. What’s the big deal?”

“Just show me.”

Chae Nayun saw the blog site on the computer screen. She closed her eyes and rubbed her temples. *What was mom’s ID again?* She buried her head in her hands. *Think!*

“Ah! Bellflower!”

“Huh? What’s Bellflower—”

“It’s an ID! Quick, search for Bellflower!”

Yi Jiyeon tilted her head, but did as instructed. Only one user had that nickname and Yi Jiyeon clicked on the link.

“...”

“Ah...”

Chae Nayun’s heart suddenly stopped and so did Yi Jiyeon’s.

“This is...”

A streak of tears trickled down Chae Nayun’s cheek.

“What’s wrong? Chae Nayun, Yi Jiyeon?”

The rest of the party gathered around the computer. Shin Jonghak came first, followed by Kim Suho, Yun Seung-Ah, and Yoo Yeonha. All of them fell silent when they saw the computer screen.

“...”

[Bellflower] [●Currently Online] [Blog of eternal happiness. I write about

my son.]

Photos of a young Chae Jinyoon filled Bellflower's blog.

"Ah..."

Chae Nayun muttered in a daze. Her tears flowed and a sad smile spread across her lips.

"They're alive."

Kim Suho and everyone else looked at Chae Nayun. Shin Jonghak stretched his arm towards Chae Nayun, but Yoo Yeonha stopped him.

"My mom and brother too."

"Yeah..."

Yun Seung-Ah stood next to Chae Nayun and hugged her. Chae Nayun stared at the photo of her mom and her brother smiling together while resting her head on Yun Seung-Ah's shoulder.

"Hey Jiyeon, does this have a live chat feature?"

"Hm? Oh yeah. Wait a sec—"

Their peace didn't last long.

Chwaaak—

Silver wires danced outside and shattered the windows before spreading across the room.

"What the..."

The party quickly grabbed their weapons, but the enemy acted faster.

"*Shh*. Don't move. This is just a game, not reality. I'll kill you if you

move.”

The voice threatened them as a sharp wire stopped in front of their necks.

“This...”

Kim Suho had seen these silver wires before. He clenched his teeth and glared at the shattered window. The man hidden under the robe leaned against the wall.

“You’re...”

Kim Suho recognized his eyes and familiar build. They had been enemies ever since they first met in the Tower of Wish. Only the Chamelon Troupe’s seat of silver, Kaita, used steel wires as his main weapon.

“Long time no see, Kim Suho.”

Kaita smirked and a *[User]* marker floated above his head.

“Are you the one behind all this?”

Kaita shrugged at Kim Suho’s threatening gaze.

“Nope. I have no idea what’s going on either, so don’t glare at me like that. After all, I’m only here to help. You guys don’t even know what this game is about, right?”

Tap— Tap—

“FYI, at least 1500 other users besides you and me came here. About 300 in Suwon and 50 of them were aiming at you guys until just now.”

Kaita explained. Then he sat on the nearest bed and continued.

“All 50 of them ran away because of me! I helped you guys out. Do

you understand? Now stop with those faces.”

Kaita smirked in the center of the six heroes that kept glaring at him.

“I’ll take that as a no. Shall we just continue talking then?”

Chapter 314

The Virtual Reality Containing Truth (4)

[Motel in Suwon Area A]

“First of all, I don’t know why I’m here either.”

Kaita continued explaining in the motel room full of wires. He told the truth, but his audience didn’t believe him as evidenced by their faces. Kaita shrugged, feeling somewhat helpless.

“It’s true. I’m too great to be stuck in this shabby past.”

“Why don’t you free us first?” Kim Suho suggested. He sounded calm, unlike Shin Jonghak, who still struggled with the wires.

Kaita nodded after a brief silence. “Fine, but only you.”

Tak! He snapped his fingers and the wires binding Kim Suho returned to his gauntlet. Kim Suho stood straight again and looked around at the silver wires stretched like a spiderweb. He would’ve easily destroyed these wires under normal circumstances, but found it difficult to control his magic power in this virtual reality.

“Secondly, all of you sure are lucky.” Kaita kept speaking.

“I’ve lost count of how many damn years I’ve spent in this fake world, but you only just got here?”

“What are you talking about? Everyone arrived at different times?” Kim Suho asked with a frown.

“That’s right. Apparently, time outside flows much slower than here. It

took me two years to figure that out. Others say this whole situation has something to do with brain science, virtual reality, and dimensional systems. *Blah blah blah...* I really couldn't care less."

Kaita sat on his wires with a smirk. "Would you like to work together?"

"Work together?" Kim Suho furrowed his brows in confusion. That didn't sound like something Kaita would say, so Kim Suho couldn't help but doubt him.

"Yeah, I just want to get the fuck out of here as soon as possible. I'm sick and tired of idiots settling for this fake world. I'd kill them all if I could."

Chwaaak! Kaita withdrew all his wires. Freed at last, the party took a minute to calm down before shifting their attention to Kaita and Kim Suho. Everyone remained silent while trying to figure out what to say. Yoo Yeonha broke the silence first.

"We should hear more, but..."

She smiled at Kaita. "You're a Chameleon Troupe member, no?"

"*Hmm?* You shouldn't mention that name so casually."

Kaita looked annoyed, but Yoo Yeonha didn't falter. She knew they fundamentally acted as thieves no matter how heinous their crimes. She could always bring up Black Lotus if things took a turn for the worse.

"Anyways, we need more information about this world and how to escape. We'll cooperate if necessary."

Time outside flows much slower than here. Yoo Yeonha regained her usual confidence thanks to this crucial piece of information. Kaita nodded with a smirk.

"Okay, but I'm only going to say this once. Listen carefully..."

[Office Building, Outskirts of Seoul]

Cheok Jungyeong and I left the church. We moved to our new base, an abandoned building near Boss' nursery, with our two new companions.

"Clean this place up and it'll be decent enough to use for the next couple of days."

The building featured 3 floors, each about 640 square feet. Spiderwebs and mold covered everywhere, but I didn't care.

"It's too damn filthy to clean."

Cheok Jungyeong, on the other hand, seemed irritated. Believe it or not, he cared quite deeply about hygiene.

"It'll only take an hour."

"Excuse me, hyungs?"

One of our new companions spoke. They had been beaten so badly I couldn't tell them apart from their faces. Only their different hairstyles gave them away. One sported a mohawk and the other had a shag.

"What do you... plan on doing from now on?" Mohawk carefully asked.

"I'm not sure," I softly replied. I didn't want to be harsh on them as the one responsible for this situation. In my defense, Cheok Jungyeong had beat them up.

"What have you two been doing until now?"

"We just tried to survive. Our base is GTA."

"Base? GTA?"

“Yes.”

Cheok Jungyeong and I frowned in confusion. Fortunately, our quick-witted companions explained.

“Oh, your base refers to the game you were playing when you first got dragged to this world. Our base is Grand Theft Auto.”

“*Hmm...* Could you explain from the top? From the very beginning?”

“Ah, of course.”

Mohawk began telling their story. “So about 300 days ago, wait, was it 300? Anyways, we were playing a game at a capsule cafe in Paris...”

They had been playing Grand Theft Auto XS at Capsule de Mars when a system message suddenly popped up. [*You have been disconnected from the game*]. Afterwards, they lost consciousness and found themselves in early 2000s Korea when they opened their eyes. Soon, they found out about a game-like feature called privilege in this world. However, user privileges depended on the genre of their base games and GTA turned out to be the worst.

“The privileges of GTA users are stealing, mugging, and those sorts of things. We chased after that sedan to rob them.”

Our two companions honestly told us everything.

“I see.”

“That’s our story. And... what are your bases?” Shag asked us.

“*Huh?* Oh... we’re...”

I shook my head after briefly hesitating. Mohawk told us his base game had reduced his physical abilities and gave him certain talents called privileges. However, Cheok Jungyeong moved the same as always half an hour ago. Maybe a little slower than usual, but by no means any weaker.

“I don’t think we have a base. We weren’t playing any games at the time, so our base must be reality.”

In other words, we came into this world without any limitations and possessed our full physical strength within the capsule’s limits.

“Wow... Oh, but the fact that new players are coming must mean this is an actual game being hosted somewhere.”

“No, you’re probably wrong about that.”

I shook my head. Each user probably arrived at different times because of me. Stigma must’ve spread out when I plugged in the flash drive. Those closest to me arrived at a similar time and those farther away probably traveled back in time. Cheok Jungyeong became an exception as my party member, but I couldn’t tell them all this and changed the subject.

“A lot of users must’ve also arrived.”

“Oh, no. The playable area covers half of Korea, but users only amount to about a thousand,” Mohawk informed us.

“*Mmm...* Are there different factions?”

“Only a few are worth noting. There’s the Gladiator Union with players from [*Gladiator of the Century*] and the Church Union with players from the [*Holy Magical Battle*]. However, the strongest is Silver Flash.”

“Silver Flash?”

“Yes, he’s terrifying. Nobody knows which game he came from. He uses silver threads as his main weapon and that thread—”

“Silver threads?” Cheok Jungyeong and I both frowned.

“Yes, his threads are made from steel,” Shag confirmed.

Cheok Jungyeong and I smiled at each other.

“What’s he doing here?”

“I wonder.”

I stretched with a grunt. An unexpected ally, though not exactly reliable, made me feel more comfortable.

“Anyways, it’s our first day here.”

I continued with a sigh. “So let’s clean up this place first.”

An hour should be enough to clean up this mess. Cheok Jungyeong looked at my right arm and asked, “Can you do it with just one arm?”

“One is more than enough.”

“And we’re not going to do anything about Boss?”

Cheok Jungyeong sounded worried and sympathetic. I picked up the broom and dustpan with a bitter smile.

“We have no choice for now. Let’s be extra nice to her when we return.”

We spent the next two hours cleaning the office. I definitely struggled with just one arm, but we quickly finished thanks to our companions.

“I appreciate the help.”

“No problem. Like we said, you can talk comfortably around us.”

Shag and Mohawk became our loyal supporters. They instinctively realized, maybe through Cheok Jungyeong, that their chances of survival would be better with us.

“Then could you go out and get us something to eat? Maybe a pot and a burner too. I’m a bit hungry.”

“Of course!”

“We’re on it!”

The two left as I looked out the window. The sunset’s glow poured in through the window.

Then Cheok Jungyeong asked, “So do you know how to get out of here?”

I nodded with a smile. “I do.”

“How?”

“It’s simple.”

The co-author messaged me the moment I got dragged into this virtual world. I just discovered it late because I lost consciousness when I first arrived.

[This is a message from the co-author. I assume you will be very confused.]
[This is a side arc to take a closer look at Boss’ past.] [Therefore, the
logout feature will be reinstated once you observe at least one of the events
that Yoo Jinhyuk has prepared.] [Do your best to witness the events.]

The first event would take place today as I read over Yoo Jinhyuk’s message.

Yoo Jinhyuk’s Message: [Tonight at 9 PM, track down the girl’s parents.]

“We’ll be able to return after we witness the relationship between Yi Yeonjun and Boss.”

This world would cease to exist once I witnessed what Yoo Jinhyuk wanted me to see. Of course, something could go wrong if the users intervened, but that seemed unlikely. After all, I had Cheok Jungyeong by my side.

“Their relationship?”

"Yes. It's 5 o'clock now, so we'll have to wait 4 more hours."

"Yeah?"

Cheok Jungyeong nonchalantly nodded and slumped on the floor next to me. *Kooong*— Even his simple act of sitting sounded loud. We slouched on the floor together and gazed at the sunset through the window.

Soon, Mohawk and Shag returned with some food and a burner.

* * *

Later that day, we tailed Boss' parents as Yoo Jinhyuk instructed and ran after their expensive sedan on the highway. Mohawk and Shag followed behind on a motorcycle.

"Look, they're stopping."

An hour passed and Boss' parents arrived at a building in Seoul. Cheok Jungyeong frowned as they drove to the underground parking lot.

"Do we need to follow them down there?"

"No, let's not risk it. We'll just watch from here."

"I can't see them from here."

"I can."

"What good is that for me?"

"*Shh*—"

I shushed him and widened my eyes. Master Sharpshooter seemed to work fine in this world as I peered through the building.

Boss' parents parked their car and took the elevator to the top floor.

Ding—

The elevator opened at the penthouse and revealed a robed man. I recognized him right away as Yi Yeonjun. Boss' parents approached him with big smiles.

— We're back, elder.

They bowed and respectfully addressed him. However, Yi Yeonjun said something quite cruel without even greeting them.

—...!

The parents froze in shock, but soon regained their composure and nodded as if they had heard it before. They had been preparing for this day.

I clenched my fists and my heart began pounding.

Then I received another message.

Yoo Jinhyuk's Message: [At first, the girl's parents were faithful devotees and benevolent philanthropists.] [They tried to understand their daughter's dark powers.] [However, Yi Yeonjun brainwashed them. His lies and schemes led the couple to believe their daughter's powers were a curse.] [He ruined her family.] [Today, Yi Yeonjun ordered them to kill their daughter.] [He knew about the girl's enormous potential and planned all of this to win her trust.] [The couple will now try to murder their daughter and you'll soon witness the consequences of their actions.] [Now, please watch until the end.]

[Nothing is impossible — Yoo Jinhyuk, Investigator]

A cruel story like this never happened in my original setting.

— We'll get rid of her today.

The couple replied and I swallowed a sigh. It traveled down my throat and mixed with my rage. I brushed my hair back with trembling hands.

“Cheok Jungyeong...”

“What?”

He nonchalantly responded as I kept my eyes on the building.

“Looks like we might have to kill someone.”

Boss’ parents went back to the parking lot and got into their car. They planned on heading back to their daughter and carrying out Yi Yeonjun’s orders.

“Will you help me?”

“Sure, why not?” Cheok Jungyeong casually nodded.

“Really?”

“You’ve always been right, so I believe in you.”

The couple’s sedan left the building.

“Let’s follow them.”

“Okay.”

We put on our hoods and chased after the car. *Wooong*— Their engine roared and we ran after them. *Chwaak!* A silver wire stretched out from the right side of the road and twisted around the sedan.

“*Huh?*”

We stopped in surprise. *KOOONG!* The wire crushed the car and slammed it against the ground. *KWAAANG!* Then the car flipped upside down and exploded.

“...?”

Silence filled the air after the devastating car accident. I might've thought this actually happened in the past if that man didn't suddenly fall from the sky.

“What the... What's he doing?”

Cheok Jungyeong chuckled in disbelief. The Chameleon Troupe's seat of silver, Kaita, gracefully landed on the wrecked car. He withdrew his wire with a smile and he leaned into the car seat before whispering something.

“Oi!”

Cheok Jungyeong's thunderous voice rang out. Startled, Kaita turned towards us and widened his eyes.

“Cheok Jungyeong and... you too black?”

He muttered in a daze.

I knew this Kaita came from the present because he called me black.

“Yep, it's me. What are you doing here?”

As Cheok Jungyeong approached Kaita...

KWAAAAANG!

A magic power explosion occurred at Yi Yeonjun's building and I sensed multiple magic powers. The sudden explosion caused us to look back in surprise.

Chapter 315

Virtual Reality Containing the Truth (5)

After 3 years, Kaita finally discovered a way to escape this perfect reproduction of a past Korea. The solution turned out to be quite simple, yet complicated. He just had to destroy this world's core. The core could be a person, location, or object. However, Kaita knew for a fact it was a person thanks to his base game, Isekai Dating Simulator.

His privilege gave him eyes that could identify the *[Importance]* and *[Level of Difficulty]* of people in this world. His physical abilities also remained quite high because his base game took place in a fantasy world.

Eventually, Kaita found someone he thought could be this world's core. That man possessed an *[Incalculable]* importance and a *[Near Impossible]* difficulty. His entire existence practically screamed to be the core. Kaita knew him well and had lived with him for a long time. He regarded Yi Yeonjun as his savior.

Kaita couldn't bring himself to kill his savior even in a virtual world. He also hesitated because he didn't possess the strength to face Yi Yeonjun alone, so he watched from a distance while diligently training.

Soon, Kaita realized Yi Yeonjun might not be the person he thought. He began to feel betrayed while observing his former boss.

The Chameleon Troupe also existed in this world. They acted like vicious criminals and obtained whatever they wanted through violence. Their cruelty didn't bother Kaita since he grew up surrounded by blood, violence, and death.

However, Yi Yeonjun had destroyed Boss' family because he wanted

her for himself. He sought to control Boss' life.

Seeing Yi Yeonjun carry out such a heinous scheme made Kaita wonder about himself. He always thought his meeting with Yi Yeonjun felt like fate, but maybe their encounter had also been prearranged.

Kaita recalled when someone forcefully injected him with a drug at 11 years old. He could still feel the rush from that high as he killed all those people. His life changed after that day.

Could that have been planned?

Kaita pondered for 3 years. Maybe everything in this world might be fake. He spent many nights wondering if all of it could be an elaborate scheme to turn him against Yi Yeonjun. In the end, the truth felt too clear and he decided to kill Yi Yeonjun to escape this world. Fortunately, he gained several dependable allies like Kim Suho, Yun Seung-Ah, and the other heroes.

For two months, Kaita helped them regain their original strength. The heroes gladly cooperated because they wanted to escape this fake world too.

Today, they would carry out their plan.

* * *

KWAAAAANG!

A magic power explosion erupted at Yi Yeonjun's building. I sensed multiple magic powers as we looked back in surprise.

I spotted a group climbing the building towards the top floor where Yi Yeonjun resided. I recognized them right away. *Kim Suho, Yun Seung-Ah, Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak...*

Cheok Jungyeong watched for a while before turning back to Kaita.

“Oi, what the hell are you doing?”

“Can’t you tell? I’m trying to go back to the real world.” Kaita sighed after regaining his composure.

“Why did you have to destroy that building?”

I left them to talk and ran towards the car. Then I pushed my head inside, but Boss’ parents already turned into digital fragments and forever disappeared.

“Haaa... Why did it have to be today?”

I ruffled my hair and glared at Kaita. Of course, I already had a good idea of how this story would end. The couple planned to kill their daughter, but she would survive and become Boss. Perhaps it turned out best that I didn’t see this through.

“Some things can’t be forgiven even in this fake world,” Kaita said to Cheok Jungyeong.

He sounded surprisingly dignified and I realized Kaita somehow found out the truth about Yi Yeonjun.

“...”

We looked at each other and Kaita nodded. Cheok Jungyeong couldn’t understand our silent conversation.

“How long have you been here, Kaita?” I scratched my neck and asked.

“I don’t know. Three years? Maybe four?”

I pointed at the penthouse. “How about them?”

“Two months.”

KWAAAANG! Magic power exploded once again.

“Do you think two months of training is enough? I heard there’s

something called privileges in this world,” I worriedly asked. However, Kaita spoke with a confident smile.

“Don’t underestimate them.”

Clang! A giant sword pierced through the penthouse’s ceiling. Chae Nayun’s longsword, wrapped in magic power, seemed like it would split the sky.

“All six of them are pretty damn strong.”

Golden magic power also flashed in the distance. It came from Kim Suho’s reinforced sword qi. *Chwaaa*— His sword qi traveled forward and cut off all light in the area. The world briefly turned dark.

“We might be in virtual reality, but our real base is our own body,” Kaita casually stated.

Shin Jonghak’s black flames rose into the air. Kim Suho continued slashing as Shin Jonghak burned everything. His fire engulfed the building and swallowed it whole. Such a scene looked terrifying.

“Two months. It only took them two months to achieve what took me over a year.”

Clang... Lightning blossomed like a flower. This came from Yun Seung-Ah’s white flowers, a graceful technique to incapacitate her opponents.

Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, Yun Seung-Ah, and Kim Suho. These four could be considered some of the strongest characters in the novel. Even Yi Yeonjun wouldn’t last against all four.

“Amazing.”

It didn’t look like they needed any help. I stood still and watched them when...

System Alert [An event has been interrupted. An error has occurred.] [The system will run a test to identify and fix the problem.] [Your session will be

forcefully terminated if no solution is found.] [Running diagnostics...]

Several system alerts popped up.

“Hyungs! What happened here?”

“Uwaaaa, it’s coming down. It’s coming down!”

Mohawk and Shag finally arrived and trembled in fear at the magic power before them.

* * *

The night sky turned deep blue after midnight. Mohawk, Shag, Cheok Jungyeong, and I returned to our office. I sent Kaita back to Kim Suho’s group, hoping he could serve as a messenger between us.

“Aren’t you all hungry? Let’s eat.”

I began cooking with one arm using the ingredients Mohawk and Shag brought. I chopped up the ingredients and stirred them in the pan with some seasonings. Meanwhile, Cheok Jungyeong gathered Shag and Mohawk.

“Is anyone bothering you?”

“Pardon?”

“Just tell me if anyone’s bothering you. I’ll crush them for you.”

“Ah, thank you!”

Tzzzt— It took me only 10 minutes to cook with my one arm.

“It’s all done. Let’s eat.”

“Oh, thank you. Wow, look at all this!”

I prepared a beef steak, stir-fried pork, and other delicacies. Then I leaned against the window and looked at the moon in the sky. My thoughts drifted to Yi Yeonjun.

Today, Kim Suho and the others successfully killed him. His death felt too banal for the Chameleon Troupe's notorious founder. Perhaps only Orden or Chae Joochul could counter the combined force of Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, and Yun Seung-Ah.

However, Yi Yeonjun still lived in the outside world and schemed like a snake beside Boss. She still didn't know he ruined her life.

Keung, Keung—

Suddenly, I heard a sound from below.

Keung, Keung—

Somebody kept sniffing. I looked down and froze. There, I spotted a little girl. She looked scruffy and skinny as if she hadn't eaten in a long time. Perhaps she came looking for her parents who would never return. *Did she really come all this way to find them?*

I sighed at the sight of her. Nothing I did in this fake world would matter, but I held a plate of leftover food and jumped down.

"Hello," I carefully called out.

"...!"

The girl flinched and stepped back. Dark magic power rose from her because she couldn't control her dangerous power yet.

"It's okay. This is for you to eat."

I wanted to calm her down, but she only moved away as I spoke. Young Boss acted totally different from adult Boss, who always seemed full of confidence. She might run away and never come back if I went any closer.

“...”

I set the plate on the ground and left a note. *[Come back anytime if you're hungry]*. Then I returned to the office. Mohawk and Shag shouted when they saw me.

“Wow, this stuff is amazing!”

“We love you, boss!”

They kept calling me boss now. I smiled at them and looked out the window again.

— *Keung*.

Yi Byul sniffed the food on the plate. I knew she wouldn't be able to resist that smell.

— *Keung. Gulp.*

She sniffed for a while before looking around and snatching away the food.

— *Nom, nom nom.*

She hid behind the bushes and stuffed her face like a small animal rather than a human. It felt heartbreaking seeing her like that. My heart ached for her more than I expected.

“...”

Did I sympathize with her? Would sympathy hurt this much? Suddenly, I wanted to see Boss again. The 6 years I spent with her overlapped with the little girl before me.

“Haaa...”

I sighed and soon chuckled. *What should I do if I actually felt this way?* Nothing seemed stranger than falling in love with a character I

created.

— *Tiriring.*

A notification rang out.

System Alert [Unable to resolve the error. The rewind feature has been disabled due to an unknown reason.] [The interrupted event will play as a video.] [The logout feature has been reinstated.]

A screen appeared in front of me and showed the original event that occurred in the past.

— *Kuaaaaak.*

The couple planned on killing their child and she had no choice but to kill her parents. Painful cries and the sound of blood spurting rang out. I clenched my teeth as I watched Boss' past. It felt much more horrifying than I imagined and I tried my best to suppress my anger.

“...?”

I felt a gaze and discovered Yi Byul looking at me. She held an empty plate in her hands and wanted to return it. I smiled and whispered.

“Tell me if you're still hungry. I'll give you more.”

—...!

She suddenly trembled and ran away after placing the plate on the ground. I watched her leave and checked the system.

[247 hours and 30 minutes until logout]

That amounted to roughly 10 days. Yi Byul would keep coming back because she couldn't forget the taste of my cooking.

“Cute.”

She even burped while running. I smiled at little Boss as she ran away with small steps.

* * *

[Kaita's Hideout, Luxurious Mansion in Seoul]

Tap, tap, tap—

[He's so cute! How can a kid be so handsome?]

Chae Nayun sat in front of a computer after successfully completing their mission. She exchanged private messages with a blogger.

[Bellflower: Thanks, as always.]

Chae Nayun and her mother, Bellflower, had been exchanging messages for two months now.

[I can totally tell he's going to be a great hero one day.]

[Bellflower: Ah! How did you know my son has a gift?]

[I can tell from his face. He just looks special!]

[Bellflower: Wow... interesting. I really hope he becomes a great hero as you said.]

Chae Nayun's eyes filled with tears as she typed.

[So is Jinyoon going to Military Agent Academy soon?]

[Bellflower: No. He's talented, but I want him to attend a regular school until he's at least 11.]

[I see...]

Chae Nayun briefly paused. Unfortunately, she didn't exist in this

world yet. Then she resumed typing after a small sigh.

[Oh, I hope I'm not being rude, but do you maybe plan on having another baby?]

[Bellflower: Of course, I've already thought of a name.]

Chae Nayun's heart immediately sank. She forced her hands to stop trembling and continued typing.

[Do you want the baby to be a girl or a boy?]

[Bellflower: Hmm... I don't know. I'll love them the same no matter what.]

[Bellflower: For some reason, I keep thinking it's going to be a girl. It's strange since I'm not even pregnant yet.]

Chae Nayun sighed in relief. So her mother didn't feel disappointed that she turned out to be a girl.

[Then... have you thought of her name?]

Someone placed his hand on Chae Nayun's shoulder. Surprised, she raised her head and saw Shin Jonghak worriedly looking at her.

"Are you sure you don't want to visit her?"

"No, this is enough."

Chae Nayun faintly smiled and shook her head.

Her mother still lived somewhere in this world, beautiful and gentle as always. She didn't know what she would say if they met. Just watching from a distance might break her, so Chae Nayun settled for chatting online.

"How about you? Don't you have anyone you want to see?"

"I don't..."

“Pfft, liar.”

“It’s true. Something like virtual reality can’t recreate the person I admire.”

He sounded sincere. As he said, Shin Myungchul didn’t exist in this world because a mere virtual reality couldn’t replicate him.

“Yeah?”

Chae Nayun nodded and received a reply from Bellflower.

[Bellflower: Name? Hmm... I do have a name for a girl... but I wonder if it's okay to tell you...]

[Oh, you don't have to if you're uncomfortable.]

[Bellflower: No, it's fine. I'll tell you because you're special, Jajanggirl. If I have a girl...]

Chae Nayun swallowed her saliva as the computer screen glowed blue. Heavy tension filled the air and... *Tirring*— Bellflower’s reply arrived with a cheerful ring. Shin Jonghak also smiled as he read the message.

[Bellflower: Nayun (娜允)]

[Bellflower: It means true beauty. Isn't it pretty?]

Chapter 316

Demon Realm Gate (1)

[Bellflower: Nayun (娜允)]

[Bellflower: It means true beauty. Isn't it pretty?]

Chae Nayun deeply sighed as bitterness rose from the bottom of her heart. *True beauty*. She didn't think it suited her, an empty shell who lost everything.

[Yes, it's pretty.]

She wanted to end the conversation.

[Bellflower: I want my child to be beautiful just the way she is.]

Bellflower continued.

[Bellflower: She might fall and get hurt, but I want her to overcome everything in the end.]

Looking at the messages stung Chae Nayun's heart, but she couldn't turn away. She brushed her hair back and grumbled.

[How is that beautiful? That's just not knowing when to give up.]

[Bellflower: You're right. To me, true beauty isn't weak, but strong and stubborn.]

Chae Nayun's fingers hovered over the keyboard.

[Bellflower: Being hurt, regretting, and grieving. However, also accepting that pain and sadness as a part of her.]

[Bellflower: Accepting herself and standing up on her two feet as a person...]

Her mother's voice, the same one she recalled years ago, seemed to flow into her ears through the messages.

[Bellflower: That's what Nayun means to me.]

"I'm heading out..."

Shin Jonghak read the mood and left. Chae Nayun wiped the tears around her eyes and typed.

[I'll remember that.]

She knew this was only a fake world, but decided to believe anyways. She decided to remember the meaning of her name and hold onto it.

[Always.]

Of course, that didn't mean her outlook on life would change overnight. Her memories of Kim Hajin, Chae Jinyoon's death, and Chae Joochul's sins. She still found everything hard to accept and would likely continue doubting herself.

However, she would also recall the meaning of her name that she learned today. Eventually, she might truly change one day.

[I have something to attend to. Thank you.]

[Bellflower: Ah, okay. Let's talk later. ^^]

Chae Nayun ended their conversation and turned off the computer. Yoo Yeonha appeared at the perfect time.

"You're done chatting?"

"Yeah..."

Chae Nayun stood up with a short reply. Yoo Yeonha became startled when she saw Chae Nayun's face and brightly smiled.

"Looks like you received a good piece of advice."

"*Huh? Ah*, no. It's nothing like that."

Chae Nayun shook her head and went out to the living room with Yoo Yeonha. Her comrades gathered inside the large penthouse living room surrounded by glass walls.

"Why can't we log out? You lied to us, didn't you?"

Yun Seung-Ah complained to Kaita while Kim Suho greeted Chae Nayun with a smile.

"Would I be here if I was lying? Just wait ten days."

Chae Nayun walked past the arguing Kaita and Yun Seung-Ah. Then she sat on the couch. A cool breeze blew in from the window and gently caressed her hair. She felt the peaceful atmosphere while staring at her comrades and slowly opened her mouth.

"Everyone."

They all turned to Chae Nayun. She let out a small breath and smiled as if a huge burden had been lifted off her shoulders.

"I'm going to meet my mom and oppa."

* * *

[D-6 Until Logout]

Cheok Jungyeong went to work with Shag and Mohawk in the morning. He left for the mountains because he knew many hidden experts lived there in the 2000s. Cheok Jungyeong enjoyed a happy daily life repeatedly fighting strong opponents. Shag and Mohawk dutifully witnessed his battles.

I chose a more peaceful lifestyle.

“This is the flower you like?”

Byul nodded from beside me. She held two yellow flowers as I checked the name with *[Observation and Reading]*.

[Evening Primrose]

“Evening primrose?”

“...?”

Byul only tilted her head. From the looks of it, she didn’t know the flower’s name either.

“That’s this flower’s name. Now you know if you didn’t before.”

I stretched and stood up. We played ball for about an hour. I read her a fairy tale and we went flower hunting. Then the time to eat finally arrived.

“Let’s go eat dinner now.”

“...”

Byul nodded while keeping three steps away. She remained just as expressionless as before. However, I could tell from our 4 days together that she actually felt extremely happy. The corners of her mouth slightly twitched.

“Alright, follow me.”

“...”

Byul silently nodded and chased after me like a duckling following her mother.

On a side note, I purchased this orphanage 4 days ago to win over

Byul's heart. Kaita gave me the money. I didn't know how he made so much, but he basically became a mogul in this world.

Of course, I lied to Byul that her parents suddenly disappeared because they abandoned her. She didn't express any shock or sorrow. Instead, she acted normal even though she must've hurt on the inside.

"Oh right, what's your favorite meal out of all the ones I've made so far?"

I asked as we walked together. This virtual world came into existence because of the extreme synergy between Yoo Jinhyuk's gift and stigma. This young Boss should have the same taste as the present Boss.

"..." Byul remained silent.

"Pasta? Pork belly?"

She didn't answer no matter how many times I asked.

"Chicken? Pizza? Candy? Dumplings?"

However, she stopped at dumplings.

"Dumplings?"

"..."

She looked up and I smiled at her sparkling eyes.

"That's unexpected."

I never made dumplings for Boss now that I thought about it.

"Perfect, let's go with dumplings."

"..."

Byul nodded and even excitedly walked ahead. The kid who always followed from behind now skipped to the kitchen.

“Pft.”

I laughed and chased after her.

* * *

[D-2 Until Logout]

Chae Nayun arrived at a traditional Korean house on the outskirts of Seoul. She lived here all her childhood and walked to the front gate in delight.

[Chae Family Home]

The nameplate, written in Chinese characters, looked slightly less worn than what she recalled. She stood in front of the gate with a grin. Suddenly, a voice flowed into her ears.

— Hey, don’t get caught. They’ll notice if you act suspiciously. You know when they go out for a stroll, so just aim for that moment.

Kaita’s voice informed her. Chae Nayun walked away from the house and headed to the nearby trail surrounded by grass, flowers, a mountain, and a stream.

She sat on the nearby bench and knew exactly which path her mother would take for her daily stroll.

“Whew...”

She took a deep breath and felt the surrounding spiritual energy. Kaita’s voice rang out again after she waited about 20 minutes.

— She’s out. Chae Jinyoon’s with her.

Chae Nayun immediately tensed with nervousness. A woman and a

young boy appeared about 3 minutes later holding hands.

“...!”

Chae Nayun shot up and recited the sentence she prepared beforehand.

“Oh, if it isn’t it Bellflower? Wow, what a coincidence. I also come here often.”

She practiced the line again to sound as natural as possible.

“Sigh...”

This is it. Don’t be scared. Don’t be afraid. They became scars in my heart because I loved them so much. Walk towards them slowly.

Chae Nayun courageously stepped forward.

* * *

[15 Minutes Before Logout]

The sky turned dark. I sat on a chair and stared at Byul sleeping on the bed. She only ate dumplings for the past week and began smelling like one too.

“What a shame.”

I stayed with her for a week. Cheok Jungyeong and Kaita dropped by to see her, but Byul spent most of her time with me. A week felt too short and she never once smiled.

[10 minutes remaining until logout. The virtual reality will shut down in 10 minutes.]

That’s the one thing I regretted, but my time here hadn’t gone to waste. After all, I learned about Boss’ past and figured out what she liked to eat. I felt more than satisfied.

“Byul.”

I smiled and placed my hand on her forehead. She felt warm now.

[7 minutes until logout...]

I turned off the system alert and I stared at her for the remaining time.

Time continued to pass as I calmed the emotions in the corner of my heart.

Then, in the final minute...

“See you tomorrow.”

I said my farewell.

[The virtual reality will now end.] [Forceful logout commencing.]

* * *

Wooong—

The capsule opened with a hum and I immediately checked the time.

[9:45 P.M.]

Only 3 hours had passed in the real world.

“Hmm.”

This experience truly felt mysterious. Some spent 3-4 years there, but only 3 hours passed.

“Huu...”

I shook off my grogginess and came out to the capsule room’s hallway.

Woong— Woong— Woong—

I could hear other capsules opening and hurried to Capsule de Mars' exit.

"You're leaving?"

Yoo Yeonha's voice rang out as I grabbed the doorknob. I turned to the side and looked at her.

"You knew I was here?"

"I suspected as much when I saw Chameleon Troupe members in the virtual world."

"I see."

"I have a good hunch as to what happened. Anyways, it served as a nice healing trip for us."

Yoo Yeonha stretched with a grin. I looked at her oddly.

"Healing?"

"Yep. For me, I didn't have to work for 2 months. As for Nayun..."

Yoo Yeonha paused and glanced behind her. No one had left the capsule room yet.

"She met her mother and older brother."

"..."

"It's all thanks to you." Yoo Yeonha softly spoke and placed her hand on my shoulder.

"You can go. Looks like the others will come out soon."

She opened the door for me. I briefly looked at her and left.

Paris' Mars Plaza came into view. The festival hadn't ended yet, but I only wanted to do one thing right now.

I turned on my smartwatch and called Boss.

— What's up?

She picked up immediately. I calmed my heart before speaking.

“Boss, are you also in Paris?”

— I am.

“Then wait for me. I'll be right there.”

— *Hmm?* Now? What—

I hung up and found her location with Spartan. Currently, she ate some fish cakes at a street stall.

First, I ran to a flower shop and asked the owner for evening primroses. He pointed to a flower bouquet and I quickly left with the yellow flowers after throwing him the money.

Soon, I arrived at an alleyway filled with street stalls. I spotted Boss munching on the fish cakes and called her with a bright smile.

“Boss!”

She turned around and curiously tilted her head. “W-What is it so suddenly?”

“ ... ”

I stomped towards her and handed her the bouquet. Boss' eyes widened and a question mark popped up above her head.

“What’s this?”

“A present.”

I shoved the bouquet into her arms. She furrowed her brows before nodding and looking at the flowers.

“Ah...”

Her shoulders faintly trembled as I stared at her.

“They’re called evening primroses. It’s a beautiful name, right?”

“...”

Boss looked at me. Flustered, she repeatedly blinked and my body moved on its own.

I... pulled her into my embrace.

Our robes touched and Boss’ forehead leaned against my chest. Time slowed as if bullet time activated.

Boss froze like a statue as my face rested on her shoulder and I quietly whispered.

“I wanted to see you.”

* * *

[Paris, France]

The Gate of Glory’s 3rd round of selections proceeded without any problems. A total of 1000 candidates would be selected. Only 200 would be chosen after the 4th and 5th rounds to enter the demon realm gate.

“Our farewell is soon.”

Bell murmured from on top of the Eiffel Tower.

“Yeah.”

Jin Sahyuk replied while floating next to him.

“Don’t let your personal feelings cloud your judgment. Don’t hesitate or you’ll miss the opportunity.”

This time, Jin Sahyuk didn’t reply. Normally, she would say something like, *I’ll kill you before you even have the chance to revive!* However, she felt somewhat bitter and sad now that the end finally neared.

“Convince Rumi for me too.”

Bell seemed calm and composed as always. He had no hesitation or regrets.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk silently nodded.

“Good. Then I’ll see you next week.”

Tk, tk. Bell tapped on her shoulder before turning into his gas state and disappearing. The top of the Eiffel Tower became quiet. Jin Sahyuk deeply sighed by herself.

“*Huu...*”

Soon, Baal would descend from the demon realm gate. She would be able to return to Akatrina. Didn’t she want that?

“*Tsk.*”

Where did this bitterness come from? She couldn’t figure it out and created a portal to leave.

Chapter 317

Demon Realm Gate (2)

I prepared for the future after returning to Seoul. First, I purchased an entire block of single houses in Hannam-dong. Then I began renovating their basements. I no longer knew the future, but I knew we didn't have much time before most of the world transformed into the demon realm.

I designed the blueprint for an underground city with the help of Young Dwarf's Dexterity. With *[Buster Call]*, I summoned Genkelope's Vessel and began construction using their maintenance ships.

The assembly quickly progressed because Yoo Yeonha lent me all of the required equipment. The ship's crew also praised my top-notch blueprint.

"What's this?"

Today, I brought Boss to the construction site. *Jiing*— Boss widened her eyes at a robot making parts with its laser hands.

"I'm building this place to prepare for the demon realm transformation."

"Demon realm transformation?"

"Yes."

We needed to prepare for the incoming crisis to achieve the happy ending everyone deserved.

"This is the crystal that can stop the transformation."

I took out *[Akatrina's Purification Crystal]*. Prihi, from the recorded

past, had given it to me. However, its effects could only be used in a 5 km radius.

“This crystal can also purify the soil and air. We can easily produce underground crops with it.”

According to Horner, we could even build an artificial sea. We wouldn’t have to worry about food shortages if we could grow crops like the [*meat-flavored corn*] from the Tower of Wish.

“That’s interesting.”

Boss nodded. *Tirring*— I received a video call on my smartwatch.

“Excuse me for a minute, Boss.”

The call came from Yoo Yeonha. I adjusted my smartwatch’s angle so Boss wouldn’t be seen.

— Hello?

Yoo Yeonha appeared in the air as a hologram.

“What’s up?”

— How’s the construction going? Is everything okay?

“Yep, I think it’ll be finished in a month.”

The underground city looked massive, but Genkelope's crew worked unbelievably fast. They could work without rest thanks to the [*Orb of Regeneration*].

— *Mmm...* You said you were using technology from Genkelope’s Vessel, right?

“Yeah.”

— Then could you help me?

Yoo Yeonha carefully asked.

“Help you?”

— Essential Dynamics is also working on underground cities in Seoul, Busan, and Ulsan. We’re also planning some in the U.S. and Japan too.

“Ah, really? That sounds like a good plan. I’ll help.”

Yoo Yeonha acted meticulously as always.

— Thanks! I’ll send my people to you later. I have to go now.

“Ah, wait up.”

I suddenly recalled something and turned towards Boss glaring at me. I muted Yoo Yeonha and asked.

“Boss, the Mountain Sage members are still locked up, right?”

“Yes...”

“It’s time to use them.” I unmuted the smartwatch with a smirk.

“We’ve been keeping tabs on some wonderful informants.”

Yoo Yeonha tilted her head at my words.

— Informants?

“Yeah, they’re called the Mountain Sage.”

Yoo Yeonha specialized in persuading people. The Mountain Sage had yet to reveal who ordered my assassination despite being locked up for 6 months. Perhaps Yoo Yeonha could make them talk.

— Mountain Sage? *The Mountain Sage!*

Yoo Yeonha's calm voice became unusually high-pitched.

"I'm pretty sure we're talking about the same people. They're incredible."

—...

Yoo Yeonha's cheeks became flushed. She would always get extremely excited whenever she discovered exceptional talents.

"You can have them if you persuade them." I said with a grin.

— What do you mean by that?

"I'll text you the details later."

Sadly, our call would have to end here. I had no choice since Boss kept glaring at me.

— *Ah*, okay. I'll be waiting.

"Yeah, bye."

— Bye!

Yoo Yeonha clenched her fists and hung up. I turned to the pouting Boss.

"What?"

"You've been on the phone too long. Also, I don't want to hand them over. They tried to kill you."

"*Ah*."

She sounded angry. I placed my hand on her shoulder with a gentle smile.

“That’s why I’m handing them over. To find out who tried to kill me.”

The Mountain Sage members all possessed immunity against mental interventions. Neither torture nor hypnosis worked, but I knew Yoo Yeonha would find a way to break them.

“...”

Boss said nothing, but her silence always meant consent. I slowly reached for her hand.

“Now, should we get something to eat?”

Boss looked down at our clasped hands and slowly nodded.

“Let’s go.”

I pulled her towards the restaurant with her favorite dish, dumplings.

* * *

[The last round of the Gate of Glory’s qualification tournament will be held at the Temple of Justice.] [It has been a long journey. Now, the remaining 1000 heroes are headed for the temple.] [This will be the last hurdle for the countless heroes.]

The internet overflowed with news articles after the 4th round. Social media only talked about the tournament and gambling sites hosted real-time bets on who would be included in the final 200.

“These three are the judges?”

The Temple of Justice became the center of global attention. Aileen looked around the judges’ waiting room.

“It’s four in total, including you, Chairman Aileen.”

Her secretary replied, but Aileen seemed rather dissatisfied with the lineup.

“Good to see you, little one.”

Heynckes of the Nine Stars called her. Aileen sat in her chair and sighed in disapproval.

“What’s wrong, little one?”

“Dammit, stop calling that.”

She snapped at him.

She didn’t feel dissatisfied about Heynckes. No one would be more suited than an active member of the Nine Stars. However, she had a problem with the woman sitting next to him.

Yoo Yeonha, Essence of the Strait’s chief officer, could only be considered a high-intermediate rank, grade 1 hero at best. Aileen couldn’t understand why so many people called such a weakling the Queen of Seoul.

“Hello.”

Yoo Yeonha slightly bowed with a smile. Aileen snorted and turned to the man sitting opposite Heynckes. Yoo Sihyuk, the master of Baekdu Mountain, busily read a book and didn’t even spare Aileen a glance. It had been a while since they last saw each other, but he still acted snobby as ever.

“Ah, right. Lord Heynckes.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke and Aileen looked at her. She handed a pill to Heynckes.

“What’s this?” Heynckes asked. Aileen also stared at the pill with sparkly eyes.

Is it vitamins? She wondered to herself when Yoo Yeonha courteously explained.

“It’s the cure to your side effect that we talked about before.”

“The cure?”

“Yes.”

Kim Hajin had given her these pills and asked her to give them to the Nine Stars. Yoo Yeonha gladly accepted his request.

“Is this what you tried to give me last time?”

“They’re similar.”

“...”

Heynckes stared at the pill for a while before placing it in his pocket. Then he bashfully spoke, “I do need to stay alive until the demon realm gate opens.”

“Thank you for accepting it.”

“I should be the one thanking you. I don’t think my heart has much time left and I’ve been regretting your last offer.”

Aileen turned away and began organizing her papers.

“I like gifts and pills too,” she muttered. Aileen had grown more interested in health as she neared her 40s.

“Oh, I have a gift for you as well Chairman Aileen.”

Of course, Yoo Yeonha wouldn’t miss such an opportunity. She prepared a box of top-class medicinal pills for Aileen. Each pill contained a small amount of *[Dimensional Entropy]* and cost at least 100 million won. The box contained 60 of these pills.

“*H-Hmm*. Yeah? I guess I’ll take it if you so insist.”

Aileen tightly hugged the gift box.

“Well then, should we get on with the meeting? Let’s discuss how we’re going to judge?” Aileen beamed in satisfaction and Yoo Yeonha bit her lips to hold back her laughter.

“Look, we have to pick 200 out of 1000 people. Do we even have enough time to meet all the candidates? Of course, we don’t. First, we should pick out the most qualified candidates and—”

“Ah, about that...” Yoo Yeonha interrupted her. Aileen felt more forgiving than usual because of the gift she just received.

“What is it?” she casually asked.

“...”

Without a word, Yoo Yeonha pushed forward an envelope. It featured a black and golden lotus symbol embossed on it. Kim Hajin gave her this letter hoping to earn himself a spot in the final 200.

“This is...” Aileen frowned at the symbol on the envelope.

“Yes, it’s a letter from Black Lotus.”

Heynckes and Yoo Sihyuk widened their eyes.

Yoo Yeonha glanced at them and carefully continued.

“Black Lotus sent this letter to my guild. It appears he also wants to enter the gate. What do you think? I’d like to hear your opinions.”

* * *

[Korea — Demon Realm Gate]

A cold wind swept across the land under the gray sky. This weather felt unusual for April. The qualification tournament had ended and they finished the selection process. Black Lotus would secretly enter as one of the participants. I visited the demon realm gate and realized its 30 day deadline would soon end.

“*Hmm...*”

The area around the gate had been sealed off to the public. Everything felt calm and quiet for now.

I hid on a nearby mountain and looked around. Several heroes and djinns gathered below, hoping to enter the gate.

Whish—

The wind blew and a certain person appeared next to me.

“You’re here,” I muttered.

“Yeah, I am.” Jin Sahyuk nodded with [*Alexander III’s Cape*] fluttering behind her.

I spotted Chae Nayun, Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Jin Seyeon, Aileen, Yoo Seung-Ah, Rachel, Yoo Jinwoong, Kim Junwoo, Vast Expense, and even Bell. All of them possessed enough strength to represent humanity.

“I see Bell over there.”

“Not just Bell.”

Jin Sahyuk seriously remarked, “Tons of djinns too. The greatest devil of all time will be born from that gate.”

“The greatest devil... are you talking about Bell?”

I took out my bow and arrows. As Jin Sahyuk said, too many djinns had gathered here. I could see them underground and even in the sky. They all waited for a chance to enter.

“Yes, Bell will die inside the gate and Baal will be born.”

“...”

I notched my 5 *[Dark Ore Arrows]* and shot. *Chweeek*— The arrows flew like hawks and ear-splitting shrieks followed.

Keuk—

Keuk—

I retrieved the arrows and notched them again. Then I asked Jin Sahyuk.

“Does that mean we’re 100% sure Baal will descend?”

“Kill me inside the demon realm gate and eliminate Baal.”

Jin Sahyuk mimicked Bell’s voice. She sounded quite similar and I couldn’t help but laugh.

“That’s what Bell said.”

“Yeah, I agree. We can’t bring him to Earth if Baal descends. We’ll have to end him in there.”

Baal would be even more powerful than Orden and closest to a god-like existence. Earth would be destroyed for good if he escaped.

“What are you going to do, Jin Sahyuk?”

She would need Baal’s powers if she wanted to connect Akatrina and Earth. Therefore, Jin Sahyuk had no choice but to cooperate with Baal if she didn’t give up on returning to her homeland.

“Bell and I will take care of that.”

“How—”

“I’ll make sure it doesn’t cause you any problems, so stay out of it.”

Jin Sahyuk seemed adamant, so I reluctantly nodded and fired my arrows again. The *[Dark Ore Arrows]* danced in the sky towards the

djinns. A dozen djinns died before the arrows returned.

— Fuck! Someone’s shooting arrows!

— It’s dark arrows! Dark arrows!

— Dark arrows... that means it’s Black Lotus.

— Damn it, that son of a bitch!

The djinns activated their devil transformation, but the heroes immediately detected their demonic energy. Aileen jumped in the air first and tracked them down. She mercilessly destroyed them with Spirit Speech like the grim reaper.

— What do you think you’re doing? Vermins, you’ll be crushed!

Her Spirit Speech literally crushed the djinns. Yoo Sihyuk’s white wolves also jumped in, followed by Yoo Jinwoong’s lightning and Shin Jonghak’s dark flames.

“Jin Sahyuk.” I called her as the scene unfolded before us.

“What.” She looked at me.

“...”

I hesitated and couldn’t look her in the eye. I opened my mouth before closing it again. It took me a while, but I finally managed to say it. I wanted her to hear this.

“Can’t you just stay here?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk remained silent. I waited for an answer, but she didn’t say anything. Suddenly...

Guooooo—

The demon realm gate released its magic power in every direction and shook the earth. The djinns and heroes stopped fighting as runic symbols rose above the gate. I translated the symbols with *[Observation and Reading]*.

[The demon realm gate shall determine who is worthy to enter.]

Magic power branched out from the half-open gate when I finished reading.

— *Kieeeeeek*

Two of the branches came our way and wrapped around me and Jin Sahyuk.

“What the...!”

“Dammit.”

We didn’t even have time to react. *Whish!* The branches of magic power instantly dragged us inside.

Chapter 318

Demon Realm Gate (3)

“Hello, we are here at the Gate of Glory’s opening.”

Reporters from all over the world gathered in Hamgyeong Province. They couldn’t approach the gate, but filmed from a distance.

“On estime que la porte...” (“It is estimated that the gate...”)

“Zarban and Leonardo have been selected for the final 200...”

“ここにはまた、世界の有名人が集まっています...” (“Here, the world's celebrities are gathering again...")

Various languages could be heard and Yoo Yeonha busily greeted celebrities in front of the cameras.

“You’re here too, Soohyuk?”

She finished meeting several corporate leaders and spotted Park Soohyuk, SH Agency’s CEO, who had become one of the world’s greatest individuals.

“*Haha*, yes. I was lucky enough to receive an invitation.”

“It might get dangerous when the gate opens.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine, especially with Essence of the Strait members protecting us.”

Yoo Yeonha smiled at Park Soohyuk’s subtle praise. Many members including Kim Youngjin, Yi Jin-Ah, Leonel, Yohei, Shen Yuan, Ah Hae-In, and even Heynckes stood guard.

“Still, stay alert. At least make sure you’re wearing protective gear.”

“Oh, protective gear?”

Park Soohyuk smiled and tapped his smartwatch. Immediately, reinforced magic power rose from the watch and shrouded him.

“*Hmm.*”

Yoo Yeonha nodded in satisfaction. Park Soohyuk’s smartwatch featured a magic enchantment powered by *[Dimensional Entropy]*. Essential Dynamics developed this commercial product called the protect watch. It boasted reinforced magic power that rivaled an intermediate rank, grade 1 hero and functioned as portable armor. Unsurprisingly, it cost well over 100 million won.

“It’s scary how far Essence of the Strait’s technology has progressed. I can’t imagine the future anymore.”

Park Soohyuk shook his head in amazement.

“*Huhu*, the new technological revolution is only beginning.”

[Dimensional Entropy] contained infinite potential. Yoo Yeonha smiled just thinking about it.

Wooong!

A huge surge of magic power erupted and the area grew noisy.

“I-It looks like the gate is opening!”

“What a brilliant flash of mana!”

The ground shook as reporters and spectators screamed. Yoo Yeonha and Park Soohyuk clad themselves in reinforced magic power while Jin Sechan, Kim Youngjin, and the other guild members ran to Yoo Yeonha.

“Chief Officer!”

They planned to lead Yoo Yeonha to safety, but...

KWANG!

Several magic power branches shot up and dragged her underground before anyone could react.

“S-Shoot!”

Kim Youngjin and Jin Sechan immediately threw themselves into the crack in the ground.

* * *

My head hurt and my body felt weak. It felt like floating on water exhausted. I couldn't see anything or sense the passage of time.

My consciousness slowly grew clearer. I remembered who I was and why I was here. What I needed to do... My understanding gradually returned.

“*Haa...*”

I heard someone breathing. Actually, I couldn't tell if it came from me or someone else. I simply focused on the sound and tried to regain my senses.

“*Huu...*”

I heard another breath and now recognized it as mine. I took deep breaths and tried to move. Soon, my eyes opened.

“...?”

My vision returned and I spotted an old drawer. It looked worn and moldy with bugs crawling over it.

I frowned and twisted towards the ceiling. *Kiik*— The bed I lay on creaked. The ceiling looked even moldier than the drawer.

“Am I in a prison cell?”

I murmured in confusion and got up. Immediately, a huge wave of dizziness swept me and I fell back onto the bed. *Crack*— The shabby bed broke.

“*Argh...*”

I had no choice but to rest a bit more. I massaged my temples for the next 5 minutes before getting up again.

“*Auu.*”

I still felt dizzy, but could properly move now. First, I checked the room’s interior. It contained a bed, drawer, and closet with two uniforms. Besides that, I only noticed some other random items on the drawer.

“*Hmm...*”

I examined the writing utensils on the drawer. A notepad, pen, bag, half-eaten bento box, and an identification card. The identification card obviously caught my attention the most.

[Lorenzo Secret Service, F Rank Sharpshooter – Kim Hajin] [ID Number – 02937102]

“F rank sharpshooter... Kim Hajin?”

I frowned and didn’t know anything about how the demon realm gate worked. Naturally, I had no clue about this situation.

I closely examined the identification card, but didn’t find anything noteworthy. Next, I opened the drawer with a crossbow and arrows stored inside.

“Sharpshooter...”

I guess I am one. I inwardly laughed and opened the second drawer. It only contained casual clothes and nothing else. Same for the third drawer.

“What kind of situation is this?”

I don't even get a hint? As I thought that, a series of messages popped up.

[This is the world where Baal was first born.] [You will participate as a supporter in this world. Your goal is to annihilate Baal.] [Your variable stats have been suppressed from the dimensional travel, but do not worry. They will gradually return or you can further increase them through training.] [A total of 200 individuals from Earth have entered the demon realm gate.]

“...”

I read the messages and checked my stats.

[Strength 4 (+1)] [Stamina 4 (+1)] [Speed 4 (+1)] [Perception 4 (+1)] [Vitality 4 (+1)] [Magic Power 4 (+1)]

Status Effect: [Rejective Force] will temporarily reduce your variable stats.

Gift ▷[Master Sharpshooter] [High Rank] [Composite Attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 1] ▷[Young Dwarf's Dexterity] [High Rank] [Illusion Attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 2] ▷[Random Consolidation System] [Intermediate Rank] [Spirit Attribute] [4 Stage Consolidation] ▷[Constraints and Amplifications] [Intermediate Rank]

Physique (2/3) ▷[Magic Dysfunction] [High Rank] [Illusion Attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 2] ▷[Random Consolidation System] [Intermediate Rank] [Spirit Attribute] [4 Stage Consolidation]

Status Effect: [Rejective Force] will temporarily reduce all gifts and physiques.

I didn't know anything about this rejective force and checked stigma's magic power. *Guoo...* Thankfully, I still had all 5 streaks. However, the weapons I stored inside had disappeared, including the Desert Eagle and aether.

“Wait, hey! Where are my weapons?”

I asked, but no one replied. I grew worried since I couldn't do anything without my gear. Then...

— It's time for food! Come out, everyone!

Someone shouted from beyond the door. The voice sounded so loud it even shook the room. I flinched and looked out the window. The navy sky indicated twilight. *They're eating at this time of day?*

— Food!

Other voices rang out and I opened the door to check. A hallway stretched out and I could see others busily running towards one direction. This place seemed to be a dorm of some sort.

“I'm coming.”

I changed into the uniform hanging in the closet and chased after them. We arrived at a cafeteria 5 minutes later. It felt similar to when I served in the Korean army in my original world. I just followed the others and sat at a random table after receiving my food.

“Ah, you idiot!”

A man who seemed to be an instructor pointed at me and shouted. Everyone in the cafeteria turned and I stood up in a fluster. I reacted the same way when I messed up in the army.

“Are you a D rank? Why are you sitting at the D rank table?”

“Sorry!”

I could guess my mistake. My identification card stated I belonged in F rank. I shot up and apologized.

“Sit down at the correct place next time. You brainless fool!”

“Yes! My apologies!”

“Screw off now.”

I glanced at the instructor before looking at the table. Indeed, they clearly inscribed the letter D on it. I left and began looking for a table labeled F.

“Ah.”

I found a table on the brink of collapsing in the corner. I scurried towards it and sat next to someone I didn't know. Soon afterwards, a man with disheveled hair came and sat here as well.

“...”

I looked at the man in front of me. More precisely, I looked at his uniform. He wore a sword-shaped nameplate and a light green uniform like mine. Next, I turned to the D rank table I just left. The individuals sitting there all wore slightly greener uniforms.

“Mmm...”

The uniform's color seemed to indicate one's rank. I nodded and spoke to the guy sitting next to me.

“Excuse me.”

“...?”

He looked at me curiously. I thought about what to ask before giving up. It didn't seem like a good idea to ask about our location or situation.

“No, nothing. Do you want to eat my share as well?”

“Huh? Uh, sure.”

* * *

— One, two! One, two! One, two!

A morning training session took place after the early breakfast. I used stigma's magic power to make it seem like my right arm was rotting and skipped it to collect information about this world.

“An army?”

A large castle sat on the right of the military training ground. I checked it with *[Observation and Reading]* and it read, *[Duke Lorenzo's Castle]*. Most likely, it belonged to this place's military commander.

I looked to the left of the military training ground and spotted the dorm where I woke up. Several structures stood there. The entire place seemed to be called, *[Lorenzo Knight Training Institution]*. The military training ground and dorm seemed like trash compared to those other buildings.

“Hmm...”

I slowly walked towards the left and arrived at a large building about 500 steps from the training ground. The sign above it read, *Library*. Luckily, I found the perfect place to learn about this world.

I walked in without hesitation. No one seemed to be inside because of morning training.

“Let's see. History, history, history...”

I went to the history section and picked out several books. The information I obtained after 30 minutes of reading included:

■ *The Lorenzo clan ruled this dukedom as part of the Arunheim Kingdom.*

■ *Duke Lorenzo served as commander here and the Lorenzo Knight Training Institution trained not only knights, but also foot soldiers.*

■ *Unsurprisingly, I served as a common soldier. Even among them, I received the lowest F rank and would only be a meat shield.*

“Did I possess this guy’s body?”

I frowned and inwardly complained about being a common soldier. Still, I felt content in learning about the world beyond the demon realm gate.

I stood up from my seat and found a mirror in the library. I still looked like myself, Kim Hajin.

“*Hmm... Ah.*”

I suddenly recalled and nodded. I didn’t take over someone’s body, but simply transmigrated into this world.

I took out the notepad from my room and jotted my current goals:

■ *Recover my strength and find other heroes from Earth.*

■ *Find Bell. He will be the key to Baal’s descent.*

■ *Find my weapon. In addition to the Desert Eagle and aether, the Misteltein bullet will be critical for annihilating Baal.*

■ *Annihilate Baal.*

As I finished writing my goals...

“*Oi!*”

Someone shouted and grabbed my neck.

“*Ak!*”

“You idiot! Who do you think you are? This isn’t a place you can enter!”

I turned around in shock. A red-haired knight glared at me with his hand on my neck.

“*Huh?* Sorry, I, *aaak!*”

I couldn’t resist because of the huge difference in strength. The knight simply dragged me away.

“H-Hold on a minute!”

“This is the first time I’ve seen a soldier sneak into the library.”

“W-Wait, I didn’t sneak in. I just wanted to read some books...”

“That’s what sneaking means.”

“But—”

“Shut it.”

I couldn’t breathe as his grip tightened around my neck.

“*Kak...*”

I blacked out just like that.

* * *

“An F rank soldier sneaked into the library?”

Knight Commander Airun furrowed her brows at the unexpected report. She held the highest position in the Lorenzo Knight Training Institution and became the sworn sister of Duke Lorenzo’s daughter.

“Yes, we threw him into a cell for now.”

“What would a foot soldier even read there? I’m sure he just got lost.”

The male knight shook his head at Airun’s question.

“That’s what I thought when I first received the report, but we found the stack of books he was reading.”

“Interesting.”

A foot soldier reading books in the library. Airun nodded and snickered at the strange idea.

“It isn’t too big of a crime if he was only reading.”

“But he’s an F rank soldier from a commoner background. He isn’t even allowed to walk up the stairs to the west wing.”

“Draven?”

Airun interrupted the knight and stared at him with her ocean eyes. Draven shut his mouth and lowered his head.

“Don’t be so tough. You should first figure out what motivated him if a soldier acts out of line. The punishment comes afterwards.”

Draven didn’t respond and Airun smiled at his obedience. He possessed a good character along with skills, but cared too much about social hierarchy. This disappointed Airun since she believed he could become a good leader without that flaw.

“Alright. Keep him imprisoned for a week. I won’t allow any more than that.”

Chapter 319

A New Path (1)

Currently, I found myself in a guardhouse. Well, perhaps it could be called a prison cell. They locked me up, so I decided to work out. Push ups, plank, pull-ups, etc.

[Your strength has increased by 0.1] [Your vitality increased by 0.1]
[Your stamina has increased by 0.1]

Exercising went pretty well as the above alerts indicated. My stats increased by 0.6 points in just 36 hours. I could never have experienced such a rapid increase on Earth.

“...”

I looked at the veins protruding from my forearms. At this rate, I would regain my original abilities in a few months.

KWANG!

The door burst open and I looked up. *Tap, tap*. Heavy footsteps approached. *Clang*. The sound of metal striking metal. A robed individual stood in front of my cell.

“Are you F rank sharpshooter Kim Hajin?”

A beautiful voice flowed into my ears. No one would ever forget such a voice once they heard it.

“I am,” I replied.

The woman under the hooded robe faintly smiled.

“Is it true you broke into the library to read books?”

The woman looked at me and asked. Only then did I realize her name and status. *[Observation and Reading]* activated slightly late and finally showed me.

[Airun – Knight Commander]

“Yes...”

“Does that mean you can read?”

Did this world have a high illiteracy rate? Airun smiled when I said I could read.

“Great, that’s good to hear.”

She took out a copperplate and a card from inside her robe.

“Only those who are competent may enter the Lorenzo Secret Service. Statistics show that soldiers in the Secret Service are usually a rank or two better than soldiers from other squads.”

Airun threw a copperplate and card into my cell.

“I heard it’s only been 3 months since you joined the army.”

I examined the copperplate with short sentences written on it.

[1:30 A.M., March 8th, A stable near Lorenzo’s eastern gate] [I need a sharpshooter to guide me through the Rotio Mountains.] [He needs to be able to read this copperplate.]

I found the last sentence a bit odd, but moved on to the card. It read, *[Supply Card]*.

“Can you read that copperplate?”

“Pardon? Ah, yes I can. 1:30 A.M. March 8th...”

Airun smiled as I read the copperplate.

“Alright, listen up. I’d like to hire you on a secret mission. Surely you’re aware as an F rank soldier that your army career may end at any moment now that you’re in jail.”

I carefully listened since I didn’t know anything about my current situation.

“However, I’ll guarantee you a spot in the army if you come back alive from this mission. Not just as an ordinary soldier, but as a commissioned officer. Oh, and you’ll be released immediately if you accept my offer.”

It turns out she came here to ask for help.

“Mmm...”

I wondered whether to accept or not when several sentences suddenly popped up.

[New Event] [Summary – Airun has chosen you as Harin’s bodyguard.] [Difficulty – High] [Goal – Escort Harin safely to the Republic of Leores in the south.] [Reward – A piece of equipment you have lost.]

“I’ll do it.” I immediately nodded.

“Good. You’ll change into regular clothes and depart tomorrow. You’ll be able to get all the equipment you need from the armory with that card.”

Airun smiled and gracefully turned around. The guard opened the cell as she left.

“You’re being released, F rank sharpshooter Kim Hajin. You’ll have to fill out a short form before leaving.”

* * *

KOOOONG!

The guardhouse door closed shut. Airun sighed as she watched the iron door slam. As always, it felt too heavy and bulky for her taste. A simple magic enhancement would've sufficed, but whoever constructed it didn't care.

"So this is where you went."

An annoyed voice caught Airun's attention. Startled, she turned around and spotted Draven waiting for her.

"Draven."

"Commander, are you up to something again?"

"That's no way to speak to your superior."

Airun wore a solemn expression, but Draven persisted. He blocked Airun's path and looked more serious than before. Airun sighed with no other options left.

"An old friend has asked to lend her a sharpshooter."

"An old friend?"

"Yes."

Airun bitterly smiled and continued, "I'm sure you know her as well."

"...!"

Draven widened his eyes. He could only think of one person. The sister of the man who had been executed for spreading false rumors about the prince.

"Commander!" he exclaimed in shock.

"*Shh...*"

"They might think we're working with the traitors. They—"

“It’s okay. That’s why I specifically came.”

Only Harin, the Leon clan’s eldest daughter, survived after her entire family had been executed because of her brother’s treacherous prophecy: *The prince will one day become the devil and destroy the world.*

“She’s in need of a sharpshooter to escape. He’s not even D rank. I can spare an F rank soldier. No one would notice he’s gone anyways.”

Airun already tested the F rank sharpshooter named Kim Hajin. The copperplate she showed him could only be read by those with good eyesight. They specifically designed the magic item for that purpose.

“Lending her a soldier won’t change her situation, but it could change ours—”

“Draven.”

Airun adamantly interrupted him.

“It’s something I decided and you have no right to stop me. You’re also indebted to Leon.”

“...”

Drevon fell silent. As the commander said, the duke of Leon had ardently supported Arunheim’s knights. He supported those with talent regardless of their status and offered financial support so beneficiaries could focus on honing their sword skills. Airun also used to be one of Leon’s beneficiaries. She and Harin drifted apart because of something in the past, but she never forgot about all the support from their family.

“Fine.”

Draven, a local aristocrat and another beneficiary, finally gave in.

“Commander, it’ll be fine if that soldier dies during the mission. However, I’ll kill him myself if he comes back alive. We need to keep this to ourselves.”

“...”

Airun remained silent. She quietly walked away as Draven followed her.

* * *

[New Event] [Summary – Airun has chosen you as Harin’s bodyguard.] [Difficulty – High] [Goal – Escort Harin safely to the Republic of Leores in the south.] [Reward – A piece of equipment you have lost.]

I scrutinized the details of this important mission and changed into new clothes as soon as I got out of the guardhouse. I started feeling itchy again the moment I put them on.

Next, I headed to the armory. The guards tried to stop me at first, but stepped aside when I showed them the card. They provided me with all the necessary equipment.

“Chainmail, hunting backpack, crampons, iron crossbow, and 40 bronze magic bolts. Are you all set?”

“Yes sir.”

I picked out the best equipment from the armory. Everything still seemed mundane, but I could further improve them through the *[Random Consolidation System]*.

“Good luck.”

“Thank you.”

I exchanged greetings with the guards and left. Then I headed to the shooting range. My mission would begin tomorrow and I felt the need to sharpen my skills.

“It’s big.”

The shooting range stretched 15 meters wide and 500 meters long. It

seemed pretty well taken care of too.

I stood in a lane and took out the crossbow.

Kiik—

I loaded a bolt against the bowstring and aimed at the target. Then I fired. *Tang!* I immediately shot a second after the first. *Tang!* The second bolt chased after the first as if I shot them at the same time. Only my gift could achieve this rapid fire technique.

Koong! Koong!

A heavy sound rang out. The first bolt struck the center and the second bolt split the first in half to hit the target.

“...”

I nodded in satisfaction. My stats had decreased, but the results still seemed great. I felt confident in dominating most enemies with a single shot thanks to my accuracy and stigma.

“I wonder what everyone else is doing.”

I suddenly grew curious about the 200 that arrived in this world. Did they all start at the very bottom like me or did they start higher? Maybe some of them became aristocrats and could better grasp our situation. I took out the Book of Truth to find out.

“Where is Kim Suho in this world?”

I assumed this question would take 2 streaks, which might be risky given my limited physical abilities. However, I wanted to know Kim Suho’s location no matter what.

[Kim Suho is in the Republic of Leores in the south.]

“Oh?”

My eyes widened.

“That’s where I’m going.”

I couldn’t help but laugh and thanked my luck again.

* * *

[Arunheim, March 8th of Kairos Calendar, Late Night at Duchy of Lorenzo]

“Huu...”

Short blue hair and sharp facial features. Not even dirt and bulky armor could hide the beauty that once charmed the entire kingdom.

Anyone would notice this mysterious, yet filthy woman. This fact made Harin, the last survivor of Leon, tremble in fear even more.

“Huu...”

She wandered alone in a stable near the castle wall and managed to arrive at the duchy of Lorenzo thanks to the help of her knights. Her only companion had left to divert the enemy.

— Wait!

She suddenly heard a man shout.

“Hup!”

Harin hid behind a wall and covered her mouth.

— Let’s search elsewhere! The night is still young.

— Great idea! Let’s go!

“Haa...”

She waited in the dark for the aid from Airun to arrive. Footsteps from passersby and wild animals constantly startled her.

“How much longer do I have to wait?”

She felt humiliated asking Airun for help, but had no other choice. Staying alive felt more important than her dignity. She had asked for a sharpshooter and needed to cross a rugged mountain range to escape.

“Wait, did she...?”

She couldn't rule out the possibility that Airun betrayed her. She knew Airun wasn't the type to go back on her word, but... Harin clasped her hands and prayed for Airun to remember all the good things the Leon clan had done. Then...

“Is that you?”

A voice captured Harin's attention. Startled, she stepped back and raised her head. There, she saw a robed man hidden in the shadow of the castle wall. Harin gulped and looked at him.

“You are?”

She felt relieved, but only briefly. The tension in the atmosphere returned as she suspected the man might be an assassin from the royal family.

“I'm the receiver of this copperplate.”

The man showed Harin the copperplate she had given Airun. This proved he belonged on her side, but Harin still couldn't deny the possibility that Airun might've betrayed her.

“Did Airun send you?”

“That's right. I'm the pawn.”

“Pawn?”

Harin felt confused by his words, but chose to believe him. She wouldn't make it to Leores no matter what even if Airun did betray her.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Renha." Harin gave an alias and reached out.

"I'm Kim Hajin."

The man also introduced himself and they shook hands. He would now become her bodyguard.

"Kim Hajin..."

His name sounded rather strange, which made him more suspicious.

"Yes, that's me."

The man nodded without suspecting anything. This made Harin feel slightly more comfortable. He seemed too lax for an assassin.

"I only have one horse. Do you know how to ride horses?" Harin nonchalantly asked.

"*Hm? Ah*, yes. I can."

"Well then..."

Harin nodded and pulled her horse out of the stable.

"Let's ride her together. *Ah*, but before that..."

Harin suddenly realized she didn't know her bodyguard's rank.

"Are you..."

However, she stopped midway. It would be rude to ask for his rank if he was a knight. It might be better if they knew nothing about each other if she actually made it out of Arunheim alive.

“A sharpshooter?”

She decided to change her question and wanted to confirm that Airun sent a sharpshooter.

The man nodded with a smile.

“Yes, I’m a sharpshooter.”

Harin felt more than satisfied with that, but her bodyguard added another sentence she would've been perfectly happy without.

“I’m Kim Hajin, an F rank sharpshooter.”

“Pardon?”

Harin’s mind went blank. *F rank*? Did this man mean the same F rank she knew? The F rank that symbolized trash?

Harin dumbfoundedly looked at the man for a while before asking.

“Did you say... F rank?”

“Yes.”

“...”

Only then did Harin finally get a good look at the man. He dressed nothing like a knight and looked more like a common soldier. Coincidentally, the man even showed her his ID.

“You can trust me. This is my identification card with my name and rank.”

[Secret Service Soldier, F rank Sharpshooter Kim Hajin]

“This is just—”

Trust me? How could I trust you? Harin suddenly grew dizzy and stumbled from her stress-induced anemia.

“F rank...”

She grabbed her head and only felt resentment.

Airun, how could you? I know I was asking for a lot, but an F rank is just too much. He won't even survive the mountains I have to cross...

“Why...”

The troubled Harin sank to the floor.

Chapter 320

A New Path (2)

[The Rotio Mountain Range, 1400 km in length and 240 km in width, is located between the Republic of Leores and the Arunheim Kingdom. Each mountain peak has a unique environment and is filled with powerful monsters that prevent humans from living there. Keilin Mountain and seven others, all over 5000 meters, are included in this mountain range...]

A safe road existed between the duchy to the republic, but Harin chose to travel over the mountain range. That told me enough about her situation.

“Did you study up?” Harin asked.

I placed the book down and nodded.

“Somewhat.”

We stayed in the stable with Harin’s beloved horse. I ran to a bookstore first thing in the morning and picked up a book about the Rotio Mountain Range.

“...”

Harin gave me an odd look. She doubted my trustworthiness and most likely lamented having to depend on a mere F rank soldier.

“It’s fine if you give up.”

Harin bitterly spoke after some time.

“The Rotio Mountain range is infamous. It’s not a place a mere soldier can survive. I’m confident in my martial prowess because of my knight training, but I can’t guarantee your safety on such a dangerous trip.”

She honestly spoke instead of blaming anyone or complaining.

“No, it’s fine.”

I accepted the situation. Climbing a mountain didn’t pose any problems with parkour. My art only performed better with more obstacles. Moreover...

[Harin – Eldest Daughter of the Leon Clan, Devil Hunter]

Harin’s status showed a surprising detail, *Devil Hunter*. Obviously, I had to keep an eye on her.

“Sigh... I wonder where your confidence comes from.”

Harin furrowed her brows before gulping a bottle of water in one go.

“Then let’s make something clear before we set out. I won’t hesitate to leave you behind if anything happens.”

“Yes, I understand.” I nodded.

“Then shall we go?”

Tzzzt— tzzt— A square box Harin set in the corner emitted strange noises. It spat out a piece of paper like a printing machine. Harin snatched the paper and began reading it.

“What’s that?”

“I asked my friend to investigate your background,” Harin simply responded.

“...”

Don’t people usually keep background investigations a secret? I didn’t know whether to call her honest or shameless.

Harin glanced at me and murmured, “Please understand. It’s just to

confirm whether your identity is real or not.”

“Ah, yes.”

I felt curious about my background as well, so I sat still. Harin’s eyes widened after a while.

“You were an herbalist?”

“*Huh? Ah, yeah.*”

“Yeah?”

Harin’s eyes turned sharp since I subconsciously spoke in a casual manner.

“Ah, my apologies.”

“I don’t know when we will say farewell, but please don’t forget your manners.”

Harin glared at me before reading the paper again.

“Your family...”

She paused and didn’t finish her sentence. Then she slowly raised her head and dropped the paper in a fluster when we made eye contact.

“*C-cough.*”

Her honest reaction meant I didn’t have parents in this world. The co-author sure kept that one detail consistent.

“Are you finished?”

“Yes, but I want to ask again. Will you really not give up?”

I grinned and nodded.

“Understood then. Leines!”

Harin lightly sighed and led her horse, Leines, out of the stable. Meanwhile, I glanced at the paper lying on the floor.

[Lorenzo's F Rank Knight, Kim Hajin] [Special Note – Has experience working as an herbalist at the duchy's outskirts.] [Training Records – 510 shots, 610 lookouts, 410 close combat... Has the potential to become a B rank sharpshooter.] [Family – Orphan. Came to the Lorenzo Temple at 6 years old and stayed for 10 years before becoming an herbalist.]

“Do you really know how to ride a horse? Ah, I'll get rid of the report.”

Harin asked again. She saw the report in my hand and burned it with her magic power.

“Do you know how to ride a horse?”

“Of course...”

I took the reins and led Leines as the sky grew brighter.

* * *

Harin thought to herself while sitting on her horse. *This sharpshooter, his horse-riding skills are better than I imagined. I've never seen anyone handle Leines so well.*

— *Hiiiing!*

Leines suddenly cried and came to a stop. Kim Hajin pulled the reins back.

“It seems like we're here.”

“Already?”

She hid her surprise and looked around. A sky-high mountain range

filled the distant view. Only 40 minutes had passed from the duchy to Rotio Mountain Range. Their speed felt incredible.

“You’re right.”

Harin hopped down from Leines’ back and undid the reins and saddle. Leines understood what that meant and shook her head while clacking her hooves. Unfortunately, Leines’ journey would end here.

“You can go now.”

Leines stomped and expressed reluctance.

“You did well to get me here. You’re an excellent horse, so you’ll be able to live happily with an owner of your choice.”

Harin consoled the horse. She stood at the entrance to the mountain range and spoke with determination.

“Let’s go.”

I nodded at her. “I’ll take the lead.”

The first mountain we had to overcome was Ploriun. A bone-chilling cold filled the air like any other mountain over 2000 meters.

“Will you?”

Harin still seemed doubtful, but asked in a nicer tone than when we first met.

“Don’t worry. I have good eyes,” I confidently replied.

* * *

[24 Hours Later, 2350 Meter Mark on Ploriun]

“Haa... Haa...”

I lay on a cold rock halfway up the mountain. I could easily climb thanks to parkour, but my stamina ran out. After all, we climbed without stopping for 24 hours.

[Your stamina has increased by 0.3 points.] [Your vitality has increased by 0.2 points.] [Your strength has increased by 0.2 points.] [Your stamina has increased by 0.1 points.]...

Of course, my stats quickly rose again. Harin said it would take at least 3 months to get over the mountain range, so my stats should mostly recover by the end of this trip.

“Are you okay?” Harin looked down at me and asked.

I silently nodded.

“Your stamina is better than I thought,” she murmured. Then she examined the grass in the area and harvested some. She also picked up some sticks for kindling and stored them in her bag.

She even took the time to explain as I stared at her.

“We have to gather as many herbs, kindling, and food as possible. The forest will disappear once we get up into the extreme cold.”

“I see.” I nodded and raised my body.

Harin gave me a strange look. “You’re done resting already?”

“Pardon? *Ah*, yes. Let’s go.”

My stats increased as I used up stamina, so always keeping myself a little tired would lead to the best results. We picked up our bags and began climbing again. Icy dirt replaced the greenery as we moved further up. The chilling cold cut into my skin like blades, but *[Random Consolidation System]* also boosted the heat-resistant properties of my clothes. I endured it slightly better.

I looked at Harin enduring the cold with qi reinforcement. Seeing this reminded me of her setting, *[Devil Hunter]*. She undoubtedly served an

important role against Baal in this world. Without a doubt, I had to keep her safe.

“Haa, haa.”

The extreme chill became too harsh to endure once we reached the 4000 meter mark. I had no choice but to strengthen my equipment with stigma’s magic power.

“Are we going the right way? I can trust you, right?” Harin suddenly asked and sounded extremely cold.

“Yes, just follow me.” I confidently replied, but perhaps my tone provoked the mountain as snow poured down.

“It’s a snowstorm! Be careful!” Harin immediately shouted.

She headed in the opposite direction as she said that. The person who told me to be careful lost her sense of direction due to the whiteout. I grabbed her wrist and pulled her back as she headed towards a cliff.

“Ah! W-Who is it! Is it you?”

“Yes, it’s me. I can hear you fine, so you don’t have to shout. Just follow my lead.”

This snowstorm even contained magic power, which made it all the more difficult to endure.

“Whew... I see a cave ahead.”

No one would curse us for taking a break considering how long we climbed without rest.

We trudged to the natural cave about 500 meters away.

* * *

[28 Hours into the Climb, Cave on Ploriun Mountain]

Tk— Tk—

A campfire burned as three skewered fish cooked above it. Harin smacked her lips and swallowed her saliva. She murmured as if to give an excuse when I stared at her.

“It’s been a while since I’ve eaten meat.”

“Really?”

“Campfires leave behind tracks.”

“*Mmm...* You’ve been on the run for a long time?”

Harin flinched. Her eyes trembled until she deeply sighed and spoke, “Yes, I’m on the run. That’s why I chose this mountain range.”

“Why are you running away?”

“It’s better if you don’t know. In case I get captured, that is.”

With that, Harin picked up a skewer. I felt a bit disappointed in not hearing the full story, but left it for another day. I looked outside the cave, but the snowstorm showed no signs of ending. Then I turned back to Harin.

Nom, nom—

She busily ate the fish and finished it in the blink of an eye.

“By the way...” Harin sat straight and looked at me somewhat suspiciously. She turned serious.

“Are you really an F rank soldier?”

“You’ve seen the report,” I replied with a grin.

“An F rank soldier can’t possibly endure Ploriun’s extreme cold.”

Her words made sense, but I simply gave the same answer she did.

“It’s better if you don’t know.”

A new alert suddenly popped up.

[A core character in this world, Devil Hunter Harin, has taken an interest in you.]

“I see.”

Harin closed her mouth. We didn’t talk to each other after that and just stared at the snowstorm outside. Soon, Harin glanced over and handed me a skewer. I told her she could have it.

“I have another question.”

She asked while nibbling on the fish.

“Why did you join Lorenzo’s army?”

I didn’t have an answer to that question. I planned on remaining silent, but came up with a good idea instead.

“*Cough...*”

I leaned against the cave wall to set the atmosphere. Then I wore a solemn expression and purposefully looked a bit nervous.

“To defeat a devil, maybe?”

“...!”

Her body shook and she widened her eyes. I just wanted to feel out her *[Devil Hunter]* title, but it worked better than expected.

“Devil?”

“Yes,” I nonchalantly replied. It didn’t matter what she asked from here. She already found out about my orphan status through her investigation. No one knew my background before I came to the orphanage, so I could make up anything as I pleased.

“You...” Harin swallowed hard and asked again.

“Do you actually believe devils exist?”

I put on the best act imaginable after hearing her words. I clenched my teeth and fists so hard my veins showed and I roughly brushed my hair back.

Harin carefully observed my reaction.

“...”

I remained silent and shook my head. She grew impatient and approached me.

“Tell me. Do you believe in the existence of devils?”

“...”

I sharply glared at her to stop her from asking any further, but Harin didn’t back down. We got into a staring contest for a few minutes. Then I muttered as though I gave up.

“When I turned six... it killed my family.”

Harin’s face turned stiff. Most likely, she thought about my family background that she read.

“A human turned into a horned monster and killed everyone.”

I tried to act angry.

“A devil is the only word to describe him.”

“ ... ”

Harin fell silent and backed away. She closed her eyes and pondered in the dark cave. Soon, she nodded with a sad expression.

“I see.”

She seemed to have reached her own conclusions and confidently spoke.

“I understand now.”

Harin stared at me like a fellow comrade.

“I understand why Airun sent you to me.”

She took the bait.

Chapter 321

A New Path (3)

[Republic of Leores]

A mysterious world lay beyond the demon realm gate. Three kingdoms and one republic existed on the continent of Kruni. Kim Suho became one of the republic's sword commanders in this unfortunate world that would soon be destroyed.

“So you're saying Baal will soon destroy this world?”

Aileen wore a somewhat worn-out uniform and asked Kim Suho in his sword commander office. She served as a maid to a high ranking politician in the republic.

“That's right.”

“And we have to stop Baal to pass the gate's test?”

“Yes, exactly.”

Kim Suho nodded and handed Aileen a book. She frowned at it.

“What's this?”

“It's an item I got as a reward for clearing a quest.”

“Quest? Oh, right. I have a quest too. What was yours?”

“I had to enlighten the president's daughter in the way of the sword.”

“What kind of quest is that?”

Aileen grumbled and received the book. The title read, *[Summary of the Past and Future]*.

“*Hmm.*”

She frowned once again after opening the book because it only contained blank pages.

“What the heck. I don’t see anything.”

“*Huh?*”

Kim Suho widened his eyes, but soon understood the situation.

“*Ah*, I guess I’m the only one who can read it.”

“What? Why?”

“Here, let me read you the most important chapters.”

Kim Suho slowly recited the book so Aileen could understand.

“First of all, this world is also currently undergoing a demon realm transformation. Fortunately, the people of this world discovered an ore called purification crystals and managed to slow the process.”

To summarize the past, the people of Kruni successfully averted the demon realm transformation thanks to the purification crystals and devil hunters.

“Devil hunters?” Aileen widened her eyes.

“Yes, they’re humans who are particularly strong against devils. Devil hunters can inflict lethal harm upon devils whether or not the devil has fully descended or remains in an incarnation body.”

According to the book, devil hunters of this world had already killed a total of 8 devils.

“Well, sounds to me like stopping Baal is awfully easy then.” Aileen shrugged.

“No, the next part is the most important.”

Kim Suho read the paragraph out loud.

“The devils decided to stir up division among the humans. Baal possessed the prince of Arunheim and ousted the Leon clan, whose members served as devil hunters for generations. The Leon clan’s eldest daughter, Harin Von Leon, attempted to escape to the republic. However, she failed and died. Baal descended two months later.”

Baal, the strongest devil, easily crushed this world without devil hunters.

“Baal...” Aileen muttered.

“So we only have 2 more months.”

“Two months and three days. Baal destroyed the world in 3 days after he descended.”

“What? 3 days? Seriously?”

Aileen’s expression stiffened. Even Orden couldn’t destroy the world in 72 hours.

“Yes, it took him 71 hours to be exact.”

“...”

Aileen subconsciously bit her fingernails and Kim Suho faintly sighed as he watched her.

“Aileen, you should quit your job and become my maid.”

“What? Your maid? Are you out of your mind?”

“We don’t have a choice. The most important thing right now is to stick together. Also, we have to restore our strength and gifts.”

Kim Suho shrugged. He managed to locate Aileen since he could mobilize informants as a sword commander. He should be able to find the others too with the right composite sketches.

“First, I’m going to gather our party and save the Leon clan’s eldest daughter.”

“Save her? Isn’t she already dead?” Aileen doubtfully asked, but Kim Suho only grinned.

“Who knows? After all, there are 198 of us in this world.”

* * *

[Rotio Mountains, Peak of Plorium]

We reached the peak, but felt as if our bodies would crack due to the severe -50 degree temperature. However, we adapted over time. Harin and I exchanged glances before descending the mountain.

“Six more peaks like this and we’ll reach the republic.”

She said while leaving footsteps across the snowfield.

“Thank god,” I sarcastically remarked.

“Hang in there.”

She smiled and seemed much more comfortable after the cave incident.

“Oh, and... the one who murdered your family was probably a djinn, not a devil.”

Harin whispered from close behind. I glanced at her.

“You’ve been thinking about what I said this entire time?”

“Of course, how could I not?”

Harin smiled and we continued to walk. Climbing down felt much easier than going up. The cold drastically decreased after 3 hours. Wild boars, hawks, and monsters such as Yetis began to appear. We easily dealt with them. The boars and hawks served as a great food supply and we stored them in Harin’s spatial pocket.

“Wait.”

However, I felt a faint presence spying on us when we reached the midpoint. Definitely not a monster or a passerby. What kind of person would voluntarily climb this mountain?

“Take out your sword.”

Harin did as I instructed. *Sssk*— I also took out my crossbow and nocked a bolt. *Kiiik*— Nothing could hide in such a quiet and open place as this mountain range. The enemies noticed our hostility.

Six assassins in white robes jumped out from the snow-covered hills and trees.

“It’s Icarus.”

Harin muttered as she glared at them. She sounded angry and troubled.

“Icarus? What’s that?”

“They’re a group of assassins who secretly work for Arunheim’s royal family. Looks like they’ve been waiting for us.”

“*Mmm.*”

I nodded and looked at the assassins surrounding us. It would be hard to handle all of them in my current state.

Then something strange happened. One of the assassins looked at me and began trembling. Confused, I turned towards this assassin who looked too small to be a man and had black hair poking out of her robe. Finally, she called my name.

“Kim Hajin?”

“Huh?”

My eyes widened when I saw through the assassin’s robe. The woman underneath possessed eyes that sparkled like obsidian.

“Boss?”

“Y-Yes! It’s me!”

She quickly nodded and... slowly approached one step at a time. The other assassins looked at us bewildered. I whispered into Boss’ ear when she came close enough.

— What are you doing here?

— I don’t know. I was with them when I woke up.

— *Ah*, really?

Boss probably became an assassin the same way I became an F rank sharpshooter. I glanced at the assassins over her shoulder. They stood still in confusion.

“W-What’s going on? Have you been working with them this entire time?” Harin shouted in shock.

“Huh? Oh, of course not. I’m on your side.”

I shook my head and pulled Boss towards me. The fight just went from 2 against 6 to 3 against 5. Everything felt much more balanced now.

“Boss?”

“*Hmm?*”

“Could you take care of them?”

“Of course.” Boss nodded with a smirk.

“How much of your abilities have you recovered?”

“I’ve still got a ways to go, but...”

A dark shadow rose from behind her and turned into sharp blades that resembled spider legs.

“I can take care of them.”

The shadow blades flew towards the assassins and they stepped back in surprise. Only their leader came forward.

“Aiken! Just what are you doing—”

“My name is not Aiken.”

However, Boss had no intentions of listening to him. *Chwaaak!* She wielded her shadow and her blades swiftly pierced the assassins. *Chwaak...* Scarlet blood splattered on the snow. Harin accidentally dropped her sword as the scene unfolded.

* * *

We made a campsite on Ploriun about 1300 meters above sea level and decided to take a break before moving on to the second mountain, Lokio. Harin kept the tent in her spatial pocket and I set it up.

“How do you two know each other? You called her Boss. Were you members of the same squad?”

Harin looked at us in the cozy tent and I could only shrug.

“She’s a friend of mine from back home. Don’t worry. She’ll be a great

addition to our team.”

Harin still looked uneasy despite my word of honor. I glanced at Boss and she placed a hand on Harin’s shoulder.

“Worry not. I’ll protect thee.”

“...”

Why is she speaking like that? I suppressed my laughter and Harin also frowned in suspicion. Soon, she nodded with a sigh.

“It’s not like I have a choice. I’m tired. Let’s get some rest.” Harin bitterly remarked and lay on the tent floor.

Boss pointed at her and mouthed a silent question.

— Who is this woman?

— An important client. She’s a devil hunter.

I replied.

— Devil hunter?

— Yes, I’ll explain the details later.

“Enough with the silent conversation.”

I said with a smile.

“We should get some sleep too.”

I felt exhausted after climbing a 5000 meter mountain in 3 days.

“Okay.”

Boss nodded as I lay on the tent floor.

“Yaawn.”

I closed my eyes. *Ssk— ssk—* However, I heard a sound shortly afterwards and opened my eyes again. Boss spread her blanket and prepared to lay next to me.

“Ah...”

“...”

Our eyes met and we silently stared at each other. Boss coughed and spoke first.

“We don’t have much room.”

Zzz— Zzz— We could hear Harin snoring. I glanced over to make sure she actually fell asleep and nodded.

“It’s okay. Please lay down. I’ll allow it this time.”

“You’ll allow it? Well then...”

Boss lay next to me in a sulking manner and our shoulders touched in the small tent.

Around 10 minutes passed in absolute stillness.

I felt tired, but couldn’t sleep for some reason. I turned to the side and saw Boss lying straight as a vampire in a coffin with her eyes closed.

“Boss, are you sleeping?”

No answer. She seemed to have fallen asleep even though I recalled her saying she never needed to sleep. I stared at Boss with a smile.

“Hmm...”

Was it because I hadn’t seen her for so long? Maybe we met at such an unexpected place that I felt extra glad to see her. She looked prettier

than usual. I slowly reached for her hair and brushed the soft, silky strands.

“...”

Still no response, so I proceeded to pinch her cheek. *Streeetch*— Her cheek easily stretched. It felt soft and tender like a mochi. I could get used to playing with Boss’ cheek.

“...”

Boss opened her eyes and turned to look at me. I slowly let go of her cheek.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“*Hmm?* Oh... nothing. It’s just that...”

I smiled and stretched my hand towards her head. Then I picked up a leaf in her hair.

“You had something stuck there.”

“...”

Boss looked at me without a word. We stared at each other for a long time. Long enough for me to notice her hair and clothing had become disheveled.

Suddenly...

Her scent struck me from our close distance. I could feel her breath and her red lips came into view. A certain desire consumed me.

— *Gulp.*

I swallowed hard and my heart raced. Then I moved without thinking.

Chapter 322

A New Path (4)

I reached out to Boss. My crude hand touched her cheek and I could feel her softness. A bitterness rose within me as I saw my calluses from nocking the crossbow. I had grown used to this world more than I imagined. The urge within me disappeared and an unknown heaviness replaced it.

However, Boss moved this time instead. Her cold, yet warm hand grasped mine and kept it from shaking. We looked at each other while holding hands. Neither of us said a word in this strange atmosphere.

I slowly approached her. Close enough for our bodies to fully touch. My heart grew louder and I could also hear another heartbeat. *Did she feel just as nervous?* I felt a little embarrassed and happy at the same time.

Just as our breath mixed and our lips almost touched...

“Cough.”

An intentional cough rang out and the romantic mood disappeared. We widened our eyes in surprise. *Gulp*— I swallowed hard and stared at the corner of the tent. Harin took up two people’s worth of space and only then did I realize how close Boss and I became.

“...”

I scooped away with a bitter smile. Boss remained expressionless, but soon glared somewhat aggressively at Harin.

“I’m tired.”

I loudly murmured and lay down. I stretched out my arms and stared

at the tent's ceiling. My heart still thumped and a smile lingered on my face. Nothing happened, but my mood felt great. I decided to fall asleep while this feeling lasted. I wanted to enjoy every moment with the end approaching. I closed my eyes.

“...?”

Something pressed on my arm. I curiously opened my eyes again and saw Boss' head over my arm. She slept on it like a pillow. I couldn't tell whether she actually fell asleep or just pretended. Regardless, I turned back to the ceiling with a smirk. It felt a bit uncomfortable, but I didn't mind. Boss' small head barely felt heavy at all.

* * *

We climbed past the second peak, Lokio, and arrived at the third peak, Kilata. Kilata's environment resembled a jungle with all sorts of threats like giant mosquitoes, elemental snakes, crimson monkeys, and king alligators. It also contained quicksand swamps and magic-eating plants.

We managed to traverse this hellish mountain with Boss' strength and my incredible eyesight. Boss didn't lose too much of her strength because of her assassin background.

“Kilata is more difficult than the previous mountains. It's worse than I imagined.”

Harin murmured. It took us 5 days to reach the mountain's midpoint at 3500 meters. In comparison, Ploriun and Lokio only took us 2 and 4 days respectively to climb.

“Just finding a place to stay the night is annoying here.”

Kilata didn't have any caves and sleeping on the ground would be impossible because of the monsters. We could only sleep in the sky or not at all.

My stats recovered to a certain extent and I could easily build a shack with my eyes closed. I built us treehouses with stigma's magic power and all the wood surrounding us.

“I’ve seen it multiple times, but... your craftsmanship is beyond human...” Harin muttered as she looked around the shack. I inwardly laughed since this one might be my best work yet.

“I’m a descendant of the dwarves.”

“Dwarves?”

“Yep, I’m not kidding either.”

“...”

Harin blinked in a daze. I’m not sure if she believed me, but she seemed to have heard of dwarves.

Whish—

Boss arrived with a strong gust of wind. She took charge of procuring food and arrived with some birds and berries.

“Do these look edible?”

“Yep.”

According to [*Observation and Reading*], the bird could be considered a delicacy called [*Licor*]. The berries simply appeared as [*Delicious Tropical Fruit*]. I seasoned the bird meat and started a campfire. Then I skewered the meat and placed it over the fire. Six skewers finished in the blink of an eye. Each person received two and I presented the berries as dessert. We finished our meal in 15 minutes.

“It’s getting dark.”

Night time arrived earlier in the swampland. Darkness surrounded us by 5 in the afternoon.

“Thanks for the meal. Should we rest now?” Harin leaned against the wooden wall as she rubbed her belly.

“Sure.”

I spread out the bedding I made with soft leaves from the jungle. Harin immediately lay down and I lay across from her. Boss lay next to me and stared as if asking to use my arm as a pillow again.

“You two”

Harin suddenly opened her mouth and we subconsciously flinched.

“W-What’s up?”

“You said you believed that devils exist, right?”

Harin sounded serious, so I strained my ears. I could tell this would be an important piece of information.

“Yes.”

“Then do you remember the incident from a month ago?”

“Incident?”

“The noble Leon clan was destroyed for committing treason. You know, for spreading the rumor that the prince was an incarnation of a devil.”

I only heard about this for the first time, but nodded anyway.

“Yes, I have.”

“It’s hard not to have heard about it.”

Harin paused and deeply sighed. “It’s not a lie.”

She continued more seriously than before.

“Arunheim’s prince, Krisbell, houses the devil Baal in his body.”

“...”

I quietly listened and reflected on Harin's words. Then something she said caught my attention. *Arunheim's prince, Krisbell. Baal's incarnation body. Krisbell and Baal. Kris... bell.*

“...!”

I turned to Boss with wide eyes. She also seemed to have realized something and wore a shocked expression.

* * *

[Arunheim's Palace – Arun]

Arunheim Kingdom ruled as a superpower on the continent along with the Republic of Leores. It advocated a caste system, but also featured something called the common promotion system. This allowed talented commoners to rise in status. Some called it the kingdom where the shackles of slaves looked most beautiful.

Jin Sahyuk stepped into the heart of Arunheim Kingdom, the palace Arun. She walked through the palace halls and reached the most decorated place, the king's quarters.

“This is your past?”

Jewels and ornaments adorned the room. Just the king's quarter could buy an entire castle.

“Foolish and arrogant.”

Jin Sahyuk muttered as she looked around. She couldn't protect her country as a king, but never indulged in luxury like this.

“Yep, this is me.”

Bell answered while sitting on the corner of his bed. His outfit looked different from what he wore on Earth. He wore a gown engraved with

gold, enchanted bracelets around his wrists, and enchanted rings on his fingers. Bell called them the kingdom's greatest treasures.

"Royalty from a ruined world and the incarnation body of Baal. That's who I am. A bit complicated, right?"

Jin Sahyuk deeply sighed at Bell. "So I have to kill you here?"

"No, not yet." Bell shook his head, but looked forward to his death and smiled.

"We have two months left, so you don't have to rush. Baal will descend the moment you kill me. I'm sure you need time to prepare."

"..."

Jin Sahyuk looked around the room again. Countless treasures filled this place, but nothing looked useful.

She turned to him once again. "I'm curious about something."

"*Hm?* Oh, go ahead. I'm about to die, so I'll answer any of your questions as long as I don't have to repeat the past."

Bell looked truly relieved as Jin Sahyuk asked in a small voice.

"How did you become Baal's incarnation body?"

Bell's face stiffened a bit. However, his smile quickly returned.

"I wanted to see someone one more time even if I had to sell my soul to a devil."

"Sell your soul?" Jin Sahyuk frowned.

"Yes, humans all have something they want. For me, it was going back in time."

Jin Sahyuk's eyes widened. Such a phenomenon transcended miracles.

To go back in time while maintaining one's memories. Only Earth's Shin Myungchul ever achieved that.

"Going back in time?"

"That's right. I'm a regressor. I sold my soul to Baal in exchange for going back in time."

"..."

Jin Sahyuk found it hard to understand. She furrowed her brows and glared at him, but he simply smiled. *Kiik*— The door opened and another man walked in.

"So you're Jin Sahyuk."

She turned towards a man with a sharp expression. Jin Sahyuk knew he had to be Yi Yeonjun.

"That's right. And you're what... his boyfriend?"

Jin Sahyuk smirked and pointed at Bell. Yi Yeonjun frowned and Bell shot up with a flustered expression.

"No, no. Of course not. That's not even funny."

Bell pulled on Jin Sahyuk's shoulders while Yi Yeonjun continued glaring at her.

"Both of you calm down. This meeting is so we can peacefully discuss how to achieve what each of us wants."

Bell seated them down and began their meeting.

* * *

Meanwhile, Shin Jonghak and Chae Nayun met at the house of a noble family called Pritun some distance away from Arunheim's capital.

“So this Leon clan spread a false rumor about the prince being a devil?”

“Yes, now you understand.”

Shin Jonghak clapped and nodded. He woke up as the successor to the Pritun clan and Chae Nayun became his knight.

“*Hmm...* but why would the Leon clan spread such a rumor? It’s obvious what would happen to them.”

“Probably because they housed a devil themselves, so they spread that rumor to draw attention away. Our clan received orders to kill the devil that escaped from their clan,” Shin Jonghak confidently replied.

“*Our* clan? Really?”

“Who cares? It’s nice being a noble.” Shin Jonghak grinned and Chae Nayun made a vomiting gesture. Then she asked again.

“So... we have to catch the devil that escaped?”

“Right, catching and killing that devil is the demon realm gate’s first trial.”

“*Hmm...* It’s surprisingly simple.”

They hadn’t reached anywhere near the truth, but seriously nodded at each other. Their analysis might seem cute from a third party perspective.

“Alright, I’m going to train now that we know our ultimate goal.”

“*Huh?* Oh... How much strength have you recovered?”

Shin Jonghak grabbed Chae Nayun as she prepared to leave. He didn’t want to let her go after she became a clan member.

“I’ll be back to normal in a month,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly replied.

“Then what’s your quest?”

“Recovering my strength is my quest.”

“And the reward?”

“My weapon, Balmung. Why are you asking me all this?”

“*Huh?* Oh, well... because you’re my knight.”

“I think you’re too into this. Snap out of it.”

Chae Nayun left with a scowl. Shin Jonghak wanted her to stay, so he asked another question.

“Wait. Have you thought of any ways to contact the others?”

“How would I do that? This world doesn’t even have a phone.”

Then Chae Nayun suddenly recalled her 8 star card, [*Infinite Communication*]. She couldn’t help but wonder if it worked in this world.

“No, wait. Maybe I do have a way.”

Chae Nayun closed her eyes and focused on sending a telepathic message to the most familiar person, Extra7.

— Hey, can you hear me? It’s me, Chae Nayun. Reply if you can hear me.

“*Gulp...*”

Time continued to pass: 5 seconds... 10 seconds... 1 minute... 3 minutes... No answer ever came back.

“Guess it doesn’t work.”

Chae Nayun smacked her lips and turned back.

“Looks like we’ll have to directly look for them.”

Suddenly...

[Chae Nayun? Is that really you?]

Extra7 finally replied.

Chapter 323

Break-Even Point (1)

[Mount Kilata]

We reached the peak at about 5120 meters. The view at the top looked nothing like the other mountains. The temperature didn't decrease at higher altitudes due to a magic power phenomenon. Kilata maintained the jungle's humid temperature even at its peak.

"We have 3 more peaks left."

Harin muttered as we looked down. We had to climb 3 more mountains to arrive at the republic. I dragged myself up with a sigh.

"Should we get going then?"

Harin glanced at Boss, who nodded and looked into the distance.

"Yes, let's go."

We walked through Kilata's dense forest and swamps again while slaying monsters as they appeared. Our surroundings slightly changed after about an hour.

"Fog?"

A thick, dense fog blocked our view. First, it stayed around our ankles, but soon ballooned and entirely covered Kilata in less than 30 minutes. Harin and Boss couldn't see anymore and stopped.

"It looks like Mirinae's fog drifted down here." Harin calmly informed us.

"Mirinae?"

“Yes, Mirinae is also known as the mountain of fog. I’ve heard of its nickname, but never imagined its fog would be this thick.” Harin bit her lower lip.

“It’s okay.” I grabbed their hands since not even this thick fog could block my thousand-mile eyes. I could still see like usual.

“I’ve got great eyes.”

We continued walking while holding hands. Harin awkwardly followed and Boss willingly trusted me.

This fog felt more like a blessing than a curse because it also blocked the view of countless monsters. We quickly descended thanks to the fog. It only grew thicker, but we traveled from the peak to the midpoint in less than 3 hours.

Then...

[Hey, can you hear me?]

I suddenly heard a voice and stopped.

[It’s me, Chae Nayun. Please answer if you can hear me.]

It sounded like Chae Nayun. She must’ve contacted me through her 8 star card.

“Hajin?”

Boss and Harin looked at me confused as I thought of a reply. However, I found it difficult to form any sentences in my head. This world’s rejective force probably disrupted the card’s communication. I couldn’t form any long sentences and barely managed to send a short one.

[Chae Nayun, is that really you?]

“Kim Hajin? Is there something up ahead?”

“Uh, no.”

Boss prodded me and I began walking again. I received a reply from Chae Nayun after 3 minutes.

[Yeah, it's me. You're also inside the gate, right?]

[Yeah, I'm on my way to the Republic of Leores with the Leon clan's daughter.]

I replied as we walked.

Again, it took her 3 minutes to answer.

[What? Isn't she a devil? Why are you going to Leores? Turn back and bring her here!]

“...?”

What the hell is she talking about?

I tilted my head in confusion.

* * *

[Republic of Leores, Basement Training Room, Presidential Residence]

Kim Suho looked at the woman in front of him holding an iron sword. Her posture appeared flawless and the magic power surrounding her sword felt sharp. His student's growth amazed him. The president's daughter instantly absorbed everything he taught her like a dry sponge.

“You're growing fast.”

The president's daughter, Seraine, didn't smile and only focused on her training despite his heartfelt praise.

“Hi-yah!”

She swung her sword with all her might. Her magic power scratched the floor and rushed towards Kim Suho, but he easily sliced it in half.

“Your magic power is hard as steel. You’ve achieved a lot considering it only resembled a breeze when we first started.”

“—!”

Seraine dashed towards him without a word. *Tat!* She covered the 100 meter distance with a single jump and slammed her sword down. Kim Suho blocked it with his sword and sparks flew.

Kiik— Kiik—

“I hear you have a favor to ask me.” Seraine spoke as their swords clashed.

Kim Suho smiled as his efforts finally bore fruit.

“Are you finally acknowledging me?”

“I’m not acknowledging anything—”

Seraine focused her magic power around her arms. This increased her muscles, but she still couldn’t push Kim Suho away. She kept pushing until she realized it wouldn’t work and stopped.

“*Haa...* I’ve merely realized the rumors were wrong.”

Everyone throughout the continent recognized Seraine as a prodigy. In contrast, rumors floated around about Kim Suho being incompetent. Everyone claimed he only became sword commander through connections.

“Is that so? Thank you.”

Initially, she only asked him to teach her the sword because she regarded him as her father’s mistake. She planned to embarrass Kim Suho by beating him in a sword fight, kicking him out, and appointing

a more fitting person as sword commander.

However, Kim Suho went beyond her imagination. He possessed enormous strength contrary to the rumors. His sword and magic power couldn't be more harmonious. His sword seemed flawless and Seraine felt the desire to learn from somebody for the first time in her life.

“No need. So what is this favor you— *Ah!*”

Kim Suho suddenly struck the back of her foot with his sword. Seraine flew into the air, but had experienced this situation hundreds of times. She performed a backflip in midair and escaped from Kim Suho's reach. She moved as if she belonged to a circus.

Kim Suho proudly looked at her.

“I heard there's a clan called Leon in the northern kingdom.”

“Leon?”

Seraine loosened her grip around her sword and Kim Suho calmly continued.

“Yes, they've been falsely accused and exterminated in Arunheim.”

“I know who they are. What about them?”

“The Leon clan's eldest daughter is on her way to the republic.”

“...”

Seraine sheathed her sword. Kim Suho didn't take that as a good sign from someone so obsessed with the blade.

“I understand what you're trying to say.”

However, Seraine adamantly shook her head.

“The answer is no.”

Tak— She snapped her fingers. The door immediately opened and a crowd of knights entered. They served as Seraine’s personal bodyguards.

“Surely you’re aware of our history with Arunheim and all our sacrifices to achieve peace with them. I can’t betray my father and this country just to save Leon.”

Seraine left the training room and her flock of knights followed.

“Sword commander.”

Lekendol, Seraine’s highest ranked bodyguard, wore a black armor and cape. He looked at Kim Suho full of animosity.

“Don’t be so proud.”

“Of course.”

Kim Suho shrugged. Lekendol grilled him some more before finally leaving. Soon afterwards, Aileen entered the training room with Kim Suho’s clothes and a towel.

“Ah, thank you.”

“Why are they so rude to you? Want me to beat them up?”

Kim Suho smiled at Aileen’s suggestion.

“Please calm down. You haven’t fully recovered your abilities yet.”

“Still, she said she would grant you a favor, but didn’t even listen when you actually told her? What’s with that?”

“She doesn’t have a choice. I get it. After all, her country is at stake.”

Kim Suho and Aileen’s conversation continued when...

[Hey Kim Suho!]

Kim Suho suddenly heard a desperate voice. Anyone would recognize Chae Nayun's voice and he listened in confusion.

[It's me, Chae Nayun! Kim Hajin is in this world too! Where are you? Answer me!]

Ah, this is her 8 star card!

Kim Suho smiled after that realization.

Answer... how do I answer again?

He closed his eyes and focused.

— I'm at the Republic of Leores.

He heard Chae Nayun's voice again after 3 minutes.

[Thank god! Kim Hajin is on his way to Leores with Leon's eldest daughter right now! You have to meet them!]

Kim Hajin is coming here with Leon's devil hunter?

Kim Suho widened his eyes.

“Ah, this is, Seraine!”

Kim Suho quickly wiped his sweat and darted out of the training room.

* * *

[500 Meters Above Sea Level, Entrance to Mount Mirinae]

We successfully escaped from Kilata and currently climbed Mirinae, the mountain of fog. The magic fog only grew thicker with each step

and even I couldn't see much further ahead now.

I asked with my gaze fixed to the front.

"Harin, what should we look out for on this mountain?"

"We need to look out for people."

"People?"

"Yes."

Harin seriously nodded. On a side note, she already confessed her true identity as Harin, the Leon clan's eldest daughter, when she told us about Krisbell.

"Mount Mirinae is special because of the magic fog that surrounds it. The fog that blocks our view also increases the magic power density in the air. This makes Mirinae the perfect place for training."

Harin continued as we walked side by side.

"For that reason, this place is crawling with hidden experts. Martial artists who seek to become stronger and criminals on the run from the kingdom."

"Mmm..."

Her explanation made sense. This mountain sounded similar to the Himalayas in my settings.

"I understand. For now, let's keep moving until we find a place to rest."

I carefully proceeded since I could only see up to 100 meters ahead. Suddenly, a huge rock appeared in front of us. The oddly shaped rock stood about 30 meters tall. It completely blocked our path and only a cliff lay beyond it. I stopped Boss and Harin.

“I think I’m lost.”

“You, Kim Hajin?” Boss sounded surprised, but I quickly admitted it.

“Yes, this fog is too thick even for me. I see a rock up ahead...?”

Chwaaa! Magic power suddenly erupted from the rock and the fog disappeared from the surrounding area. We could clearly see again and also heard a voice at the same time.

“Who are you?”

The voice resounded with magic power and I spotted a woman sitting cross-legged on top of the rock.

“I asked you a question, dimwit. Answer me.”

Her long hair looked disheveled and she wore a worn-out coat. However, the magic power she emitted felt second to none. Her voice overflowed with magic power and I noticed that Harin completely froze.

“Shimurin...” Harin whispered in a daze.

“*Hmm?*”

The woman raised her eyebrows. “Look at you. So you’ve heard of me, *huh?*”

Gulp— Harin swallowed hard and replied.

“Not a person in this world doesn’t know you.”

“*Mmm?* Well, I guess that makes sense.”

The woman stood up with a smirk. She looked quite tall as I looked up at her.

“That’s Shimurin, the grand magician,” Harin whispered to us.

“Grand magician?”

“Yes, she’s a magician who used to serve the kingdom. However, her genius led her astray and she got involved in strange research.”

“What are you whispering about?”

The grand magician Shimurin viciously looked down at us.

“Do you have the time to talk? I could swallow you alive right this minute.”

A system window popped up in front of me.

[Quest] [Level of Difficulty – Hardest] [Summary – Shimurin is a magician who studied interdimensional migration. She became disillusioned with secular society and took refuge on Mount Mirinae. She abhors humans.] [Goal – Persuade Shimurin to return to the republic or survive against her.] [Reward – Your aether armor.] [Failure – Probably death.]

The highest difficulty and death as failure. I turned to Boss in shock. Her eyes also wandered in the air. It appeared she received the same quest.

“Boss... did you also get a quest?”

“Mmm? Ah.”

I carefully asked and...

“I did. It has the highest difficulty.”

Boss slowly nodded.

* * *

[Arun, Arunheim Royal Palace – VIP room]

The crescent moon’s dim light shone through the darkness below. Jin

Sahyuk deeply pondered in the middle of the night on a terrace where the leaves trembled and owls mournfully cried. She thought about Bell, Kim Suho, Kim Hajin, and herself.

The end is near...

Bell had told her. However, she had no idea what Bell's end would look like. She didn't even know if he would keep his promise. All the uncertainties left her confused, but something else concerned her the most.

"Kim Hajin..."

Bell told her Kindspring was Kim Hajin. A mistake had occurred because of the distortion in time and space. Jin Sahyuk could only believe this after witnessing [*Synchronization*] with her own eyes. She saw the emotions Kindspring harbored for her inside Kim Hajin.

"Hmm..."

She sighed and turned towards the endless darkness. A cold breeze ruffled her hair and her royal beauty shone even in the dark. She thought about Kim Hajin and Kindspring, who left a scar in her heart. Then she came to a decision.

"If I can go back..."

If she could return to her kingdom full of her mistakes, sorrow, pride, agony, love, and regret...

"I'm bringing you with me."

The synchronization rate referred to the extent in which Kim Hajin became one with Kindspring. She felt confident it would drastically increase if Kim Hajin lived in her kingdom, in their world...

"..."

Jin Sahyuk sighed again and glanced at the invitation on the table.

[Arunheim Nobles' Gathering]

Bell strongly advised her to attend the social gathering. She usually loathed this hypocrisy peculiar to nobility. However...

“I guess I should at least grant his dying wish.”

Jin Sahyuk stuffed the invitation into her pocket.

Chapter 324

Break-Even Point (2)

[Mirinae Mountain]

The grand magician brought us to her home. It looked like a prehistoric hut, but the interior could fit 20 soccer fields. Shimurin locked us in and went outside.

“Shimurin was famous as Arunheim’s grand magician.”

Meanwhile, Harin explained some background information to us.

“She became an official magician at the age of 8, a grand magician at the age of 18, and reached the highest realm in history at 28. That’s why she received the title, the One Closest to the Truth.”

Harin looked around and continued.

“However, she left the kingdom 10 years ago when she turned 30. Her juniors reported her saying she wanted to leave this world before completely disappearing. That’s why everyone thought she committed suicide.”

“I can’t believe she’s been hiding here this whole time.”

“Yes, but I don’t know why.”

Harin nodded.

“Mmm...”

I checked the quest summary once again.

[Quest] [Level of Difficulty – Highest] [Summary – Shimurin is a magician who studies interdimensional travel. She took refuge on Mount Mirinae after being disillusioned with secular society. She abhors humans.] [Goal – Persuade Shimurin to come to the republic or survive against her.] [Reward – Your aether armor.] [Failure – Probably death.]

The summary said she studied interdimensional travel. She probably came here because of that.

“To think Shimurin hid on Mount Mirinae all this time. I’m surprised no one ever noticed.”

“She probably killed everyone who did.”

I shrugged and Harin raised her eyebrows.

“What do you mean?”

“No one noticed because she killed everyone who saw her. She said it herself when we first met. That she could eat us alive.”

“...”

Harin’s face froze, but she soon forced a smile and shook her head.

“No way, a grand magician would never—”

Whoosh. Shimurin suddenly returned like a gust of wind and Harin immediately froze. I stared at the book in Shimurin’s hand. According to *[Observation and Reading]*, *[Shimurin’s Magic Book]* contained all her research on magic.

“...”

Shimurin began murmuring a spell and her magic power seeped into the book. Boss instinctively covered just the two of us with her shadow barrier.

“W-Wait, what about me—”

Harin muttered as I thought about what to do. The solution should be quite simple. After all, the quest window already showed what Shimurin desired. I took a deep breath and shouted.

“Are you studying interdimensional travel?”

Shimurin’s expression immediately stiffened.

* * *

[Republic of Leores – Underground Prison]

Kim Suho ended up being imprisoned after receiving Chae Nayun’s message and hastily bursting into Seraine’s room. She screamed and fell. Then all the knights guarding her arrested him.

“Geez, couldn’t you have knocked? They almost executed you for an attempted assassination.”

Seraine stared at him dumbfoundedly. He didn’t suffer any harsh treatment thanks to her.

“Seraine, my friend will soon arrive with the Leon clan’s eldest daughter,” Kim Suho spoke from behind the bars.

“Then we’ll let Arunheim Kingdom know a wanted criminal has arrived.”

“...”

Kim Suho clenched his teeth and looked genuinely angry. *I guess I shouldn’t have made that joke.* Seraine stepped back and cleared her throat.

“Anyways, we can’t let her cross the border even if we don’t tell Arunheim Kingdom.”

“They will be valuable allies.”

Kim Suho refused to give up.

“I know the Leon clan’s eldest daughter is a powerful knight. I’m sure she has the potential to rise to a high position in Leores, but—”

“No, I’m not talking about the Leon clan’s eldest daughter.”

“Pardon?” Seraine tilted her head in confusion.

Kim Suho spoke full of trust and faith in someone else.

“My friend accompanying Leon’s eldest daughter can stop this war by himself.”

“What?”

“You’ll know when you see him.”

Kim Suho knew from experience the terror of bullets compared to arrows. Kim Hajin could easily kill a hundred soldiers with his bullets and overturn any battle.

“But...”

“Lady, don’t listen to him. He’s only here because of his connections.”

Lekendol approached Seraine, but Kim Suho didn’t give up and stared into her eyes. Seraine had no choice but to comply after meeting his gaze for a long time.

“*Sigh...* fine.”

Honestly, what Kim Suho said had won her over. A man who could stop the war by himself. As someone deeply interested in martial arts, she wanted to know this person highly praised by the sword commander.

“I’ll talk to my father and try to secretly deploy a squad, but make sure no one finds out. Otherwise, we’ll both be killed.”

“Thank you—”

“One more thing.” Seraine held up her index finger.

“We’ll test their skills first if they manage to arrive. Especially the man you speak of. They’ll have to prove their worth. As for the method...”

Seraine pointed at Lekendol.

“He’ll test them.”

Lekendol smiled in satisfaction.

“Yes, I understand. Let’s do that.”

Kim Suho sighed in relief. He trusted Kim Hajin would succeed no matter what.

“Good. Okay, we’ll release you now.”

Seraine looked at Lekendol and he promptly opened the cell.

* * *

[Arunheim]

A gathering of nobles took place at Arun Summit before matters of national emergency. They came together at the royal palace to uphold a long tradition.

“I detest the Republic of Leores.”

Prince Krisbell spoke from next to Jin Sahyuk.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk seemed to be thinking with her eyes closed as Bell continued while staring out the window.

“Because the republic killed someone I loved.”

“Didn’t you go back in time to see this person again?” Jin Sahyuk asked.

“Yeah, and I got to see her for another 6 years. She died at 20 in the original timeline and at 26 in the second. It’s almost as if death is set by fate. Someone fated to die young won’t live past 30 and someone fated to die old will always live past 70. Funny, isn’t it?”

Bell smiled, but his voice soon turned cold.

“A transnational peace conference will take place in the Republic of Leores next month. Representatives from every nation will gather to discuss the demon realm transformation. That’s where I summoned Baal.”

Bell closed his eyes and recalled the past. The peace conference transformed into hell as Baal descended at the heart of the continent and destroyed the world in just 4 days.

“I want you to change that future, Sahyuk. Release me from that fate with death.”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t reply and simply stared at the door. She felt a presence behind it just now.

“Did you call someone?”

She turned to him and asked.

“*Hm?* Oh, is he here already?”

Bell grinned and raised his body. Then he went to open the door. *Kiik* — A nicely dressed Shin Jonghak appeared and Jin Sahyuk immediately scowled.

“Shin Jonghak?”

He also noticed Jin Sahyuk and his expression similarly soured.

“What... crazy bitch, why are you here? Prince, this woman might look pretty, but she’s a psychopath. I’ll hold her back, so please escape.”

Shin Jonghak looked back and forth between Bell and Jin Sahyuk. She glared at Bell and demanded an explanation. Bell simply shrugged.

“Characters mentioned multiple times are bound to appear again.”

“What bullshit is that?”

“Bullshit? You’re speaking to the prince! I see you have no manners in this world either.”

Shin Jonghak muttered while pointing at her.

“What the hell are you saying? Don’t you know who this is?”

Jin Sahyuk pointed at Bell and Shin Jonghak closely observed him. He should’ve seen Bell’s face during the Orden Assassination Mission, but he couldn’t recognize the changed appearance. He simply went back to glaring at Jin Sahyuk.

“Shut up—”

“Alright, why don’t we start now that Shin Myungchul’s grandson is here.”

“What?” Shin Jonghak paused at his grandfather’s name. It struck him like cold water.

“Wait, you...”

He finally recognized Bell, who wore a calm expression.

“Take a seat. You’re also part of this story I’m about to tell.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak frowned and refused to sit, so Bell added another sentence.

“Listen up. This is a story about your grandfather and me. A story about regressors.”

Bell took out a crystal ball and threw it at him. It rolled over to Shin Jonghak's feet and he stared at the young Shin Myungchul reflected from within.

* * *

[Mount Mirinae]

“What did you do?”

Harin whispered as she glanced at Shimurin. The grand magician currently led us somewhere else.

“Let's just say we came to a mutual understanding,” I shrugged and replied.

“Mutual understanding?”

“It's a bit difficult to explain.”

Shimurin chased them away to talk with me after I mentioned interdimensional travel 30 minutes ago.

First, she asked how I knew about her research topic. I honestly told her that we came from another dimension. She asked for proof, which no one else would have. However, I possessed stigma and Shimurin could feel the inexplicable power from it as a grand magician. Then I projected the world we came from using stigma's magic power.

Negotiating became a piece of cake after that.

“Tell me. What mutual understanding did—”

“Damn it.” Shimurin suddenly turned around.

Harin froze and didn’t finish her question. What Shimurin said next eased her fears.

“Do we have to keep walking?”

“Pardon?” Harin tilted her head.

Shimurin unleashed her magic power as if all this walking bothered her.

“I’m talking about teleportation. Why can’t we use something like that?”

“N-No, we can. Of course, we can. Why shouldn’t we?”

Harin fiercely nodded and encouraged her. She wouldn’t hesitate to beg on her knees if they could immediately leave this mountain range.

“I can? Good, then I’m going to use it. Is that okay?” Shimurin turned to ask me.

I nodded and her magic circle immediately enveloped us.

“__”

Shimurin muttered a strange chant only she understood and activated her magic circle.

Woong—

The world distorted and I felt a floating sensation. I closed my eyes and my feet soon touched the ground again. I didn’t feel any pain or nausea at all. She had cast a perfect teleportation spell.

“You can open your eyes now, scaredy cats.”

“...”

Everyone opened their eyes.

“Wow.”

I exclaimed in awe. The mountain fog had disappeared and Leores' buildings spread out before us in a city that resembled modern England. We crossed several hundred kilometers in just 3 seconds.

“Let's see... HJ?” Shimurin said while pointing at me.

“*Huh?* Me?”

“Yeah, you. Follow me. We're going to my workshop. You didn't forget our promise, did you?”

“Ah, yeah. Sure, but it's Hajin. Not HJ.”

“Your name doesn't matter. I just need your magic power.”

Shimurin marched forward.

“*Um*, what do you mean by workshop? You have something like that here?”

Harin asked as she chased after us and the grand magician nodded.

“Yeah, it's easy to fake your identity here because this country doesn't have a damned caste system.”

She scowled at those last words.

Chapter 325

Break-Even Point (3)

We arrived in Thaines, a small port city in the Republic of Leores. Shimurin guided us to her workshop near the coast. It looked like a huge mansion or a vacation home owned by a millionaire. The gentle ocean breeze brushed past us.

“This way.”

Shimurin deactivated the security magic and opened the door. We slowly entered and the interior looked just as fancy as I imagined.

“So this is where you’ve been all these years? In the middle of a city?” Harin muttered.

“Just because I’m a magician doesn’t mean I have to live in isolation. I only go to Mirinae when I have to meditate or gather research materials,” Shimurin replied with a snicker.

She deactivated her transformation and looked filthy because she hadn’t taken a shower in a long time. However, it only took her 3 seconds to clean herself with simple magic.

“You must be tired from all that climbing. Pick any room you want and rest. Oh, you can explore the city too if you want. Except you.”

Shimurin pointed at me.

“Hejin, follow me to the basement.”

I simply nodded, but Boss frowned from beside me.

“Hajin, I don’t sense any hostility, but be careful. It’s hard to figure out what she’s thinking.”

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Get some rest, Boss.”

“...”

I dismissed her concerns with a smile and followed Shimurin to the basement.

The mansion’s basement looked more like a typical workshop with magic circles everywhere. A mountain of scrolls sat on her desk and strange plants grew in the corner.

“Is this where you’ve been studying interdimensional travel?” I casually asked.

Shimurin suddenly stopped in the center and turned around. She frowned and her gaze felt sharp as a blade.

“Oi.”

“Yes?”

Her voice grew heavy and I backed away from her overwhelming aura.

“I don’t care how you found out about my research.”

She announced as her magic power flowed out.

“Your strange magic power isn’t enough proof you’re from another dimension. Anyone can create illusions through magic power.”

Her enormous magic power pushed down on me and my breathing grew rough. It felt as if my organs twisted from within.

“I’m only interested in you for one reason.”

The pressure disappeared and I collapsed, desperately gasping for air.

“Your magic power feels close to the truth.”

Her gaze seemed to be piercing through me.

“That pure magic power flows from the strange scar on your arm.”

She looked at my right arm and her magic power ripped my clothes apart. Stigma became completely visible.

Shimurin continued while staring at my tattoo.

“Truth, origin, essence... your magic power contains everything. That’s why I thought it could be the key to my grand magic.”

She turned on the lights after finishing her speech. A staircase led deeper below the basement and she began walking down.

“Should I go with you?” I asked.

“No.”

She stopped and scanned me from head to toe.

“You’re already surrounded by my magic. Rest, and I’ll summon you when I’m ready.”

She continued down after a somewhat threatening declaration. Several system alerts suddenly blocked my view.

[You have completed a high level quest.] [You have completed a quest of the highest difficulty.]

I also received all my equipment back: *[Aether]*, the *[Desert Eagle]*, my *[Black Lotus Uniform]*, and boxes of bullets that included the god-slaying bullet.

“I’ve missed all of you so much.”

Words could not express my joy.

Welcome home, my dear friends.

I equipped myself with all my gear and sent Chae Nayun a message.

[Tell Kim Suho we've arrived in the republic. We're in Thaines.]

* * *

[Arunheim – The Prince's Residence]

The setting sun lit the afternoon sky a blazing red. The prince's spacious room felt almost empty.

"He just left," Jin Sahyuk muttered in a daze.

"Hahaha... Yeah, he did." Bell shrugged.

Only he and Jin Sahyuk remained in the room. Shin Jonghak stomped out after Bell mentioned Shin Myungchul.

"Is it okay to just let him go?" Jin Sahyuk nonchalantly asked. She hadn't expected someone as arrogant as him to leave without a word.

"It's fine. I thought this might happen," Bell calmly replied.

Shin Jonghak's beliefs and values all came from Shin Myungchul. He would continue to evade any discussions on Shin Myungchul out of fear that he might come to doubt his beliefs.

"I'm curious. Can't you just tell me?" Jin Sahyuk muttered.

Everyone knew the legendary Shin Myungchul and his fame aroused her interest. Bell only faintly smiled at her.

"About Shin Myungchul?"

"Yeah."

Shin Myungchul had accomplished a lot in life. He recaptured Seoul with Chae Joochul, drove the djinns out of Korea, established the Hero Association with his colleagues, founded the Jinsung group, and

saved millions of lives at the expense of his own.

For these reasons, the people also called Shin Myungchul the one true hero. He embodied virtue and humanity's last hope.

"We were quite similar."

Bell knew everything about Shin Myungchul, including his past life.

"Similar?"

Jin Sahyuk couldn't make sense of that. How could Bell, who she knew as trash, be compared to the respectable hero Shin Myungchul?

"Yeah."

Bell recalled his first encounter with Shin Myungchul and bitterly smiled.

Long, long ago...

He had warned Shin Myungchul about the regression stone and told him it would only lure in devils. The ghost of regression, Baal, would most definitely destroy him and his world for going back in time.

However, love could easily blind a person.

Shin Myungchul readily sold his soul and his world to the devil for a chance to meet his loved one again.

"Yeah?" Jin Sahyuk nonchalantly responded.

"You don't sound surprised. That's the truth about the legendary hero, Shin Myungchul."

"I'm more interested in Baal. Just what is he?"

"He's just a pervert who likes to collect different worlds," Bell simply announced.

“What?”

“Some people collect books and figurines. Baal’s the same. He collects worlds for pleasure.”

Jin Sahyuk boiled with rage and clenched her teeth.

“Then—”

“Baal didn’t meddle with your world though. Akatrina fell by itself.”

Bell answered her question before she even asked. The slightly embarrassed Jin Sahyuk coughed and changed the subject.

“I-I wasn’t going to ask that. So, what’s the demon realm gate then?”

“This place? This place is just a condition.”

“A condition?”

“Yeah, it’s sort of like a contract. A great force requires an equally great restraint. Kind of like Newton’s third law.”

Baal’s existence transcended reality, so he had to go through a proper process to descend.

“The demon realm gate is not an ordeal given to men by Baal.”

Baal chose the demon realm gate as the solution.

“It’s an ordeal Baal placed on himself to descend.”

The demon real gate reenacted the first world he descended on and used that as a medium to transfer himself to another dimension. Baal had chosen this method to descend on Earth.

“Baal won’t be able to descend on Earth if you stop him in this world.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk only silently stared at Bell. Their staring contest lasted for some time.

* * *

[Downtown Thaines]

I went to the downtown area with Boss and Harin. The ocean breeze gently blew through the bustling harbor city. We toured around, enjoyed the food from vendors, and visited some shops. Seeing a world I didn't create felt somewhat refreshing.

“Hajin.”

Boss called me as I examined magic scrolls in a shop.

“Yes?”

“Look at that.”

Boss pointed to a stall.

[Stuffed Dolls. Starting at just 8 shillings.]

She stared at a particular stuffed bear.

“Do you like bears, Boss? I guess that explains why you liked that bear helmet so much.”

“No, I wouldn't say that. Do you have any money?”

She asked me like a delinquent.

“Ah, yes. I do.”

I grinned and gave her a gold coin. It came from the payment to escort

Harin.

“*Mn*, thanks.”

Boss walked to the stall and picked up the stuffed bear. One didn't seem like enough, so she also picked up a stuffed cat. I watched her with a smile before turning towards another stall.

Then...

“What.”

Several robed men suddenly surrounded me. They looked huge as though fully armored underneath and each carried a sword on their belt.

“...”

Did the Arunheim assassins already arrive?

“Who are you?”

Boss quickly returned and released her magic power. I also took out my Desert Eagle, but the man who seemed to be the leader spoke respectfully.

“Kim Hajin, correct? We've come to pick you up according to Sword Commander Kim Suho's orders.”

* * *

[Republic of Leores – Basement of Seraine's Mansion]

Seraine received a message from Kim Suho that Harin and her companions had arrived in Thaines.

The fact that they entered the republic without being noticed by the border guards surprised her. She promptly ordered her knights to summon them.

“He’s an F rank sharpshooter from the Lorenzo duchy according to our research.”

“What?”

However, the man highly praised by the sword commander turned out to be an F rank sharpshooter.

“That’s impossible. Perhaps he’s staying at F rank on purpose?”

“Perhaps, but he’s also a rookie who only joined the army a year ago.”

“...”

Seraine fell silent and looked at the man inside the glass prison. He didn’t seem to know they had imprisoned him and nonchalantly yawned in his chair.

“What about the others?”

“We’ve confirmed the identity of the Leon clan’s daughter, but the other one can’t be identified. We couldn’t find any records of her whatsoever.”

“*Hmm...*”

Seraine furrowed her brows and rubbed her chin. *An F rank sharpshooter stopping the war by himself?* It sounded like the funniest joke ever. This sharpshooter didn’t seem to be hiding his strength either. He looked dumb and she couldn’t feel any magic power from him. All powerful beings leaked magic power. Not even Kim Suho could prevent that.

“Does Lekendol even need to test him? Did the sword commander lie?”

As Seraine judged Kim Hajin...

KWANG!

The basement door burst open and a knight urgently shouted.

“My Lady, a monster pathway has opened in the capital!”

“What?”

She immediately scowled and the knights guarding Kim Hajin ran out. Seraine continued staring at Kim Hajin.

He looks like an ordinary F rank soldier no matter how much I observe him. It would be fine to leave him here, right? No, what if father finds out?

Koong. Koong. Koong.

“Kyak!”

The man inside the glass prison suddenly knocked.

“Geez, you surprised me! What is it?”

Seraine jumped and realized the man had said something.

“Huh?”

She walked up with a frown and read his lips.

— If they're ordinary monsters... no matter how many there are... I can take care of them... by myself...

“What does he mean?”

The man held up a strange object as Seraine murmured to herself. The Desert Eagle only looked like a lump of metal to her.

“What's that?”

She asked and Kim Hajin grinned.

— A weapon specialized for slaughter.

“Slaughter?”

KWANG!

An artificial earthquake occurred and a large hole appeared in the ground.

Kwaaaa... A mixture of monster cries rang out from the hole. A long time had passed since a monster pathway had appeared so close to the capital. Seraine clenched her teeth and pulled out her sword.

“...”

Then she glanced at Kim Hajin. He stared at her like an innocent child while knocking on the glass. Kim Hajin spoke when their eyes met.

— Let me out.

He looked too relaxed.

KWAAAAA!

The cries of monsters grew louder.

Koong, Koong, Koong.

The man inside the glass prison urged her.

— Just let me out. I’ll take care of them for you.

Seraine frowned as she read his lips.

“Hmph, why don’t you just break out if you’re so confident?”

However, she pushed the button to open the prison. *Whish*— The door to the glass prison opened and the man leisurely walked out. He

stared at her and arrogantly muttered.

“I don’t want to be charged for destruction of property.”

At that moment...

KWAAAAA!

Demonic monsters shot up from the hole in the ground.

Chapter 326

Transnational Peace Conference

(1)

[Leores Sword Institution – Commander’s Office]

Kim Suho paced back and forth in his office. He immediately informed Seraine of Kim Hajin’s arrival when he heard from Chae Nayun. However, he worried about Seraine’s previous declaration that she would test Kim Hajin’s abilities.

“Why are you so worried? Kim Hajin knows how to take care of himself.”

Aileen yawned and slouched in her chair.

Kim Suho awkwardly scratched his neck and also took a seat. “Will he be okay?”

“How should I know? He’s not a kid.”

Mnnn... Aileen stretched.

“By the way, I found some more people.”

“What? Really?” Kim Suho widened his eyes.

“Yep, three more. Rachel, Yoo Yeonha, and Yi Jiyeon.” Aileen smirked at her accomplishment.

“Wow!” Kim Suho exclaimed in surprise.

Then he thought about someone else and his heart sank. *Yun Seung-Ah*. She had been dragged into this world too.

“The three of them are running a business in a local city.”

“A business?”

“Yeah.”

Kim Suho tilted his head and Aileen handed him a crumpled piece of paper. This document outlined Yoo Yeonha, Rachel, and Yi Jiyeon’s current status. He silently read the paper.

Indeed, Yoo Yeonha seemed to be running a business. She became a merchant’s daughter and her family had run a local business for generations. Rachel served as Yoo Yeonha’s maid and Yi Jiyeon turned out to be a local aristocrat there.

“Looks like they’ve joined hands. Apparently, they’re making tons of money.”

“That’s hardly surprising. Yoo Yeonha is the type who can thrive anywhere.”

She'd even survive stranded on an island. Kim Suho placed the document down with a smile.

Yoo Yeonha had settled in Lecor, a provincial metropolis.

I should visit her after taking care of the current matter with Kim Hajim.

Then...

— Emergency! Emergency! A monster pathway has appeared!

The siren wailed through the speakers. *Koong, Koong!* Kim Suho immediately rose from his seat and ran out.

“Sigh...”

Aileen stretched and yawned again before chasing Kim Suho.

[Basement of Seraine's Mansion]

“...”

Seraine couldn't believe her eyes even though she stood in the middle of everything.

Kwaaaaaa!

Monsters flooded through the giant hole in the ground. The man extinguishing them looked just as unrealistic.

Tudududu...

The man aimed a strange object at the monsters. His shooting seemed unruly, but his attacks surprisingly killed the monsters with stunning precision. Monsters struck by a bullet immediately died as their heads and hearts exploded. Every single bullet possessed far more power than Seraine at her best.

“Wow, this is endless.”

Kim Hajin chuckled.

He hadn't shot like this in a while, so the excitement and thrill made his heart race. However, he knew he shouldn't waste any bullets since he only had a limited supply here.

Kim Hajin took out the grenade he ordered from Essential Armory that contained dimensional entropy. He had upgraded it with *[Bomber]*, the trait he earned from the Tower of Wish. He also enhanced it with the *[Random Consolidation System]* and a streak of *[Stigma]*. The grenade only looked as big as a baseball, but its power would exceed most bombs.

Roll—

He threw it into the hole where the monsters came from.

Then he turned and spoke to Seraine.

“Cover your ears.”

Seraine flinched and covered her ears as instructed.

Chwaaaaa!

The grenade exploded.

Koong!

The giant explosion shook the ground and white pillars of light erupted from the hole because of the grenade’s light attribute.

“...”

Silence descended after the huge explosion and Seraine ran her fingers through her hair.

“*Keuk—*”

She felt a severe headache coming. *What is this? What am I seeing?*

Her head felt like it would explode from confusion.

“*Mmm.*”

In comparison, Kim Hajin calmly moved and looked inside the hole. All the monsters had been wiped out without a trace as expected.

“This place is safe now.”

He proudly declared while carrying the Desert Eagle that transformed into a machine gun.

“Excuse me, Seraine. Does this place have a rooftop?”

“Rooftop?”

She asked back in a daze and swallowed her saliva.

“Yeah, there are more outside, right? I have to get to the rooftop to kill them.”

“There... is one.”

Kim Hajin surrounded himself in aether after Seraine’s confirmation.

“I’ll go on ahead.”

Parkour also increased his physical abilities as he stepped on the walls and quickly climbed to the rooftop like a spider.

“That’s a lot.”

He looked down from the windy rooftop at the monsters that escaped and caused a ruckus on the streets.

“*Hmm.*”

Kim Hajin lightly sighed and lifted his machine gun. With the thousand-mile eyes, he estimated roughly 20,000 monsters. That meant he had to kill at least 30 monsters with a single bullet.

“Will it work?”

His gift’s power had been reduced, so he didn’t think his bullets would be as accurate. However, these normal monsters probably wouldn’t stand a chance. He aimed at multiple targets, calculated the trajectories, and pulled the trigger without hesitation.

Dudududu...

Bullets rained from the mansion’s rooftop.

[2 Hours Later, Leores Sword Institution]

I went down to the basement with Harin. Seraine, Kim Suho, and several knights waited for us.

“Hello.”

Harin greeted them. Seraine silently looked at her and finally nodded after Kim Suho’s signal.

“Yes, nice to meet you, Lord...”

Seraine stopped midway since no one here should know Harin belonged to the Leon clan. The Leons had been officially annihilated.

“...Harin.”

“Thanks for taking me in, Lord Seraine.”

The way she had been called didn’t offend her. Honestly, Harin could bow down to Seraine for saving her life.

“Yes, and...”

Seraine looked at me completely different from when we first met. Then she stared at Kim Suho before finally opening her mouth.

“Seems like everything you said was true, commander.”

Kim Suho’s expression brightened and his lips twitched. He couldn’t contain his joy and burst into laughter.

“*Hahahaha*. Didn’t I say so? So, how was my friend?”

“*Sigh...*”

Seraine took out a document.

“According to our reports, the monsters that came out of the hole included 15,912 low-intermediate ranks, 6534 intermediate ranks, and 301 high ranks. This could only be called a grand invasion. We would’ve suffered serious losses in lives and properties. It would’ve also taken at least 3 days to subjugate all of them. However...”

Seraine stopped and looked at me. This seemed like the right time for me to simply shrug.

“We managed to get everything under control in just 2 hours with the help of a mysterious weapon.”

“A weapon? You mean a person.”

Kim Suho corrected her and Seraine gave him a dirty look.

“Sure, with the help of a person.”

Seraine crossed her arms. She reminded me of Yoo Yeonha, except much more sloppy and inexperienced. The thought made me smile.

“Excuse me, what are you laughing at?”

“*Huh?* Oh, no, it’s nothing.”

“*Ssp...* anyways...” Seraine pouted and asked.

“How did you do it?”

“That’s...”

How should I explain?

One bullet killed at least 30 monsters. My bullets moved like guided missiles. I could shoot just about anything from a high enough altitude and still had more than 3,000 bullets left.

“Regardless of the amount, I can kill all weak monsters with the pull of a finger.”

I condensed the complicated explanation into a brief sentence.

* * *

[30 Minutes Later]

I officially reunited with Kim Suho in his office. Harin left to speak with Seraine and Boss returned to Shimurin's mansion. We had to keep our relationship hidden from others.

“I got this from a quest.”

[Summary of the Past and Future]

Kim Suho handed me a book. It contained a summary of this world's past and future.

“Can you see what's written inside, Hajin?”

I opened the book, but only saw blank pages.

“No, I can't.”

“Ah, I guess I'm the only one who can read it.”

Kim Suho regretfully muttered and skipped to the last page.

“This book ends with a description about the transnational peace conference, which will be held in a month and a half.”

“The transnational peace conference?”

“Yeah, this is the last sentence of the book. *[A grand calamity will descend on the day of the transnational peace conference].*”

I stroked my chin in thought.

I should ask the Book of Truth about this conference once stigma recovers.

“It’s clear something will happen at the transnational peace conference.”

Kim Suho said and I nodded in agreement.

“I’ll look into it later.”

I turned to him. “More importantly, did you find the others?”

“Oh, right. We found Yoo Yeonha, Rachel, and Yi Jiyeon.”

“Really?”

I couldn’t help but smile. I’d been wanting to meet them again. Well, maybe not Yi Jiyeon, but definitely Yoo Yeonha and Rachel.

“Yeah, and they’re not far from here.” Kim Suho beamed.

“Yeah? What have they been up to?”

“Business. Yoo Yeonha already has influence over a local metropolis.”

“Pfft. Really?” I burst into laughter.

“As expected of Yeonha, right?”

I nodded.

“Right.”

“Then how about we go meet them now?” Kim Suho suggested while putting on his coat.

I also straightened my clothes and stood up. “Good idea. You know

the way, right?”

“Yeah, you can count on me.”

Kim Suho grabbed the doorknob, but paused as if he suddenly recalled something.

“Oh, before we leave...”

He gave me a warm look and pulled my arm.

“It’s good to see you again.”

He hugged me before I could react. His arms felt as big and sturdy as I remembered.

“What? O-Oh...”

“I’m glad.”

“*Huh? Um...* sure. It’s good to see you too.”

I patted Kim Suho on the back. *Tak, tak, tak*. Three times to signal him to let me go. He seemed to have mistaken my gesture and squeezed even harder.

“*Sniff, sniff...*”

I felt quite uncomfortable, but Kim Suho also happened to smell good. This seemed to be a main character trait as well. Anyways, the hug didn’t feel too bad as I waited for him to release me.

Chapter 327

Transnational Peace Conference (2)

[Megacity, Lecor]

Yoo Yeonha fully utilized her skills in the megacity known as Leores' second capital.

[Merchant Group – Lotus Flower]

Her clan owned a merchant group called the Lotus Flower. In a mere month, she turned them into the most famous group in the area. This could've only been possible thanks to the people around her.

First, Rachel contributed a great deal as Yoo Yeonha's servant. This world amplified the power of elementals because more mana existed here. Rachel's elementals could speed up carts, preserve easily decaying items, and automatically collect herbs.

Next, Yi Jiyoona became the daughter of the renowned Prin clan. The caste system had been abolished in the Republic of Leores, but citizens still considered the Prin clan as nobles. Yi Jiyoona invested her clan's money into Yoo Yeonha's merchant group and even allowed her to borrow the clan's name. The Prin clan possessed a spotless reputation, so Yoo Yeonha's merchant group had no trouble earning everyone's trust.

"Wow, our profit margin is even bigger than I thought." Yi Jiyoona muttered in surprise as she stared at the group's financial statement in their office.

"What are you going to do with all this money?"

Yoo Yeonha shrugged at her question. "First, establish a force. We

don't know what will happen from now on.”

She didn't forget this world only existed inside the demon realm gate. They should prepare everything, whether it be military force or money.

“Our chief officer sure is amazing.”

Yi Jiyeon snuggled next to Yoo Yeonha and praised her. *Tok, tok*— Someone knocked on the door.

“*Cough*.” Yi Jiyeon switched to a stern expression befitting a noble.

“Come in.” Yoo Yeonha called out with a smirk.

The door opened and Rachel appeared with a long object wrapped in a red veil.

“Oh, you're here, Rachel?”

Yoo Yeonha welcomed her as Rachel walked in with a smile before setting down the item.

“Oh, that must be what I ordered.”

Yoo Yeonha unwrapped the item without hesitation and the ornamental sword emanated a clear aura.

“What's this?” Yi Jiyeon asked.

Yoo Yeonha picked up the sword with an entirely blue blade. She bought this treasure for Rachel.

“Here, take it.”

She handed the sword to Rachel, who quietly stood there and widened her eyes.

“...?”

“It’s a sword that increases the power of elementals. Our world doesn’t have treasures like this since elementalists are so rare, but this world has many. It’s a sword named Wisp.”

Yoo Yeonha placed it in Rachel’s hands. Rachel could only bow with a bitter smile at the unexpected gift.

“Thank you.”

Kwang! The office door burst open and a guard drenched in sweat appeared.

“Demonic monsters! Demonic monsters have appeared!”

“...!”

They ran out of the office and looked outside the merchant group’s building. To their surprise, the city looked too peaceful for demonic monsters to have invaded.

“Where are the demonic monsters?”

“I... don’t know.”

“He didn’t seem to be lying.”

Yoo Yeonha, Rachel, and Yi Jiyeon all curiously tilted their heads when a robed man approached them.

“Demonic monsters?”

His voice sounded familiar as he walked up to Yoo Yeonha. She furrowed her brows and stared at him.

“Who are you?”

“They were here, but not anymore.”

“Pardon?”

Yoo Yeonha bent down and peeked under his hood.

“Ah!” She pointed at the man and shouted.

“You!”

“Yo, it’s been a while.” Kim Hajin smiled.

“Huh? Why is Kim Hajin here?”

“Ha, Hajin?”

Yi Jiyeon and Rachel also felt shocked and stared at him in a daze.

“I’m here too.”

A small child appeared from behind him. Of course, Spirit Speech Master Aileen also tagged along.

* * *

[Priton Clan’s Castle]

The Priton clan’s eldest son, Shin Jonghak, sighed in bed.

“That bastard...”

What the prince said lingered on his mind.

“What does he know about grandfather? And how?”

His anxiety and curiosity turned into chaos.

Tok, tok—

Someone knocked on the door as Shin Jonghak rumbled his hair in agony. He didn’t want to see anyone, but that woman only knocked as a formality.

“Hey, Shin Jonghak.”

As expected, Chae Nayun barged into his room.

“Why are you here?”

He sighed and stared at her. Chae Nayun currently wore an antenna on her head. *Wouldn't this make communication faster?* She came up with the idea a couple of days ago and foolishly curled her hair up every time she wanted to use [*Infinite Communication*].

“Have you heard of the transnational peace conference?”

“Transitional peace conference?” Shin Jonghak furrowed his brows at the sudden question.

“I've heard of it. It's exactly what it sounds like.”

“When is it?”

“Next month. Why?”

“Ah, Kim Suho says something will happen on that day. He told us to train and prepare.”

Chae Nayun sat on the corner of Shin Jonghak's bed as he stared at her.

“Kim Suho said that?”

“Yeah, should I contact him again?”

Chae Nayun closed her eyes and shook her body. *Brrr— Brrr— Brrr—* Her strange actions only seemed cute to Shin Jonghak.

“Haha.”

Shin Jonghak liked her for no particular reason. Just looking at her melted away the dark emotions in his heart. How could he not fall for

her?

“Chae Nayun.”

“*Huh?*”

She opened her eyes and stared at him. He decided to ask about what had been bothering him.

“What do you think about regressors?”

“Regressors?”

“Yeah.”

Chae Nayun slightly frowned. “Why are you suddenly asking about that?”

“Well, you’ve heard about my grandfather being a regressor, right?”

Honestly, he never wanted to admit that rumor. In his mind, it would diminish Shin Myungchul’s achievements and sacrifice.

“*Mmm...*”

Chae Nayun recalled what she heard from Yoo Yeonha, who once said Kim Hajin might be a regressor. Yoo Yeonha only speculated, but Chae Nayun still thought about the topic.

“*Mmm... well.*”

She casually replied, “I’m jealous. I also want to go back in time.”

“No, not that. *Haha.*”

Shin Jonghak laughed and shook his head. *It’s my fault for asking Chae Nayun.*

“What? Aren’t you jealous? I think it’s amazing if regressors exist. Think about it. It’s not like we’re in a novel. You would have to be incredibly lucky and powerful to go back in time.”

“...”

“At least, that’s what I think. Who cares if your grandfather is a regressor? Do people hate him because of that? No, everyone respects him. His name is written in every history book and his biography is a best-seller. Statues of him can be found everywhere. Why would you even worry?”

Shin Jonghak remained silent. He simply stared at Chae Nayun and couldn’t help but smile.

“Pft... *haa*,” he faintly sighed and muttered.

“This is why I love—”

“Oi.”

Someone appeared outside the window and cut off his confession.

“What?”

Chae Nayun quickly covered herself in qi reinforcement and Shin Jonghak grabbed his spear from the corner. Only after preparing themselves for battle did they confirm the intruder’s identity.

“How are ya?” Jin Sahyuk sat on the windowsill and stared at them.

“You wench... where do you think you are...”

Chae Nayun cursed and formed a sword with her magic power. Then Jin Sahyuk said something completely unexpected.

“Let’s join forces.”

“What?” They both stared dumbfoundedly at Jin Sahyuk.

“We need to stop a crazy bastard named Yi Yeonjun.” Jin Sahyuk continued with a stern face.

“*Hmph*, as if we’ll believe you!”

Chae Nayun shouted, but another figure leaped into the room and stopped her before she could release her magic power. Chae Nayun stared at the giant with a muscular body strong as steel.

“*Uhahaha*, it’s been a while, brat.”

The cheerful voice undoubtedly belonged to Cheok Jungyeong.

* * *

[Merchant Group – Lotus Flower’s Office]

We joined up with Yoo Yeonha and discussed the upcoming transnational peace conference.

“I don’t know what will happen exactly.”

Kim Suho said, but he felt certain a disaster would occur during the event.

“Can’t we just stop the conference?” Yi Jiyeon asked.

“No, it’s already too late to cancel. It took 3 years for all the nations to agree on a date. Canceling the conference would be no different from declaring war.”

Kim Suho had a good grasp of this world’s politics as a sword commander. I glanced at Rachel who sat next to me. She also stared at me and we both smiled.

“What are you two doing?” Yoo Yeonha caught us and glared. *Chak!* She suddenly clapped.

“You can greet each other later. Focus on the meeting. Kim Suho, are

Nayun and Jonghak ready?” Yoo Yeonha asked him.

“Let me ask. Hold on. This thing has a slight delay.”

Kim Suho closed his eyes and nodded after about 2 minutes.

“Yeah, they said they’re ready. *Hm?*”

He received another message and tilted his head.

“...”

Kim Suho’s expression suddenly froze.

“What? What happened?” Aileen urged him and Kim Suho clenched his teeth.

“Jin Sahyuk and Cheok Jungyeong are with Chae Nayun.”

* * *

[Harbor City, Thaines]

I returned to Thaines on a full moon night and returned to Shimurin’s mansion. Boss would be happy we found Cheok Jungyeong since she must be feeling lonely.

However, a surprising sight greeted me when I arrived at Shimurin’s workshop.

“Right, that’s how you use magic power. Your ability is excellent, but your connection with magic power isn’t delicate enough. It’s because you’re instinctively using your gift rather than magic power.”

Boss didn’t look lonely at all. She didn’t even look bored.

“Imagine putting magic power into your shadow. Magic isn’t anything special. You can transform it into any attribute you want. That’s what magic is.”

Shimurin seemed to be tutoring her and Boss' shadow no longer looked black. She had imbued an attribute into her shadow and it turned blue like ice.

"Boss?" I carefully called her. She had been eagerly training and turned around.

"Oh, you're here, Hajin."

"Y-Yes, I'm back," I replied in a daze. Shimurin also looked at me and blinked a few times. Then she rubbed her nose.

"Oh, you're back early. My dimensional magic isn't ready yet."

"Ah, well, I need to talk to you about something."

I slowly approached and stood next to Boss, who stared at me with her usual expressionless face.

"Boss, I—"

"Oh, Hajin." Boss cut me off and smiled.

"I found Jain."

"Jain? Great! I found Cheok Jungyeong."

"That's Jain."

"*Huh?*"

I tilted my head. *The Cheok Jungyeong I found turned out to be Jain?*

"Jain is pretending to be Cheok Jungyeong for now. You sent Gyeong to the Tower of Wish's 9th floor, remember?"

"Oh, right."

I finally realized what she meant. Indeed, I had sent Cheok Jungyeong to the 9th floor.

“Then you won’t be lonely once Jain comes.”

Boss frowned at my words. “What? Who said I was lonely?”

“*Pft.*”

“Don’t laugh.”

Boss scowled at me, but that didn’t scare me at all. I smiled like a kid and placed my hand on her shoulder.

“*Hmm.* You two...”

Shimurin looked back and forth between us.

“What’s your relationship?”

“*Huh?*” We tilted our heads at her sudden question.

“What’s your relationship? It doesn’t look like you’re just friends. Especially you.”

Shimurin pointed at Boss and asked again.

Boss didn’t reply and simply stared at me. She probably wanted to hear my answer. I smiled at her and turned to Shimurin.

“As I said, she’s my boss and... I like her a lot.”

I focused stigma’s magic power into my eyes and my vision expanded. I could see Boss blushing from the side.

“*Cough.*”

She acted all embarrassed, but I only found that cuter.

Chapter 328

Transnational Peace Conference

(3)

I bought ingredients for dinner at a grocery store near Shimurin's workshop. Then I made broiled beef and dumplings using 3 star Michelin recipes. The delicious smell wafted through the mansion and Shimurin, who initially claimed disinterest, also came to the table.

"What's this? What's that?"

She kept asking as she ate every dish. Eventually, she sat and we all ate together.

"*Mmm. Gulp.* I see."

Boss feared Shimurin would steal the food from her plate, so she hurriedly swallowed the last dumpling and nodded.

"Yes."

I just finished explaining about the transnational peace conference. I also told her about meeting Yoo Yeonha, Rachel, and the others. The last major event, Baal's descent, would take place at the conference.

"*Hmm...*"

Nom, nom. Boss pondered as she chewed a mouthful of dumplings. *Nom, nom.* She must be deeply contemplating. *Nom, nom.* Probably about Bell's true identity and his relationship with Yi Yeonjun and Baal...

Tak—

Shimurin suddenly set down her fork.

“Mmm...”

She turned to us and smiled.

“Your claim from another world seems to be true. You know about this world’s future and your magic power is different from ours.”

We silently stared at her. Neither of us felt surprised because we had already acknowledged Shimurin’s unimaginable intelligence. After all, a grand magician like her would equal someone like Oh Jaejin, a Nine Stars member and 10 star magician. I had used settings intervention to make pills that could cure his side effect, but he ran away with his wife. Of course, I couldn’t devalue everything he had done for humanity. Still, I felt somewhat disappointed about losing someone as knowledgeable as Shimurin.

“So how much time does this world have left? Is this world going to end soon?” Shimurin asked.

I hesitated before nodding. I wouldn’t be able to fool her even if I tried. It would be better to honestly ask for help.

“Yes, probably.”

“Probably? That’s a tricky word.”

Shimurin muttered as she rose from her chair.

“I said probably because it can be stopped,” I earnestly remarked.

Shimurin remained expressionless and coldly glared at me.

“It doesn’t matter to me anyways. Didn’t I tell you? My goal is to migrate to another world?”

“...”

My heart sank, but I couldn't say anything. This world had already fallen long ago and only existed as Baal's reconstruction. Dimensional travel would be impossible since this Shimurin could be considered a mere ghost.

"I see."

I didn't say much in the end.

Shimurin stared at me for a long time before returning to her basement.

* * *

[The Republic of Leores' Capital]

Seraine roamed the capital's streets the next day. She liked to study public sentiment up close as the president's daughter. No one recognized her disguise, so she confidently walked around. Men traveled in and out of tall brick buildings with women who wore antique coats. The city felt busy and vibrant as ever.

"Extra! Extra!"

She heard a boy shouting as he handed out newspapers. Seraine widened her eyes and had heard of this phenomenon before. Newspaper companies would sometimes print extra copies in the evening when a newsflash occurred. She felt amazed at seeing it for the first time.

"Find out the truth about the monster massacre from 3 days ago."

The boy shouted and only then did the passersby show interest. Seraine hesitated before grabbing a copy herself. She glanced at the front page and...

[Monster Massacre From 3 Days Ago – An F Rank Sharpshooter From The Lorenzo Duchy Saved The Day?]

"What the..."

Seraine widened her eyes and clenched her fists. The article spoke about Kim Hajin when she had gone through so much trouble to keep everything confidential. *How did they find out about Kim Hajin?*

[Three days ago, republic citizens witnessed an unforeseen phenomenon. The fifth largest monster pathway in history appeared in the capital city. However, hardly any damage occurred thanks to a mysterious hero. At around 8:37 P.M., a rush of magic power descended from the roof of Lady Seraine's mansion and wiped out all the monsters. Approximately 30,000 monsters had been annihilated in just 2 hours. President Zucri declared the pathway's complete subjugation at 11:29 P.M. However, he declined to comment about the mysterious hero. According to an anonymous source the next day...]

"Dammit!"

Seraine crumpled the newspaper, but everyone in the streets had already read the article.

— An F rank sharpshooter?

— Seriously? They're joking, right?

— This is interesting. I'm going to show it to my son.

The people murmuring bothered her. At this rate, it wouldn't be long until Arunheim heard about Kim Hajin. He successfully arrived with the Leon clan's daughter and they only had a month left until the transnational peace conference.

Bzzzz—

She felt a vibration in her pocket from her portable crystal for long-distance communication. Seraine quickly took out the crystal and picked up the call.

"Yes, it's me."

— Miss, we just received a message from Lorenzo. It's Airun. She claims to be in charge of the military unit Kim Hajin belongs to and

wishes to speak to her subordinate.

Seraine bit her lower lip. Of course, she knew Airun, the most famous knight in Kruni and one of the leading candidates for this era's strongest swordsman.

"Tell her we don't know."

— Pardon?

The transnational peace conference would be just around the corner, but Seraine didn't want to give up Kim Hajin. A man who could single-handedly stop a war. Kim Suho had described him as such.

Seraine felt skeptical at first until she witnessed Kim Hajin's power. Afterwards, she considered Kim Suho's assessment an understatement. He would be the ultimate weapon. A single man who could replace an army. She also learned about Kim Hajin's overwhelming power from Kim Suho. His strength came from his equipment. More specifically, his gun, a weapon Kim Hajin invented on his own. Arunheim wouldn't allow him to use such a weapon since the kingdom strictly regulated illegal weapons.

"Make up a credible excuse. Tell her he suddenly disappeared or he's already left for the kingdom."

How dare they label a man of such talent F rank? Now they wish to have him back? Talent like a jewel buried in mud only belongs to discerning eyes.

— Ah, yes. Okay.

"Please request for the correction of this news article and prepare a new ID."

Seraine said with a smile.

* * *

“Listen carefully.”

I found myself in the middle of an intense lecture in Shimurin’s basement. This lecture could be called, *How to Utilize Stigma’s Magic Power (by Grand Magician Shimurin)*.

“Indeed, your stigma is a mysterious power. It seems to be in touch with the end of the world.”

Shimurin muttered as she stared at stigma. “But you’re using it wrong.”

She flatly remarked and her expression stiffened.

“Pardon?”

Her words surprised me since I thought I’d been using it well until now.

“The way you use magic power is far from efficient. You use it without control like you’re borrowing it from the outside. You’re turning the water on from a faucet like the majority of people,” Shimurin explained.

Then she gathered magic power in her right hand. It clung together and formed a distinct ball that vibrated like an ultimate skill. Next, she gathered magic power in her left hand. However, her magic power appeared dimmer this time with no vibrations whatsoever.

“Observe the difference. Both contain the same magic power, but their shapes are different.”

“Mmm... Let me try.”

I gathered magic power in my hand like Shimurin. The amount should’ve been the same, but mine seemed faint and less distinct.

“Huh?”

This dumbfounded me since I'd been using stigma all this time. How could I be wrong? Wasn't stigma the power to make my wish come true?

"You're not completely wrong. This is just my way of doing it."

Shimurin noticed my confusion and continued with a smirk. "It'll take a while for you to understand. Most magicians and knights exert magic power, but I carefully assemble and place magic power."

Shimurin continued explaining and I decided to use *[Settings Intervention]* to accelerate my learning. I didn't need to take classes and learn something over time.

▷ Arts (3/3) 1. *[Parkour]* 2. *[Charming Voice]* 3. *[Spirit Power Technique]*

I deleted the second art, *[Charming Voice]*, and added a new one.

▷ Third Art (3/3) *[Shimurin's Teachings]* *[Calculating Rank... High-intermediate]*

The amount of SP required shouldn't be as much since Shimurin currently taught me.

[The original cost was 6,500 SP. However, you're currently learning this technique from Shimurin.] [The required cost has been reduced to 3,500 SP. Would you like to save?]

I expected less, but fortunately had 3,546 SP. I'd been earning SP even inside the gate and had just barely enough.

[Saving Arts.] [Your luck has activated!] [Shimurin's Teachings has increased to high rank!]

The knowledge, experience, practice, function, and ideas all flowed into my head and body.

"Do you understand? It will take at least 10 minutes per spell if a typical magician wishes to use magic through the process of assembly.

However, with my efficient assembly skill—”

“I think I get it.” I confidently declared even though Shimurin hadn’t finished.

“What?” She frowned.

“Who do you think you are?”

“*Huhu.*”

I smiled and assembled stigma in my body and released it outward according to Shimurin’s teachings. *Guooo...* I used the same amount of magic power as before, but it looked flawless now and violently resonated like an earthquake. Shimurin’s expression stiffened.

“What?”

“How’s that?”

“...”

She became speechless and couldn’t take her eyes off my ball of magic power. It shocked her beyond belief.

“I learned something new. Thanks.”

I sincerely bowed and had never thought of assembling stigma in my body. They called Shimurin the grand magician for a reason.

Tok tok—

Someone knocked and I opened the basement door because Shimurin had frozen like a statue.

“Who... *huh?*”

The familiar faces greeted me. The Leon clan’s Harin arrived with Seraine, the daughter of the republic’s president.

“Have you been well?”

Harin spoke first and I could tell things had gone well from her relaxed smile.

“I have. Are you done with your verification procedures?”

“Yes, it went well. Harin will be staying here in the republic.”

Seraine answered and showed me an ID card.

[Citizen – Seyeon]

“This is Harin’s new identity.”

“Ah, I see.”

“And this...”

Seraine took out another card.

“Your new identity, Hajin.”

I tilted my head and looked closely at the ID.

[Head of Presidential Security Service – Heiji]

“Heiji?”

“It’s your new name if you want to stay in the republic—”

“No, not that.”

Head of Presidential Security Service? My initial status in this world used to be an F rank sharpshooter.

“The head?”

“Yes, that’s your new position. Don’t you think you should be in a position of power to get things properly done?”

Seraine smiled at my dumbfounded face.

“Please stay in the republic. I promise you 10 times, no, 100 times the treatment you received in Arunheim.”

Her smile looked too much like Yoo Yeonha’s.

* * *

[Transnational Peace Conference D-25]

The burning afternoon sun shone down on the Priton mansion’s backyard. Jin Sahyuk poured a bucket of cold water on Shin Jonghak, who had collapsed after their duel.

“*Uhohuh!*” Shin Jonghak sprang up with a strange scream.

“What the hell is wrong with you? Do you want to die?”

“You’re the one who said losers don’t get to complain.”

Jin Sahyuk simply smiled despite his threat.

“...”

Shin Jonghak lay back on the ground without a word. He had lost to her.

“Have you thought about it?” she glanced at him and asked.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk had proposed a plan a few days ago, but he hadn’t answered yet.

“We don’t have much time. Everything will be over in 3 weeks.”

“Three weeks is a long time.”

Jin Sahyuk frowned at his nonchalant answer. “Loser.”

“Asshole.”

“Why are you acting so childish?” She scowled at him and from the far corner of Priton’s backyard...

“Hey!”

The reason for Shin Jonghak’s childishness appeared.

“Fight me! I got all my equipment back. You’re so dead!”

Chae Nayun appeared with a longsword.

Chapter 329

Transnational Peace Conference (4)

[Transnational Peace Conference D-24]

I visited the president's residence at the heart of the capital. To be exact, I arrived at the president's secret service institute. It looked neat and imposing. The director's office featured a suit hanging in the closet, a teakwood desk, and a luxurious black chair.

"Hmm..."

I ended up becoming the head of the presidential secret service. I sat in the chair and it felt quite comfortable. Then I picked up the nameplate on the desk that read, *[Director of the Secret Service – Heiji]*. It felt quite heavy.

"Hmm..."

Seraine told me I had to protect the republic's core members, which included the president and other high ranking officials. That shouldn't be too difficult now that I had recovered my stats.

— You're at work?

A voice rang out from the desk and I stared in shock at it. The crystal ball on a miniature pedestal shook.

"Ah, yes. I am."

— Great. Your job as the director is simple. All you have to do is protect me and my father during the upcoming transnational peace conference. Oh, and also the other high ranking officials.

I stood still for a moment without replying. I didn't know if I could annihilate Baal, the strongest devil, if he descended that day.

— Your subordinate will arrive soon. The secret service is something we quickly formed, so it doesn't have many employees.

Tok, tok— Someone knocked on the door.

— *Ah*, that person must be here. Please take care.

The crystal ball stopped shaking and Seraine's voice disappeared.

Tok, tok—

The knocking continued and I opened the door.

"Hmm?"

An unexpected face appeared.

"Hello."

She had a beautiful smile and her blue eyes shone like jewels.

"My name is Rachel."

The elemental swordswoman, Rachel, became my first subordinate.

* * *

[Transnational Peace Conference D-23]

I went out on a business trip with Rachel to inspect the Plaza of Glory where the transnational peace conference would take place.

"The plaza is spacious, but I hear the conference will take place in that small temple."

I nodded at Rachel's explanation.

The Plaza of Glory resided in the republic's capital. It would be difficult to protect a large group in this open space, so the international summit would take place in the small temple at the plaza's corner. Spotting any threats should be easy from the high ground in the plaza's center.

"The problem is we only have one enemy."

We already knew our enemy, the strongest rank 1 devil, Baal.

"I'm sure we can win." Rachel encouraged me with a smile.

"Well, we can only hope."

As I smiled back...

Jiing—

I felt a strange gaze and tracked its source. My thousand-mile eyes easily spotted the person glaring at me.

"What..."

My thoughts briefly froze when I recognized the culprit. Yi Byul hid behind a wall and glared at me. *Had she been following me this entire time?*

"Hajin? What's wrong?"

"Uh... nothing. Let's go."

I walked through the plaza with Rachel and checked on Boss at the same time. She continued following us while hiding her presence.

"I'm a bit worried. I hope she's doing well."

Rachel mentioned Evandel and I bitterly smiled.

“I’m sure she’s fine. She has Hayang and Ah Hae-In.”

Spartan should be playing with her as well. I trusted all of them.

“Yes, I think she’ll be cheerful as always. After all, she takes after me,” Rachel proudly declared.

“You’re right.”

I stared at Rachel and laughed. Then I recalled something.

“Oh right, what happened to Lancaster?”

“*Huh? Ah...* I’m not sure.”

“Do you think he followed you all the way here?”

I jokingly asked and Rachel also laughed.

“*Haha*, what if he really did? Lancaster might...”

Rachel light-heartedly replied, but a chill went down my back the more I thought about it. It wouldn’t be a laughing matter if Lancaster actually followed her here.

“Well, there’s no use worrying about what ifs.”

Honestly, I worried more about Boss who kept following us. Her gaze carried more and more killing intent as time passed.

“Should we head back now?”

“Back?”

“There isn’t much to inspect and I need to do something else.”

Rachel briefly stared at me before smiling like she knew what I meant.

“Ah, I understand. Then let’s do that. See you later.”

Rachel spun back. *Ssk*— The nearby trees shook as if reacting to her movements and a flower fell on her shoulder.

“See you tomorrow.”

I assembled stigma’s magic power according to Shimurin’s teachings and planned to teleport behind Boss.

Woong—

My feet seemed to float and my surroundings instantly shifted.

“Where did he go?”

Boss peeked out like a meerkat and stared at the spot where I disappeared. I placed my hand on her shoulder.

“...!”

She turned around in shock. “What...”

Her eyes widened when she saw me and I simply grinned.

“What are you doing here?”

“Uh... nothing.”

Boss brushed her hair back and coughed as I stared at her. She wore casual clothes instead of her usual robe. Honestly, she looked even more beautiful today.

“Nothing much... just...”

“Just?” I faintly smiled and grabbed her hand.

“Well, why don’t we go for a walk if you’re not busy?”

I wanted to openly stroll around the beautiful plaza with her.

* * *

[Transnational Peace Conference D-16]

“I won!”

Chae Nayun’s voice rang out in the Priton mansion’s backyard. Shin Jonghak and Jin Sahyuk lay on the ground next to her. Shin Jonghak had already fainted and the surrounding area revealed the traces of a fierce battle.

“*Whew...* I’m exhausted.”

Chae Nayun staggered until she plopped on the ground. Jin Sahyuk turned to the side and stared at her.

“Aren’t you embarrassed?”

Chae Nayun flinched before facing Jin Sahyuk. She certainly won against Jin Sahyuk, but had teamed up with Shin Jonghak. Right, they had fought a 2 vs. 1 battle.

“...”

Chae Nayun dodged her gaze without replying.

“*Pft.*” Jin Sahyuk smirked and raised her body.

“*Eh?* You can still stand? I thought you were out!”

Chae Nayun didn’t know that Jin Sahyuk’s authority gave her an insane recovery rate.

“I’m different from you.”

“*Ha*, there goes your annoying attitude again. Just wait. I’ll be ready in 3 minutes—”

Jin Sahyuk ignored her and left for the mansion.

“Shall I prepare your meal?”

A maid greeted her.

“No, it’s fine.”

She became Shin Jonghak’s guest and walked up the stairs to her room on the 4th floor.

Kiik—

After she opened the door...

“...?”

An unexpected guest wearing a robe stood in her room. He carried a sword on his waist that looked even taller than himself.

“Kim Suho.”

Jin Sahyuk smiled and Kim Suho took off his robe with a stiff expression. The tension broke when she spoke.

“You’re finally here.”

“You knew I’d come?”

“Of course.”

Kim Suho raised his eyebrows at her confidence. “I came to hear your plan.”

“Oh? That’s a surprise. You’re going to trust me?”

“I know you’re not a liar.”

This time, Jin Sahyuk's stiff expression changed and the corner of her mouth twisted up.

"Right, right. I don't lie, but..."

Jin Sahyuk glanced behind him, but that person didn't show up.

"Kim Hajin's not here?"

"Hajin? I didn't think I needed to bring him."

"*Tsk*, useless."

She clicked her tongue and pushed Kim Suho aside. Then she sat on her bed as he glared at her and spoke imposingly.

"Tell me what you know and what you're planning to—"

"We have 16 days left until Baal's descent."

Jin Sahyuk interrupted him with a serious face.

"Before then, you need to kill Yi Yeonjun."

* * *

Jin Sahyuk lay in bed and stared at the ceiling after Kim Suho left. It had already turned dark outside and a cool breeze entered the room through the window.

"It's almost time."

She murmured as the night made her more emotional.

"The return to my beloved home. The ending I strived for my entire life. Soon, my life's purpose will be fulfilled."

"What do you mean?"

Another voice rang out and she couldn't find its source. She even wondered if the voice came from her heart.

“...?”

That couldn't be the case and she blankly raised her head.

“I'm going to ask again.”

A man suddenly stood next to her bed and Jin Sahyuk smiled when she saw him.

“It's you.”

He wore a black robe inscribed with a lotus flower and a mask that fully covered his face. Still, Jin Sahyuk knew him well.

“You told Kim Suho we had to kill Yi Yeonjun.”

Most knew him as the infamous Black Lotus, but his real name was Kim Hajin.

“Explain to me in detail.”

Jin Sahyuk felt quite happy perhaps because she hadn't seen him in a while. She wanted to keep staring into his eyes.

“Hey.”

“...”

“How long have you been watching me?”

Kim Hajin didn't answer. He secretly followed Kim Suho and watched them the entire time.

“Since a while ago.”

As Kim Hajin spoke...

— HEY!

Kwang!

Someone shouted and Jin Sahyuk's door burst open. Chae Nayun stomped in from the other side.

"Is it true that Kim Suho came and..."

Chae Nayun couldn't finish her sentence after noticing the robed man in Jin Sahyuk's room.

"Uh..."

Her eyes naturally went to the lotus symbol on his robe. *A jet-black robe with a lotus symbol.*

"...!"

Chae Nayun slightly jumped after her sudden realization.

"Who's..."

Every hero and djinn knew Black Lotus by now. Some worshipped him as an idol and others despised him. Some called him the world's strongest and others criticized him as the world's worst criminal. He became an anti-hero and a villain.

Chae Nayun's eyes widened to their limits after seeing Black Lotus up close.

"..."

On the other hand, Kim Hajin became drenched in cold sweat under his robe. His thoughts temporarily stopped, but he quickly regained his calm. Even Chae Nayun's incredible intuition shouldn't be able to figure out his identity. After all, he specifically designed the *[Black*

Lotus Uniform] with Young Dwarf's Dexterity to hide his identity.

"*Puhaha.*"

Jin Sahyuk burst into laughter as Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin stood in a daze.

"Looks like even an idiot knows who you are."

"Idiot?"

Chae Nayun scowled and Jin Sahyuk grabbed Kim Hajin by the collar.

"Let me introduce him. He's my friend, Black Lotus."

Chapter 330

Ten Days (1)

“Let me introduce him. He’s my friend, Black Lotus.”

Jin Sahyuk grabbed Black Lotus by the collar and he sharply glared at her. Meanwhile, Chae Nayun looked back and forth between them.

“Black Lotus?”

She muttered as Kim Hajin remained silent. He had deleted the art that allowed him to change his voice, so he feared she might discover something if he spoke. Chae Nayun stared at Black Lotus and asked in a stern voice.

“Oi, why did you invite a thief?”

“Hm?” Jin Sahyuk tilted her head.

“What thief? Isn’t he a legend to you?”

“Legend my ass. Now that I think about it, you must also be with the Chameleon Troupe! Like that Cheok Jungyeong bastard...”

Jin Sahyuk smirked at Chae Nayun’s aggressive tone.

“Think what you want.”

She let go of Black Lotus’ collar and he promptly stepped back.

“Alright, well I have something to discuss with Lotus.”

Jin Sahyuk shooed Chae Nayun away.

“Go ahead.”

Surprisingly, Chae Nayun left without any issues. *Kwang!* She purposely slammed the door shut, but obviously intended to eavesdrop. After all, a mere wall couldn’t stop her sharp hearing.

“Now then...”

Jin Sahyuk must’ve noticed Chae Nayun’s intentions too, but mischievously smiled and continued.

“Are you going to kill Yi Yeonjun?”

“...”

Kim Hajin didn’t answer and Jin Sahyuk glanced at the door.

“Yi Yeonjun is trying to become Baal’s new incarnation, but it’s obvious what will happen if that crazy bastard returns to Earth. He’s far more evil than Bell.”

She didn’t know a more evil human being than Yi Yeonjun. The very root of his existence consisted of pure evil and she knew about his current infatuation with Baal.

“So Lotus, are you going to kill Yi Yeonjun? Or...”

She paused and her lips twisted up.

“Will you let Kim Hajin kill him?”

“...”

Brrrrr. They both felt someone’s presence outside the room. Jin Sahyuk glanced at the door again and continued.

“You should know what this means. It doesn’t matter who kills Yi Yeonjun, but one of you must do it.”

Jin Sahyuk meant to say, *Kill Yi Yeonjun yourself.*

“If I were to guess, I’d say Kim Hajin will be the one to kill him.”

Jin Sahyuk snickered and released her magic power. It slowly wrapped around Kim Hajin, but it didn’t carry any hostility so he stayed still. She opened her mouth again.

“If you look at it from a bigger picture, it’s Yi Yeonjun’s fault that Kim Hajin had to kill Chae Jinyoon.”

“What?”

Kim Hajin couldn’t ignore this nonsensical comment and his eyes immediately widened in shock.

“Like I said, if you look at the bigger picture.”

Jin Sahyuk mischievously spoke, but their conversation ended there as Chae Nayun burst into the room again.

Kwang!

She glared at them with a shocked expression.

“Hey! What did you mean by—”

Kim Hajin couldn’t hear the rest of her sentence.

Woong...

Jin Sahyuk activated her Reality Manipulation and a brilliant light shot out. *Chwaaaa—*

He briefly closed his eyes before opening them again and found himself in the middle of a forest.

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk had teleported him far away from Chae Nayun.

* * *

[Seoul, Korea]

Large-scale calamities continued after the demon realm gate opened.

First, the demon realm transformation accelerated. Previously, it only affected Manchu and the Ural Mountain Range. Now, it had spread to Central Asia, Eastern Europe, and Northern Europe. Over 20% of Earth had become corrupted.

Of course, humanity didn't just sit around and wait. Researchers around the world discovered that mana stones could delay the progress. Next, Essential Dynamics succeeded in creating more mana stones with the power of *[Dimensional Entropy]*. As a result, the rate of demon realm transformation noticeably diminished.

However, another problem arose due to djinns and demons. Demons took over the land after Pandemonium partially transformed. The djinns that had been chased out caused chaos in human society.

The politically moderate argued that djinns served different devils and some non-hostile djinns served non-hostile devils. They encouraged distinction between evil and non-evil djinns, but their opponents argued that djinns would fundamentally commit evil and belonged in prison.

The political climate became charged with chaos and anger.

[Tower of Heroes, Hero Association Headquarters]

“...”

“...”

Two noble guests, Chae Joochul and Heynckes, stared at each other. Chae Joochul looked expressionless as always while Heynckes shrugged as if he had nothing more to say.

“Are you finished?”

A gentle voice flowed into their ears. They both turned towards the voice that belonged to a woman who had died once, but now returned.

“I can leave then, right?”

The first descender, Medea, didn’t cower at all in front of Earth’s strongest. She treated them like children and laughed at their actions.

“What kind of life do you plan on leading from now on?”

Chae Joochul stopped her and asked. Medea stared at him like a cute puppy and touched her lips with her finger.

“Let me think... Since I’m the first descender...”

Medea liked the title. Athena, Lü Bu, and the others continued looking for ways to descend, but she knew they wouldn’t return any time soon.

“I’m going to live beautifully. I heard Seoul is the richest and most powerful city, so I’m going to build a huge mansion there. I’ll have my workshop in the basement and about a hundred servants.”

“...”

“...”

Chae Joochul and Heynckes exchanged glances again. The lifestyle she wished for seemed too simple for someone called a witch. Heynckes opened his mouth after their brief exchange.

“We can do that much for you, but—”

“By the way, when will the two of you stop speaking to me so casually? I’m thousands of years older, you know?”

Medea frowned and Heynckes nodded with an annoyed expression.

“We can grant you that, but will you help us in return?”

Heynckes didn't argue and politely spoke. A smile immediately bloomed on Medea's face.

“You're saying the same thing as that man.”

Heynckes furrowed his brows. “That man?”

“Ah, you don't need to know. He's far more delicate and valuable than you two.”

“...”

Even Chae Joochul slightly frowned at those words. Neither he nor Heynckes could think of anyone who fitted that description.

“Well, anyways...” Medea smirked.

“Don't worry about that. I don't want the world I'm going to live in to be dirty either.”

She spun around and flapped her ceremonial dress. This heavenly dress crafted by Kim Hajin had reached the peak of perfection.

“My true name is Medea. I shall lend you my strength as an ancient demigod and sorceress.”

The magic power she suppressed immediately rose from her body and swirled inside the room.

“...”

“...”

Chae Joochul and Heynckes stared at each other again.

Looks like things worked out, friend.

Heynckes said with his eyes.

Indeed.

Chae Joochul silently replied in the same manner.

* * *

[Transnational Peace Conference D-10]

We only had 10 days left until the transnational peace conference. I looked out the window of the director's office and sighed. Birds flew in the clear, blue sky. Everything seemed so peaceful.

"Haa..."

However, my mind felt far from peaceful. I recovered my strength and reclaimed my equipment, including the god-slashing bullet, yet my worries persisted. What Jin Sahyuk said lingered on my mind.

— If you look at it from a bigger picture, it's Yi Yeonjun's fault that Kim Hajin had to kill Chae Jinyoon.

What did she mean? Did she just try to provoke me or Chae Nayun?
Perhaps she heard something from Bell.

I found out about Yi Yeonjun's relationship with Boss thanks to Yoo Jinhyuk, but I still didn't know much about him.

What could Chae Nayun be thinking right now? What could she have talked about with Jin Sahyuk after I left?

I felt curious, but Chae Nayun had cut off communications with me.

"Is something on your mind?"

Harin suddenly asked. I turned and glanced at her. She joined the

secret service 4 days ago under the fake name, Yurin.

“No, it’s nothing. What about you? Are you feeling better?”

“Yes, except that I still can’t get used to my name.”

Harin laughed out loud. I bitterly smiled and nodded.

“The transnational peace conference will be in 10 days, but don’t worry too much.”

She tried to calm me. Honestly, I felt relieved having a real devil hunter on our side. Unlike me, she inherited the lineage of exorcists. She would surely be a valuable asset in fighting Baal.

“I’ll leave it to you, Harin.”

“*Mmm*, but I still can’t believe you’re my superior now. You used to be the one protecting me.”

“You can talk casually if you want.”

“No, no, it’s fine. I’m not nobility anymore. I’m more comfortable the way things are.”

Harin smiled as if she found peace in her heart.

Tok, tok.

Someone knocked on the door.

“*Hm?* Is it Rachel?” I tilted my head and opened the door.

“Rachel?”

I didn’t expect the guests on the other side.

“*Haha...* It’s been a while, Hajin.”

A woman awkwardly scratched her head and laughed.

“It really has been! Wow!”

A muscular man also tried to hug me with a wide grin.

Yun Seung-Ah and Yi Yeonghan came to visit.

“What?”

I blankly stared at them and Yun Seung-Ah explained.

“We ended up in the Krovon Kingdom below the Republic of Leores. We heard from Suho that you were here and came to visit.”

“Ah, I see.”

I nodded in a daze and Yi Yeonghan smacked my arm.

“Oh yeah, someone else came with us.”

“Hm?”

“Hey, get over here!”

Yi Yeonghan shouted and a large man walked out from behind the wall. I couldn't help but smile when I saw him.

“I didn't expect to see you here.”

We had a mild conflict back in Cube. To be exact, I one-sidedly beat him up and left early.

“Cough... H-Hey, it's... been a while.”

I felt somewhat touched after such a long time. He used to be Shin Jonghak's lackey, Kim Horak.

“Yeah, it has.”

I grinned and reached out. He flinched, but smiled in embarrassment and took my hand.

“I’m glad to see you.”

“We haven’t seen each other since Cube, right?”

“Y... Yeah.”

I shook hands with Kim Horak. As expected of a close-quarter fighter, his hand felt full of calluses.

“You have a lot of friends.”

Harin approached us with a bright smile.

“Nice to meet you. My name is Yurin, the third most influential person in the secret service.”

“Pardon? *Ah*, yes, hello. I’m Yun Seung-Ah.”

“Yun Seung-Ah! What a pretty name. What about you?”

“I’m Yi Yeonghan.”

“*Ah*, Yi Yeonghan.”

Harin warmly greeted them like a true extrovert.

Chapter 331

Ten Days (2)

I contacted Kim Suho and asked about the sudden arrivals. He decided to send over the people from Earth to me.

The secret service now had 7 members: Harin, Aileen, Rachel, Yi Yeonghan, Kim Horak, Yun Seung-Ah, and me.

“Really.”

Aileen murmured with her legs crossed in my office. She used to be Kim Suho’s maid, but had been promoted to the secret service’s manager. The newly created institution made such things quite convenient.

“Yes, we need to work together to defeat Baal.”

Rachel summarized the plan once more.

“There’s something else too.” I wanted to add one more goal to our mission.

“Something else?”

They all turned towards me and I showed them a portrait.

“This person.”

I made this portrait using the Book of Truth. Aileen and Yun Seung-Ah recognized him and raised their eyebrows. The other five only curiously tilted their heads.

“Who is... this?”

Rachel asked, but Aileen answered instead.

“He should be the Chameleon Troupe’s former boss when the group wasn’t well-known yet. He’s a criminal on the Hero Association’s blacklist. From what I recall, he was the first person on the blacklist as a single entity. It’s a lot different now with Wicked and the other Nine Evils.”

Aileen leaned against her chair.

“Blacklist?” Yi Yeonghan asked somewhat nervously. The association’s blacklist only included the most heinous villains and djinns. Rumors stated that one had to be at least master rank to kill a blacklisted target. Some even said a high rank hero could only receive master rank after killing a blacklisted target.

“Yep, the Chameleon Troupe used to be much more vicious. They abducted and sold people, took on assassinations practically every week... *Yaawn*.”

Aileen stretched her arms and continued.

“They aren’t that vicious anymore even though they’re still considered thieves. They reject unnecessary murder now and even got themselves off the association’s wanted list after helping with the Orden incident. The Chameleon Troupe changed so much because...”

Aileen paused and held up the portrait.

“This man isn’t their leader anymore. He died a long time ago and the Chameleon Troupe changed under a new leader.”

Yun Seung-Ah nodded as Aileen tapped on the portrait.

“We can’t find him even if we want to since he’s dead.”

“She’s right, Hajin.”

I chuckled. Everyone who knew about the Chameleon Troupe would agree with Aileen and Yun Seung-Ah.

“No, this man is still alive.”

I firmly spoke and had confirmed it with my own eyes. According to Jin Sahyuk, he had been frozen all this time.

“His name is Yi Yeonjun.”

I pointed at the portrait and continued.

“He faked his death and is now in this place. He should be in the Arunheim Kingdom, but he’ll eventually come to the republic.”

“What?” Aileen and Yun Seung-Ah turned serious.

“We have to kill Yi Yeonjun before Baal’s descent.”

“No, wait. I don’t understand. How can he be—”

“You’ll understand later. For now, we have to get ready.”

I left behind the shocked Aileen and turned to Harin. She had no clue about our conversation and took down some notes.

“Yurin?”

“*H-Huh? Ah, yes.*”

Harin paused and looked at me. I smiled and made a request of her.

“Please teach us how to hunt a devil.”

* * *

[Arunheim Kingdom – Guest Room]

The stars seemed like they would fall from the night sky. Jin Sahyuk came to see Yi Yeonjun on this cold, winter night. She asked to speak and Yi Yeonjun happily obliged.

The two of them sat across each other at a table on the guest room balcony. They exchanged cold glances and neither revealed a hint of weakness.

“Let me ask you one thing.” Jin Sahyuk began the conversation.

“It can be more if you’d like,” Yi Yeonjun replied with a smile.

“Why do you want to be with Baal?”

She asked without the slightest change in her expression.

“*Hm?* Isn’t that question a little—”

“All Baal can do is destroy Earth. You won’t obtain anything if Earth is destroyed. You also won’t be able to form an equal relationship like Bell since you’re not the true incarnation body. You’ll only end up as Baal’s slave.”

Bell had lived for hundreds of years as Baal’s incarnation. He couldn’t die, so he continued to resist Baal. Perhaps Bell might even return to being human once Baal descended.

That wouldn’t be the case for Yi Yeonjun. He would simply become a slave and rampage until death.

“It doesn’t matter,” Yi Yeonjun nonchalantly replied.

“Why?” Jin Sahyuk asked.

“*Mm...* Who knows?”

Yi Yeonjun thought about the environment he grew up in and the events that shaped his personality.

A baby who became an orphan. A child that the adults only used. A youth who grew vicious for strength.

The world had always been a target for his anger and resentment.

“It will be destroyed even without me, so I want to destroy it myself.”

“Pft, what a petty answer.”

“Isn’t it? I fully agree.”

Yi Yeonjun honestly replied to Jin Sahyuk’s snarky comment.

Memories flashed in his mind. The violence and abuse he suffered at the orphanage. His friend and lover’s betrayals. When he killed the two individuals who abandoned him with his own hands. The days of his youth when he constantly told himself, *It’s this damned world that made me this way.*

“You realize how stupid that is, right?”

Yi Yeonjun chuckled at her question.

“Of course, I do. However...”

Yi Yeonjun paused and recalled what used to be his: the Chameleon Troupe, Bell and Rumi, Byul and Jain. The days he spent with them could be considered fond memories, but those days belonged in the past.

“However...”

Yi Yeonjun clenched his teeth. Those memories had lost their light. Byul had inherited the Chameleon Troupe and someone he didn’t know had ruined her.

“I have nothing left.”

He didn’t fear death or being forgotten.

“I have no choice but to destroy it all.”

He couldn’t accept his belongings being stolen.

“You’re insane.”

Jin Sahyuk laughed. Yi Yeonjun only glared at her and continued.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with you. I promised I’d open a dimensional portal to Akatrina. That promise will stand even if I become Baal.”

Yi Yeonjun calmly stared at her and smirked.

“Becoming one with Baal in an endless loop of destruction and death. That seems like a wonderful end to this pitiful life.”

Jin Sahyuk thought Yi Yeonjun resembled herself. To be exact, her past self before she met Kim Hajin.

A bitter taste lingered in her mouth.

“Let’s stop here.”

She sighed and rose from her seat.

* * *

[Arunheim Kingdom, Priton Mansion]

Chae Nayun racked her brains with Shin Jonghak.

“For whatever reason, Kim Hajin and Black Lotus are fighting,” she explained.

Shin Jonghak frowned and tilted his head. “Kim Hajin is fighting Black Lotus?”

“Well, something like that. They’re both competing to kill Yi Yeonjun or something.”

She demanded more details, but Jin Sahyuk remained silent regarding Kim Hajin and Black Lotus’ relationship.

However, Jin Sahyuk did say she would honestly tell her if Chae Nayun managed to win in a one-on-one fight.

Chae Nayun couldn't defeat Jin Sahyuk yet. Most likely, she wouldn't be able to until after the transnational peace conference. As Shin Jonghak said, she had the worst match-up against Jin Sahyuk.

"Yi Yeonjun?" Shin Jonghak asked again.

"Yeah, Kim Hajin is trying to kill Yi Yeonjun. As for why..."

— If you look at it from a bigger picture, it's Yi Yeonjun's fault that Kim Hajin had to kill Chae Jinyoon.

Jin Sahyuk's voice lingered on her mind and Chae Nayun clenched her teeth.

"It might be related to oppa."

Shin Jonghak didn't say anything and simply nodded. He knew how sensitive Chae Nayun felt about Chae Jinyoon.

"Anyways!"

Chak! Chae Nayun suddenly clapped.

"I thought we should brainstorm together."

"Brainstorm what?" He scratched his head.

"You know, let's come up with theories on how Kim Hajin, Black Lotus, and Yi Yeonjun are all related. Why is Black Lotus trying to kill the former leader of his group and why is Kim Hajin trying to kill Yi Yeonjun."

Chae Nayun placed a notebook on the table filled with ideas.

"Let's go. We can solve anything if we rack our brains together."

“If you say so.”

“Great. Let’s begin!”

Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak contemplated together. Several theories flew around. As a result...

“N-Nayun, the person who planted the devil’s seed into your older brother... What if that was Yi Yeonjun?”

Shin Jonghak arrived at a shocking hypothesis.

“...!”

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened like a frightened rabbit.

* * *

[Transnational Peace Conference D-7]

Only a week remained until the transnational peace conference.

The republic brightened up at night with artificial nights. Countless came to the republic to watch or participate.

— Can you see them, director?

I oversaw the security operations for this conference as the secret service director. Currently, I kept an eye out for terrorists from the watchtower in the middle of Leores Plaza.

“Yeah. Kim Horak, I see a suspicious individual wearing a black hat to the northwest of where you’re standing. He has bombs on him too.”

— Understood.

Kim Horak followed my command and quickly subdued the terrorist.

I realized why Shin Jonghak liked to order him around after he perfectly followed my instructions.

— Here, take him away.

Kim Horak handed the man over to the other security forces that arrived.

“Good job. Looks like there’s nothing else to worry about within a 3 kilometer radius. We can rest...”

I suddenly spotted someone while speaking through the crystal ball.

“Wait, attention.”

My thousand-mile eyes easily penetrated the individual’s grey robe. As expected, Yi Yeonjun had arrived.

Found him.

I smiled in satisfaction, but my expression stiffened once again.

— Director? What happened?

— *Oi*, director?

“...”

I couldn’t tell them that I found Yi Yeonjun because I also spotted Boss with Shimurin a short distance away.

Chapter 332

Ten Days (3)

“I...”

I studied the situation from the watchtower. Boss and Shimurin munched on snacks from a street stall as Yi Yeonjun wandered nearby. Not causing a commotion seemed like the best choice.

“I found Yi Yeonjun.”

— What? Really?!

Aileen’s surprised voice rang out from the crystal ball.

“Yes, but we need to act with restraint. I’ll keep an eye on him for now.”

I would never let Yi Yeonjun meet Boss. At least, not until I killed him.

— The plaza is filled with people right now. Can you keep tracking him, Hajin?

Yun Seung-Ah asked.

“Don’t worry about that.”

I answered and slowly released my spirit power. My ability to wield spirit power returned along with my stats. I should be able to use *[Miracle Creation]*, the ability engraved in my spirit power as the original author.

*[Observer] [Summary – Will summon a small bird to monitor a target]
[Activation Condition – User must directly call the observer.]
[Consumption – 1% of Kim Hajin’s spirit power per 24 hours.] [Effect –*

The observer can conceal itself while watching the target. It can also share its vision with Kim Hajin.]

I created a miracle with my spirit power. I didn't have Spartan, so I needed a replacement.

"Observer."

Spirit power leaked from my body when I called its name and formed a small bird that smiled at me.

— *Coo.*

The cute fuzzball resembled a Korean crow tit. I strengthened it with *[Random Consolidation System]* and set its target to Yi Yeonjun.

"Fly."

— *Coo.*

The observer left my hands and flew into the sky. I closed my eyes and shared its vision. It began tracking Yi Yeonjun.

"It's all under control for now."

— I don't know what that means, but fine. Just to be sure, Yi Yeonjun is really alive?

Aileen's high-pitched voice rang out from the crystal ball.

"Yes, he is. Don't you believe me?"

I replied with a bitter smile.

— Of course, I believe you. It's just that... *Sigh*, fine, fine. *Huh?* No, I ordered a chicken kebab. No, not spicy...

Tk. The communication cut off as Aileen busily ate street food.

“Pft.”

I chuckled and returned to observing Yi Yeonjun. However, my face went stiff when I saw what happened next.

—...

Boss stared in a daze with a kebab in her hand. She looked at a spot 500 meters away where Yi Yeonjun stood. Yi Yeonjun had his back towards her and Boss shouldn't be able to recognize him with his grey robe.

I quickly took out the crystal ball and contacted Boss.

“Boss.”

I called her and she briefly flinched before taking out her crystal ball.

“Boss, where are you right now?”

— Me? I'm...

Boss looked around and continued.

— In front of a street vendor.

“Have you spotted anything strange?”

— No, nothing. What about you? Are things going well?

“Yes, of course.”

I dragged out the conversation until Yi Yeonjun grew farther away. Thankfully, he didn't see Boss and left somewhere else. I sighed in relief.

“Boss.”

— *Hm?*

“I think you should go home for today. Aileen is near you. Also, contact Jain for me.”

I heard Jain became a general for the Arunheim Kingdom.

— Sure, what do you need?

Boss replied, but her complexion remained dark. The grey-robed figure must’ve bothered her.

“Ask her when she’ll arrive in the republic. You should go home for now.”

Boss hesitated and looked around, but Yi Yeonjun had already disappeared. She had no choice but to agree.

— Got it.

* * *

[Sword Commander’s Office]

Meanwhile, Kim Suho met with Yoo Yeonha regarding Baal.

“We’ve recovered our strength for the most part, but Baal’s strength is on another level,” Yoo Yeonha seriously spoke.

“We have no way of confirming the stories about Baal. According to Jin Sahyuk, he destroyed the world he descended upon in just 4 days.”

“Yeah.”

Kim Suho solemnly nodded. An evil god who could destroy the world in 4 days felt shocking, but they couldn’t just sit around and do nothing. Baal would undoubtedly descend on Earth if they didn’t stop him here.

“I started looking into items historically used for exorcisms. I figured we would need these powerful artifacts against such a foe.”

Yoo Yeonha took out a catalog from her desk. It listed ancient artifacts for exorcisms that she found through her merchant group’s connections. Kim Suho glanced at the pictures of a sword, bow, spear, talisman, fan, and others.

“Contact the president’s daughter and ask if she can find any of these.”

“You mean Seraine?”

“Yes, I would buy them myself if I could, but they’re too expensive. We’ll need a nation’s assets to acquire them.”

“*Mmm...* I’ll try to ask her.”

Yoo Yeonha scowled at his words. “Don’t just try. We need these items with only a week left.”

Yoo Yeonha looked more serious than ever and Kim Suho knew he shouldn’t be indecisive.

“Okay, I’ll ask her even if I have to risk my position.”

“Perfect.”

As the duo discussed their plans...

Tok, Tok— Someone knocked on the door. Speak of the devil, Seraine’s voice rang out from the other side.

— Sword commander, it’s me. Seraine.

“...?”

“...?”

Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha stared at each other in surprise. Then they

both grinned and nodded.

“Come in, Lady Seraine. I’ve been wanting to see you.”

“*Aiya!* If it isn’t Lady Seraine, the future of our republic.”

“*Eh?*”

The duo warmly welcomed their guest.

* * *

I returned to Shimurin’s workshop late at night after a long day of work. Boss and Shimurin waited for me at the kitchen table.

“You’re late.”

Boss spoke first and Shimurin slammed her fist on the table.

“Right, you’re too late. We almost died of hunger.”

“Why didn’t you eat?”

“What?” Shimurin’s face viciously distorted.

“This is all your fault. You’re too good at cooking, so everything else tastes horrible.”

“Alright, I’ll make you something.”

I chuckled and walked to the kitchen. Shimurin smiled in satisfaction and Boss’ shoulders danced as well.

Today’s meal would be spicy rice cakes, dumplings, and tempura.

I finished cooking in 15 minutes. Shimurin placed a third of it on her plate and left downstairs. It seemed she wanted to continue her research while eating.

Poke, poke, poke. Boss sat on the kitchen table and ate the spicy rice cakes with her chopsticks. I silently sat next to her and she looked at me strangely. Her chopsticks slowed and her munching turned to nibbles. Eventually, she couldn't hold back and asked.

"Do you have something to say?"

"Something to say?"

"Yeah."

I did have something. I wanted to ask what she would do if Yi Yeonjun, the man she trusted most, turned out to be the one who ruined her life.

"Boss..." I wanted to know what she would think if I killed him.

"It's just an if, but..."

I tried to be indirect.

"What would you do if the person you trusted most disappointed you?"

This question held two meanings. One, if Boss found out the truth about Yi Yeonjun. Two, if she found out that I betrayed her by killing him.

"Disappointed?"

Boss' expression turned cold and she seemed to have lost her appetite. She set down her chopsticks and stared at me.

"*Mmm...* I don't think you'll ever disappoint me."

"Oh, so I'm your most trusted person?"

"..."

Boss' expression softened and she coughed in embarrassment before changing the subject.

"Did something happen? Why are you asking me that?"

"No reason."

I carefully thought about what to do. She would probably try to kill him herself if she learned the truth. That would cause her too much pain.

"I just felt curious."

This duty belonged to me. I could tell Boss the truth after killing Yi Yeonjun.

"I asked because I like you. That's the sincere truth."

"...!"

Crack! The chopsticks in her hands snapped in half. She stared at me with trembling hands and her eyes widened like a cartoon character.

"W-W-What are you s-saying. I-It's obvious a subordinate should l-like his boss. I'm leaving. *Cough! Cough!*"

Boss stood up in a fluster and scurried to her room. She left behind her favorite food on the table.

* * *

[Transnational Peace Conference D-5]

Five days remained until the transnational peace conference. Harin taught us how to hunt a devil at the magic practice area inside the secret service institute.

"I'm from a clan of exorcists."

Harin released her magic power to demonstrate exorcism. It bloomed with a red hue. This color represented the exorcist's power that could critically wound evil beings.

“A clan is determined by bloodline as I previously explained. We mix our magic power with our blood when we hunt devils. Follow me.”

We took out blood packs that Harin made with the help of Yoo Yeonha. Surprisingly, we discovered this simple method to borrow the power of exorcism. We just had to imbue our magic power into the blood packs and let the two mix. Kim Horak and Yi Yeonghan struggled, but Yun Seung-Ah, Rachel, and Aileen easily accomplished it.

“My magic power will mix with this blood and become an exorcist's magic power.”

Aileen spoke a single sentence and I also commanded stigma's magic power.

[Blood of a devil hunter has partially assimilated with you.] [Your authority, Devil Hunter, has grown stronger!] [Partial Devilization – Devil's Arm has grown stronger!] [An incredible luck has occurred! You have partially received the genetics of an exorcist!] [You have obtained a new gift, True Exorcism! An auspicious event may occur with an astronomically low chance!]

“...?”

A series of alerts popped up and I blinked at them. Aileen spoke to Harin while I stood in a daze.

“By the way, shouldn't we tell Kim Suho about this?”

“Ah, I will teach the sword commander later.”

“Okay.”

“Then, next!”

Chak— Harin clapped and the loud noise brought me back. I turned towards her.

“Let’s start learning exorcism!”

For some reason, I felt like I obtained a huge hint and Harin’s words didn’t register in my head.

Harin’s blood and stigma’s magic power had assimilated. My authority, Devil Hunter, grew stronger as a result.

“*Um*, Yurin?”

As I called Harin...

Bzzzzz— The crystal ball in my pocket suddenly vibrated.

“*Cough*, please turn off your crystal ball during lessons.”

Harin glared at me.

“*Ah*, sorry.”

I took out the crystal ball with a wry smile. I received it from Jin Sahyuk when I went to Arunheim.

“Hold on a minute.”

I left the area and picked up the call.

“What do you want?”

I whispered and Jin Sahyuk said something strange.

— It’s important. We need to settle some things, so come meet me at 1 A.M. tomorrow. Don’t be late and don’t even think about not showing up.

Tk—

“The hell?”

Jin Sahyuk hung up without even waiting for my reply. I furrowed my brows and glared at the crystal ball.

“Hajin, what are you doing?”

“Hajin, you’re the one who said we didn’t have much time.”

Rachel and Yun Seung-Ah voiced their complaints.

“Ah, sorry. I had something to take care of.”

I scratched my head and ran back.

Chapter 333

One Step (1)

“My blood reacts when it’s exposed to demonic energy. I guess you can say it boils.”

I listened to Harin’s explanation in the secret service institute’s training room that Shimurin constructed with Seraine’s funding.

“A new power forms when my blood mixes with magic power. My clan calls it exorcism. It’s incredibly effective against demons, but can’t be used against anything else.”

“Mmm.”

I listened while looking at the new gift that I luckily obtained.

[True Exorcism] — Blood of an Exorcist: Will increase all variable stats by 1-100% when facing demonic beings. The stat increase will be proportional to the demonic being’s power. — Abyss: Will strengthen partial devilization. — Exorcism: Will connect with your authority, Devil Hunter, and greatly ignore demonic energy.

Kwang!

The door burst open as I read the gift’s description. Yun Seung-Ah and Aileen barged in with flaring nostrils. Harin and I stared at them in confusion.

“Argh, how annoying. Seung-Ah, are we allowed to be ignored like this?”

“People just aren’t friendly to new faces.”

Aileen stomped in and Yun Seung-Ah simply sighed.

“Those weak idiots. *Arrrgh!*”

Aileen raised her hands and almost exploded in frustration.

“Did something happen?” I quietly asked.

“*Huh? Ah*, you’re still here.”

Aileen cooled down and scratched her head in embarrassment before placing a hand on her hip. She looked ready to vent.

“We went to the higher-ups because we needed something. However, the employees there didn’t answer any of our questions and simply ignored us. They openly shit-talked about how we got in through connections when turned around to leave.”

Aileen paused and grabbed her neck. What happened to them made sense. They could be compared to grade 5 public officials in Korea and we did get in through connections.

“*Ah*, my blood pressure. I’m too old for this.”

“*Pft.*”

I couldn’t help but chuckle. It felt strange seeing Aileen say that when she looked like a high school girl.

“Did you just laugh?” She immediately sent me a death glare.

“No, I didn’t...”

Tok, tok— Someone knocked and saved me from a difficult situation. We turned towards the door and Aileen opened it before I could say anything else.

“Hello! Oh, Aileen?”

“*Ah!* Who are all of you?”

Essence of the Strait's Kim Youngjin, Yohei, Shen Yuan, Yi Jin-Ah, and others who entered the demon realm gate finally showed up.

“Oh, familiar faces!”

The secret service would be gaining new members again. Aileen found new toys to play with and greeted them with a bright smile.

“Welcome, my juniors!”

* * *

The stars illuminated the dense darkness at 1 A.M.

Kim Hajin came out alone to the republic's nameless forest. Jin Sahyuk chose this secluded spot, but it also seemed to be a walking trail with long benches placed here and there.

Kim Hajin sat on a bench and looked at the sky. The full moon coldly shone, but stars surrounded it as if for protection. He couldn't help but admire this beautiful scene.

“...”

He looked at the calm scenery in a daze for about 10 minutes.

“I thought you'd be late.”

A woman's voice rang out. Kim Hajin turned towards Jin Sahyuk trudging out of the dark. She tied her long hair in a ponytail and seemed full of confidence as always.

“Why did you want me to come?” Kim Hajin asked without the slightest change in expression.

Jin Sahyuk stopped in front of him and looked down.

“I need to ask you something one last time.”

“Last?” He raised his eyebrows at the strange word.

“That’s right. This is the last time I’ll be seeing your ugly face.”

Jin Sahyuk nonchalantly retorted and sat on the bench.

“*Co, cough.*”

She acted imposing, but became speechless after taking a seat. Rather, she didn’t know how to start a conversation. She had always been straightforward as a king and only knew how to talk like that. Nothing had changed even now.

“It’s about Kindspring.”

“*Pft.*”

Kim Hajin smirked at how quickly she cut to the chase. She glanced at him and continued.

“What’s your relationship with Kind—”

“I don’t know either.”

“What?”

Kim Hajin didn’t want to talk about Kim Chundong. To explain everything, he would need to accept once again that this world had been a novel he wrote. However, this world became more than just a novel now.

He chuckled and turned towards her.

“I don’t know the details. I came here from another world just like you and Kim Chundong... He went to your world and became Kindspring. That’s it.”

Jin Sahyuk received his gaze with a stern expression.

“I already know, so don’t try to hide anything. Bell looked into your memories—”

“I wouldn’t tell you even if I knew.”

“What did you say, you bastard?”

Jin Sahyuk frowned and Kim Hajin simply shrugged.

“I won’t tell you. No matter what.”

“...”

She became dumbfounded. It didn’t look like he would spill anything, especially about Kindspring and synchronization. After all, what idiot would openly reveal his weakness?

“I see.”

Jin Sahyuk sighed with no other choice. She stood up and glared at him. “I called you here for nothing then.”

“That was it?”

“Yeah, you piece of shit.”

She felt disappointed and prepared to leave when she suddenly grew angry and turned back.

“Oi, we won’t meet again after this. Want to fight one last time?”

“Fight?”

Kim Hajin stood up without hesitation and Jin Sahyuk immediately flinched. She didn’t expect him to fall for such an obvious provocation. Did he have pent-up stress?

“W-W-What? You’re down? F-Fine, come at me.”

Jin Sahyuk brandished her arms and legs, but Kim Hajin simply raised his hand and... *Tak*— Gently placed it on Jin Sahyuk's shoulder.

“Why would we? We're friends now, aren't we?”

She could feel the warmth and sincerity from his smile.

“...?” Her mind went blank and she blinked in a daze. Her vision seemed to blur as if a hammer struck her head.

“I'm leaving. See you again.”

Kim Hajin didn't give her time to recover and walked past like the fleeting wind.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk stood frozen as Kim Hajin's footsteps grew farther away. The word friend shocked her. She had never heard it until now and never even considered the possibility of having a friend. After all, a king didn't have any friends.

Shooooo—

Magic power condensed on the bench that Kim Hajin sat on. It swirled and transformed into a human that Jin Sahyuk already expected.

“You came to like him?”

The figure's voice brought her back to her senses.

“Shut your mouth, you damned—”

“What, didn't you say you would bring him to Akatrina? You just let him go! I told you how to switch Kim Hajin with Kindspring.”

“...”

Bell's words made her speechless. As he said, she planned on bringing

Kim Hajin with her even if she had to abduct him until she heard the word friend.

“He...” Jin Sahyuk scratched her head and spat out an excuse.

“He made me recall the past.”

She remembered how her younger self, Prihi, interacted with Kim Hajin in the recorded past.

Prihi and Kim Hajin grew quite close. She learned many things from Kim Hajin, relied on him, and even declared that she would become like him one day. They could clearly be called friends.

If, if I also met someone like Kim Hajin when I was young...

Jin Sahyuk pondered.

“Well, I don’t care either way. I just don’t want you to be lonely without me,” Bell playfully added.

“I don’t need you. Shut the hell up.” Jin Sahyuk glared at him and shot back.

Bell smiled and turned into a wisp of magic power.

“I’ll go on ahead. Don’t be late.”

“I’m not going back today, idiot!”

Shooooo— Bell flew away with the wind. Jin Sahyuk plopped on the bench alone and looked at the night sky. The same sky Kim Hajin admired. The full moon shone in the dark, but it didn’t look so lonely because of all the stars around it.

“I...” Jin Sahyuk slowly muttered as she gazed at the sky.

“I’m used to being alone.”

Her words disappeared into the air without reaching Bell or Kim Hajin.

* * *

[Transnational Peace Conference D-1]

Everyone from the secret service made their way to Leores Plaza a day before the conference. Citizens from all over the world gathered for the opening ceremony that would soon take place.

We surveyed the area for potential threats.

“I don’t see anyone suspicious, but stay on your toes.”

I looked down at the plaza from the watchtower and communicated with them.

— Got it.

— Okay, tell us if anything happens.

The secret service members replied from all across the plaza. They waited with heightened senses to detect any demonic energy.

Tap, tap— Footsteps rang out from the staircase to the watchtower. I placed the crystal ball away and turned around.

“*Hmm...*”

A familiar voice rang out. It turned out to be Yoo Yeonha.

“There you are.”

She looked around the watchtower with her arms crossed. I could tell all the dust bothered her quite a bit.

“What are you doing here, Miss CEO? Aren’t you busy running your business?”

Yoo Yeonha furrowed her brows and walked over.

“It’ll be the day of the transnational peace conference in less than 20 minutes. *Ah*, I’m sure you know, but it’s a 2 week event. The first 10 days are no different than a festival and the real conference will take place on the last 4 days. Unfortunately, we don’t know when Baal will descend.”

“If possible, he’ll descend on the last day,” I confidently replied. From what Jin Sahyuk said, Baal would wait until the end to make his move.

“I see. I trust you.”

Yoo Yeonha nodded without asking any more questions. Her trust in me felt quite baffling. I smiled and tried to look cool.

“Did you finish preparing?” I asked.

“Yes, I gave each secret service member an exorcism weapon. We’ll have to wait and find out if they’re effective. Oh right, this is yours.”

Yoo Yeonha held a long, wooden case in her right hand.

“What’s that?”

“A bow. We couldn’t buy it even with the republic’s treasury, so we stole it.”

“You stole it?” I doubted my ears for a second.

“Open it.”

“...”

I tilted my head and opened the case. *Kiik*— The wooden bow looked completely ordinary.

“How is it?”

I couldn't answer her.

“Whoa.”

I exclaimed in shock. I never imagined a bow could surpass the Black Lotus Bow that resulted from the synthesis between Temujin's Bow and Horus' Bow.

[Ancient Hero Leoricus' Exorcism Bow] [Pinnacle Grade] [Legendary Artifact] — The bow used by the hero Leoricus to combat devils. — Contains the legacy of Leoricus' exorcist power.

Now I had a legendary pinnacle grade bow. This Leoricus had to be on the same level as Yi Sun-shin in Korea.

“It's amazing.”

I murmured in a daze and Yoo Yeonha faintly smiled.

“You have to safely return and give it back, okay? We replaced it with a fake replica at the museum.”

“Huh? Uh...”

I don't know if I can return this. I can't begin to imagine the results if I fused it with the Black Lotus Bow.

“S-Sure, I'll return it safely.”

I nodded anyways.

— The transnational peace conference will now begin!

Midnight struck and fireworks went off with a loud announcement. Yoo Yeonha and I turned towards the fireworks, but I couldn't focus on the scenery and only stared at messages popping up.

[The final episode, Daybreak, will begin.] [You are now only a step away from the end.] [Remember, you still have the right to ask me a question or

make a request.]

I closed my eyes and focused on the sound of exploding fireworks and people cheering. My heart suddenly turned cold and a thought crossed my mind.

“No matter how this episode ends...”

I sent a message to the co-author.

“Let’s butt heads once everything is over.”

Yoo Yeonha thought I meant her and curiously tilted her head.

“*Huh?* Butt our heads?”

“It’s nothing.”

I laughed and she pouted like a kid. Surprisingly, the co-author messaged me back.

[Understood.] [Whether Baal dies or you die...] [Once this episode is over...] [I will invite you.] [I wish you the best of luck.]

Now I had another reason to absolutely win.

Chapter 334

One Step (2)

Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak arrived in the republic for the transnational peace conference.

They traveled by carriage to a mansion owned by a well-known billionaire named Larin and would stay there for the next 2 weeks. He formally invited Shin Jonghak, who came from the respectable Priton family.

“Mmm...”

This grand mansion in Leores’ capital city cost a fortune because of the extremely high price of land.

“It’s pretty big. I’d say it’s about the size of my room.”

Chae Nayun assessed the mansion rather brutally. She lived in Chae Joochul’s traditional home all her life, so she naturally regarded this place as mundane.

“Nothing stands out.”

Her gaze roamed across the room until it landed on Shin Jonghak.

“Dude, what’re you doing?”

Shin Jonghak read a small notebook and raised his head.

“I’m looking at the guest list.”

“What’s that?”

“Other people staying in this mansion besides us. Airun, Draven... Apparently, they’re all famous nobles in the kingdom. I figured I should at least memorize their names.”

“Oh, I see.”

Chae Nayun didn’t care about networking and headed towards the balcony. Her entire body ached from being in the carriage all day.

“*Hmm...*”

She leaned against the balustrade and gazed into the distance. The street below came into view. The scenery looked like a combination between the past and present with a hint of mysteriousness.

“*Hmm?*”

A woman’s upside-down face suddenly appeared in front of her as she watched the busy street.

“...”

She stared at the face for 1 second, 2 seconds, 3 seconds...

“Fuuuck!”

She shouted in surprise, fell backwards, and rolled into the room.

“*Hahahaha.*”

Jin Sahyuk appeared like a ghost and walked in while laughing.

“D-Dammit. You asshole, what did you do that for?”

Chae Nayun charged like an angry bull, but Jin Sahyuk’s chains of magic power held her back.

“*Argh!* These chains again?”

“*Shh*. I need to tell you something, so listen up. You too, Shin Jonghak.”

Jin Sahyuk sounded somewhat forlorn.

* * *

[The Republic of Leores — First Day of the Transnational Peace Conference]

I fell asleep late at night on the watchtower, but suddenly woke up.

— Are you watching me?

A voice flowed into my ears. At first, I thought Chae Nayun contacted me.

— Answer if you’re watching.

However, this voice belonged to a man and sounded threatening.

“...?”

— You have some nerve to follow me like this.

“What... *ah*.”

Only then did I realize the situation and connected to my observer’s vision.

— Looks like you can see me now.

Yi Yeonjun appeared in front of me with the observer in his hand. He glared with his dark eyes.

— Answer me.

“How did you find out?”

The observer delivered my question to Yi Yeonjun, who promptly scoffed.

— Did you think such a cheap trick would work on me?

“Mmm... So what?”

— What?

I tried to remain calm as possible.

“This might be better. Why don’t we meet right now? It’s clear we dislike each other.”

I felt confident in defeating him with full access to my gifts and weapons.

— *Hahaha...*

He only laughed. Was he scared or making fun of my boldness?

— Fine, see you in 4 days.

It seemed to be the latter. He nodded in satisfaction and announced a date.

“And the location?”

— I’ll notify you through this bird when the time comes. I’ll be keeping it until then.

“Go ahead.”

— I will.

The observer’s vision darkened and Yi Yeonjun’s voice disappeared as well.

“Tsk. All this right after I wake up?”

I brushed my hair and sighed. I hadn’t expected him to catch my observer. Thankfully, I managed to play it cool.

“Hajin?”

“*Uaaak!*” I jumped 5 meters into the air.

“*Whoa!*”

Rachel also threw her hands out in surprise.

“...”

“...”

We awkwardly stared at each other before I coughed.

“W-When did you get here, R-Rachel?”

“*Eh? Ah*, it’s nothing important. It’s just that, Hajin...”

She didn’t get the chance to finish.

— Emergency, emergency! This is Yi Yeonghan! Several demons have infiltrated this place! We need help!

The crystal violently shook. Rachel and I jumped through the watchtower’s window. We fell from 130 meters, but had nothing to fear shrouded in magic power.

KOOOONG!

We darted forward after landing and endured the soreness in our calves.

We arrived at Yi Yeonghan's location 5 minutes later. He sent the backup request from the capital's underground sewer system. Kim Horak and Yi Younghan fought dozens of demons in this humid darkness.

"What happened here?"

I asked and Kim Horak quickly replied.

"We're not sure. We followed a trail of demonic energy and found them here."

Kim Horak addressed me politely after our first meeting. I didn't know why. He just felt like it.

"They look fairly strong. Will the four of us be enough?"

Yi Younghan worriedly muttered. He wiped the sweat from his forehead and grabbed his gauntlets.

"Well..."

I scanned the demons to estimate their strength.

[A total of 24 demons have awakened your instincts.] [All your variable stats have increased by 49%.]

Increased by 49%?

"I think we can pull it off."

The situation didn't look as bad as it seemed anymore.

"Uhahaha!"

A hearty laughter resonated throughout the sewer. *Tap, tap*— A demon who looked like a mummy came forward.

"You make me laugh, human."

He gathered demonic energy in his hand as he spoke. The other demons did the same and also gathered energy in their mouths and chests. Soon, their demonic energy filled the entire sewer.

“You want to defeat us, but it’s no use. You won’t stand a chance against the duke of hell!”

The demon shot his condensed energy at me.

“Return to dust, human...?”

It flew towards me like a boomerang, but I easily grabbed it with my bare hand.

*[Exorcism has been activated. Demonic energy has been reduced by 90%.]
[Your luck has affected the amount of reduction.]*

“I see you have a trick up your sleeve, human.”

“Huh? Oh no, this isn’t—”

“Kill him!”

The demon who seemed to be the leader shouted. All the demons released their demonic energy and their power merged into a single wave that flew straight at me. I held out my hand.

KWAAAAAA!

The explosion shook the surroundings. All the sewer water evaporated, the air grew hot, and poisonous gas filled the air. Their demonic energy wrecked everything and swallowed me whole.

“Kuhahaha...?”

The demon laughed again, but stopped midway because I stood completely intact after being struck by the enormous attack.

“Huhu. This...”

I checked the system window with a smile.

[Exorcism has been activated. Demonic energy has been reduced by 95%.]

“Doesn’t hurt at all.”

An astounding 95%...

“What did you say, human?”

“Well, it seems...” I continued cheerfully.

“You won’t be laying a finger on me.”

Fighting demons suited me more than anyone else.

* * *

[Earth – Tower of Heroes]

— Rank 3 Vassago, Rank 14 Leraje, Rank 29 Astaroth, Rank 62 Valac.
We have identified 4 devils so far.

An emergency meeting took place at the Tower of Heroes in Gwanghwamun, Korea. The demon realm transformation, which they thought had slowed, began to spread again due to the devils who appeared with incarnation bodies.

— Valac and Astaroth are the more aggressive ones.

Yi Gongmyung, who had brilliantly led the Orden annihilation mission not too long ago, led today’s meeting.

“Then...”

The audience consisted of Heynckes, Chae Joochul, Yi Yookho, and Kim Sukho. The latter two served as the association’s chairmen and all four held great influence.

“Does that mean the others aren’t aggressive?”

— Vassago and Leraje aren’t.

Yi Gongmyung answered Heynckes’ question.

— I’m not sure whether they’re building power or simply not interested in fighting. I’ve only heard rumors, but we do know they’re currently not involved in the demon realm transformation.

“Rumors?” Kim Sukho asked with a frown.

“What kind of rumors?”

— These are the rumors regarding the devils.

Yi Gongmyung immediately pulled up a slide as if he had been expecting Kim Sukho’s question.

[Season 5 Gladiator of the Century Official Ranking] 1. [Lijengyi — 393 Official Matches: 391 Wins, 2 Draws] 2. [SpamMachine — 584 Official Matches: 404 Wins, 170 Losses, 10 Draws] 3...

“*Gladiator of the Century?*” Kim Sukho rubbed his temple in confusion.

— This user who goes by the username Lijengyi is rumored to be Leraje.

“Oi, Yi Gongmyung. Are you trying to be funny?”

Kim Sukho raised his voice, but Yi Gongmyung remained calm.

— That was also my initial reaction, but I contacted the capsule developers and investigated Lijengyi’s account. The result...

Yi Gongmyung changed the screen again. This time, it showed a record of all the games Lijengyi had ever played and the amount of time she spent playing each game.

Not just *Gladiator of the Century*, but also *Grand Theft Auto*, *Three Kingdoms*, *Become a Legend*, etc. Lijengyi spent a total of 4000 hours playing different games.

— An astounding 4000 hours. This means she's been playing games almost nonstop if we take into consideration when she made her account.

“Ha...” Kim Sukho let out a dumbfounded laugh.

“Are you saying this devil is a game addict?”

— Yes, at least according to the rumors.

Yi Gongmyung slightly nodded and changed the screen.

— While Leraje is busy playing games, the most aggressive Valac is...

The video showed the Sahara partly transformed into the demon realm and monsters marching in an orderly fashion under Valac's command.

— As you can see, Vakac is creating an army.

“So it seems.”

Kim Sukho's expression stiffened. Chae Joochul, who had been quiet all along, finally opened his mouth.

“I heard England has a remarkable summoning magician.”

His comment didn't seem related at all to their meeting and he sounded emotionless as always.

— Yes, that's correct.

Yi Gongmyung replied, unshaken by the sudden change in topic.

— She's Lady Ah Hae-In's disciple.

“Ah Hae-In?” Kim Sukho frowned.

— Yes, I couldn’t find out any details because Lady Ah Hae-In was quite secretive.

“Good, let’s not meddle with Ah Hae-In.”

Kim Sukho coughed and lowered his head. The association could probably handle one 9 star magician, but they feared opposition from other magicians who revered 9 star magicians.

— I understand. This is my last report for the day. A strange phenomenon occurred last week at a beach in Vladivostok.

The long meeting came to an end as Yi Gongmyung showed security footage of Vladivostok from 3 days ago.

— Please take a look.

All four VIPs turned to the screen.

The 5 second footage could only be described as strange.

“What was that? I didn’t get a clear look.”

Even Chae Joochul and Heynckes, who had been sitting comfortably, leaned forward. Yi Gongmyung replayed the footage.

Chwaaaaa...

Monsters appeared on Vladivostok’s shore. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew across the sea and all the monsters died.

“Can’t you play it slower?”

Heynckes seemed perplexed as well. This wind didn’t occur naturally, but he couldn’t identify the source because it moved so fast.

— It has already been slowed to the limit. The Russian government

took care of the monsters' remains. They said something sharp slashed apart the bodies.

“Is this also the work of devils?” Heynckes asked.

— Nothing is certain, but I don't believe the devils did this.

Yi Gongmyung replied.

“And what's your reasoning?”

— We looked at the flow of magic power in Vladivostok and found it quite familiar.

“So?” Kim Sukho interrupted Yi Gongmyung and impatiently waved.

“What is it if it's not the devils?”

—...

Yi Gongmyung fell silent for the first time. He looked at Kim Sukho, Chae Joochul, Heynckes, Yi Yukho, and...

— I believe it's...

He uttered a name that didn't belong to any devil and his declaration startled even the Immortal.

— Orden.

Chapter 335

One Step (3)

The republic's anti-demon bureau rose to the top ever since the demons' rampant activities 10 years ago. The members took pride in their mission to purify the demonic and subjugate demons.

Today, a rather troublesome guest visited them. Airun, the famous knight commander from Arunheim, wished to see the anti-demon bureau's director. Seraine agreed to meet after much thought.

"One wrong step and this matter might become an international issue," Airun said as she walked through the bureau's hallway with Seraine.

"Issue? What do you mean?"

Seraine tilted her head and pretended to be oblivious. Airun's brows sharply went up.

"I'm talking about the F rank sharpshooter, Kim Hajin."

"Uh... Kim Hajin?"

"Yes." Seraine blinked her eyes as if trying to recall.

"Kim Hajin... who was that again? *Mmm...*"

However, she only mumbled in confusion.

"He recently made headlines in the republic's newspapers."

Airun bit her lips.

“Ah!”

Seraine clapped her hands with a straight face. She recalled seeing such a headline, [*F Rank Sharpshooter Kim Hajin*]. She did her best to suppress the news, but couldn't stop the rumors.

“I see what you mean now.”

“Yes, so where is he? He should return to the army now that he's done with his mission.”

“Who knows? I've seen his name in the news, but that's all I know. *Ah*, I heard it was a misreport. I mean, how could an F rank sharpshooter decimate all those demonic monsters?”

Seraine innocently scratched her cheek as Airun glared at her.

“So you're saying you don't know?”

“No, but I'm sure he returned to his home country already.”

“No, he didn't come ba... *huu*.”

Airun felt quite troubled. She knew Kim Hajin had safely escorted Harin to the republic, but couldn't dig into the matter any further. If she did, the kingdom might find out she helped Harin escape. Even Airun feared punishment from Arunheim's tyrannical ruler.

“From what I hear, the republic established a new institute called the secret service.”

Airun changed the subject. She suspected Kim Hajin had something to do with the secret service, but couldn't confirm her suspicions.

“I wouldn't say it's a new institute. We simply reinstated an old agency for the transnational peace conference.”

The subject must've made Seraine nervous as her voice slightly trembled.

“I see. The director’s name was Heiji, correct?”

“Yes, we luckily picked up an excellent talent. We promoted him to director straight away to put a tight leash on him.”

“Picked up, you say?” Airun stopped and Seraine also halted.

“Are you sure he didn’t walk in himself?”

Airun didn’t want Kim Hajin. She simply wanted to meet him and make sure he hadn’t told anyone about his escort mission. After all, Airun’s position might be at stake.

“...”

Seraine didn’t reply and smirked condescendingly. She found it quite funny that Airun, the paragon of knights, feared for her life in her own country.

“Well, maybe he did.”

— Demon invasion! Demon invasion!

An alert rang out from the speaker above as Seraine spoke. They both looked at each other.

— 25 demons have appeared in the capital’s northeast sewage system!

They immediately dashed out of the anti-demon bureau and the other members followed. The group moved with magic power like a soaring hawk and arrived at their destination in just 5 minutes.

An unexpected sight greeted them when the 133 members entered the sewage system.

“*Hmm?* Oh, you’re finally here.”

The 25 demons had been tied up with ropes with the secret service members sitting on their backs.

“A bit late, but I guess it’s fine.”

Seraine immediately recognized Kim Hajin, Kim Horak, Yi Yeonghan, and Rachel. The anti-demon bureau members stood with dazed expressions as Kim Hajin leisurely smiled and handed off the demons.

“Take them.”

One woman became speechless at Kim Hajin’s words. She recognized him, but couldn’t believe her eyes. After all, who would believe an F rank sharpshooter could defeat 25 demons?

“We’ll be taking our leave then.”

Airun didn’t know what to say. It seemed Kim Hajin hadn’t noticed her and left with a relaxed smile.

* * *

[Transnational Peace Conference, Day 5]

“The republic’s pride... Director Heiji and his subordinates... subjugated 25 demons...”

The secret service received special treatment for its recent achievements. All personnel affiliated with the group accepted the president’s commendation and a hefty reward. Naturally, everyone in the city spoke about the agency.

Subjugating 25 demons could be considered an unbelievable feat. Demons possessed incredible strength and their united force could topple any nation in a few days.

I returned to the director’s office after being congratulated by the citizens.

“Congrats.”

Boss came to visit me. Well, she technically intruded without

permission.

“Don’t tease me. By the way, how did you get in? I couldn’t sense you at all.”

“*Hehe*, good. My ability has been improving recently.”

Boss proudly strutted with her chest out. Then she transformed into a shadow. Her body melted into a dark puddle on the ground and her presence completely disappeared.

“Wow, that’s impressive.”

— *Huhu*.

Boss laughed in satisfaction and transformed back. The way she shot up from her shadow felt astonishing and creepy at the same time.

“So, what are you going to do next?”

She asked as a funny thought popped up in my head.

“Grab my hand.”

“H-Hand? Why?”

“Just take it.”

Boss grabbed my hand hesitantly.

“Now, close your eyes.”

“...”

Gulp— I could hear her swallowing hard. Boss closed her eyes and I connected our vision to my second observer, which I dispatched not too long ago.

The scenery from the heart of the capital appeared before us. The sun had already set, but the capital bustled with tourists. The observer looked down from the sky and spotted 3 people in the crowd.

— Baal will probably descend on the 13th.

Jin Sahyuk said with a sweet chicken skewer in her hand.

— So we have 8 days left.

Chae Nayun replied. Boss squeezed my hand when she spotted Chae Nayun, Chae Jinyoon's sister and Chae Joochul's granddaughter.

— Prepare yourself until then. Don't just eat like a pig.

— You're the one eating like a pig!

Chae Nayun growled and reached for Jin Sahyuk's skewer, but Jin Sahyuk easily blocked her. Chae Nayun could only sigh with a frown.

— Aren't you on that Bell guy's side? Why don't you just convince him to stop Baal's descent?

— That's impossible.

Jin Sahyuk shook her head resolutely.

— If left alone, Baal will tear apart Bell's body and descend by himself on the 14th. That's why Bell hastened the descent by a day, so he could save himself through death.

Jin Sahyuk chewed on her skewer and I turned to Boss.

“Hear that? Bell will die soon.”

“...”

Boss squeezed my hand without replying. She no longer hated Bell after realizing he never killed Yi Yeonjun. In fact, she felt sorry.

“I see,” she bitterly mumbled.

“Yeah.”

We didn’t have much time left until Arunheim and Leores’ ending, this world’s ending, and my own ending.

What choices would I make on that day? What choices should I make?

“Huuu...”

I disconnected our vision and opened my eyes. I could see Boss’ face with her eyes still closed. She frowned from our vision being cut off.

I couldn’t describe her beauty with words, but one thing always came to mind whenever I saw her cute, clumsy side.

I want to be with her longer.

A voice suddenly flowed into my ears as if to stop this train of thought.

— Come here tomorrow at 3 A.M.

Yi Yeonjun spoke to me through my first observer. He wanted to meet in a secluded alleyway somewhere in the republic.

* * *

[England – Chameleon Troupe’s Sanctuary]

The Chameleon Troupe members returned to their underwater base in the English Channel when Pandemonium showed signs of being swallowed by the demon realm transformation.

The underwater sanctuary remained clean and well-kept thanks to Kim Hajin’s modifications. Each member unpacked their belongings and gathered in the lobby.

“*Hah?* Orden is alive? Are you positive?” Cheok Jungyeong asked with a scowl while sitting on Kim Hajin’s handcrafted couch.

“Yep, that’s what Droon said. Interesting, right?” Jin Yohan nodded as he took out a can of beer from the fridge.

“*Hmm...*”

Cheok Jungyeong rubbed his chin and pondered. No one doubted he already thought about fighting Orden in his mind.

Jin Yohan sipped his beer and changed the subject. “So, what happened to the 9th floor?”

“Oh, that? It’s over. I took care of those calamities or whatever.”

Cheok Jungyeong recalled his battles on the 9th floor with a grin. Legendary monsters from myths became stepping stones for his growth. He even sparred with Lancelot and Lü Bu.

“What are we going to do now? Find and kill Orden again? *Huhuhu.*”

Cheok Jungyeong chuckled as he sunk into the couch.

“*Ah*, this couch is so comfortable. Is it because Hajin made it?”

“That? Yeah, Kim Hajin made it. Focus, Jungyeong. Shouldn’t we wait until Boss comes back? We need to take care of other things like the matter with Vast Expanse.”

Jin Yohan crushed the beer can in his hand. Last week, Vast Expanse came to visit them and wanted to meet Yi Yuri, the girl with the authority of healing.

“Oh yeah, isn’t Droon going out with that girl now?”

“Yeah, they’re together right now.”

“*Haha*, well that’s something.”

Cheok Jungyeong laughed like an old man and spread out his arms. He peacefully lay on the couch and thought about all the devils that recently appeared. These transcendental beings supposedly descended on Earth using incarnation bodies. Cheok Jungyeong stared at the ceiling and murmured.

“Oi, these devils... don’t you think we can take care of them?”

“Why, do you want to fight them?”

“*Kuhuhu*, do you even need to ask?”

Cheok Jungyeong raised his hand and stared at it. The toughest hand in the world. He firmly believed in his strength.

“No matter what devil I encounter...”

He had defeated Lü Bu, crushed Dullahan, and beat Behemoth.

“I can crush all of them.”

He confidently smiled and purple magic power blazed around his hand. He obtained this violet magic power after eating Behemoth’s heart. His strength had reached a transcendent realm now.

“...” Jin Yohan silently looked at him.

“Well...”

He couldn’t help but agree as he had also seen Heynckes and Chae Joochul. The current Cheok Jungyeong didn’t seem any weaker than the Immortal. Jin Yohan couldn’t imagine Cheok Jungyeong losing.

“It looks like you’ve become a monster too.”

Jin Yohan honestly praised him. Cheok Jungyeong faintly smiled and the violet magic power crackled around his arm. His new strength mesmerized him the more he saw it.

— Ignore everything else and just focus on conquering the 9th floor.

Like always, what Kim Hajin told him turned out to be correct.

While Cheok Jungyeong became intoxicated by his strength...

Beeeeep! Beeeeep!

A loud siren went off in the sanctuary. To be exact, the sound came from the members' smartwatches.

“Whoa!”

“Ah, geez! That surprised me.”

Kaita and Setryn woke up from their sleep. Droon also came out of his room with Yi Yuri.

“What happened Jin Yohan, Cheok Jungyeong?”

“...”

Jin Yohan calmly looked at his smartwatch. He raised his head after about a minute and exchanged gazes with Cheok Jungyeong. Soon, a big smile emerged on his face.

“What happened?”

Droon asked again full of anticipation. Jin Yohan projected the emergency alert.

[Emergency report! Rank 62 devil, Valac, is marching north with his army!] *[Emergency report! Rank 29 devil, Astaroth, has appeared in Spain!]* *[Emergency report! Rank 14 devil, Leraje, has announced the creation of a devil's castle. Its location has been confirmed as the former headquarters of the gaming company, Leol!]* *[Emergency report! Rank 3 devil, Vassago...]*

Chapter 336

The Stories of Characters (1)

[Rank 62 Devil Valac]

Valac's army rose from the desert and displayed overwhelming power as they marched through Central Asia to Europe. Europe couldn't repel the devil army after the land and ocean partly transformed into the demon realm.

The association issued worldwide disaster warnings and dispatched heroes to Europe. A war finally broke out between humanity and devils.

[Rank 29 Devil Astaroth]

Astaroth formed a barrier around Madrid, Spain. No one could enter or exit and what happened inside remained a mystery.

Spain suffered a complete lockdown while Valac wreaked havoc in the east. Europe didn't have the time to complain about the two devils.

[Rank 14 Devil Leraje]

Leraje, on the other hand, stirred up trouble far from Europe. She constructed her castle using Leol's gaming headquarters in the United States, California. Leraje's devil castle served as a portal to the demon realm and demons flooded out from it like a tidal wave.

However, Leraje didn't cause any destruction like Valac and Astaroth. In fact, she offered a rather strange mission to humanity. To be exact, she ordered the gaming company Leol.

— Make me the most enjoyable game ever created. It would be nice to choose from multiple classes.

Her order confused Leol's CEO and developers, who became trapped in the devil's castle. However, Leraje added another objective for them before they could even comprehend the situation.

— I won't harm humanity if the game you make satisfies me and someone can beat me in that game.

To their bewilderment, Leol had been handed the fate of America.

— I swear on my name as a devil that I will keep this promise.

Leraje even made an oath that caused all Americans to focus on the Leol gaming company.

The 5,300 employees began their game development with the world's expectations on their shoulders. Leraje gave them a deadline of 20 days. The laughable timeframe would've normally made this mission impossible, but Leol had already been in the middle of developing a game. They felt confident it would be the modern era's greatest game as they sped up its completion.

[Rank 3 Devil Vassago]

Vassago also gave humanity a unique, but less generous mission. He constructed a colosseum in Pandemonium and invited the warriors of Earth.

— Come defeat me.

He sent them a simple message, but not many responded. Vassago grew disgruntled at the lack of challengers and agreed to fight multiple opponents simultaneously. Even that turned out ineffective, so he released an ultimatum that he would wait 10 more days.

Humanity realized the dangers they faced as a determined master rank hero visited the Hero Association.

"I will challenge Vassago."

Jin Seyeon had originally planned on entering the demon realm gate,

but changed her mind when she heard the Chameleon Troupe's Cheok Jungyeong appeared on the Tower of Wish's 9th floor. Jin Seyeon wanted to ask the Chameleon Troupe several questions about the events that completely changed her life.

"You?"

The association chairman, Yi Yookho, blinked in confusion. Jin Seyeon's sudden visit caught him off guard.

"Yes."

"..."

She looked determined, but Yi Yookho felt hesitant. She couldn't be wasted on Vassago's colosseum. The association planned on using disposal heroes to challenge that devil and buy some time.

"There's no need for you to—"

"It's fine. That man will be there too."

"That man?"

"Yes."

Jin Seyeon failed to track down Cheok Jungyeong on the 9th floor, but he would certainly challenge the colosseum. Perhaps Black Lotus would be there as well.

"The Chameleon Troupe's Cheok Jungyeong and maybe even Black Lotus..."

Yi Yookho internally sighed at her words. Even at a glance, he could sense her overwhelming determination. He couldn't say much since he knew about the relationship between her and the Chameleon Troupe.

"I understand, but here's what I think."

Yi Yookho took out a secret document from his drawer to dissuade her.

“What’s this?”

“You’ll know when you read it, but I’ll simply explain. There’s a chance Orden is still alive.”

“Orden?”

Jin Seyeon immediately scanned the document as Yi Yookho continued explaining.

“The area around Russia’s Vladivostok has been free of demonic monsters for some time. Its surroundings have all undergone the demon realm transformation, but Vladivostok remains spotless. You’ll hear the residents laughing and living peacefully if you visit.”

The document contained accounts of Vladivostok’s residents. Apparently, a mysterious power annihilated the demons and demonic monsters in the area. No one knew what or who, but Yi Gongmyung deduced the culprit through the magic power’s smell and frequency.

“I want to entrust you with this task. It might be more important than the devils. Heynckes and Chae Joochul also agreed to participate.”

“...”

Jin Seyeon set down the document after thoroughly reading it. Her expression hadn’t changed in the slightest and Yi Yookho couldn’t help but sigh.

“I’ll stop Vassago. I wouldn’t make much of a difference if the two of them are participating.”

“Why?” Yi Yookho finally scowled.

“Why are you so bent on pursuing the Chameleon Troupe? I told you before, the Kwang-Oh Incident is—”

“I’ll take my leave.” Jin Seyeon stood up from her seat and had no intentions of listening to a made-up story about her past.

“You’ll regret it if you leave now.” Yi Yookho’s expression stiffened. He tried to stop her, but failed.

“I hope we meet again.” Jin Seyeon bowed and left without hesitation.

“That stubborn woman... Earth is on the brink of destruction and all she cares about is some bygone past.”

Yi Yookho massaged his temples and turned on his smartwatch to report to Kim Sukho.

* * *

[3 A.M., Republic of Leores]

The moonlit field of grass looked like the perfect place for a young couple to meet. Unfortunately, only Yi Yeonjun waited for me here.

I quickly spotted him from a distance and he also stared at me.

“Hey.”

He began with a simple greeting. I reminded myself to also talk as much as possible.

[Lv.8 Unique Skill – Clockhand of Fate] Fate: You may select up to 8 targets as your fate. Your variable and special stats will increase by 300% for 3 minutes when fighting your fate. (May be used once every 120 hours).

I chose Jin Sahyuk as my first target and talking to her a few times had been enough. However, the requirement for a second target posed a huge problem.

[Condition to Select a Second Target – Must exchange at least 100 lines of dialogue face-to-face.]

“Did you hear me?” Yi Yeonjun spoke again after I remained silent. His monotone voice made me question whether he felt bored.

“Yeah, I heard a lot about you from Boss. My name is Kim Hajin. What’s yours?”

“...”

Yi Yeonjun shut his mouth as if I said something I shouldn’t have.

“Hello?”

He didn’t react at all. *Did he hear about my unique skill from Bell?*

“Answer me. What’s your name?”

“...”

I considered reversing time and starting over, but time reversal’s side effects would cost me too much. My movements would be severely restricted for at least 10 minutes even with the Orb of Regeneration. Yi Yeonjun didn’t strike me as the type to wait that long.

“Jin Sahyuk told me about your plan.”

He seemed uninterested in talking, so I continued by myself. This time, I took a more direct approach.

“Baal would need a new incarnation body if he descends after Jin Sahyuk kills Bell.”

Yi Yeonjun planned on taking that role.

“You’re trying to become Baal’s new incarnation body.”

“...” Yi Yeonjun remained silent.

“Hello?”

“Shut your mouth.” He released his magic power after those three words. His magic power appeared white contrary to his disposition.

“Quite a foul mouth, aren’t you?”

I raised my gun, which contained bullets tipped with the basilisk’s venom. I also activated all the medicinal effects from my [*Medicinal Memory Physique*].

KOOOONG!

A huge earthquake that could score at least an 8 on the Richter scale broke out.

Yi Yeonjun kicked off the ground and fully unleashed his magic power.

Chwaaaaa...

His white magic power spread out in every direction. I activated bullet time as the brilliant light swallowed all the shadows.

Kirik— Kirik—

I could see Yi Yeonjun in slow motion. Magic power shot out from his body like tree branches. I heard from Jin Sahyuk that he could freely manipulate the temperature of magic power. His gift sounded simple, but it had to be powerful given his status. I transformed the Desert Eagle into a shotgun and aimed.

—!

I pulled the trigger and the Desert Eagle spat out a venomous buckshot like a dragon’s breath.

* * *

KOOOONG!

The ground rumbled and Jin Sahyuk's eyes shot open. Her intuition told her this was no simple earthquake.

“What, what happened!?”

Chae Nayun also woke up from the couch as Jin Sahyuk jumped out the window. Chae Nayun and Shin Jonghak both quickly followed.

“Wait! Tell us what's happening! Where are you going?”

Jin Sahyuk ignored Chae Nayun and ran straight to the earthquake's epicenter. The streets grew chaotic because of the disaster.

Jin Sahyuk jumped from roof to roof and rushed to Bell's mansion.

Clang!

She broke the window and entered the dark mansion. As she looked around the empty bedroom...

“Haa...”

A low-pitched sigh rang out from the corner. Jin Sahyuk turned and found Bell collapsed with his hands on his stomach.

“BELL!”

She shouted, but paused from embarrassment. Shin Jonghak and Chae Nayun also arrived while she hesitated. Shin Jonghak furrowed his brows at Bell. Meanwhile, Chae Nayun asked as she blinked in confusion.

“What, what happened to you?”

“It's nothing.” Bell stood up drenched in cold sweat.

“It just signaled me that it wants to come out even if it has to tear my body apart.”

“Is it bad?” Jin Sahyuk asked from a distance. Bell bitterly smiled and nodded.

“Yeah, I don’t think I can last more than two days. If possible, I want you to kill me today... *Keuk!*”

Bell collapsed to his knees.

“*Kueek...*”

His back bent and his shoulders violently trembled. As he desperately tried to endure...

“—!”

An otherworldly cry burst out. Soon, Bell’s right eye turned crimson and the left side of his body flickered with black demonic energy.

“*Kuk... Kuaaaaak!*”

However, Bell managed to force Baal back. The devil screamed a few times before disappearing and Bell collapsed to the floor from exhaustion.

Jin Sahyuk knelt in front of him.

“You okay?” she worriedly asked. Bell smiled at her uncharacteristic attitude and shook his head.

“No, I’m not. Can you kill me now?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t reply. She hesitated. She knew she could kill Bell with a complete extermination of the soul through Reality Manipulation.

“*Huh? Wait.*”

Bell discovered Shin Jonghak standing behind Jin Sahyuk. He grinned and gestured at him.

“You’re here, Myungchul’s grandson.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak didn’t reply and felt uncomfortable hearing his grandfather’s name come out of Bell’s mouth.

“Are you ready to hear our story? This might be your last chance... *Kuuek.*”

Bell scowled from the monstrous pain eating away at his body.

“I don’t see a reason to hear you out.”

Shin Jonghak expressed his discomfort. Bell simply smiled at him. He could feel the demonic energy roiling inside, but endured with all his effort.

“A reason to hear me out, you say...”

Bell wanted to tell Shin Jonghak about Shin Myungchul. No, he had to. Bell hadn’t met Shin Myungchul by coincidence, but by fate. He promised Shin Myungchul.

“You resemble Myungchul the more I look at you.”

Shin Jonghak frowned at his words. “What are you blabbering about?”

“*Hm?* Oh, nothing much. I’m just saying you two are alike. Both in appearance and character.”

“*Ha!* Character?”

Shin Jonghak knew himself well enough to know his character didn’t resemble Shin Myungchul at all. Naturally, what Bell said sounded like an insult to his grandfather.

“I dare you to say that again—”

“I’m talking about Shin Myungchul before he went back in time.”

Shin Jonghak became speechless and took the bait. Bell couldn’t help but chuckle at Shin Jonghak’s cute reaction and slowly continued the tale.

“The world Myungchul originally lived in looked a lot different. Science and technology paled in comparison to this one, but could still be considered advancing. Devils had no room to interfere there, but Myungchul felt anxious. I guess that’s why he wanted to go back in time.”

Bell stopped as Shin Jonghak grabbed his Conqueror Spear.

“Shut your mouth,” Shin Jonghak coldly spoke.

“Shin Myungchul asked me.”

“What?” Shin Jonghak’s face distorted. To Bell, this side of him also resembled Shin Myungchul.

“He asked me to tell his grandson the story of his life, so you wouldn’t make the same choice.”

Shin Jonghak clenched his teeth and gripped his spear even tighter. Jin Sahyuk and Chae Nayun prepared to stop him at any moment.

Bell continued, “Myungchul made the first choice.”

He went back in time and allowed Baal to reach Earth.

“Most likely, you’ll be the one to make the second choice.”

Shin Myungchul left his final will in his grandson’s heart.

“Because...”

Rain entered through the broken window and dense demonic energy blew in along with the wind. The screams of civilians tore through the night sky. Demonic monsters had appeared after the earthquake.

“You might not know, but Shin Myungchul left everything to you. He knew his son didn’t have the talent for it.”

Shin Jonghak looked out the window. A pillar of golden light shot up to the sky and the cries of demonic monsters rang out. He could tell this light came from Kim Suho. With that, Shin Jonghak turned back to Bell.

“So, feel like hearing me out now?” Bell asked once again.

Chae Nayun quietly watched them, murmured whatever, and jumped out the window. She wanted Shin Jonghak to decide for himself. Of course, Jin Sahyuk stayed without paying attention to such things.

“*Haaa...*” Shin Jonghak glared at Jin Sahyuk and sighed in disappointment.

“Go ahead.”

He sat cross-legged on the floor while holding his spear and wouldn’t hesitate to use it if Bell lied.

Bell looked at him and recalled the day he met a man who looked just like Shin Jonghak. The day he met a violent, arrogant man living in discontent.

Chapter 337

The Stories of the Characters (2)

[Tower of Time]

They first met here.

— Are you the fairy of regression?

The man said as I opened my eyes. I couldn't say a word because being called a fairy shocked me. After all, no one with eyes would ever mistake me for a fairy.

— Answer me. Are you the fairy of regression?

However, the man persisted.

“Pft.”

Thanks to him, I didn't even feel the frustration and despair of reincarnating again. Of course, the man frowned at my laughter.

— You think this is funny?

Being suddenly summoned surprised me, but I quickly understood his circumstances. He must've climbed to the top of this tower alone and found the regression stone. He probably thought it would allow him to travel back in time as its name suggested.

— Who the hell are you and why did you pop out of the regression stone? I won't ask a third time. Answer!

The man raised his spear and his killing intent woke me up. I stopped daydreaming and surveyed the area. It looked unfamiliar, but I must've reincarnated inside the seed that Baal planted. The seed had

grown into this tower.

— I'll ask a third time. Who are you?

The man kindly gave me another chance. I smiled without replying like before. I didn't mean to smile, but it came out naturally when I saw his otherworldly appearance. I wandered across many worlds and his physical appearance ranked among the best.

— I'll count to three. One, two... two and a half...

I immediately noticed his strangeness.

— Two and a half... and a half... and a half...

I loosened up and raised my body. He flinched and stepped back as I stood up.

"I'll ask first."

— N-No, I'll be the one to ask...

"Where are we?" I asked him.

— The Tower of Time.

He muttered.

"Oh."

I had been summoned once again by a human's selfishness after destroying another world and aimlessly drifting through space. By now, I felt all too familiar with this development.

— It's your turn to answer. Are you the fairy of regression?

The man, Shin Myungchul, asked again. I slightly turned and closely examined him. His eyes shone like gems underwater. Even his long, unkempt hair couldn't conceal his good looks.

“I’m not a fairy, but a devil.”

I honestly replied. He didn’t seem taken aback in the slightest. Such a reaction surprised me.

— Fairies and devils are pretty much the same.

Shin Myungchul always possessed a strong character even before he went back in time. However, he lost himself in guilt and anger at being unable to protect his loved ones when I first met him.

— Devil of regression, can you send me back in time?

Shin Myungchul wished to change the past.

“It’s possible.” I nodded without much thought. He instantly smiled like a kid and approached as if to hold my hands in appreciation.

“But there’s a condition.”

— Condition? That’s fine. No matter what it is, I’ll...

“I will always be beside you once go back in time and I’m quite annoying.”

I took a more backhanded approach then. I didn’t think to stop or persuade him. I gave up before even trying. Perhaps I already resigned myself to this development. I knew a stranger like me wouldn’t be able to convince him.

— You will be beside me?

“That’s right. There’s nothing I can do if you don’t want that.”

Humans who chose to borrow a devil’s power always regretted it in the end as they watched their world crumble. They struck their chests and cried out in sorrow and anger.

— I don’t care.

I concluded that Shin Myungchul would end up the same.

“Great, but I need to warn you about a few things before we travel back in time.”

— Go ahead.

The young Shin Myungchul acted quite proud and arrogant. I had experienced all sorts of people across different worlds, so I ignored his flaws.

“The regression stone serves as a medium for summoning the devil Baal. It will transport him from the transcendental plane to this one. Baal will undoubtedly descend upon your world if you use the regression stone. That is the price to travel back in time. What you experience will not be a miracle, but a calamity that will destroy your world.”

— *Pft*, that doesn't matter.

As expected, Shin Myungchul acted selfishly like all the other regressors.

“You will regret it.”

However, one thing stood out about him.

— I won't. I'll just beat Baal up if he descends into my world.

Shin Myungchul possessed confidence befitting his strength. He grasped the regression stone without hesitation.

Like that, he became 17 years old again and returned to a world where his lover and family still lived.

Shin Myungchul cried tears of joy. He rapidly grew with his knowledge of the future. In just 2 years, he became a powerful hero capable of protecting his loved ones.

Three years later, Shin Myungchul married his lover. A year after that, he had a child that never existed in his previous life.

However, fate couldn't be changed so easily and his happiness didn't last forever.

Shin Myungchul's wife died from an illness not long after giving birth. He cried until his tears dried. His grief felt even stronger this time because of how long he loved her, but he needed to protect his son now.

Like that, 30 years flew by.

Shin Myungchul finally witnessed his son becoming a father. He named his grandson Shin Jonghak.

I had to prepare for Baal's descent, but watched over him most of the time. I found it quite fascinating and beautiful to see the once self-centered man become a grandfather.

Of course, I had no choice but to fulfill my duty as Baal's host. I met Yi Yeonjun, who caught Baal's attention, and formed the Chameleon Troupe. Then I also met kids like Yi Byul, Jain, and Kaita. I formed a family just like Shin Myungchul. I liked Yi Yeonjun because he reminded me of the person I loved in the past. I also liked Yi Byul simply because she looked cute. Jain's two-faced nature and Kaita's one-dimensional personality also appealed to me.

If possible, I wanted to stay with them as long as possible.

However, Baal didn't let me.

The first seizure came abruptly as Baal rampaged within me. He sensed my attachment to Earth and sought to destroy everything without descending through the demon realm gate.

Once enraged, Baal easily took over my body. However, his rampage ended in just a day after Shin Myungchul stopped him.

He beat up Baal as he once swore, but Baal chose to self-destruct like

a true villain. A third of Korea risked total destruction. Meanwhile, I watched Shin Myungchul's decision from within Baal's consciousness.

To my surprise, Shin Myungchul didn't hesitate in the slightest.

— Bell, let me ask you for one last favor if you can hear me. Tell Jonghak my story, so he won't become like me. Help him achieve what I couldn't. Jonghak is always saying he'll become a great hero. I believe him. He'll become the greatest hero of all time. Even greater than me.

Shin Myungchul left his will with me before forming a barrier with all his strength. He traded his life for millions of others. That was how the hero Shin Myungchul met his fate.

“What do you think?”

I finished my story and turned to Shin Jonghak. I had to summarize Shin Myungchul's tale because of my condition. Shin Jonghak should understand everything since I passed him my memories through magic power.

“Shin Myungchul's sacrifice is lauded in textbooks as the epitome of heroism, but he only took responsibility for his past selfishness.”

Shin Jonghak couldn't say anything. He slumped with a stiff expression and stared at the ground. I chuckled and placed my hand on his head.

“Myungchul left his inheritance in your body. You should know what to do.”

I couldn't tell if he was still listening, so I kept the last shocking truth to myself. Even I felt shocked when I found out.

“Sahyuk.”

Jin Sahyuk turned and I could see my reflection in her eyes. Demonic energy swayed around me and my eyes had turned red. I didn't have much time left.

“Are you ready?”

Jin Sahyuk nodded at my request. I endured the piercing pain and bitterly smiled.

“I’m sorry. I would explain more, but I don’t have time.”

The final truth... that this world was nothing more than a novel written by a certain man. That would be buried with me. I only found out after looking through Kim Hajin’s memories.

“It’s fine.” Jin Sahyuk got up with an expressionless face.

“Thanks.”

It had been far too long. It felt frustrating to find out that the four, five hundred years I suffered hadn’t even been mentioned in the damn novel. That didn’t matter anymore. I no longer cared.

“I just want to rest.”

After all, death would relieve me of everything.

* * *

Chwaaaaaa!

Yi Yeonjun swung his tentacles of magic power. They melted the ground and evaporated into the air.

I used every single gift and creation against him: *[Extraction]*, *[Complete Understanding of Spirit Power]*, the *[Random Consolidation System]*, *[Desert Eagle]*, and more. I always preferred quantity over quality.

Even so, I couldn’t penetrate his defense. The Desert Eagle rusted away, my armor broke, and aether shattered. All because the temperature fluctuated between scorching hot and freezing cold.

“You have fascinating abilities.”

Yi Yeonjun nonchalantly muttered amidst the piercing cold. He didn’t mean it as a compliment, but a cynical expression of contempt.

“Yours is even more fascinating.” My breath froze as I exhaled.

“...”

Yi Yeonjun twisted his lips.

“Huu...”

I barely kept my head above the water thanks to the Orb of Regeneration. I couldn’t win and purposely chose methods that couldn’t defeat him.

My chances would’ve been better if I attacked from a distance. I might’ve killed him before he even reacted. I had planned that until 3 hours ago. In the end, I chose to face him head-on.

“I’m curious about something.”

I managed to open my mouth despite my half-frozen lips. Sadly, Yi Yeonjun ignored me and shot his magic power again. The hot beam of magic power pierced my shoulder.

I used my gift, *[Constraints and Amplifications]*, to suppress the pain.

“I looked into your past.”

Yi Yeonjun finally showed a reaction and glared at me full of hostility.

“What you did to bring Yi Byul into the Chameleon Troupe, what you did to her parents to incite their fear, and how you turned her life into a living hell when she could’ve lived happily.”

I listed everything that I witnessed in the past, but not for Yi Yeonjun. I had no intentions of persuading him. This world no longer existed

only as a novel. The cliché of persuading a villain didn't appeal to me. After all, humans didn't change so easily.

"The reason Yi Byul's parents wanted to kill her. I saw it all."

I spoke for the person I believed was watching. I couldn't sense her and it would be a real bummer if she didn't come, but I believed in my luck.

"You must've enjoyed it."

Yi Yeonjun smirked at my words and I frowned. "Don't you feel guilty?"

"Of course not, Byul would have lived among trash forever if not for me."

Yi Yeonjun confidently replied and I scoffed in disbelief.

"Why did you do it?"

"I wanted to own her."

His voice sunk and he sounded stiff like a wooden block.

"People become easier to own when they break. That's all."

"..."

He acted like the perfect example of a two-dimensional villain I once read about in a writing guide. A character who couldn't change no matter what. Someone created for the sole purpose of being a villain.

"It's like you're a character in a novel."

I forced a smile at him. He shrugged and spoke.

"Now it's my turn. Why are you with Byul? What do you—"

“I love her,” I sincerely and confidently declared.

“Love?” Yi Yeonjun clenched his teeth.

“Yeah, you know what that is, right? *Ah*, maybe someone like you can't understand.”

I could hear his teeth grinding and our conversation ended there. Yi Yeonjun's magic power grew much more violent than before.

Chwaaa!

His magic power turned into a bundle of tentacles. I didn't dare to count how many as the grotesque strands rose into the sky and sunk to the ground before flying towards me.

Kwaaaa...

Countless tentacles blocked my view. I couldn't stop them and would probably die. I could still resurrect with my unique skill though.

Then I realized my luck had activated once again.

[Coincidentally, someone has heard and understood your true feelings.]
[Narrow Escape From Death (8/9) – Special stat, Accumulation of Luck, has partly unlocked!]

The flashing alerts informed me.

Chapter 338

The Stories of Characters (3)

Reality Manipulation allowed its user to interfere with the material world. Jin Sahyuk knew she could kill Bell with her authority. She just had to manipulate his body's material. He simply became a container for Baal and already lost his humanity. It wouldn't be too difficult to transform his body in this state.

“...”

However, Jin Sahyuk hesitated as she recalled old memories. She reincarnated into a boring world called Earth after her end in Akatrina. Her biological parents abandoned her before she could even memorize their faces. She went through the painful process of learning to walk and speak again at an orphanage.

Bell came to see her for the first time when she turned three and finally learned Earth's language.

“Oi.”

She called out to him and he slyly smiled like usual despite his tremendous pain.

“What? Got something to say?”

She silently stared at him. They had spent 25 years together. Perhaps 25 years meant nothing to someone like Bell, but that amounted to most of her life.

“I do.”

Bell became her teacher and helped awaken her authority. He acted like a male nanny and watched over her. He endured her temper and

selfishness without much complaint. Jin Sahyuk felt the need to say something she had never said before. Even if everything he did turned out to be an act for this moment.

“Thank you.”

“...”

Bell’s expression stiffened, but he soon playfully smiled again. He proudly looked at her.

“No, I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

Bell’s words served as the signal. Jin Sahyuk nodded and gathered her magic power. Now, she would finally grant Bell’s wish.

Guooooo...

Jin Sahyuk’s authority to dismantle reality gathered like a whirlwind. She swung her hand towards Bell like a spear.

Chwaak!

Her hand penetrated Bell’s chest. It pierced through his skin, broke his ribs, and reached his beating heart.

Jin Sahyuk looked into his eyes.

“...”

Bell met her gaze and waited for his end. She closed her eyes and inhaled. *One, two, three.* She counted in her head and opened her eyes again. Her entire body surged with magic power as she poured everything into one final move. Bell smiled at her for the last time.

“Please.”

Jin Sahyuk nodded. She had already made her decision and released her magic power into Bell without hesitation.

Guooooo...

Her authority enveloped him. The magic power tore apart his veins and dove deeper into his body. Soon, she reached the authority of Bell's magic power physique etched in his heart.

Jin Sahyuk poured all her magic power into Bell's heart to destroy it.

“...”

An unimaginable pain struck Bell, but he didn't scream or squirm. He only placed his hand on Jin Sahyuk's shoulder and remained calm throughout the process. He looked at her like a proud father.

Chwaaaaaa!

The magic power quickened and Bell's human shell fell apart. Patches of his skin turned to dust. His bones, muscles, nerves, and organs all faded as well.

“Goodbye.”

Jin Sahyuk said her last farewell. Bell didn't reply, but he looked like the happiest man ever. She wished for him to rest in peace and only remember the happiest memories.

However...

A tremendous amount of magic power exploded from where Bell disappeared. *Kwaaaaaa!* It immediately spread out of the mansion and formed a dome-shaped barrier.

The barrier surrounded not only Jin Sahyuk and Shin Jonghak, but the entire Leores plaza. Even so, Jin Sahyuk remained calm since she knew the owner of this magic power.

Baal.

— *Haaa...*

The strongest of the evil gods and the rank 1 devil. He finally broke free from his container and descended.

— I've waited for far too long.

Baal and Bell looked almost identical except for the horn on his forehead and his crimson eyes.

— So you're the one who granted my friend's wish.

His voice resounded unlike any human voice. Baal smiled at Jin Sahyuk. The evil god's presence felt overwhelming, but Jin Sahyuk stepped forward without being intimidated.

"It's your turn to keep your promise."

— Promise.

"That's right. Did you not hear about the promise?"

— Of course, I did.

Baal shook his head. Then he formed a rock and handed it to Jin Sahyuk.

— Take it. This stone will transport you to another dimension. A dimensional portal will appear once you pour your magic power into it. After all, your power is special."

"..."

Jin Sahyuk looked at the rock suspiciously, but it appeared authentic. According to Bell, Baal always kept his promises.

"By the way, what did you mean by friend? You considered Bell your friend?"

Jin Sahyuk asked as she slid the rock into her pocket.

— Yes, 693 years is a long time even for me. He's been with me all these years. I reckon that qualifies him as my friend.

“Then I assume you're sad?”

Jin Sahyuk sarcastically asked. The word friend bothered her. What kind of person would enslave his friend for 693 years?

— He served his uses as a friend, but that's okay. It's been long enough. He can go now. The one who truly wants to be with me is here.

Baal smiled and looked into the distance. His gaze traveled past the wall that Chae Nayun and Jin Sahyuk destroyed upon entering. She widened her eyes and looked in the same direction.

“...”

Yi Yeonjun slowly appeared from the dark. She noticed one of his arms had been torn off from a recent battle.

“What are you doing here? And where'd you lose your arm?”

Jin Sahyuk mockingly asked and Yi Yeonjun glared at her.

“I've been betrayed.”

“*Huh?*”

Jin Sahyuk couldn't help but frown at his random answer.

* * *

[England – Evandel's Domain]

— Valac's army is causing an uproar across Europe. Germany has decided to retaliate while Italy has chosen to respond more realistically.

— Next up is Spain. Astaroth's army has appeared outside the barrier.

— We have breaking news. Djinns are currently invading by sea. All citizens near the coast must evacuate.

Valac and the other hostile devils rampaged across the world. Ah Hae-In watched the news on her smartwatch when she heard the sound of a belt tightening around a waist and turned to the side.

"All done. I'm finished."

Evandel announced and clenched her fists.

Ah Hae-In carefully scanned the girl. The hat from Kim Hajin, the robe that improved its wearer's physical and elemental resistances, and her belt with defensive magic against enemy attacks. Everything looked perfect.

"I see you're all dressed up. Are you sure you can do it?" Ah Hae-In carefully asked.

Evandel's talent had fully bloomed, but she would always be a child who needed protection.

"Yeah! I can do it!"

Evandel confidently nodded despite her teacher's worries. She endured a long period of loneliness to build her domain for one reason. Evandel wanted to protect Rachel, Hajin, her friends, as well as all the good people and animals around the world.

"I see."

Ah Hae-In proudly nodded. "Then let's get ready."

"Okay!"

Evandel shouted and they both summoned their spirit beasts. The pair stared at the demonic monsters emerging from the horizon.

Kim Hajin and the others hadn't returned from the demon realm gate yet, so they would have to win without those heroes.

“Go.” Ah Hae-In muttered and the cardinal beast, azure dragon, appeared.

Grrrrr...

The azure dragon revealed his gigantic figure and placed Ah Hae-In on his head. Meanwhile, Evandel sat on a much smaller unicorn.

— Look, over there! It's the azure dragon!

— There's also a unicorn!

— W-Wow!

Reporters, drones, camera crews, heroes, and citizens who had all been waiting near Evandel's domain focused on the pair.

“Let's gooooo!” Evandel shouted at the center of this hopeful audience's attention. Her cute voice sounded full of determination.

Rumble!

Evandel's spirit beasts charged towards the villains on the other side of the ocean. All their footsteps merged into a giant roar that shook the earth.

* * *

[Demon Realm Gate – Republic of Leores After Baal's Descent]

“...!”

I opened my eyes and felt something soft against my back. The ceiling looked unfamiliar.

Gulp—

I swallowed hard and began thinking. I knew with certainty that I hadn't revived. Boss must've saved me and defeated Yi Yeonjun.

"You up?"

"Uaak!"

I turned towards the voice in surprise. My heart almost burst, but I sighed in relief. Jain sat next to the bed in her original appearance that I hadn't seen in a while.

"Yes, I'm awake. Long time no see, Jain."

"Yeah, it's been a while. I missed you. How are you feeling?"

"Fine. More importantly, where's Boss?"

She bitterly smiled and drew the curtain. Then she pointed outside the window. I became speechless because the scene looked like hell.

"What is that?"

A huge barrier surrounded Leores plaza where the transnational peace conference should've taken place. A dark storm raged and gargoyles roamed the sky with other creatures.

"It's a mess. I managed to escape with you, but they're all stuck in there. Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, Yun Seung-Ah, and Boss..."

"Has Baal descended?"

"Yeah." Jain casually nodded.

"It happened much quicker than we all expected. Bell's dead and Baal descended."

"..."

"Oh, and I heard about Yeonjun. I didn't know. Thanks for bringing

me to my senses. He almost tricked me too.”

I stared at Jain in a daze before turning back to Baal’s barrier.

“Is Boss in there?”

“Yeah, she’s probably waiting for you.”

Then I looked at the corner of the room where all my equipment lay: aether, the Black Lotus Uniform, Temujin’s Bow, and the pinnacle grade *[Ancient Hero Leoricus’ Exorcism Bow]*.

“I fixed all of them with the regeneration orb or whatever it’s called.”

“Thanks.”

I got up from the bed and tried to walk towards my gear.

“Sure. By the way, you have a quite nice body Hajin.”

Jain said something weird and I finally realized why something felt off. I had no clothes on.

“Ah...”

Thankfully, aether noticed my dilemma and flew towards me. It transformed into a piece of cloth and covered my most important parts.

“Cough. Kmmm.”

I awkwardly coughed and prepared to gear up. First, I wore my Black Lotus Uniform and placed the Desert Eagle into its holster. Finally, I turned to the two bows.

[Temujin’s Bow Blessed by Horus] [Ancient Hero Leoricus’ Exorcism Bow]

I hadn’t synthesized them yet.

“Synthesis.”

Now seemed like a good time.

[You have activated Lv.10 Synthesis.] [Fusing a pinnacle grade item with another pinnacle grade item...] [The success rate is extremely low...]

This would be like combining the two rarest items in a game. Therefore, the extremely low success rate didn't surprise me. My luck always overcame the impossible.

[Your luck has activated!] [A tremendous luck has increased the success rate!] [Young Dwarf's Dexterity has also activated!]

Golden confetti covered the system. As a result...

[Your skill has successfully synthesized the Black Lotus Bow from Temujin's Bow Blessed By Horus and Ancient Hero Leoricus' Exorcism Bow!] [You have created a world-class weapon with Young Dwarf's Dexterity. You have earned SP!]

The pair of bows clung to each other and transformed into an even more powerful artifact. Its name simply became the Black Lotus Bow. This one-of-a-kind artifact could only be made thanks to all my skills and gifts.

“...”

I scrutinized the bow's information.

“Wow. What's that? It looks good.” Jain exclaimed in admiration before I finished reading. I nodded with a faint smile.

“You're right. It is good.”

“Then, are you ready to go?”

I took a deep breath and nodded.

“Yeah.”

This could be the last battle. I no longer had any reason to conserve SP, stigma’s magic power, the god-slaying bullet, or anything else. I vowed to use everything.

“Let’s go and end this.”

Chapter 339

The Stories of Characters (4)

I walked to Baal's barrier with Jain. The surrounding area could only be described as chaos. The transnational peace conference's joyful atmosphere completely disappeared and key buildings like the republic president's residence had been swallowed up as well.

"It's only been a day since this barrier formed, but it consumed almost half the capital. Do you have any plans on how to deal with it?"

I shook my head at Jain's question. I didn't know anything about this setting since I never described Baal or his abilities in my novel.

"Then what are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure."

I checked my amount of SP and DP. I currently had 4030 SP and a tremendous amount of DP.

"Jain, do you know if this world has demon merchants?"

"*Hm?* Oh, I heard they're living around the outskirts of this continent. They might be on their way here considering what's going on. Why? Do you have extra DP to spend?"

"I do. I have almost a million."

Litrain became a world-renowned knight called the Knight of Brilliance thanks to my sponsorship. She earned me close to a million DP.

"How?" Jain's eyes widened.

“There’s something called a lucky bonus. I get an extra 20 DP every time I earn 100 DP. Anyways, that’s not important right now.”

I looked at the dome-shaped barrier piercing the sky and took out the *[Mystic Key]*.

“First, let’s go inside.”

“Mmm... Are you sure that key will work? After all, Baal made this barrier.”

I couldn’t blame her considering how tiny and insignificant this key looked.

“It should be able to partly break the barrier after I strengthen it.”

Several footsteps rang out from our right. Jain and I slowly turned and saw Arunheim’s knights rushing towards us.

“Who are they?”

Jain shrugged and their leader stepped forward.

“Can you really break through this barrier?”

The voice belonged to a woman and she took off her helmet. I immediately recognized her as Airun, the knight commander who ordered me to escort Harin.

She seemed to be on the verge of crying. No, I could see traces of tears around her eyes. She must’ve felt guilty because she couldn’t protect her lord.

“Yes, it should be possible.”

I took off my robe as I replied. Her eyebrows rose in shock when she saw my face.

“You are...”

“Let’s talk about that after we break through this barrier.”

I cut her off before she could finish. Then I cloaked the *[Mystic Key]* with aether and it grew slightly bigger.

“Can that really open the barrier?” Airun’s voice anxiously trembled.

“Yes.”

“Then please hurry. Our prince is waiting for us inside.”

Airun earnestly pleaded. I could feel her sincerity in wanting to protect Arunheim’s prince.

“Our prince...”

Her trembling hands touched the barrier. However, it instantly pushed her back.

“Got it.”

I added the *[Random Consolidation System]* and *[Constraints and Amplifications]* to the key. Then I shoved it into the barrier.

Tzzzt!

Sparks crackled when the two magic powers clashed. I infused stigma’s magic power into the key.

Kwaaaaa...

The barrier and the ground rumbled. A crack appeared around the key and the knights swallowed their saliva as I poured half of my remaining stigma.

Clang—

A sharp sound rang out and one side of the barrier crumbled.

“I-It opened!” Airun shouted ecstatically. She burst into tears with the other knights and they expressed their gratitude.

Honestly, their overreactions surprised me.

* * *

[United States of America – Leraje’s Devil Castle]

Leraje lounged around in her new home as she waited for her game. Thanks to her patience, America remained far more peaceful than Europe.

However, Leol’s employees felt more pressure than ever. They frequently kept themselves going by taking drugs and potions. Seven of them collapsed from stress, but they continued working without any rest. All for the one customer waiting for their work.

“Lord Leraje, the game is almost complete.”

Leol’s CEO, Varan, bowed before Leraje in a dark room. She looked down at him with bored eyes before skillfully typing on a keyboard.

— That’s good to hear. What type of game is it?

Varan glanced at the reply that Leraje typed.

“It’s a combination of training, battling, strategy, adventure, and travel. This game will surely be the greatest ever created.”

The countless hours his employees put in and the demons’ encouragement led to the final stage of development. Naturally, Varan had mixed feelings about it. He worried that Leraje might not like it, yet felt excited about what he believed would be this century’s greatest game.

— I see, but would a human be able to defeat me?

“How could a mere human accomplish such a feat.”

— I don't like imbalanced games.

The faces of the demons around the room turned sharp.

"I-It won't be." Varan quickly slammed his head on the ground.

"The game will have a raid system."

— Explain.

"No human is capable of defeating Lord Leraje in a one-on-one confrontation. I have personally seen the lord's overwhelming control, which has surpassed human capabilities. In our game, a level 1 expert may defeat a level 50 player depending on their level of control, so—"

— So humans will work together to defeat me. A true test of skill. I like that. I hate games that depend on luck.

"Y-Yes, of course."

The demons' expressions softened and Varan sighed in relief.

— But...

Varan almost fainted when he heard that word.

— You are wrong.

"Ah..."

Varan saw his life flash before his eyes and he became certain of his death. *Wrong*. He no longer had a way out after Leraje muttered such a word.

"L-Lord, please spare my life—"

— One human has defeated me.

“Pardon?”

Varan’s jaw dropped. Leraje nimbly moved her fingers and opened her record in a game called *[Gladiator of the Century]*. To Varan’s surprise, Leraje had several consecutive losses.

— I assume you can see this.

Varan’s head turned blank. He couldn’t believe someone could defeat this devil. Leraje became even stronger inside virtual reality because many experts on Earth like Heynckes and Chae Joochul didn’t know how to play games.

— His ID is Extra7.

Leraje pulled up Extra7’s player info.

— Find him for me.

Even the demons seemed shocked at their lord’s defeat.

— I witnessed unimaginable movements and game sense. I felt angry at my consecutive losses at the time, but I have much to learn from him now that I think about it.

The room became silent as Leraje explained. A devil admitted that she could learn from a human? This shocked Varan beyond belief.

— I would like to defeat him with my own hands now that I am more experienced.

Leraje faintly smiled as she typed her final sentence. One would be lucky to see her smile once in a hundred years. The demons in the room all felt their heart shake.

* * *

[Baal’s Barrier – Destroyed Mansion]

Baal left Shin Jonghak and Jin Sahyuk behind. Jin Sahyuk said Baal went to construct his castle and now would be their best chance to stop him, but Shin Jonghak sat in the corner without moving an inch.

He simply froze there without so much as a heartbeat. He seemed to have lost himself after the image of his respected grandfather shattered.

“Yo, idiot. Are you just going to sit there?”

Jin Sahyuk called him again. However, Shin Jonghak didn’t react in the slightest.

“*Tsk*, I’ve never seen anyone more pathetic,” Jin Sahyuk openly sneered.

“We found Lady Seraine! She’s safe inside the underground bunker!”

An urgent voice rang from outside the window. Shin Jonghak closed his eyes and just wanted to ignore everything.

“Open your eyes, fool.”

“*Ak!*” Jin Sahyuk stabbed his eyes with her fingers. He shot his eyes open and glared at her.

“You piece of... *Haa*.”

The usual Shin Jonghak would have cursed and swung his spear, but he only sighed and helplessly stumbled now.

“You don’t understand.”

He muttered as he reminisced. He only wanted to become a hero because of his grandfather. He always felt proud of himself because he descended from that man lauded as the greatest hero of all time.

“You don’t understand what I lived for. What I wished for.”

His faith had been shattered by the cold truth that Shin Myungchul invited Baal to this world.

Kwak!

Jin Sahyuk kicked his shoulder and he fell back without a sound. She clicked her tongue and spoke in frustration.

“He was the most heroic person among the fools who called themselves a hero.”

“...?”

“Your grandfather, I’ve seen him before while traveling with Bell.”

“What?”

Shin Jonghak’s expression stiffened because she had never mentioned it until now. Jin Sahyuk looked out the window and continued.

“Shin Myungchul risked his life to correct his mistake. That means he possesses the quality of a hero.”

Ssss— A faint vibration shook the barrier. Jin Sahyuk’s eyebrows went up when she saw it. She continued as she observed the barrier.

“So get up and fight. Didn’t Bell tell you? Shin Myungchul left something for you and Bell never lies.”

Ssssss. The vibration grew stronger and a small crack appeared in Baal’s barrier. Someone tried to break in and Jin Sahyuk quickly understood who.

“If you just want to sit there...”

She smirked and looked down at him.

“Go ahead and disgrace your grandfather’s name all you want. A man bigger than you has just arrived. Someone like you isn’t needed.”

“What?”

Shin Jonghak’s face distorted as Jin Sahyuk smiled and stared out the window. He slowly stood up after her provocation. Then he witnessed it himself. *Crack*— A crack appeared on Baal’s barrier.

“...”

His shoulders tensed. They continued observing the crack as Jin Sahyuk muttered.

“Look, he survives like a cockroach and always comes crawling back.”

Boom! An earth-shattering sound rang out and a part of the barrier crumbled. A certain man emerged from the rubble.

“People like that are surprisingly cool.”

Kim Hajin appeared with an army of knights. Even Shin Jonghak had to admit his entrance looked cool.

“Bullshit.”

Shin Jonghak snorted and felt an uncomfortable feeling in his chest. He knew it came from his distaste for Kim Hajin. It burned away all his despair and helplessness.

“He doesn’t look good no matter what he does.”

Shin Jonghak inwardly laughed and recognized his jealousy. Right, he felt jealous. He finally admitted to this feeling after all these years. After all, Bell said Shin Myungchul acted the same. He finally dropped his high and mighty attitude after learning about all his grandfather’s flaws.

“Why?” Jin Sahyuk asked with a mischievous smile.

“Can’t you tell from his average-looking face?” Shin Jonghak sneered. He never admitted to this jealousy that drove him to his current level.

“He doesn’t look as good as me.”

Finally, he picked up his Conqueror Spear again after wholeheartedly acknowledging everything.

Chapter 340

The Stories of Characters (5)

[Republic of Leores – Underground Bunker]

Meanwhile, Kim Suho headed to the capital's underground bunker while evacuating citizens. The bunker, which Yoo Yeonha designed, could accommodate most of them.

“Thank you, thank you...”

The citizens' tearfully expressed their gratitude. He smiled at them and headed to Yoo Yeonha's office. The nameplate on the door read, *[Bunker Operations Planning Office]*. Yoo Yeonha spoke on a radio inside.

“Did you just say someone breached the barrier's right side?”

This news surprised Kim Suho as well. Even he couldn't break Baal's barrier with his gift.

“*Mmm...* Got it. *Ah*, we're protecting Miss Seraine, so don't worry. Keep up the good work.”

Yoo Yeonha glanced at Kim Suho and turned off the radio.

“The barrier was breached?” Kim Suho spoke first.

“Yeah.” Yoo Yeonha had a rough idea of who destroyed it. Naturally, she sighed in relief.

I hadn't heard from him in a while and wondered if something bad happened. I guess he's alive and well.

“Who—”

KOOONG! The door swung open before Kim Suho could finish. They turned to the entrance and saw Aileen. She approached with an excited expression and shouted, "Black Lotus is here!"

Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha responded quite differently.

"What?"

"..."

Kim Suho's nostrils flared in surprise while Yoo Yeonha carefully examined their reactions. Aileen eagerly nodded and continued.

"Yes! Oh, and also Shin Jonghak."

Yoo Yeonha could no longer feign indifference. She asked while trying to conceal her interest.

"Jonghak is here?"

"Yeah, I just got a call from Yun Seung-Ah. He's with Jin Sahyuk or whatever her name was."

Jin Sahyuk's name made Yoo Yeonha feel uneasy and she silently turned to Kim Suho. Likewise, he became stiff as a dried fish.

"Kim Suho?"

Yoo Yeonha called him and he sighed.

"Uh... What were they doing together? Jin Sahyuk and Shin Jonghak?"

"How should I know? Seung-Ah said they went to the devil's castle."

Baal built a fortress at the center of his barrier. Currently, he gathered his strength inside to descend on Earth.

"Shouldn't we head there as well?"

“Yeah, we only have 2 days left. Let’s hurry.” Kim Suho nodded at Aileen’s question.

“Two days? How do you know?”

“The book said this world would be destroyed 3 days after Baal’s descent.”

However, a day had already passed. They only had 2 days left to somehow stop Baal from destroying this world and Earth.

“Let’s hurry for now.”

Kim Suho took out a potion and gulped it down. It might not be enough to relieve all his fatigue and injuries, but he couldn’t spare any time.

“Okay, let’s find Black Lotus and Jin Sahyuk first.”

Aileen smirked and grabbed Kim Suho’s hand. Then she immediately activated her skill, [*Teleport*]. Everything seemed to shake and Kim Suho closed his eyes. He opened them a moment later and saw the devil’s castle in the distance.

“Kim Suho?”

A disapproving voice rang out from somewhere. Aileen and Kim Suho turned around only to find the two people they just mentioned.

“Aileen, your teleport is shockingly accurate.”

“Y-Yeah?”

Kim Suho exclaimed in amazement, but Aileen only blinked and scratched her neck. All this took her by surprise as well.

“Did you two follow us?”

Jin Sahyuk and Shin Jonghak scowled at them from about 10 steps

away.

“*Huh?* No, we wouldn’t say we were...”

Kim Suho panicked for no reason. *Did those two get closer?* He recalled that they didn’t get along.

“*Hmm...* Whatever, you should get ready too.”

Jin Sahyuk calmly spoke despite Kim Suho’s strange behavior.

“Get ready for what?” Aileen asked.

Jin Sahyuk scoffed at the silly question and pointed to the devil’s castle. It used to be the president’s residence, but had now turned into Baal’s castle. Demonic energy surrounded it and its appearance became grotesque.

“We need to bring that castle down.”

“*Huh?* You?” Kim Suho’s eyes widened until they almost bulged out. The Jin Sahyuk he knew wouldn’t act like this. Not too long ago, she declared that she would destroy Earth if she couldn’t return to Akatrina.

“No.”

Jin Sahyuk shook her head with a cold smile. Kim Suho thought he made a momentary mistake, but her next remark shocked him even more.

“We’re doing this together.”

* * *

[Eastern Pandemonium]

Vassago built his colosseum in a city once called Harbin. This land shared its border with Russia and boasted a view of Korea to the

south.

The colosseum used a design from the demon realm and its magnificent size could be seen from both Korea and Russia. It became a symbol of terror for many. Today, a hero arrived at the colosseum of her own will.

“It’s big.”

Master rank hero, Jin Seyeon the Divine Archer, came to challenge Vassago. She looked around the colosseum in a daze.

“Only those who lack skills care about appearances.”

A heavy voice rang out from behind and she immediately turned around.

“It’s been a while, archer.”

As expected, Cheok Jungyeong also came. He broke into a big grin and Jin Seyeon also felt glad to see him for some reason. She softly smiled in return.

“I didn’t know we were close enough to share such a greeting.”

“Who cares? We can get to know each other from now on.”

Cheok Jungyeong shrugged and Jin Seyeon nodded in agreement. She had no idea what would happen, but felt confident Cheok Jungyeong wouldn’t betray her.

“Oh, right. You must know since you’re a master rank hero. Is it true Orden is still alive?”

Koong— Koong— Koong— Cheok Jungyeong walked barefoot and stood next to her. Their height difference seemed to be at least 40 centimeters. Jin Seyeon had to tilt her head so much her neck hurt.

“Well, that would mean we’re quite close to Orden right now if he’s

still alive.”

Jin Seyeon answered without much thought. One could reach Vladivostok after a long walk east of the colosseum. Rumors about Orden originated from there. Cheok Jungyeong raised his eyebrows, somewhat dissatisfied by her answer.

“That’s not what I asked. I want to know if he’s still alive.”

“The residents of Vladivostok seem to think so. They worship Orden.”

“Worship?”

“Yes. According to them, it’s all thanks to Orden that they can live in peace. Vladivostok has long been abandoned, but they don’t have to worry about monster invasions.”

“*Huh...* So it’s true Orden’s been hunting monsters by himself?”

“I’m not sure. It could be someone else. Maybe a hidden expert like Black Lotus.”

Jin Seyeon shrugged and Cheok Jungyeong couldn’t help but chuckle.

“*Pft*, alright. Whatever, I didn’t come here to chat.”

“I agree.”

They stood next to each other and stared at the arena. Many others also observed from a distance, including the Chameleon Troupe members who secretly followed Cheok Jungyeong. Vast Expense openly exuded his presence, so Cheok Jungyeong stepped into the ring and took a deep breath. Then he yelled at the top of his lungs.

“*Oi*, old man!”

His voice shook the surroundings as he enthusiastically called out Vast Expense.

“Aren’t you going to come out!”

His cry echoed through the colosseum, but Vast Expense didn’t respond and only watched from afar.

“Well, it’s pretty obvious what that greedy old man wants.”

Cheok Jungyeong muttered in discontent. Vassago declared that he would reward the victor with any wish. Vast Expense probably wanted to ask for immortality.

“Never mind those cowards. Let’s go first.” Cheok Jungyeong tapped Jin Seyeon’s shoulder. She seemed hesitant and looked around. However, she couldn’t detect Black Lotus’ presence anywhere.

“...”

Did Cheok Jungyeong come alone? Perhaps Black Lotus also entered the demon realm gate? Jin Seyeon concealed her disappointment and began walking.

“I guess you aren’t called the Divine Archer for nothing. *Bwahaha*. Oh, by the way—”

Cheok Jungyeong beamed in satisfaction because of her boldness and pulled out a card. Jin Seyeon read the words on it, *[Invitation Letter to the Love Room]*.

“What’s this?”

“A card that allows me to summon one of my friends. I know who you’re looking for, so let’s get along.”

“...”

He surprisingly had more tact than she thought. Jin Seyeon felt embarrassed he read her mind, but soon nodded with a smile.

“Good idea.”

As the saying went, the end justifies the means.

“Cool. Now, let’s go.”

“Yes.”

Jin Seyeon and Cheok Jungyeong walked into Vassago’s lair together.

* * *

[Republic of Leores]

Airun and her knights began fighting monsters as soon as they entered the barrier. They wielded their swords to find their prince. On the other hand, Jain and I left since I didn’t have any strength left to fight. I consumed most of stigma just to break the barrier.

— Boss, can you hear me?

I sent her a message, but she didn’t reply for a long time. *Did something bad happen?* Her voice flowed into my ears as I worried.

— I hear you, Hajin.

She sounded faint and frail as if she had been crying.

— Where are you?

— Sorry, I’d like to be alone for a while.

I never imagined Boss could sound so weak and pitiful. She refused to meet, so I could only sigh.

— Okay, rest well. Just for today because I’ll come by tomorrow.

— Thank you.

Boss whispered.

— Sure.

I ended our mental transmission. Boss seemed to be struggling, but only her safety mattered. We could fix everything and heal as long as she lived. I felt relieved when...

“Oh, you’re here!”

Someone grabbed me and I turned around to see Shimurin. She looked at Jain and me with a big grin.

“I see... You’re with a woman disguised as a man today.”

“*Huh?* Oh, *haha.*”

Shimurin immediately saw through Jain’s disguise and Jain stepped back in surprise.

“Why are you here, Shimurin?”

“Why do you think? I also have some questions for him.”

Shimurin pointed at the devil’s castle with a solemn expression.

“I believe he possesses essential knowledge for dimensional migration.”

“*Ah...*”

Once again, Shimurin’s instinct proved correct. Baal had confidently stated he could send Jin Sahyuk back to her native dimension.

— Hey, are you also inside the barrier?

Chae Nayun’s voice suddenly flowed into my ears through her *[Infinite Communication]*. Her voice sounded clear, which meant she wasn’t far.

“What...”

I widened my eyes and looked around. Then I finally realized the situation. Yun Seung-Ah, Chae Nayun, Kim Youngjin, Yohei, Kim Horak, Yi Youngjin, Airun, all the knights, and even civilians armed with shabby swords and sickles. Everyone fought against Baal's monsters.

“...”

I looked at Jain and Shimurin, who both mischievously smiled.

“We can spare some time.” Jain whispered to me.

— Okay, listen. We need your help since you're good at these types of battles. Their numbers are endless...

I heard Chae Nayun's nervous voice and stored my bow away.

“Well then.”

I pulled out the Desert Eagle with plenty of ammunition, including the basilisk bullets. *Kiik— Kiik—* I transformed it into a heavy machine gun with its muzzle pointed towards the sky. It had been a while since I used this form and each bullet would be as powerful as a bomb.

“We'll talk after taking care of this.”

— It's me who's shooting right now.

I messaged Chae Nayun before pulling the trigger.

Then I fired away.

Chapter 341

The Stories of the Characters (6)

[Republic of Leores]

“Whew...”

Chae Nayun heaved a sigh and the children surrounding her cried. They all stood on the remains of a crumbled building. A wooden plaque on the ground read, *[Orphanage]*.

“Um...”

One of the children approached Chae Nayun with shaking legs and tried to speak.

Krrrr!

“Ah!”

However, she fell flat on the ground after a demonic beast growled.

“Don’t worry.”

Chae Nayun reassured them as she turned around. Demonic beasts that resembled a wolf, an octopus, and an 8-handed humanoid stared at her with killing intent.

“I’ll protect all of you.”

Chae Nayun formed a barrier around them with her magic power. She didn’t specialize in barriers, so it consumed even more of her magic power. Still, it would be better than one of them getting hurt.

— *Krrrr!*

The demonic wolf beast shot forward and Chae Nayun swung her sword at its head. She cleanly severed it in half.

— *U-Uwoah!*

— Y-You can do it!

The children cheered from inside the barrier when she cut down the beast. Hearing them gave her an energy boost, but more annoying monsters appeared.

— *Kieeeeeek!*

A loud screech descended from the sky and she looked up.

— *Kieeek!*

— *Kieeek!*

Dozens, no, hundreds of flying demonic beasts gathered.

“I’m not good at aerial battles.”

Chae Nayun had to infuse more magic power into her sword to increase its length. She didn’t find that difficult, but worried about the children. She could very well destroy the barrier and even kill them if she accidentally swung her blade in the wrong direction.

— We believe in you!

— Don’t die!

Their heartwarming encouragement seemed to provoke the demonic birds.

— *Kieeek!*

The birds loudly screeched and shot down.

“—!”

Chae Nayun gathered magic power in Balmung and swung in a huge arc. Balmung's blade spread out like a fan and obliterated everything in its path.

Something suddenly shot to the ground from a distance. It left behind a curved trail without a sound. She could only think of gunfire from a certain man.

Kwaaaaa!

A thunderous clap boomed after a brief silence. The sound of gunfire arrived after the bullets.

Kwaaaaa!

The bullets left behind trails that forked into multiple paths. They traveled faster than sound and the impact only rang out after they already pierced the demonic beasts.

“*Whew.*”

Chae Nayun stabbed Balmung into the ground and leaned against it. Demonic beasts still surrounded her, but her intuition told her this 24 hour battle would soon end.

Kwaaaaa!

The bullets decimated all the demonic beasts and seemed to have a mind of their own as they freely curved to strike countless targets.

Chae Nayun sighed in relief and knew her ally would never miss. She could finally rest now.

“Come here.”

She dismantled her barrier and gathered the children. They trembled in fear at the indiscriminate shooting, but soon realized that wasn't the case. Chae Nayun lay flat on the ground and collected her breath.

“Let's rest a bit.”

The children hugged each other and closed their eyes. Chae Nayun sat in the center and gently stroked their hair while reassuring them.

30 minutes later...

Whish— The endless barrage of bullets finally stopped. A gust of wind tickled Chae Nayun's shoulders and she gazed at the sky. It still looked dark because of Baal's barrier, but no demonic beast remained.

“It's over.”

Chae Nayun chuckled. She fought all day, but Kim Hajin ended it in just 30 minutes. She couldn't help but praise his gift.

— Is it over?

She messaged him for confirmation.

— Yeah, more or less.

He replied about a minute later.

Chae Nayun closed her eyes and grinned. She could hear the children breathing in her arms and felt a great sense of achievement. Protecting them had been hard, but worth it.

— Hey...

She sent another message as her heart rate slowed from the exhaustion.

— What's up?

— Thanks.

Kim Hajin didn't respond right away. A long silence passed before a few words came back.

— Don't say that.

Chae Nayun laughed at his words. She knew what he meant. Like a fool, he always saw himself as someone to be hated.

So she didn't say anything.

She looked at the children in her arms, recalled the people she saved during the day, and everyone who lost their lives. Chae Nayun felt like she finally understood now.

Chae Jinyoon would've become a devil and killed countless people if Kim Hajin didn't kill him. Her brother would've been forced to commit murder without salvation.

She understood all this, but didn't voice it. Instead, she changed the topic.

— Where are you going now?

— Isn't that obvious?

Chae Nayun nodded. The final villain behind all the devils on Earth, Baal. She clenched her teeth.

— That bastard Baal. He's the one responsible for the rift between us. Let's storm into his castle and beat him up.

“Yeah.”

“*Huh?* What?”

Chae Nayun's ears suddenly perked up. She heard a voice from far away, not a mental transmission or [*Infinite Communication*], but a real

voice.

She quickly turned to the east and spotted a building in the distance. Her intuition roared that Kim Hajin was there. He wouldn't run away this time if she went. He couldn't.

"Pft." She grinned from ear to ear before turning back to the children.

"I'm going to sleep first before heading there. Go on ahead."

Kim Hajin didn't reply since she spoke aloud. She lay on the ground with a smile and looked at the sky.

"I'm thankful, but I can't thank you. I like you, but I can't like you. It's still like that for me."

Chae Nayun murmured to herself.

* * *

Jin Seyeon and Cheok Jungyeong arrived at the colosseum's waiting room. Vassago's servant personally guided them to a fancy table with luxurious chairs. Both of them took a seat.

"Oh?"

Jin Seyeon exclaimed in surprise. She had never experienced such comfortable chairs that hugged her like this.

"Lord Vassago is a renowned collector. Every item our guests see and use are masterpieces."

Jin Seyeon coughed in embarrassment, but Cheok Jungyeong only laughed disdainfully.

"Way to act high and mighty with such cheap furniture. The stuff we have in our hideout is thousands of times better."

"...!"

Cheok Jungyeong only meant to make a snarky remark, but the servant couldn't overlook it. His expression viciously contorted, his shoulders shook, and his stomach boiled with anger. He felt a strong urge to kill Cheok Jungyeong, but barely held himself back. The lord didn't like his challengers disappearing.

"Please refrain from such lies. This colosseum is under our lord's control, who may be watching at all times."

"I'm not lying, you hunchback weasel. Have you been to our hideout? Have you sat in our chairs or lay in our beds?"

The Chameleon Troupe's hideout only consisted of furniture handcrafted by Kim Hajin. Their furniture felt far better than the ones here.

"..."

The servant became speechless. Jin Seyeon spotted the fury in his cold expression and quickly covered Cheok Jungyeong's mouth.

"*Ahem*, thank you for guiding us."

Even so, the servant didn't stop glaring at Cheok Jungyeong. Of course, Cheok Jungyeong didn't shy away from battles, much less a staring contest. He proudly smiled at the servant and only thought about relieving his boredom by fighting.

— Let it go.

A voice rang out from the ceiling and startled them. The servant immediately retracted his anger and knelt.

"My apologies, Your Highness."

Cheok Jungyeong looked at the ceiling and the voice rang out again from the same place.

— What you said catches my attention. Every item in my possession is of the finest quality, but you say they're lacking?

Vassago wasn't a perverted collector like Baal, but a devil who specialized in discovering treasures. Cheok Jungyeong's words sounded interesting.

"I'm saying the stuff in our hideout is better."

Cheok Jungyeong confidently declared. The servant jumped in shock while Vassago remained silent. The Chameleon Troupe's furniture originated from dwarves, one of the rarest races with the best craftsmanship. Vassago's journey across many dimensions allowed him to obtain several dwarven items, but he only possessed weapons. Dwarves only crafted weapons, but not Kim Hajin.

"Rather than that, you sound more feminine than I expected."

Cheok Jungyeong changed the subject and grew curious about Vassago's gender. The silvery voice from the ceiling sounded like a woman.

— Devils don't have genders. Rather, it depends on the incarnation body. I am indeed a woman right now.

Vassago acted generously, but sounded discontent.

— I would love to see the furniture in your hideout if you leave this place alive.

"*Kuhahaha*. Great, I'll personally bring your head to our hideout and show you around."

— Good, I hope that confidence isn't just the natural arrogance of humans.

Vassago's voice cut off and the servant glared at Cheok Jungyeong one last time before leaving.

"Looks like our theory is correct," Jin Seyeon seriously muttered.

"What theory?"

“Devils are naturally more obsessed with things than humans. Think about it. Djinnns are humans influenced by devils to pursue their desires, so devils should be the incarnation of desire.”

“So what?”

Cheok Jungyeong asked with a frown. Jin Seyeon clenched her fists and looked at him. She sent him a mental transmission in case Vassago might be listening.

— It might be possible to defeat devils without fighting them. All types of tricks can be used.

* * *

[Baal's Devil Castle]

Kim Suho entered the first floor of Baal's castle. It only consisted of stairs despite the eerie atmosphere. They didn't encounter any traps or obstacles, so he observed Jin Sahyuk instead of worrying about enemies.

After about 20 minutes...

“Do you have a plan to kill Baal?”

Jin Sahyuk suddenly asked. Kim Suho flinched at the unexpected question before coughing and seriously replying.

“I'll cut him down. That's it for now.”

They only had two days left and not enough time to form a detailed plan. Kim Suho simply believed in himself and his sword, Misteltein.

“What about you? Do you have a plan?” Aileen asked from next to them. She floated in the air with Spirit Speech because she wanted to remain at eye level with them. Jin Sahyuk suddenly stopped, which caught all of their attention.

“You do? Then tell us.”

Aileen urged the silent Jin Sahyuk, who looked back and forth between them.

“I’m going to ask Black Lotus.”

Kim Suho, Aileen, and Shin Jonghak all became shocked. Shin Jonghak looked dissatisfied while Kim Suho and Aileen seemed curious more than anything else.

“You’re going to ask him? How?” Aileen asked.

“He’ll fire an arrow at the devil’s castle when I send the signal. If it’s him, he should be able to destroy the entire castle.”

“W-What? You think that’s possible? Even my teleportation didn’t work here. That’s why we’re running up, remember? Why are we even climbing if that’s possible? We can just wait for Black Lotus to destroy the castle and...”

“Quiet, I know he can. He’ll destroy the castle from the outside, but we have to take care of what’s inside.”

Jin Sahyuk remained serious despite Aileen’s sarcastic comments.

“...”

Kim Suho kept staring at her and couldn’t understand why Jin Sahyuk trusted Black Lotus so much. He couldn’t understand how Jin Sahyuk trusted anyone at all.

“Jin Sahyuk, what’s your relationship with Black Lotus?”

He asked a reasonable question.

“What?”

Surprisingly, Jin Sahyuk grew mad and muttered, “Kim Suho, you

bastard. You've grown quite arrogant!"

However, she suddenly smirked.

"Actually, I have a relationship with Kim Hajin rather than Black Lotus."

"Huh?"

Kim Suho immediately became speechless. He wasn't sure what he just heard, but Jin Sahyuk said something even more provocative than before.

"Kim Hajin has complicated feelings for me. So much so that even I find it troubling."

She didn't completely lie since those feelings came from Kim Hajin's synchronization.

"..."

"..."

Her words impacted them more than she expected. Even Shin Jonghak and Aileen became speechless.

"That's all I'm saying. Is that so surprising?"

Jin Sahyuk chuckled to herself and continued climbing the stairs. Her steps felt more poised and elegant now.

Chapter 342

Final Banquet (1)

[Baal's Castle]

Kim Suho continued to climb the endless spiral staircase. He kept mulling over what Jin Sahyuk said 2 hours ago.

Kim Hajin has complicated feelings for me. So much so that even I find it troubling. You would all be shocked if you knew how Kim Hajin felt.

Kim Suho couldn't understand what she meant and called Shin Jonghak.

"Shin Jonghak, do you know anything about it?"

"About what?"

"What Jin Sahyuk said."

Shin Jonghak shook his head.

"No clue. I only followed her here, but I've seen that woman warmly staring at Kim Hajin before."

"What? Really?"

"Don't worry about it, Suho. I'm sure she's lying. Why would Fenrir like that crazy woman?"

Aileen interrupted them. Kim Suho thought the same, but Jin Sahyuk usually never joked. She considered herself royalty and joking didn't suit her dignity.

“Rather than that, I’m curious when we’ll reach the end of this staircase.”

Aileen unhappily crossed her arms. As she said, the group had been climbing for almost 3 hours without an end in sight.

“Oi! Black-haired girl!” Aileen called Jin Sahyuk, who stopped and turned around.

“Are you sure we’re going the right way?”

“Who knows?” Jin Sahyuk shrugged irresponsibly.

“What?” Aileen scowled, but Jin Sahyuk simply smirked.

“What other choice do we have? It’s not like we can just shout for Baal to come out. Let’s keep going. I’ll send a mental transmission to Black Lotus.”

“Mental transmission? To Black Lotus?”

“Yep.”

Jin Sahyuk nodded and sent a mental transmission to Kim Hajin. She sent it in a rather unique manner using Reality Manipulation.

— I’m in Baal’s castle with Kim Suho. You stay outside and don’t enter. Do as I say if you want to save the world.

Kim Hajin replied about 3 minutes later.

— Why?

He bluntly asked. Jin Sahyuk inwardly laughed at his cute reaction while Aileen’s loud voice rang out from behind.

“Come on! How long do we have to keep—”

“Oh, there it is.”

Jin Sahyuk interrupted her and pointed to a spot on the spiral staircase. They all turned to look.

“*Huh?* You’re right. It really is there, but why didn’t we see anything a moment ago.”

Aileen’s eyes widened at the huge gate that suddenly appeared.

“I’ll enter first.”

Shin Jonghak rushed forward when he saw the gate. He hopped up 3 steps at a time until he reached it. Jin Sahyuk smiled at his eagerness.

Soon, all of them reached the ogre-sized gate. Shin Jonghak stared at Jin Sahyuk. She simply nodded and he grabbed the knob on the right. Kim Suho grabbed the knob on the left and they pushed forward together.

Kiik—

The giant gate opened and a brilliant light shone from the other side. They could hear classical music and blinked at the dazzling light. All their thoughts froze at the unexpected scene before them.

“Where is this?” Aileen muttered as she scanned the place. It looked like a banquet hall with a fancy chandelier and a sumptuous feast. Well-dressed men and women danced to the tune of classical music.

“There he is.”

Jin Sahyuk spotted a certain man among the crowd while the others stood confused. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak followed her gaze while Aileen became preoccupied with a plate of fancy chocolates.

“That’s Yi Yeonjun, the Chameleon Troupe’s former boss.”

The moment Jin Sahyuk mentioned this...

“What?” Aileen’s eyes shot open and she turned to Yi Yeonjun.

“That bastard... He’s really alive?”

Aileen also had an ill-fated relationship with him. He sat on a chair next to the balcony and looked down at them.

* * *

[Demon Realm Gate – Baal’s Barrier]

I stood in front of Baal’s castle with Jain and Shimurin. I used up most of my bullets to kill all the demonic beasts inside the barrier. Rachel, Yun Seung-Ah, and the others should arrive soon as well.

“Let’s go in.”

As I prepared to enter...

— I’m in Baal’s castle with Kim Suho. You stay outside and don’t enter. Do as I say if you want to save the world.

Jin Sahyuk’s mental transmission flowed into my ears and I paused.

“Hm? What’s up?”

Jain curiously tilted her head.

“Uh... Hold on. I just received a strange message.”

I sent Jin Sahyuk a reply.

— Why?

However, she didn’t answer. I waited for a few minutes and contemplated ignoring her, but the changed Jin Sahyuk wouldn’t lie to me.

“Let’s wait a bit more.”

I spread aether out like a mat and sat on the ground. Jain and Shimurin also sat next to me. Jain yawned while Shimurin took out a scroll.

“Is that the dimension scroll?”

I looked at it with keen interest and Shimurin nodded with a grin.

“This scroll can summon a portal connecting two dimensions. It’s still incomplete and unsafe. The portal isn’t big enough either. I still have a lot to fix. Why? Do you want to give it a go?”

“...”

I stared at the scroll and a brilliant idea flashed across my mind.

“Let me test something.”

I took out two pieces of paper.

“What’s that?” Shimurin tilted her head.

“They’re just pieces of paper for now.”

I activated settings intervention and added *[Link]*, *[Recording]*, and *[Durability]*. I also named the papers *[Messenger]*.

[You have spent 103 SP to change the settings of objects.] [Your luck has activated.] [Item, Messenger, has increased in rank.] [Item, Messenger, has been strengthened.]

“Now it’s a messenger.”

“A what?” Shimurin raised her eyebrows and Jain also looked over with interest.

“A messenger. Write something on one paper and the same will appear on the other.”

I demonstrated Messenger's function and Shimurin nodded.

"So that's what it is. You want to send this to your world?"

"Exactly."

"*Hmm.*"

Shimurin rubbed her chin in thought and continued after about 30 seconds.

"The paper will likely burn up while crossing over."

"That's fine. This paper is quite durable."

It should withstand being burnt since I added [*Durability*]. I even received a lucky bonus.

"You're that confident? This scroll might look tiny, but it's expensive enough to be a national treasure."

"Just do it. Who cares about money when the world is at risk?"

"Well, that's true."

Shimurin coughed and tore the scroll in half. The grand magician channeled her magic power and a fist-sized portal appeared in the air.

"Alright, Kim Hajin. It's your turn now."

"Got it."

I sent stigma's magic power into the portal and set the coordinates to Evandel's cabin.

"Done. I'm going to give it a go now."

I wrote a message on the paper, folded it into a paper airplane, and

threw it into the portal. The paper airplane practically flew like a real one thanks to my Master Sharpshooter gift.

“Wow, how cool. So we just have to wait now?”

Jain muttered, but Shimurin and I only stared at the remaining piece of paper.

Then...

— We found Yi Yeonjun in a banquet hall that appears to be the first stage. You wait outside and destroy Baal’s castle with an arrow when I give the signal. I know you can do it.

Jin Sahyuk belatedly replied.

“What’s she talking about?”

I complained out loud. Shimurin and Jain curiously looked at me as I sent her a reply.

— Are you crazy? How am I supposed to destroy Baal’s castle?

— You can do it.

— No way.

Even Baal’s barrier could only be partially destroyed with the *[Mystic Key]*.

Wait... the [Mystic Key]?

— You should be able to do it. Immediately shoot and destroy the castle at my signal.

Jin Sahyuk ignored me and firmly commanded.

Evandel returned to her domain with Ah Hae-In.

“TV, TV...”

She happily hummed as she turned on the cabin's TV.

— Valac's army has retreated from Europe.

A timely report of the day's news came out.

— Duchess Ah Hae-In and her disciple led humanity to their first victory.

They successfully stopped Valac's army from advancing. Evandel and her unicorn commanded 5000 spirit beasts as though they shared one mind while Ah Hae-In fully utilized the cardinal guardians to force Valac's retreat.

— The streets of Europe are filled with people cheering for the two magicians.

“Oooh, look Hayang. We did good!”

Evandel watched the news with sparkling eyes. She felt excited and proud about her achievements being broadcasted around the world.

— We captured footage of a black wolf defeating Valac's adjutant. Let's take a look.

“Fenrir, Fenrir! Come over here! They're praising you on TV!”

Evandel excitedly hugged Fenrir. The wolf maintained an indifferent act while sneaking glances at himself on TV. *Kwaaaaaaa!* A house-sized wolf stormed forward and crushed several demons.

“So cool!”

— Krrr.

Fenrir shrugged at Evandel's cheering.

“Hahaha.”

Ah Hae-In chuckled and left Evandel to enjoy her time with the spirit beasts. She turned on her smartwatch, which she had switched off during the war. Messages from the association stormed her inbox.

[Demon Realm Gate – Kim Suho, Aileen, Yun Seung-Ah, Shin Jonghak, Rachel, Yoo Yeonha, and others...] [Valac – Ah Hae-In] [Leraje – Game to be released next Monday] [Astaroth – Leore, Kim Hwang, Yi Heejoon, and 13 other 8 star magicians] [Vassago's Colosseum – Jin Seyeon, Vast Expanse, and others...]

This report contained the activities of various heroes. Ah Hae-In spotted Rachel's name on the list and looked at Evandel clapping like a seal while watching the news.

“Cute...”

A faint smile emerged on Ah Hae-In's face. She worried when Kim Hajin and Rachel left, but that seemed unnecessary now. *Tirring!* She received another message as she watched Evandel playing.

[Duchess Ah Hae-In, when will you introduce your disciple to the world? Everyone is curious. Earth needs an icon of hope.]

It came from the association again and they kept pestering about Evandel like usual. A 10 year old genius magician who could wield an army of spirit beasts. Evandel perfectly suited their icon of hope.

“...”

Ah Hae-In ignored them and turned off her smartwatch. Suddenly, a paper airplane flew in from the window.

“What's this?”

Ah Hae-In frowned and grabbed it. Her face immediately stiffened when she touched it because of the trace of magic power on it. She quickly opened the airplane to check its contents.

[Evandel, are you doing well? It's me, Hajin. We can talk by writing on this paper. I miss you.]

“...!”

This message undoubtedly came from Kim Hajin.

Chapter 343

Final Banquet (2)

[Leores – Underground Bunker]

Rachel, Yun Seung-Ah, Chae Nayun, and other members from Earth returned to the underground bunker. The people inside cheered when they arrived. Airun and the republic's knights smiled as they shook hands with the citizens. The group headed to the office to meet the person in charge.

Yoo Yeonha greeted them and looked back and forth between the knights and secret service members.

“There's too many of you for this small place.”

Six secret service members and 26 knights entered the room with hundreds of knights waiting outside.

“...”

Airun sent her subordinates a look. They took the hint and left. Only Rachel, Chae Nayun, Airun, Kim Youngjin, Yi Yeonghan, and Kim Horak remained.

“Huuu...”

Yoo Yeonha didn't feel happy about an outsider like Airun staying, but greeted the important character with a smile anyways.

“Well done, everyone. However, we don't have time to rest. Next, we —”

“Where's Kim Suho?” Chae Nayun interrupted her.

“Did he go to the bathroom?”

She blinked with an innocent look. Yoo Yeonha coughed before immediately replying.

“He went to Baal’s castle with Lady Aileen.”

“What? Already?”

“Yes, Fenrir was going to end the war with the demonic beasts anyways.”

Yoo Yeonha faintly smiled. Kim Hajin objectively performed the best in war. Kim Suho could cut down dozens of enemies with one swing, but Kim Hajin could kill hundreds with a click.

“Sorry, but where’s our prince?”

Airun urgently interrupted as they talked about Fenrir, Baal, and whatnot. Yoo Yeonha stared at her before taking out 17 small bottles from her drawer.

“There’s a large castle in the middle of the barrier. We call it Baal’s castle. The prince is probably there. Here, take this.”

“Miracle herbs?” Rachel muttered when she saw the plants inside the bottles. She could feel the energy of elementals from them.

“That’s right. We looked all over the country and found only 17. Taking it will recover your energy within 2-3 hours.”

She wanted them to get going as soon as possible. They just returned from hours of battle, but the situation demanded it. The 7 of them took the bottles and consumed the herbs. Then they stored the remaining 10 in their pockets.

“Give some to Kim Suho and Aileen when you meet them. They left before I had the chance. You can use the rest during emergencies.”

Yoo Yeonha took out a suitcase and placed it on the desk. She took out several more. *Koong. Koong. Koong. Koong.* The 7 members curiously stared at Yoo Yeonha and the 7 suitcases.

“These are treasures used for exorcism. I stole them from their original owners, but that’s not important right now. Use them when you reach the castle.”

They all hesitated. Not about the stolen goods, but they felt hungry.

“Hurry, I have to talk to others. This bunker has over 200 people and I’m busy taking care of everything. Your hunger will also disappear when you consume the miracle herb.”

Yoo Yeonha urged the heroes and practically forced them out with the suitcases.

* * *

[Baal’s Castle – Banquet Hall]

“Shoot.”

Tk— Two individuals clashed with their toes. Aileen furrowed her brows, but Kim Suho continued with another step.

“Damn it. *Argh.*”

Soon, their feet tangled once more as music flowed in the air. Their minds wandered all over the place as they danced.

“Why do we have to do this?” Aileen gritted her teeth and asked.

“Just wait until they’re done talking.”

Kim Suho glanced at the banquet hall’s 2nd floor. There, Yi Yeonjun stared at Jin Sahyuk and Shin Jonghak.

“*Agh*, when will this end?”

Aileen and Kim Suho had to dance because of the rules in Baal's castle. Jin Sahyuk could manipulate reality and Shin Jonghak remained unaffected for some reason. Everyone else would be kicked out if they didn't follow the rules.

"*Shhh...* Be quiet, so we can hear."

Kim Suho danced half-heartedly and focused on the 2nd floor where Jin Sahyuk and Yi Yeonjun met face-to-face.

"We meet again."

Her eyes narrowed at him like a fox.

"..."

Yi Yeonjun remained silent and simply looked back and forth between Jin Sahyuk and Shin Jonghak. He seemed confused, but soon spoke.

"Looks like Baal's rules don't apply to you."

"I have my authority, but I don't know about him."

Jin Sahyuk pointed at Shin Jonghak, who remained unaffected.

"*Hmm*, you're an interesting one," Yi Yeonjun said to Shin Jonghak.

Shin Jonghak immediately swung his Conqueror Spear. He cut through the air and stopped in front of Yi Yeonjun's neck.

"Answer me. Where's Baal?" he demanded.

"Baal is raging," Yi Yeonjun randomly replied. Shin Jonghak frowned and Jin Sahyuk immediately asked.

"We asked where Baal is, not what he's doing."

"He's raging."

“Is your head okay?” Jin Sahyuk paused and stared at him.

“...”

Something seemed off about Yi Yeonjun. His eyes looked murky and his body didn’t move. He sat dazed in his chair like someone who lost something important.

“Baal’s raging?”

Jin Sahyuk asked somewhat seriously. She wanted to grasp the situation, but Yi Yeonjun didn’t give them the chance.

“That’s right. Baal saw the truth from Bell’s memories.”

“Truth? What truth?”

Yi Yeonjun tilted his head and looked at her. However, Jin Sahyuk couldn’t directly look at him. She preferred his old, greedy eyes instead of his current hollow ones.

“Did you know?” Yi Yeonjun asked. Jin Sahyuk looked at Shin Jonghak, who shook his head. Then she looked back at Yi Yeonjun.

“Know what?”

“This world we live in is nothing but a novel.”

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk furrowed her brows and couldn’t make sense of his words. She didn’t react much.

“So you didn’t know either.”

Yi Yeonjun turned serious while murmuring incomprehensible things with a twisted smile.

“Bell knew. He knew this world was a novel written by a single man.

That's right. A novel. A damn novel and a worthless one at that. The world I wanted to obtain wasn't worth a penny to that man. Even the almighty devil is nothing but a creation from a magicless world."

Yi Yeonjun continued as if he lost his mind. Jin Sahyuk tried to pick up any clues, but gave up and sighed.

"Fool, it looks like Baal ate your brain. This is what you get for being too greedy and trying to obtain something beyond you."

"Beyond me... That's right. A mere character like myself dared to take over this world."

"Shut your mouth."

Jin Sahyuk gathered magic power in her hands and prepared to kill Yi Yeonjun. However, Bell's face suddenly popped up in her head. Bell said he discovered two truths, but kept one to himself even as he died. Baal most certainly would've also learned that truth after absorbing his host's memories.

"Oi..."

Jin Sahyuk retracted her magic power and looked into Yi Yeonjun's eyes.

"Tell me slowly and in detail. What did you hear from Baal? He can't possibly fear anything."

"Baal is raging."

"No human is afraid of an ant. Rage is just another form of fear."

Some people might detest ants, but no one felt angry at them. Why would Baal be angry at humans?

Yi Yeonjun closed his eyes and opened them again. Jin Sahyuk's face appeared right in front of him.

“Fine, I’ll tell you if you want to know so much.”

Yi Yeonjun began describing the memories he received from Baal.

* * *

[Outside Baal’s Castle]

— Hajin? It’s really you, Hajin?

Evandel replied and I immediately wrote back.

— Of course, it’s me. Have you been doing well? Duchess Ah Hae-In is taking care of you, right?

— *Un!* This is really cool. How did you get this to work?

Evandel’s handwriting appeared neat and clean. I held back my tears at how much she grew.

— I made it, but a magician in this world helped me send it over.

The magician in question suddenly spoke. “How interesting. I didn’t think it would work so well.”

Shimurin didn’t show any signs of happiness or pride.

“Aren’t you happy?”

“It’s not like I did much. I only brought a scroll without a destination. You’re the one who completed it in an absurd fashion. I didn’t see you make any calculations. I didn’t even see how you modified the scroll.”

“*Mmm...*”

I scratched my neck and couldn’t explain. Stigma just worked according to my will. The co-author called it a special authority that only belonged to the creator, though I could barely call myself that.

“Anyways, you helped prove something I wasn’t sure about. Dimensional travel is possible. I can cross dimensions to another world.”

A group approached as Shimurin muttered. I turned towards them.

“*Huh?*”

Rachel, Yun Seung-Ah, Chae Nayun, and Yi Yeonghan... The familiar faces headed towards us with exorcist weapons. I quickly put on Black Lotus’ hood and mask. Then I took out the Black Lotus Bow.

“Be careful Jain. They’re coming.”

“*Hmm*, who should I turn into?”

Jain briefly pondered before transforming into Cheok Jungyeong. She flexed her huge muscles at me.

“How is it?” Jain grinned in a cute manner with Cheok Jungyeong’s face. I held back from puking.

“Don’t talk and smile like that with his face.”

“*Ah*, sure, sure.”

Chae Nayun and the others stopped running when they spotted us.

“What are you guys doing here?” Yun Seung-Ah spoke first. Rachel and Chae Nayun looked at us suspiciously from behind her.

Jain arrogantly smiled like the normal Cheok Jungyeong.

“Nothing much. Are you trying to enter this castle too?”

“*Oi*, fat boar. Who’s that next to you?” Chae Nayun asked as she glared at me. Jain shrugged as if the answer was obvious.

“It’s Blackie. Can’t you see?”

I grabbed my bow to emphasize my identity, but everyone suddenly raised their weapons.

“W-Why are you raising your bow? Put it down!”

“Do you want to fight?”

Yun Seung-Ah's hostile voice rang out and Rachel's elementals flickered in the air. I felt a strong urge to reveal my identity, but forced it down. I had to be Black Lotus until the end. No, even after the end.

“You can go in. Your friends are inside. We have no desire to hinder you.”

I told them. My mask changed my voice. I also made another *[Messenger]* with my settings intervention and threw it to Yun Seung-Ah. The paper flew faster than a bullet, but Yun Seung-Ah easily caught it.

“What's this?”

“It will allow you to contact me. Take it. I'll protect you and Kim Suho from here.”

“Protect?” Yun Seung-Ah frowned as I nodded.

“How do you expect us to believe you?”

“You don't have to. You'll know once you enter.”

“...”

Yun Seung-Ah stared at the paper suspiciously. Meanwhile, I glanced at Shimurin. She smirked and immediately cast a spell. As expected of a grand magician, a flash of light erupted and we teleported far away.

“Perfect timing.”

“Perfect timing? I delayed the spell as long as possible since the situation looked fun.”

“You did? Well, it’s fine since we passed them the Messenger.”

I should be able to protect them as long as we stayed in touch. I took out the *[Mystic Key]* and *[Athena’s Arrow]*. Now, I had a job to do.

“Let’s see...”

A way to destroy Baal’s castle. I didn’t know if Jin Sahyuk knew, but I did have a way of accomplishing this.

[Would you like to fuse Mystic Key with Athena’s Arrow?] [Warning. The success rate is astronomically low.]

My *[Lv.10 Synthesis]* and stigma’s magic power should be able to fuse the two. The resulting arrow would dismantle anything in the world.

[Synthesis has failed.] [Mystic Key and Athena’s Arrow have been destroyed.]

“Huh?”

Tk— [Athena’s Arrow] snapped in half and the *[Mystic Key]* turned to dust.

“...”

I repeatedly blinked and looked at the remains. I could only stare like a carp in a frozen pond.

“The hell?” I muttered in a panic.

“What happened to my items?”

The unexpected result caught me totally off guard. Enough to cause a mental breakdown. It all felt like a dream as I gathered the broken items in a last-ditch effort to correct everything. Then I used synthesis

again.

[Synthesis has failed.]

Not even dust remained this time. My legs gave out and I collapsed to the ground.

Chapter 344

Final Banquet (3)

[Synthesis has failed.]

Don't calm down. Wait, that's not right. Calm down.

I took a deep breath. The *[Mystic Key]* and *[Athena's Arrow]* might've been destroyed, but a better solution should still exist.

— Oi, you okay?

A voice rang out and I turned around in a daze at Shimurin and Jain.

— Hajin, what's wrong?

I couldn't hear them too well as if I was underwater and suddenly felt sleepy. Perhaps everything would return to normal when I woke up again. *Wait, no, that would just be running away from reality.*

“What's wrong with him? He seems out of it.”

Shimurin's voice woke me up and I recalled something. Right, I could fix this even if it meant going overboard.

“Time reversal.”

“*Huh?*”

It would hurt, but I could still reverse time.

“*Huu, huu.*”

I took several deep breaths. *One, two, three...*

“What are you doing?”

Shimurin and Jain stared at me. I took one final breath and faced them. Using time reversal to recover my destroyed items... A philosophical thought suddenly struck me. *Would the present Jain be the same person as the Jain from 3 minutes ago?* I shook the thought away.

“See you in a bit.”

I closed my eyes and activated time reversal. The wind blew backwards and a warping sensation enveloped me. I opened my eyes again and found [*Athena’s Moonlight Arrow*] and the [*Mystic Key*] in my hands.

“Haaa...”

I sighed in relief and my legs gave out. Jain and Shimurin looked at me strangely as I slumped to the ground, but that didn’t matter.

I pondered over the key and arrow in my hands. *Should I try fusing them again or be content with recovering them?*

Then something strange occurred.

A bright orb appeared above the items and bloomed like a budding flower. I widened my eyes at it.

A system window popped up as the orb gave off a golden light.

[*Accumulation of luck has activated after being stacked 8 times – Miraculous Retry*]

[*Your invariable stat, luck, will rise to 9.99 for the next 30 minutes.*]

* * *

[*Colosseum*]

“What happened to the thing I talked about?”

Jin Seyeon asked Cheok Jungyeong in their waiting room as he lounged around on the couch.

“Do I really have to bring it?”

Jin Seyeon had asked him to bring furniture from the Chameleon Troupe’s hideout after learning about Vassago’s interest.

“Yes, I told you. They’ll come in handy during our negotiation.”

“You want to console him with furniture after we beat him up and tell him to go home?”

“Regardless of the plan, having more options is never bad.”

Vassago’s colosseum featured a simple format. Challengers placed their lives on the line to fight like gladiators. They had to clear 10 levels before reaching Vassago because he only accepted the strong.

“It’s not like we can leave this place, right?”

Cheok Jungyeong asked and Jin Seyeon furrowed her brows.

“Doesn’t the Chameleon Troupe have someone named Khalifa? Tell him to come here.”

Challengers couldn’t leave once they entered, but Jin Seyeon and Cheok Jungyeong had earned the right to invite a guest after reaching level 8. Cheok Jungyeong stood up from the couch.

“You know about Khalifa?”

“Pardon? Ah, well, the Chameleon Troupe is quite famous.”

Cheok Jungyeong looked at her suspiciously and she coughed a few times before explaining.

“I did some background investigations.”

“Why?”

“...”

She unhappily raised her brows and Cheok Jungyeong did the same.

“You think I can trust someone who investigated us?”

“Tsk...”

Jin Seyeon scratched her neck and trudged to the bed. Cheok Jungyeong smirked and also returned to the couch. Their huge level 8 waiting room turned silent until a soft voice cut through the air.

“You guys killed my father.” Jin Seyeon finally spoke.

“That’s pretty common.” Cheok Jungyeong murmured from the couch.

“Killing people?”

“It’s common to kill and be killed in this world. You should know that too. Think of all the djinns you’ve killed. Aren’t they humans too?”

“...”

Jin Seyeon turned towards her bow leaning in front of the bed. She had killed hundreds of djinns with it.

“My father was my only family.”

She calmly spoke.

“That’s common too. Some people are also born orphans.”

“Sometimes, I wish I had been an orphan instead.”

“Pft...”

Cheok Jungyeong suddenly chuckled and she glared at him.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing, I just remembered something. Someone used to make fun of me by calling me an orphan producer.”

“What?”

“*Puhahaha*. I think it’s funny. You don’t have to laugh though.”

Cheok Jungyeong rose from the couch and towered over Jin Seyeon. Then he smiled at her.

“I’ll welcome you any time if you want revenge. I don’t know if I’m the one who killed him, but the Chameleon Troupe is one entity. Just know you’ll have to put your life on the line.”

Cheok Jungyeong calmly told her. He didn’t fear death and spent most of his life with one foot in the River Styx. Jin Seyeon’s face viciously contorted.

“No thanks. You weren’t part of the Chameleon Troupe when it happened.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes, you were busy running around the steppes of Manchu killing people.”

“*Cough*, you even know about that? *Oi*, don’t look at me like I’m some sort of a monster. I’m not the man I used to be.”

“Oh please, some rumors even say you eat human flesh.”

Jin Seyeon pulled the bed sheet over her head.

“Human flesh? I don’t eat things that aren’t tasty. Plus, I’ve indeed changed. That guy changed me before I even realized.”

Cheok Jungyeong sounded as if he was making up an excuse.

“That guy? You mean Black Lotus?”

“Yep.”

“What do you mean?”

Jin Seyeon peeked out from the bed sheet after hearing Black Lotus’ name. She didn’t understand why either. Did she admire, fear, or respect him as a rival? Her intuition as the Divine Archer told her something about him resembled herself.

“Feel free to tell me more.”

Jin Seyeon gently added and Cheok Jungyeong raised his head. She looked at him with anticipation, but he only coldly smirked before lying back down.

“*Nah.*”

“Just a bit.”

“No, I’ll talk to Khalifa about the furniture though. Not that I think it’ll help.”

“...”

Jin Seyeon scratched her cheek. The information she pried out today felt satisfactory, so she gave it a rest and closed her eyes.

“Good night.”

* * *

[Baal’s Castle – Banquet Hall]

Classical music flowed in the air as Jin Sahyuk stared at Yi Yeonjun. He looked her in the eyes.

“Do you understand what kind of existence you are now? You’re nothing but a puppet.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t say anything. She simply thought Yi Yeonjun had gone crazy, but didn’t think he had turned completely crazy.

Shin Jonghak suddenly spoke up.

“That fool must be misunderstanding something, right?”

“What?”

Jin Sahyuk furrowed her brows and Shin Jonghak continued with a smirk.

“I don’t know if he’s just delusional or if it’s a side effect of his gift, but he genuinely believes this world is a novel.”

Shin Jonghak simply thought Yi Yeonjun became delusional. Jin Sahyuk also agreed and didn’t take this information seriously as Baal’s words.

“*Shush.*”

Regardless, she only needed one thing.

“Where’s Baal?”

She would know the truth once they met again.

“He’s upstairs.”

Yi Yeonjun simply told them.

“So what do we need to do now?”

“You need more people.”

Yi Yeonjun pointed at the banquet hall’s entrance and they looked down. *Kiik*— The door creaked open and Jin Sahyuk frowned. Meanwhile, Shin Jonghak looked quite happy.

— *Huh?* Where’s this?

Chae Nayun stepped into the banquet hall and looked around with her greatsword in hand.

— I’m not sure. Looks like some sort of party?

Yun Seung-Ah scanned the hall.

— I see Suho over there.

Rachel pointed at a couple dancing in the middle. Kim Suho and Aileen also spotted them. He couldn’t hear Yi Yeonjun anymore as he focused on dancing. Kim Suho greeted them with a smile.

— Hey, Suho. It’s been a while.

Yun Seung-Ah stared at him from a distance. She felt happy to see him, but didn’t show it.

— *Ah*, yes. It’s been a while.

Kim Suho straightened up and slightly bowed. Yun Seung-Ah bitterly smiled and told him.

— We met Black Lotus.

— Really?

— Yeah, he said he’s helping you. Is that true?

— Yes, apparently it is according to Jin Sahyuk.

Jin Sahyuk turned back to Yi Yeonjun, who opened his mouth as if waiting for this moment.

“You should be able to proceed now that 11 have gathered. Go ahead. Find Baal and hear the truth. Then you can fall into despair.”

Shin Jonghak hopped down to the first floor to greet Chae Nayun. Only Jin Sahyuk remained and glared at Yi Yeonjun. Soon, she gave him her usual proud smile.

“Yi Yeonjun, it looks like you’re mistaken.”

She gathered her black magic power into her hands. It gathered like a storm and exuded an overwhelming presence. Her authority blazed as if to devour reality.

“I don’t care about the truth and it doesn’t matter if this world is just a novel.”

Guooooo... She reached out with her burning hand and grabbed his head. Then she looked into his empty eyes and shouted.

“I am not a puppet, but a king! The one who decides that isn’t you or this world! It’s me! I am the one who decides who I am! I am a king as long as I live!”

She could feel the several presences below. Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak, Kim Suho, Yun Seung-Ah, Aileen and Kim Youngjin... Even more still climbed the staircase. She also felt Kim Hajin watching over her from outside and faintly smiled.

“I’m completely different from you!”

KOOONG! An explosion erupted in the middle of the banquet hall. Yi Yeonjun scattered into dust and Jin Sahyuk looked down from the balcony with wide eyes.

— W-What happened!? Who are these people?

Everyone dancing in the hall suddenly turned into death knights.

“What...”

Jin Sahyuk froze while looking at the first floor.

— Everyone, take out your weapons! Aileen!

— Yeah, I know. I'll take care of it.

Hundreds of death knights surrounded the group. Their numbers didn't shock her. Neither did Yi Yeonjun's sudden disappearance.

The death knights didn't wear any helmets, so Jin Sahyuk immediately recognized them. She wouldn't have missed the insignia on their armor and shields. *A crown of ice and a wolf*. This represented her kingdom, Plerion. These Plerion knights had protected her until her death.

Chapter 345

Meeting (1)

[Baal's Castle – Banquet Hall]

The death knights revived by the devil had no emotions. However, their hands tightly grasped their swords by instinct. They no longer possessed any consciousness or will as they stared at Jin Sahyuk.

These Plerion knights used to serve her and they dreamt of a brighter future together. Jin Sahyuk clenched her teeth and felt more confused than angry.

“—!”

Chae Nayun swung her greatsword with a spirited shout and her magic power shattered the banquet hall's ceiling.

“Sunshine, Earthy, Watery...”

Rachel called her wind, earth, and water elementals. They floated and revealed themselves. Earth focused on defense and formed barriers to protect them. Watery transformed into a cold mist and froze numerous death knights.

Whish—

Bright sword slashes flew across the battlefield like falling cherry blossoms. This came from Yun Seung-Ah's flower sword as she elegantly displayed her swordsmanship. The death knights couldn't defend against her attacks after being slowed by Rachel's elementals. Their heads fell to the floor one by one.

“—!”

Of course, that didn't stop the knights since they had already died. The headless ones charged even more viciously at Yun Seung-Ah. Her flower sword severed their limbs, but one eventually reached her. A fierce wind blew as its sword almost stabbed her.

“A storm will devour you!”

Aileen's Spirit Speech blew the death knights into the air and a flash of golden light from the Sword Saint immediately cut through them.

Kwaaaaa!

Kim Suho instantly defeated dozens as a shower of golden light continued to pour. He looked at Yun Seung-Ah.

“Let's continue.”

Yun Seung-Ah faintly smiled at his encouragement. She woke from her stupor and resumed fighting.

Kwang! Clang! Koong!

Their battle gradually destroyed the banquet hall. The fancy interior turned into a mess as hundreds of death knights fought back.

Jin Sahyuk watched her knights from the balcony as they lost their heads and limbs.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck...”

She cursed out loud. She knew they couldn't be the real Plerion knights. Baal must be playing a trick on her after reading Bell's memories. She tried to calm down and overcome her emotions.

However, she failed.

“Ah...”

Jin Sahyuk let out a short cry. The sight of a small child in the

distance broke her heart.

“What...”

A child from Plerion hid by the curtains in the corner of this battlefield. Jin Sahyuk recognized this pitiful boy. She had incarcerated him and left him to die in prison, but now he stared at her. Puharen, the boy who became a devil.

Her chest pounded and she closed her eyes as something welled up from the bottom of her heart. The boy’s face surfaced beneath her eyelids and she fell to her knees.

The magic seal deep inside her finally broke and she heard a faint voice.

Why am I stuck here? It’s cold. I’m hungry. How long do I have to wait? The chains are cold and the pain won’t go away. I want to leave. Let me out... let me out...

Jin Sahyuk covered her ears, but could still hear the voice. She clutched her chest, but the pain wouldn’t go away.

Her breathing grew heavy as she recalled Akatrina. A world full of sadness, loneliness, and regret... Her kingdom... The boy she killed to become king. He had returned to destroy her kingdom as a devil.

She could never forget Puharen and felt nauseous. Her head hurt as the past ate away at her and her limbs felt as if they would rot.

— Jin Sahyuk! Jin Sahyuk! Snap out of it!

A voice suddenly woke her and her eyes snapped open.

“W-What?”

— Finally, you can hear me.

The voice sighed and she quickly recognized it as Kim Hajin.

— Why are you squatting there? Are you okay?

“What? Y-You can see me? Where are you?”

— I’m outside the castle, but I can see what’s happening.
Reinforcements are coming.

Kwang! The banquet hall’s door burst open as he said that.

“Knight commander! We’re here!”

Airun and the devil hunter Harin led dozens of knights. Heroes from Earth like Yohei, Yi Jiyeon, Yi Yongha, and Nicholas from the Temple of Justice also accompanied them. They had all entered Baal’s barrier through the gap Kim Hajin created.

“Looks like the party’s already started.”

Nicholas, the Temple of Justice’s rank 4, raised his dagger and licked it with a smile. Yi Yongha also raised his staff.

“We’re here, chairman. Not too late, right?”

“No, you’re super late. Also, what’s up with that staff?”

Aileen smirked at Yi Yongha.

“It’s a gift from Yeonha that adds the exorcism attribute to my fire.”

Yi Yongha imbued his magic power into the staff and his hellfire shot into the air. However, Jin Sahyuk didn’t pay them any attention.

“How long have you been watching?” she asked Kim Hajin.

— For about 3 minutes, I guess?

“Did you... hear anything?”

— Hear what?

It seemed Kim Hajin didn't know about their conversation with Yi Yeonjun. She briefly paused to think. Yi Yeonjun had said that Kim Hajin created this world as a novel, but she didn't have the time to confirm that right now. Kim Hajin suddenly spoke again.

— Anyways, I think I can do it.

“Do what?”

Jin Sahyuk overcame her trauma by infusing magic power into her heart.

— Destroy the castle.

“Really?”

— Yeah, but I'm going to do it right now.

“Now?” Jin Sahyuk furrowed her brows.

— Yep, so I'll entrust the king with taking care of Baal.

“Tsk, do whatever you want.”

Jin Sahyuk stood up without saying much. Kim Hajin's snarky order annoyed her, but she liked being called a king.

“Hmm...”

She straightened up and looked into the distance at Puharen. Jin Sahyuk didn't avert her gaze this time.

“Hahaha...”

She suddenly chuckled after no longer feeling anything while looking at Puharen. Her authority, *[Reality Manipulation]*, actually specialized in manipulating the interior of things and even people.

“I bet you didn’t know, you piece of shit.”

She eliminated her complicated feelings towards Puharen in this manner. Now, she could even smile at him.

“Just you wait, Baal. I’ll find you soon.”

Jin Sahyuk looked at the ceiling and arrogantly crossed her arms. A terrifying magic power rose from behind her and transformed into dozens of spears.

* * *

[Outside Baal’s Castle – Forest Shrouded by a Barrier]

“Yep, so I’ll trust the king with taking care of Baal.”

I sent Jin Sahyuk a mental transmission as I held the *[Black Lotus Bow]* and *[Mystic Key]*. Then I activated my ultimate skill, *[Complete Understanding of Spirit Power]*. My mental transmission became crystal clear.

— *Tsk*, do whatever you want.

Jin Sahyuk briefly replied. I checked my luck stat once more with a grin.

[Invariable Stat – Luck 9.9]

My luck now transcended human capability. I didn’t know what I could do in 30 minutes, but I wouldn’t waste it.

I immediately used synthesis.

[Fusing Athena’s Moonlight Arrow with the Mystic Key...] [The success rate is astronomically low...] [You have succeeded! A perfect fusion has increased the item’s rank!]

The key fused with the arrow and became *[Athena’s Mystic Arrow]*.

“Are you ready? You’re going to shoot now?”

“Yep.” I nodded at Jain’s question and nocked the arrow.

Kiik—

The bowstring tensed as I aimed at the devil’s castle. I also used overclock and squeezed out every ounce of stigma’s magic power.

“Argh—”

It felt like my heart would burst from time reversal’s side effects, but I endured it.

[You have used Overclocking... Your life force has been reduced!] *[Your luck has activated!]* *[You have used Overclocking... Your life force has been reduced!]* *[Your luck has activated!]*

Magic power gathered as the above process repeated and the brewing storm shook the heavens and earth. *Whish!* The air currents surrounding me flowed into the arrow as leaves and grass blew in the air. *Tsssst...* The magic power burned the soil and rock underneath me.

“I’m shooting now. Get ready.”

I signaled Jin Sahyuk before I fired. Then...

Someone suddenly approached me from behind. That person broke through Jain and Shimurin and reached out, causing my arrow to veer off course.

Kwaaaang!

Large and narrow blades shot up from where I stood. My misfired arrow also sailed past its intended mark.

“What...”

I stared at the devil's castle as the mysterious hand dragged me back. Even I couldn't see the castle's peak because a mysterious barrier blocked my vision. I didn't worry too much and wondered what my devastating 9.9 luck would cause.

* * *

[Devil's Castle – Baal's Room]

Yi Yeonjun returned to Baal's room in anger. He couldn't see Baal, but could sense the demonic energy that filled the room.

“...”

He empathized with Baal, who called himself a world collector. However, Baal's existence turned out to be a small piece in another collection.

“Baal...”

Yi Yeonjun called his name. *Koong!* The space suddenly pulsed in anger.

Sssss...

Soon, demonic energy gathered and formed a giant face to personify the transcendental being. Baal moved his lips made from magic power.

— Who permitted you to speak my name?

Yi Yeonjun stared at the angry Baal glaring at him.

“What's your plan now?”

Yi Yeonjun's brusque tone caused Baal to narrow his eyes even more. Baal's face slightly twitched as though deep in thought. Then he spat out in a nonhuman voice.

— Let me ask you first, human.

The room rumbled from his fury.

— How do you plan to live now?

“It depends on the truth of the memory you showed me.”

— That was the truth without a single falsehood from Bell’s memories. That was... Truth.

“Are you sure?”

— Don’t get cocky, human. I am an existence that transcends worlds. I can tell that was the truth.

“Then...” Yi Yeonjun closed his eyes.

“I don’t have any confidence left.”

Yi Yeonjun couldn’t overcome his sense of helplessness and emptiness. This world being a novel dealt a huge blow because everything he valued became meaningless. He couldn’t easily ignore it like Jin Sahyuk.

— You are just a human, but I am different.

A human’s anger couldn’t be compared to Baal’s. Yi Yeonjun lost his drive, but Baal still possessed unimaginable power.

— I will become the destroyer.

Baal’s demonic energy surged and his presence enveloped the entire castle. The demon realm gate, the devil’s castle, and the container known as Bell... The conditions for his descent had all been met.

— I will destroy that irresponsible, reckless man and this world he created.

Guoooo... Overwhelming magic power shook the room. Yi Yeonjun closed his eyes as Baal's demonic energy stormed the room.

Then...

Chweeeek!

A small arrow broke through the barrier. Baal and Yi Yeonjun turned to the bed, which had been struck by an arrow.

...

A brief silence filled the room and Yi Yeonjun pondered.

How did this arrow get here?

The arrow released a brilliant light before he could finish thinking.

Chwaaaaaa...

A holy current of silver light swallowed the room.

Chapter 346

Meeting (2)

The full moon still shone in the early morning. A baby wrapped in a quilt sat on the steps of a temple and the faint moonlight lit his face. He didn't cry and only stared at his mother.

Soon, the mother began to cry. She turned around as the baby watched her reluctantly walk away.

A smile emerged on the innocent baby's face. The mother began to run after hearing the baby's laughter and her tears scattered in the wind.

The temple doors opened as the sun rose. An old nun paused in front of the baby and picked him up with a sigh. The baby opened his eyes, which reflected the nun's wrinkled face. She gently smiled and stroked his quilt to congratulate his birth.

The temple took in the baby and named him Eren.

Eren spent much of his childhood in the temple. It became his home, place of worship, playground, and school. The nuns taught him many things.

However, he never liked studying. Instead, he preferred to chop wood. Eren wanted to learn the sword and become a knight rather than take history lessons. The nuns couldn't provide him with such an education because they lived in the rural countryside far from the capital.

One day, a retired knight visited and the nuns introduced him to Eren. The knight wanted a successor, but had no children. Eren seemed to be the perfect match and became his student.

The boy felt elated every time he swung a sword. In those moments, he never felt sad about not having parents or friends.

He trained diligently and even slept with his weapon. The dream of becoming a knight sprouted in him. He trained every day to become like the hero of justice he read about in fairy tales.

The nuns watched him grow with pride and treated him like a real son.

Unfortunately, they didn't have much time left. The demon realm transformation that slowly devoured Akatrina finally reached the temple.

* * *

[Outside Baal's Castle]

The misfired arrow flew to the top of Baal's castle before striking a bed and exploding.

The arrow's power of *[Dismantling]* shook the entire castle. The rumbling turned into a terrifying storm that destroyed the roof. The demonic energy surrounding the castle scattered and its foundation also broke.

Kwaaaaa!

The shell of Baal's castle completely collapsed. However, I didn't have time to watch as a blade shot towards me from behind.

Clang!

A black barrier instantly formed and blocked the attack. I sighed in relief and turned towards the familiar face. I couldn't help but smile.

"Did you rest well, Boss?"

Boss appeared out of nowhere and protected me. "You should be more careful when you're using your bow."

"Ah, Boss. Are you okay now?" Jain asked and Boss nonchalantly

nodded. Shimurin simply shrugged and treated Boss like a disciple.

“Rather than that...”

Boss' shadow stretched out at the speed of light. It grabbed the person responsible for attacking me and dragged him by his feet.

“*Kuuk...*”

A djinn had attacked me. The shadow coiled around his body and strangled his neck. I frowned at his face and recalled seeing him before. Then I used *[Observation and Reading]* to check his identity.

“Ah, you're Terror's lackey.”

I finally remembered now. I saw his face before on a wanted poster from Violet Banquet. He served Terror, one of the Nine Evils.

"I almost forgot. I guess the Nine Evils are still alive and well."

I turned to Boss, who promptly nodded. Aileen had killed Destruction, but the other Nine Evils still lived.

"Terror supports Astaroth. Let's interrogate him and find out Terror's location."

Boss retrieved her shadow and grabbed the djinn's neck with her hand. She seemed quite angry.

"Oi, I don't think you should be paying attention to that guy right now."

Shimurin muttered as she watched Baal's crumbling castle.

"*Huh?*"

"Look."

She grinned and pointed at the castle. Baal appeared above it and

looked just like Bell.

He kept glaring at me.

“—!”

Then he suddenly roared and everything inside the barrier shook. He rose higher into the sky and a terrifying amount of demonic energy flowed out.

His demonic energy spread in every direction. It seeped into the barrier and turned it even darker. I had no idea what he planned on doing.

"Oi."

Shimurin seemed to know something and nudged my shoulder. She still wore a grin as I blankly stared at her.

"Wait for me. I'll see you soon."

She covered us in a barrier as she spoke. Immediately, the world exploded.

* * *

[Virtual Reality – Leraje's Game]

Leraje's character, Lijengy, looked up at the game's sky. She felt an explosion of demonic energy somewhere far away.

"Lord!"

Her loyal servant, Corte, shouted for her. His ID in the game read, *Leraje's Monster*. She nodded and spoke through the chat system.

— Looks like the old man finally descended.

Leraje lightly sighed and looked around. A vast wilderness dyed in

darkness spread out before her. They called this place Lekior Field and it served as a famous high level training ground in the game. Most players couldn't enter because of its high spawn rate for powerful monsters. However, Leraje and her servants easily occupied it with her exceptional game control.

— Take all the items.

She ordered her guild members.

— Blacksmith, can you make something with this?

"I should be able to make a *[High Rank Obsidian Breastplate]* with enough of them."

A week had passed since the game's release. It felt more realistic than one might expect. For example, crafting high rank equipment required a large quantity of crafting materials. However, a moment of carelessness could lead to death despite the high quality of one's equipment. Additionally, this game didn't feature any revival mechanics. Death would be permanent.

Leraje enjoyed the realism and other players did too. The game would've never reached 15 million concurrent players if they didn't enjoy it. The gaming company Leol had finally created the RPG game of the century.

"Will you go meet His Highness, Baal?" Corte asked as he collected the items. He sounded serious, but the way he hunched over to pick up items looked quite funny.

— I should, but I intend on keeping the promise I made with this world. My war will only be within this game.

"We will follow our Lord's wishes."

Corte bowed and Leraje nodded without a word.

— I'll log out first.

"Yes, Lord!"

Leraje logged out. Meanwhile, Corte remained in the game. He wanted to follow, but had been ordered to take care of in-game duties.

Approximately 15 million human players wanted to take down Leraje's guild. Corte refused to let his guard down even for a moment during this 15,000,000 vs 1,000 battle.

"Blood brothers!"

He turned around to his fellow demons and shouted with a serious face.

"Collect the items! We will move to the next dungeon soon!"

Corte and the guild members quickly gathered the necessary items.

— We're ready, sir!

"Good!"

He laughed and pointed at the boss dungeon cave in the distance.

"Let's get moving. Prepare for a boss raid!"

Boss raids could be considered one of the funnest parts of this game. Corte felt somewhat disappointed that Leraje would miss it.

— Yes, sir!

They marched towards the cave while eagerly anticipating the upcoming battle. They initially played for Leraje's sake, but truly enjoyed the game now.

* * *

[Earth – Korea]

— Hajin... Kim Hajin!

I slowly opened my eyes and my body ached all over, but someone kept shaking me.

— Wake up!

Kim Suho slapped my cheeks as he said something. I looked at his moving lips.

— Wake up, Kim Hajin! Wake up!

He kept shaking and slapping me with a worried expression. However, I couldn't move as if all my energy had been drained.

— Hajin, Hajin! Snap out of it!

My consciousness returned after an unknown amount of time and my senses also recovered.

"Kim Hajin! Are you okay?"

"..."

I swallowed the saliva that had gathered in my mouth. Then I looked at the sky and my surroundings. I could see Essential Armory's barrier in the distance and even North Hamgyeong Province. We had undoubtedly returned to Korea. I looked at the horizon in a daze.

"Are you okay?"

Kim Suho asked again. I turned back to him and nodded.

"We're... back on Earth?"

"Yeah."

He helped me up with his hand. First, I checked if aether worked. It protected me from the explosion and transformed into a small bag that

stored my Black Lotus equipment.

I took out the Desert Eagle and looked at the clear, blue sky.

"What..."

I furrowed my brows in confusion. *Did Jin Sahyuk and Kim Suho kill Baal?* I faced Kim Suho again.

"What happened to Baal?"

"I don't know. The castle exploded and this happened."

"..."

I finally noticed everyone around me: Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak, Yun Seung-Ah, Jin Sahyuk, Yi Yeonghan, Kim Youngjin, and even Jain and Boss. They all sprawled out on the ground.

"Ah."

I stood up towards Boss and Jain, but Jin Yohan, Kaita, and Khalifa appeared to take them away.

Soon, other high ranking heroes also arrived.

— Looks like everyone is back.

Yoo Sihyuk appeared with his 9 white wolves.

— Yeonha, Yeonha!

Yoo Jinwoong ran around looking for his daughter.

— Look for anyone who's injured! It doesn't matter what guild they're from! We have to save everyone!

Vice leader Yi Jin-Ah arrived with Essence of the Strait heroes. Seo

Youngji, Oh Junhyuk, a fully armored Heynckes, and even the apathetic Chae Joochul came.

I sighed in relief at the hundreds of heroes that surrounded us.

"Haaa..."

I felt like I could finally rest. Just as I loosened up...

“—!”

A loud screech rang out and the clear sky turned reddish-black. Once again, Baal appeared in the air and all the heroes quickly prepared for battle.

Sssk—

Kim Suho also took out Misteltein. I chuckled since it would've been too easy if Baal had died.

— Grohack derla croska fedra!

Baal muttered incomprehensible words. His cry tore through the sky and formed a pentagram.

Koooong!

Demonic energy gathered like a storm and the earth violently shook. Kim Suho and I watched in a daze as Baal cast his grand magic.

— Come!

The pentagram flipped upside down and the summoning of an evil god began. First, a giant leg appeared. It looked bigger than anything I had ever seen and stepped onto Korea.

Boom!

The ground shook from a single step. The huge shockwave spread out

and razed the nearby trees.

— *Uaaak!*

— *Kuak!*

Several medics fainted after being hit by the collapsing trees. Heroes who had been crushed by the foot instantly died.

Kim Suho froze as he watched this devastating scene.

"..."

I looked at his trembling hands. He felt afraid because he must've recognized the owner of that leg.

Rank 21 devil, Morax.

The calamity that ruined Akatrina. This Morax appeared larger and even more destructive than the one in the recorded past.

"Suho."

I grabbed his trembling hand. He flinched and looked at me. I stared into his eyes and smiled.

"Don't worry."

Kim Suho swallowed his saliva. I grabbed his hand even tighter and confidently declared.

"I can kill someone like him with a single bullet."

Technically, I didn't lie. After all, I had done exactly that in the recorded past.

"..."

Kim Suho silently looked at me. He seemed to be searching for the source of my confidence.

Then he smirked after about a minute and muttered.

"It won't be that easy."

Chapter 347

Meeting (3)

The child quickly grew and the master realized he could not foster the child's full potential by himself. The child needed an even greater role model. He had to go to the capital to blossom as a knight. His family at the temple understood and supported him. The nuns gave him all they had, 3 gold coins for travel expenses. The child left for the capital with the knight.

Their journey didn't go as smoothly as they had hoped. They ran into thugs, monsters, and natural barriers. Finally, the master and pupil overcame all the obstacles and arrived at their destination.

Plerion's capital looked magnificent even as the world neared its end. The tall buildings and bustling streets mesmerized the child. His master, who used to serve the kingdom as a knight, brought him to the royal palace. There, the child met a boy who would later become his lord.

His future lord, Puharen, looked like a fragile boy who trembled in fear and uncertainty.

* * *

[Earth – Korea]

Morax descended from the pentagram and caused major destruction. His right leg came down first and crushed the grasslands near the border. His left leg destroyed the barriers the heroes had formed. Like that, the giant devil set foot on Earth.

“...”

Kim Hajin silently stared at the devil. His instincts told him Morax would be extremely dangerous.

“Hmm...”

He could only see up to the devil's knee from the ground. Morax's upper body hid behind the clouds and fog.

Kim Hajin decided to increase the distance between them first. A sharpshooter could only properly aim from the right distance. He needed to be as far away as possible.

“Stay here. I'll cover you from behind.”

He disappeared and left Kim Suho. Aileen appeared immediately afterwards with a huge bump on her head from when she fell out of the demon realm gate.

“Hey Kim Suho, what's that?”

She asked while rubbing her head. Kim Suho tightened his grip around Misteltein.

“It's Morax.”

“Morax?”

“Yes.”

The same calamity that destroyed Akatrina in the past. Kim Suho could still recall that devil and his overwhelming strength. He even recalled Puharen's tears.

“Well, whatever.”

Aileen increased her magic power. She squinted and glowered at Morax while stretching.

“Nothing will matter once I kill him.”

Then...

— We have urgent news! Devils are appearing all over the globe!

— Help! Help! We need assistance!

— Requesting backup!

Desperate voices broke out from the heroes' smartwatches.

“W-What’s going on? Why so suddenly?”

Aileen became perplexed. Kim Suho calmly leaned over to look at a smartwatch from the hero next to him.

— This is Japan! A huge pentagram suddenly appeared and countless djinns began pouring out.

— Russia here! D-Devils have appeared here as well!

These voices shattered Kim Suho’s sense of reality. He grew dizzy, his vision blurred, and his body staggered. The nightmare from his previous world, which he had worked so hard to forget, came to life again. It made him sick.

“What’s the status quo?”

However, a particular voice flowed into his ears. Kim Suho raised his head at Yoo Yeonha. She looked at the current situation with Yoo Jinwoong's smartwatch.

“...”

Her expression stiffened and she sighed.

“Father, I’ll get going now.”

“Yeah, stay safe. Go on, hurry. Hey, Kim Hwagok!”

Yoo Jinwoong quickly ordered an Essence of the Strait hero to accompany Yoo Yeonha.

“My name is Kim Hwagok, a high-intermediate rank hero. Please hold my hand, Chief Officer. I have the teleport skill.”

“Okay.”

Yoo Yeonha glanced at Kim Suho and took Kim Hwagok’s hand. *Shoong*— Kim Hwagok activated [*Teleport*] and evacuated her to a safe place.

Soon, Kim Hwagok returned to the battlefield with several smartwatches. He handed one to Kim Suho.

“The Chief Officer ordered me to give this to you.”

“Ah, I see. Thank you.”

The smartwatch immediately connected to Yoo Yeonha.

— Can you hear me?

“Yeah.”

Kim Suho nodded. He shrugged as he looked at the smartwatch.

“By the way, did you learn a new skill? Your voice sounds... soothing.”

Something felt special about Yoo Yeonha’s voice. It seemed to naturally comfort him even at times like this. He managed to remain sane thanks to her.

— Yeah, sort of. I won’t tell you what it is though. Focus on the current situation for now.

“...”

Kim Suho silently grabbed his sword and a familiar scent approached him. As expected, Chae Nayun came over and stared at Morax. She held the greatsword Balmung in her hand.

“He’s freaking huge. How is this size even possible?”

She muttered, and Kim Suho could only faintly smile. Chae Nayun turned to him.

“Don’t worry too much. What’s wrong? You don’t seem like yourself.”

“...”

Kim Suho remained silent and scratched his neck. He felt ashamed that everyone could notice his fear. Chae Nayun slapped his shoulder several times and grinned.

“It’s okay. Everything is going to be fine. Grandpa is here and he’ll take care of it.”

Chae Nayun seemed as confident as Kim Hajin, but something immediately proved her words.

Koong!

The surrounding nature resonated. Grass, trees, the earth... All colors of nature grew clearer and began to spur. They quickly gathered and formed a huge figure. Chae Joochul the Immortal made this avatar with his authority. The avatar straightened herself and stood as tall as Morax.

“Wow, I haven’t seen this technique in a while.”

Chae Nayun exclaimed in admiration. Kim Suho looked at Mother Nature in a daze. The trees and soil intertwined to form her legs while Chae Joochul’s magic power formed her body. Her arms and head inherited the azure sky’s energy. Chae Joochul called her the Four-Colored Immortal.

“Well, let’s just leave him to my grandpa.”

Chae Nayun slapped Kim Suho’s shoulder. Morax began moving towards the Immortal and stretched his arms towards the divine creation. The Immortal did the same and the two great forces crashed.

A devastating shock wave occurred.

Kwaaaaa!

Kim Suho tightened the grip on his sword as the impact struck them.

* * *

[Vassago's Colosseum]

Meanwhile, Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Seyeon became rank 9 gladiators. However, Jin Seyeon couldn't focus anymore after hearing that the demon realm gate opened and devils descended on Earth.

"You need to pee? What are you so nervous about?"

Cheok Jungyeong sneered as she paced around the waiting room. She frowned at him.

"Aren't you worried at all?"

"About what?"

"Devils have descended on Earth! This is the biggest crisis in the history of humanity since the Great Change, yet you're—"

"What do you think we're doing right now? Are we just playing around?"

"What?"

"We're also trying to stop a devil, aren't we?"

"..."

Jin Seyeon couldn't refute him and fell silent. They had come here to defeat a devil. She could only glare before sighing and throwing herself on the couch.

“Still, four devils have appeared at the same time. Four! Morax, Baal, Phenex, Vual—”

“What? Ball?”

“No, not ball, Baal. It sounds similar, but... Wait, stop fooling around!”

Cheok Jungyeong’s awful joke angered her. Then a bird appeared from nowhere and landed on his shoulder.

“What’s this?”

They looked at the bird in a daze. It tilted its head a couple of times and...

— *Peep.*

A sentence appeared above as the bird chirped.

[My name is Observer No.3.]

It bluntly introduced itself.

“What? Observer?”

Cheok Jungyeong frowned as the bird chirped again.

— *Peep.*

[I shall help you communicate with my master.]

“Hahaha, you’re pretty feisty for a little guy. Who’s your master...?”

Cheok Jungyeong slightly shuddered as if he suddenly realized something. Jin Seyeon stared at him as he froze.

“Aha...”

Cheok Jungyeong chuckled after organizing his thoughts. He lightly patted the observer on his shoulder and gestured for Jin Seyeon to come closer.

“Oi, come here.”

“What is that?” she eagerly asked.

“It’s a messenger from the seat of black,” Cheok Jungyeong replied.

Jin Seyeon flinched and continued to wander around the room while pretending to be indifferent.

“Seat of black?”

“Yep. Oi, Black. Are you currently outside? I’m with Jin Seyeon right now.”

Cheok Jungyeong whispered to the observer. The bird chirped about 3 minutes later and relayed Black Lotus’ message.

[Yes, I’m outside. Things aren’t looking too good. Where are you right now, Cheok Jungyeong?]

“At Vassago’s colosseum.”

Jin Seyeon focused all her senses on their conversation while feigning indifference.

[How are things on your side? Will you two be able to defeat Vassago?]

“Of course, I can easily kill him. My companion here, on the other hand, wants to appease.”

[Huh? She wants to appease a devil?]

“Yep. Sounds crazy, right?”

“Excuse me, but I—”

“Shhh.”

Cheok Jungyeong silenced her and Jin Seyeon’s face distorted like a bulldog. He smugly continued and paid no mind.

[Does she have a plan?]

“I don’t know. She says Vassago loves treasures or something, so she wants to appease him with the items you made. You know, stuff like furniture. Nonsense, right?”

[Mmm... You’re right. That sounds a little reckless and it’s not much of a plan.]

Black Lotus’ disapproval made Jin Seyeon blush from embarrassment. Then...

— So far, 6 gladiators have achieved rank 9.

Vassago’s voice descended from the ceiling. Cheok Jungyeong quickly hid the observer and Jin Seyeon nervously looked up.

— The last match will begin in 2 days.

Vassago boldly declared that he would fight all six of them at once.

“Here, hand the bird over to me.”

Jin Seyeon stretched out her arm to Cheok Jungyeong after the announcement. However, Vassago suddenly interjected again.

— And you two.

They both flinched, but didn’t worry too much. Vassago allowed them to freely plot and scheme against him, so the observer shouldn’t be a problem.

— Your tribute was well received.

Jin Seyeon sighed in relief and leered at Cheok Jungyeong as if to say, *Told you this would work.*

— Someone on Earth can make things like this? You're saying a human made such a delicate object?

“Apparently, according to him.”

Jin Seyeon coldly pointed at Cheok Jungyeong with her chin. He simply shrugged and pulled out the observer from behind him.

“Take a look. This is a bird he sculpted with magic power. You can tell how talented he is, no?”

Cheok Jungyeong set the bird free and the observer chirped as it fluttered around. The small bird danced like a butterfly and looked quite cute.

— *Hmm...*

Vassago silently observed the bird.

“See? It's working,” Jin Seyeon whispered.

“So what? I also thought this was a good idea.”

“Stop lying.”

“Why?”

Cheok Jungyeong added with an unusually serious look.

“I had our members investigate and they told me Vassago's incarnation body used to be super extravagant. It's no surprise Vassago is blinded by riches like his incarnation bo—”

— I can hear you.

Vassago coldly declared. Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Seyeon fell silent.

The devil continued with a chuckle.

— I can't say this incarnation body's inclination hasn't affected me. As you intended, your tribute has greatly satisfied me. I'll visit you soon. It's only natural for a greater being to reward a lower one's good behavior. You shall wait for me.

Jin Seyeon had been waiting for such a response.

Chapter 348

Meeting (4)

Eren began as a squire under Puharen's knight order thanks to his master's oath of guarantee. Of course, nothing came easy. As a squire, his main duties consisted of cleaning and cooking. This left him with only an hour before sleep to practice the sword.

However, Eren didn't give up and viewed everything optimistically. His young, but well-built body allowed him to perform menial tasks without feeling tired. He considered it a great opportunity to watch the powerful knights train. Eren diligently trained every night with what little time he had.

Thankfully, Puharen's knights didn't ignore his efforts. It didn't take long for Eren to be invited to train with the others. Knights lived rough and crude lives, but he grew quickly because of that.

He had never been lucky and it seemed meeting his master used up all his luck. Soon, Eren found out that his master suffered from an incurable illness. He visited Eren's rural village for that very reason and wanted to experience the world more with his remaining time. He just so happened to find the perfect disciple during his travels and returned to the capital.

His master only felt joy, but the news distressed Eren. He had grown stronger than others his age, but remained a child at heart. He couldn't hide his pain at the eternal farewell. Eren visited his master every night and watched him grow weaker on his deathbed.

One day, Eren met a princess named Prihi as he swallowed his tears next to his master.

* * *

I sent observers all over the world to collect information. It didn't take long to realize the situation had become far worse than I imagined.

— Oi, Black. Wait there. Red is about to begin an important battle. I'll contact you later.

Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Seyeon seemed to have a plan at Vassago's colosseum, but Earth gradually crumbled from greater evils that descended.

[A devil has descended in Tokyo. This bird devil calls itself Phenex and has begun to sing a song of death.] [Vual is knocking on the walls of Vladivostok...]

"Spartan?"

Spartan appeared as soon as I called him. He gently landed on my shoulder and seemed slightly bigger than the last time I saw him.

— *Prrrrr.*

Spartan purred and acted cute. I bitterly smiled and stroked his head. Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to play around.

Guoooooooo...

A huge amount of magic power erupted from Morax's location. It didn't come from the devil's demonic energy, but nature's magic power. This four-colored magic power clashed with Morax. I instantly recognized it as Chae Joochul's power.

— Where are you?

Yoo Yeonha's voice rang out from my smartwatch.

"I'm watching Morax. What about you?"

I replied and took out the *[Black Lotus Bow]*.

— I'm in an underground bunker.

“Did you find out what’s happening?”

— Mostly, looks like Earth is on the brink of destruction.

“Oh yeah?”

I chuckled. Baal had once destroyed a world in 3 days, so her words held some weight. He should've spent the first day summoning subordinates as he did now. He probably took even less time to destroy the world after that.

“Huuu.”

I sighed and checked stigma. As I thought, I didn't have a single ounce left. The side effects from *[Time Reversal]* slowed its recovery even with the *[Orb of Regeneration]*. I could forcefully create more with overclocking, but I would have to wait for the right opportunity.

— How are things on your side? I thought you'd know something.

“Ah, well... I don't, really.”

— Then I guess we're doomed because I can't think of anything.

Yoo Yeonha sent me the information she collected.

[Russia, Vladivostok – Vual] [Japan, Tokyo – Phenex] [Spain, Madrid – Astaroth] [Europe – Valac's Army] [Korea – Baal and Morax]

Thankfully, Leraje and Vassago seemed less hostile. Other devils acted like boss monsters, but these two felt more like quests.

“I'm trying to come up with something. I'll let you know once I do.”

— Got it.

Kwaaaaa!

Morax's arm and the Immortal's fist clashed. A huge shockwave spread out in every direction, but aether automatically formed a barrier around me.

A golden flash and a huge magic power blade cut through the air. Kim Suho and Chae Nayun finally joined the battle.

I raised the *[Black Lotus Bow]* and continued to watch them. *[Athena's Mystic Arrow]* had been destroyed after toppling Baal's castle, so I nocked a dark ore arrow.

Then...

"Hey." A woman's voice suddenly flowed into my ears. My head instantly cooled and I looked over.

"It's been a while."

Gulp. I swallowed hard and checked before sighing in relief.

"Geez, you surprised me."

"Hahaha."

The woman playfully laughed as she poked my cheeks. I stepped back and glared at her.

"What is it?"

Medea appeared out of the blue and handed me a piece of paper.

"Here, take it."

"What's this? Actually, go help them fight Morax instead. You haven't forgotten our contract, right?"

"It's a message from Crevon."

"Huh?"

I quickly snatched it from her hand and scanned it.

[Have you been well, Kim Hajin? This is the Crevon Empire's duchess, Tomer. That's right. We're no longer a kingdom, but an empire...]

"I read it too. Crevon wants to help, but it seems they're not in a position to do so."

Medea spoke as I read the message.

"W-Why?"

She shrugged.

"They're powerless. To be exact, they don't have the necessary energy to leave the tower and descend on Earth."

"..."

"I spent hundreds of years preparing for my descent. That's how hard it is to leave that place. How annoying. I came here after all that and look at this place."

Medea's explanation quickly devolved into grumbling about her misfortunes. Of course, I ignored most of it. I could only think of one thing right now.

[Dimensional Entropy]

An energy source powerful enough for Crevon's army to descend.

"What a shame. I thought I'd get to enjoy a longer life this time—"

I ignored the complaining Medea and called Yoo Yeonha.

"Yoo Yeonha, are you there?"

A clattering sound rang out before she finally replied.

—... Yes?

“What were you doing? Planting an apple tree?”

— W-What? N-No, do you think I’m an idiot? An apple tree, *ha, haha*.

“...”

Her strange reaction made me slightly curious, but we didn’t have time.

“Alright, listen to me.”

— *Huh? Ah...* Okay.

Yoo Yeonha quickly became serious. I paused for a moment and turned to Medea.

“Medea, can you pass along this message to Crevon for me?”

* * *

[Russia – Vladivostok]

Russia’s city, Vladivostok, looked peaceful even yesterday. It seemed fine as Valac’s army invaded Europe and Earth experienced a rapid demon realm transformation.

Vladivostok was quite close to Korea and many Korean guilds used it as a strategic location due to its high number of dungeons. Recently, the people’s assessment of Vladivostok had risen so greatly that it outclassed Russia’s capital, Moscow. Many key government facilities even moved to Vladivostok.

A simple reason existed for all of this. Vladivostok had become a safe haven during the past 6 months when everything grew chaotic. Russian heroes, advanced technology, and the well-known Vladivostok walls didn’t cause this. An unknown force had wiped out all the monsters in the area. The residents called this mysterious force their

guardian deity. Dozens of shrines, temples, and churches had been built to worship this unknown god. Vladivostok's residents and the Russian government wished for these miracles to continue and hoped their guardian deity would protect them from all evil.

Russia's most famous hero, Gennadi, thought today would be the last of this mysterious protection.

"Sir Gennadi, we're awaiting your command."

Gennadi looked down from Vladivostok's impenetrable wall. A huge army and a caped devil commanding it lay on the other side.

"So that's Vual..."

Gennadi gritted his teeth. He knew they couldn't do anything against such a powerful force and began imagining the endless army razing Vladivostok.

— Open the gate.

The devil's hoarse voice rang out across the horizon. It carried a hint of demonic energy and shook the walls, causing ordinary soldiers to collapse.

— I will only say it 3 times.

Gennadi deeply contemplated. He didn't believe Vual would spare them even if they opened the gate.

— Open the gate.

The Russian hero despised his own powerlessness.

— Open the...

The devil's voice suddenly cut off. A gust of wind blew and Gennadi raised his head.

“...?”

Chwaaaaa— The wind tore through Vual’s army. Soon, it turned into a storm that threw Vual’s army into disarray.

Boom!

Vual’s soldiers screamed as this violent storm severed their limbs. Even Vual had no choice but to look around for a clue.

“Hmm...”

Something ran around faster than the speed of sound.

“An insect?”

He tried to grab the insect using his demonic energy, but it squirmed away.

“You!”

Vual furrowed his brows. His demonic energy split into multiple branches to chase after the insect. The demonic energy eventually caught the bug. No, that’s what everyone thought.

Plunk!

A thud rang out and his demonic energy rebounded. Neither magic power nor demonic energy had caused this. The insect simply used brute strength to strike back.

“...”

Vual couldn’t understand what he just saw. He stopped attacking and simply observed.

— *Krrrr, Krrrr.*

He caught a closer glimpse of the praying mantis making a strange

cry. However, Vual ignored the bipedal insect.

“You dare look at me with such eyes.”

Instead, he looked at the existence watching him from behind the mantis. He couldn't stand that existence's condescending look.

“Answer me.”

The devil commanded. However, the existence remained silent and its arrogant eyes didn't change.

The lonely king with only one vassal, Orden, stood behind the mantis.

Chapter 349

Meeting (5)

Prihi asked why Eren kept crying. He wiped away his tears and told her he wasn't. She smiled, but he remained solemn. Then she looked at the sword tied to his waist. He slowly moved it behind him.

"Your name?" she asked.

"I'm Eren. A knight."

"I see. I've heard of you."

The princess nodded as if their meeting had been coincidental. Rumors had been circulating in the royal palace for some time about a young knight named Eren. Even Romero, Prihi's henchman, praised this young knight. He said the kingdom's fate would've been different if this young knight had been born 10 years earlier. Prihi wanted a strong knight who matched her ambitions.

"I heard your master is sick."

She spoke again, but Eren hesitated to answer.

"..."

The young knight couldn't help but hope for a miracle even though he remained silent. He had sworn allegiance to Puharen, who had given up on his master's treatment.

"We're short on finances and time."

Puharen's servant had come in person to tell him that. Eren felt disappointed, but understood. His master already accepted death, so Eren had to do the same.

“Is he sick or not? I haven’t heard your answer,” Prihi asked again.

“He’s sick.”

Eren finally replied and nodded.

She opened the door to the room that he just left and Eren followed her. He looked big for his age and the princess was the opposite, so she appeared much smaller next to him.

“...”

She looked at Eren’s master lying in bed. She knew this knight, who had been reduced to a skeleton. Jinkens, a trivial knight with limited potential. He started at the bottom and remained there for all his life. Still, she considered him useful for bringing a great talent to the royal capital.

“I know him. Jinkens, a loyal servant.”

Prihi kindly gazed at the sick man.

“I heard he served the royal family for nearly 20 years. I’m sure the former king would recognize him as well.”

Prihi’s voice grew softer and Eren’s expectations grew. Maybe Prihi would help.

If so, should I ask? Maybe I should wait for her to make the first move.
Eren wondered to himself.

The princess suddenly turned to him. “Young knight.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Eren knelt before her and lowered his head. Prihi could feel his anticipation and excitement. The sly princess hid her smile and spoke with determination.

“I shall help you.”

“...!”

Eren’s heart burst with joy. He easily overlooked the condition that followed.

“But only if you pledge to serve me from now on.”

He looked at her under the pale moonlight. The young princess brilliantly shone in the silver light.

* * *

[Earth – Korea]

I sent Yoo Yeonha the Tower of Wish’s coordinates. She switched to a video call after a brief silence. Her face filled the big screen that suddenly popped up and I quickly reduced the screen size.

— Why there, all of a sudden? That’s the Tower of Wish, isn’t it?

Yoo Yeonha frowned at the coordinates I just sent. She didn’t understand my intentions yet.

“By the way, Medea is with me.”

I adjusted the angle to show Medea, who smiled and waved.

— What the... Why is Medea there?

Yoo Yeonha flinched.

“She brought me an official letter from Crevon. You should read it first.”

I scanned the letter with my smartwatch and sent it to Yoo Yeonha. Her eyes widened after reading it and she quickly understood like always.

— This...

“You understand what’s going on now, right?”

Tomer’s letter stated that Queen Araha had conquered the 9th floor, proclaimed Crevon an empire, and became the Empress. She wanted to help, but no such energy existed in the tower for them to descend. She asked if Earth had that kind of energy. Indeed, we did.

— Are you thinking about using dimensional entropy?

“That’s right.” I snapped my fingers.

“We could temporarily create a passage to the tower with enough energy.”

— *Mmm...* Give me a moment.

Yoo Yeoha began to think. Obviously, not in a normal way. Her eyes turned blue and her hair stood on end as if it became static. This special skill increased her logical reasoning and around 3 minutes passed.

— I don’t know if it’ll work because we lack sufficient data. I can’t properly calculate it, but I guess it’s our only option. I’ll do it.

Yoo Yeonha nodded resolutely and I glanced at Medea.

“Medea, please head back to Crevon and adjust the timing.”

Our timing had to match with Crevon to carry out such a huge summoning. Crevon would also need some time to prepare their army.

“Will it be alright?”

She doubtfully asked and I nodded.

“Yes, it’ll definitely work. You have to hurry.”

My [*Accumulation of Luck*] still affected everything around me. Also, I had some luck left for one last use.

“Okay, if you’re so sure.”

Medea quickly recited a spell. Ssssssss— She disappeared after the quick incantation and I almost mistook it for the wind.

“Phew...”

I took a deep breath to calm down and turned to Spartan on my shoulder.

“Spartan.”

— *Pururu.*

He read my thoughts and nodded before I even spoke. I smiled and spoke out loud anyways.

“Let’s go to Yoo Yeonha.”

* * *

[*Vassago’s Colosseum – Arena*]

“...”

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong and Jin Seyeon stared at the woman in front of them. They had reached the throne room at the colosseum’s highest point. The last challenger would face Vassago here.

However, they only peacefully looked at each other. Neither side felt threatened or scared. The pair only seemed confused at Vassago’s appearance. Not only did Vassago seem weak, but she also looked beautiful. This quality didn’t necessarily matter to devils.

Her long blue hair danced like ocean waves and her eyes sparkled as if they contained all the world's light.

"Hmph."

No words could properly describe such beauty. Jin Seyeon felt her confidence vanish and glanced at Cheok Jungyeong. He had no regard for manners as he stared at Vassago. Jin Seyeon pinched him, but that didn't do anything against all his muscles.

"I liked it a lot."

Vassago finally spoke.

"What did you like?" Jin Seyeon carefully asked. The devil smirked and tapped twice on her new throne. Black Lotus had made this chair, which Cheok Jungyeong gave to her.

"This chair. I liked it a lot."

Vassago seemed truly satisfied. Jin Seyeon nodded while holding back a sigh of relief.

"I'm glad to hear that."

"Is it true you own a lot of these things?"

"It's true, Lord Vassago. Why don't you negotiate with us? Earth has an artisan who can make items much more valuable than that chair."

Jin Seyeon seriously spoke, but Vassago only shrugged.

"Why should I negotiate when I can just kill all of you and take the artisan for myself?"

Jin Seyeon expected such an objection and immediately countered.

"Then the artisan would refuse to work for you."

“That’s a fair argument, but what if I just threaten to kill him? Isn’t death what you mortal beings fear most?”

“Baal is trying to destroy the world anyways. The artisan knows Baal will kill him even if you don’t.”

“Hahaha...”

Vassago smiled. Devils didn’t exactly have a hierarchical relationship. Baal ranked first and Vassago ranked third, but they possessed almost equal influence.

“Don’t underestimate me. I can freely collect whatever I want regardless of Baal.”

Vassago stood from her throne and Cheok Jungyeong scanned her from head to toe. No human would dare to judge her extraterrestrial beauty.

“Ohhh...”

Cheok Jungyeong admired out loud. This upset Vassago and she sat down again.

“Your strategy was quite good. I am indeed a devil who likes to collect.”

Vassago pulled out an accessory. This ring hadn’t been made by Black Lotus, but by a different craftsman from another dimension. She stared at the ring and its beauty mesmerized her.

“Collecting beautiful things is more important than my life.”

“Than your life?”

Jin Seyeon frowned. The devil revealed her weakness so easily, which puzzled the hero.

“Yes, it’s a high-end hobby among devils. Low ranking devils think

murder and destruction are the only forms of entertainment, but nobles like me are different. I don't necessarily enjoy violence unless someone is too arrogant."

Jin Seyeon's face suddenly distorted.

"Then what about Baal? He's—"

"Baal's just like me in a sense. He likes to collect worlds, but I'm different. My hobby is collecting beauty. So..."

Vassago paused and stared at them.

"I am willing to negotiate, but under one condition. You must offer an accessory that I won't grow tired of for at least 100 years. Something that will fill me with joy just by looking at it."

Vassago crossed her legs as she declared. A moment of silence filled the room. Jin Seyeon swallowed her saliva and Cheok Jungyeong yawned.

"What will you do if you like our gift?"

Jin Seyeon broke the silence and asked. Vassago lightly smiled at them.

"This incarnation body will probably last 100 years. I will stay here during that time without causing any harm to Earth."

"Here... you mean the colosseum?"

"Yes, I'll wait for challengers at the colosseum for the next 100 years. I'll even offer them entertainment and rewards. After all, my warehouse is crawling with valuable weapons. Then I'll return to the transcendental realm without any hesitation when this body dies."

The proposal sounded too good to be true. Perhaps the best they could obtain from negotiating. Jin Seyeon and Cheok Jungyeong looked at each other and she slowly nodded.

“We accept.”

“Good, I’ll give you 3 days. I won’t cooperate with Baal in the meantime.”

“Pardon? Three days is too short!”

The pressing deadline appalled Jin Seyeon, but Vassago seemed adamant. Then Cheok Jungyeong came forward.

“By the way, devil...”

“Devil?”

Vassago frowned at his insolent remark and Cheok Jungyeong widely grinned.

“Our duel is still happening, right?”

He didn’t intend on giving up. Magic power sparked around him from his determination to fight.

“Huh...”

Vassago blankly stared at him. However, a gentle smile soon replaced her dumbfounded expression. That meant she also agreed to fight.

* * *

[Russia – Vladivostok]

Vual looked at his army made up of soldiers who served him since the demon realm. His mighty army should’ve been able to wipe out these weaklings without a sweat, yet...

“...”

The devil couldn’t believe the scene unfolding before him. He stared ahead in a daze and couldn’t discern reality from illusion.

Kwaaaaaa!

A magic power beam spewed out from the enemy's palms and swept the battlefield. It burned every demon in its path alive.

Vual's army poured their demonic energy against the enemy. Their huge ball of energy flew towards him and shook the heavens and earth. However, the enemy easily absorbed their energy ball and returned it with even greater strength.

Chwaaaaa!

He fired a ki blast and scattered the soldiers into ashes.

A third of Vual's army had been wiped out in only 5 minutes. The enemy kept releasing an enormous amount of magic power, but didn't seem to grow tired at all. He overpowered the entire army by himself. Still, the devil refused to admit it. How could such a lowly being defeat his army?

"You—!"

Vual shouted and couldn't bear the humiliation any longer. His wrath shook the earth and stopped all movement on the battlefield. Orden turned to Vual.

"Who are you?" Vual asked.

His eyes turned bloodshot and his body shook with rage. The transcendent devil had a worse temper than most humans. Orden pitied him.

"I said who are you!"

The devil's cry tore apart the atmosphere.

"I don't remember allowing you to ask questions," Orden nonchalantly replied.

“W-what? How dare you speak like that. You hybrid—”

Vual couldn't accept this nonsense and no longer endured the enemy's insolence. His extreme rage overtook him.

"Devil, I have a question for you."

Orden continued and ignored Vual's anger.

"You introduced yourself as a devil, so I'm sure you've lived a long time."

A devil lived for hundreds and thousands of years. Had the devil ever seen any other existences like him in all those years?

"Have you ever seen anything like me?"

Orden wondered and asked, but the devil didn't seem willing to answer. Vual could no longer think or reason. They called him the devil of wrath for a reason. His rage had already consumed him.

“Groak, pril, ashack!”

Vual uttered some strange words and released his demonic energy. A massive wave split the earth in half and flew like a dragon towards Orden. The monster king simply countered it with his fist.

Chapter 350

Pieces (1)

Not much changed after Eren pledged allegiance to Prihi. He continued training like usual and Puharen never appeared. Only one change occurred. A small pill would find its way to Eren every night.

Prihi kept her promise and ordered a servant to deliver daily medicine for Eren's master. He felt deeply grateful as he gave this medicine to his teacher. His master gradually recovered every day and Eren rapidly grew.

The boy could now compete against an adult. Of course, his opponents used a wooden sword while he used a real one. Those days felt like the happiest.

Eren came home after his usual training and delivered the medicine to his master. They shared a rather pleasant conversation and he returned to his room.

“Huaaa...”

He sat in a chair and looked outside the window. Suddenly, he felt a sense of fulfillment. Some would describe it as joy and he placed his hand on his chest with a smile.

“Ah, right.”

Eren recalled the nuns who had cared for him now that everything had settled. He took out a piece of paper and a pen to write, so they wouldn't worry.

[To: The Temple of Kterin]

Hello, this is Eren. How are you? Master and I are well. The royal palace

is so big and amazing. I get to eat on time and my sword skills are improving too. I feel happy every day, but sometimes it hurts when I think about all of you. I miss you very much... Today, I received a stipend. They don't usually pay the squires, but I think they gave it to me because I worked hard. I'm sending it to the temple because I have no use for it. Please use it well. I'll keep the letters coming. Thank you for everything.

May the Lord's grace always be with you.

Eren sealed the letter in an envelope with 2 gold coins that he received from Prihi as a stipend. The bottom of the envelope felt considerably thicker because of the coins.

“Huhu...”

He looked at it in satisfaction and stayed like that for a while until a scarlet light penetrated his window. The light seemed to be the size of a firefly, but quickly grew as it passed through the window and shone on him.

“...?” He tilted his head and looked out the window.

“What the...”

An army of soldiers stood with torches in their hands in the royal garden. They appeared fully armed and hostile as they trampled on the grass and flowers.

Eren quickly grabbed his sword and stood up.

“Ah?”

However, he paused when he saw the small figure at the center of the army.

Eren and his master's benefactor, Prihi, stood there.

Orden woke up in a cave.

He saw the light from a lamp faintly swaying over the stone ceiling. He couldn't grasp the situation yet, but it felt like when he first gained intelligence. The fact that he still lived confused him.

— *Kururu. Kururu.*

He heard Kurukuru's voice and slowly turned. Kurukuru knelt beside him.

— *Kururu...*

The servant apologized and felt guilty for disobeying the king's orders by reviving him. However, the humanoid monster did not regret his decision. Kurukuru prepared to die and even take his own life if the king wished.

“...”

Orden silently stared at Kurukuru and read his servant's memories. All that Kurukuru had done over the years slowly seeped into him.

Kurukuru had traveled all over the world to save him. He did everything he could to obtain the ingredients for spirit medicine such as ginseng, herbs, ores, and seagrass. Sometimes, he even stole from others.

Kurukuru severed the Kraken's leg, broke into the Tower of Heroes, pulled out an ancient dire wolf's tooth, and purchased a basilisk's skin. He crossed mountains, seas, jungles, deserts, and dove into boiling magma. He lost his arms, became blind, and his antennae burned away. None of that mattered though. He only wanted to save his king. The servant would give his life if they could be together again.

“...”

Orden finished absorbing Kurukuru's memories and looked over himself. He still looked bigger than an average human, but slightly smaller than three humans combined now. His horns, which he

managed with care, had also disappeared. However, he didn't feel too heavy because of this.

Orden stood up without a word and walked with his stiff legs. The soil beneath his feet felt soft since Kurukuru had taken good care of the cave.

He stepped outside and the dazzling blue sky greeted him. The sun poured down and the clouds and moon struck a beautiful harmony.

He stood absolutely still and felt the nature around him: the salty wind, the rolling waves, the rustling leaves, and the golden sand. His senses captured everything.

“This is strange.”

A chuckle escaped his lips. He had never looked so closely at nature. It never interested him before. He only ever fought and killed as he searched for the meaning of his existence.

Tap, tap.

Quiet footsteps approached.

Tap, tap.

Kurukuru, his only servant, stood beside him. Orden didn't turn to face his servant and Kurukuru remained silent as well. The two monsters only stood and looked at the horizon together. They stayed like that for a while to make up for their time apart.

— *Kuaaaa, kuaaaa.*

Orden had come back to life for some time now. A strange sound disturbed his recollection as he gazed at Vladivostok's blue sky.

He lowered his head towards this painful groan. Vual, the devil who arrogantly attacked him, now lay on the ground. His arms had been severed, but he still had one leg left. However, it folded at a strange angle. His blood and organs also poured out from his torn stomach.

Vual had completely lost. His army seemed to cover Earth's entire surface at one point, but they had all been annihilated. Orden had destroyed the devil's army by himself.

— You, you insolent fool... How dare you...

Vual still refused to surrender. Orden saw his old self in Vual's bloodshot eyes and angry gestures.

He felt ashamed and wanted to teach this transcendent being what he had learned. Suddenly, he realized they might be quite similar regardless of how long they each lived.

Orden looked down at Vual and spoke.

"I feel sorry for you. You don't have to desire so much. That will put your mind at ease."

— Shut your mouth!

Vual spat at him, but the mixture of blood and saliva never reached its target.

— You, I'll remember you! I'll kill you no matter what! Even if I die here... I'll definitely...

"People live because they're alive. You don't need any deeper meaning."

— Shut up! Shut up! You...

Orden swung his fist. *Crack!* The devil's head exploded and Orden turned around. He no longer saw himself as a king, so he didn't feel the need to teach someone unwilling to learn.

Orden sighed at the sky. The forest's stillness surrounded him and his gaze traveled to the artificial wall standing tall amidst the green nature. He stared towards the very top.

“G-Guardian...”

“Mighty guardian!”

“He’s the guardian of Vladivostok!”

The humans who saw Orden began shouting. He looked away in embarrassment.

“Guardian God!”

“What an honor! We praise you!”

The fervent cheering continued. Orden felt surprised that this pleased him as he stood next to Kurukuru. Then the monsters returned to their dwelling.

* * *

[Essence of the Strait – Underground Facility]

I wore my *[Black Lotus Uniform]* and arrived at the underground facility where they stored the *[Dimensional Entropy]*.

“I found a way to reverse the current situation.”

Yoo Yeonha said as I showed up. I decided to hide for the time being and listen to their conversation.

"We need to transmit as much energy as possible to the Tower of Wish. Is there a way?"

"I'm skeptical. *[Dimensional Entropy]* is quite powerful, but also difficult to control. Even now, we're barely keeping it under control with state-of-the-art stabilizers. It's too risky to release this kind of energy all at once."

Each of the researchers expressed their ideas. The nine of them here might be the brightest people on the planet.

“Can’t you find a way? We should be able to pull it off at least once if we raise the output level to the max.”

“What if the machine breaks? The whole planet could be destroyed.”

I approached in the middle of their heated debate.

“Oi.”

“Uaaaak!”

The researchers screamed at the top of their lungs. I could see their hair standing on end. Even Yoo Yeonha seemed surprised and swallowed her saliva.

“Don’t worry about the stability. I’ll help you out.”

I announced with a smile.

I possessed multiple gifts and abilities that could increase a machine’s output: stigma, the [*Random Consolidation System*], and [*Constraints and Amplifications*]. However...

“W-who is this guy? I-identify yourself!”

“How did you get in here?”

The researchers clung to each other and pointed at me. I found the way these middle-aged researchers screamed quite funny.

“C-Chief Officer! Please do something! W-w-who is this man?”

“Haaa...” Yoo Yeonha sighed as she glanced over my outfit.

“It’s okay. He’s on our side.”

“Our side?”

“Yes, I’m sure you’ve all heard of him. This is Black Lotus.”

“...”

They suddenly froze when Yoo Yeonha announced my name. She spoke again after the absolute silence.

“It’s okay. He’s our ally.”

“...”

They still felt skeptical despite her encouragement. I stepped forward with no other choice.

“The plan will proceed as discussed. I’ll take care of the stability issue.”

I approached the machine and reached out towards the heart where they placed the *[Dimensional Entropy]*.

“U-um, be, be careful.”

They worriedly remarked. I smiled at them and activated the *[Random Consolidation System]*.

Wiing—

The machine emitted a loud noise and the number 48 flashed at its center. 48%. Truly a tremendous amplification. I turned to the researchers and their jaws dropped in surprise. These top experts must’ve realized the machine became completely different from before.

“Now, let’s connect Crevon and Earth with this.” I glanced at Yoo Yeonha.

She nodded and came over. “Should I activate it now?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay. Come on, everyone! We don’t have time!”

They came to their senses as Yoo Yeonha clapped. Everyone quickly headed to the control room and began typing on computers for about 2 minutes.

Wooooong...

The machine started to vibrate and energy from the [*Dimensional Entropy*] concentrated into a single point.

Guooooo...

Its resonance shook my skull.

Koong!

I heard another noise from above and detected hostile footsteps. Black water dripped from the ceiling.

“It’s the enemy.”

I warned Yoo Yeonha.

“Right, monsters must’ve sensed the entropy.”

She guessed and quickly grabbed her whip. I kept my composure and turned to Spartan.

— *Pururu.*

He understood with just a look and quickly disappeared.

— *Kuaaaaa*

— *Guaaaaa*

— Humans are down below! Kill the humans!

— Curse the mortals!

The monsters' howling filled the building along with the machine's rumbling, but we had nothing to worry about.

Jiing—

A blue portal appeared next to me after Spartan left for about 10 seconds.

“Did you call for reinforcements?” Yoo Yeonha noticed the portal and pouted.

“I did.” I smiled at her.

Shadows in different colors rose from the portal and soon took their original forms.

“Let me introduce them.”

They existed as one and many at the same time because you ultimately ended up with black if you combined all their colors.

“We're the Chameleon Troupe.”

Seat of yellow, Jain. Seat of blue, Khalifa. Seat of green, Jin Yohan. Seat of violet, Droon. Seat of Indigo, Yoo Kyunghwan. Seat of silver, Kaita. Seat of turquoise, Setryn. Seat of brown, Hirano Arashi. And the seat of white, Boss.

Every Chameleon Troupe member had arrived except for Cheok Jungyeong.

Chapter 351

Pieces (2)

Prihi incarcerated Puharen overnight and killed her other siblings who murdered her mother. She executed most of their servants and knights or exiled them. Her reformation had been swiftly and cruelly carried out.

Eren found himself alone after all the chaos. The knights who taught him swordsmanship no longer remained because they supported Puharen.

However, Eren had chosen a different path. He swore an oath to serve Prihi and betrayed Puharen. Of course, he made several excuses like wanting to save his master, not knowing the ways of the world, and being young. The knights he read about in fairytales never fought in wars. Most importantly, he never thought a young princess like Prihi could commit such cruelty.

Eren spent that first night tormented by worries and guilt.

However, Prihi visited him the next day.

“This kingdom is now mine, so practice your sword without any worries.”

She reassured him with a tap on the shoulder.

Eren became Prihi’s knight and his troubles began then. Prihi held a swordsmanship tournament after seizing the crown to encourage her knights. Of course, Eren participated and won. Her most loyal servant, Kinspring, praised him and even rewarded him with luxurious armor and a sword.

Eren wanted to tell his master about his achievements. However, something unexpected greeted him when he returned. His master had

died with a dagger protruding from his chest. He had clearly been murdered.

The dagger carried Puharen's insignia. They had punished him for his betrayal and he collapsed to his knees. His legs went numb and sorrow filled his heart. Eren embraced his master's dead body and cried until he fell asleep from exhaustion.

Meanwhile, Prihi watched this scene from a distance.

— Heroes all over the world are fighting djinns and devils. They need your support!

“...!”

Jin Sahyuk opened her eyes as an anchorwoman spoke on TV. She felt a severe headache from her returning memories and pressed her temples.

“What a shitty dream.”

She kept seeing Prihi's memories and the story of Akatrina and Kim Suho.

“Huuu...”

Jin Sahyuk shook her head and raised herself. The anchorwoman's voice rang out again.

— We have an update! Chae Joochul and Heynckes are supposedly fighting the rank 1 devil, Baal.

She turned towards the TV and watched.

“What?” Jin Sahyuk finally realized the situation and found herself on asphalt in the middle of an abandoned street.

“Tsk...”

Something big must've happened. She clicked her tongue. *Kwang!* A thunderous noise rang out from a distance when she stood up.

“...!”

She froze when she saw Morax, the giant devil that destroyed Akatrina.

The devil wore Puharen's face and stomped on the world again with its huge hands and feet.

* * *

[Korean Border]

Baal stared at Kim Suho charging towards him. The youth's eyes remained steady and a golden sword shone in his hand. Baal recognized him as a special existence even in Bell's memories.

The man beloved by the world. The so-called main character.

Baal reached out towards him.

“Uuk!”

Kim Suho came to a stop as Baal's authority constrained his movements. No ordinary human could withstand this pressure.

“Keuk...”

Even the main character couldn't do anything. Kim Suho unleashed his magic power and writhed, but couldn't free himself from the invisible shackles.

Meanwhile, Baal laughed as he watched Kim Suho squirm like a worm.

“Everything will be torn to shreds!”

Aileen's Spirit Speech rang out and Baal turned to the tiny woman.

“Die! Die!”

She shouted at the demons on the ground. Other famous heroes also fought those demons with all their might.

The Wolf of Valhalla Yoo Sihyuk, Immortal Chae Joochul, Steel Spirit Heynckes, Blitzkrieg Yoo Jinwoong, Conqueror Shin Jonghak, Hellfire Yi Yongha, Elementalist Rachel...

Baal recognized all of them thanks to Bell's memories. He knew everything about these characters and found it all quite funny. He condescendingly looked at their futile struggle, but also found them pitiful.

His feelings and their wills had all been made up. Baal felt the anger boiling inside him again and clenched his fists.

Kwaaaaaa!

A huge magic power sword shot up towards the sky and almost reached Baal's feet. The sword didn't hurt him, but succeeded in cutting the hem of his clothes. Baal furrowed his brows and looked down.

“Get down from there, you bastard!”

A girl angrily waved her fist around. He instantly recognized her as Chae Nayun and couldn't help but chuckle.

Baal tried to constrain Chae Nayun as he did with Kim Suho.

Tzzzt—

Two magic powers clashed and sparks crackled in the air. A sword strike slashed across Baal's chest.

“...!”

Baal felt a sharp pain and looked at his bloody chest. Then he turned towards where the sword strike came from. There, he saw Kim Suho aiming at him. He had escaped the shackles without Baal noticing and Misteltein shone a brilliant gold. It seemed Kim Suho had severed Baal's authority with only his sword.

“How?”

Baal grew curious, but soon arrived at an answer. Honestly, he didn't even need to think about it. Kim Suho was the main character and he was just the final villain.

Rage filled him again. He couldn't help but wonder if everything that happened simply followed a script.

“—!”

Baal roared and drew another pentagram in the air.

More demons appeared after the second pentagram and a huge army descended from the demon realm.

* * *

[Essence of the Strait – Underground Bunker]

The Chameleon Troupe instantly gathered. I shrugged somewhat proudly while looking at them. We spent several years together, but I personally called them for the first time today.

“Where are we?”

Kaita and Yoo Kyunghwan curiously looked around.

“Ah, that must be that *[Dimensional Entropy]*.”

“Looks like it.”

Jain and Setryn walked towards the *[Dimensional Entropy]*. The

Chameleon Troupe's only magician, Hirano Arashi, also showed interest.

“...”

I kept my eyes on Boss.

“Are you okay?” I asked as I looked into her eyes hidden under her hood.

Boss silently nodded and glanced at Yoo Yeonha standing next to me. She looked somewhat bothered and Yoo Yeonha must've felt it too.

“*Cough*, hello. I'm Yoo Yeonha.”

She introduced herself, but Boss only looked back and forth between us. We didn't have time to waste as the black water droplets from the ceiling bubbled up and formed a figure.

— Crayoghoak!

A 5 meter figure appeared with a muscular physique. Its oval face only had eyes and a mouth.

— *Craaaaaa!*

It opened its mouth and roared.

The Chameleon Troupe curiously looked at the creature. It roared again and showed its shiny black teeth. I smirked and murmured.

“It must be some kind of liquid monster.”

I checked its information with *[Observation and Reading]*.

[Rank 72 Devil – Andromalius]

My smile immediately disappeared. *Rank 72*. It ranked last, but a devil still showed up.

“I guess so. Don’t you think this guy’s teeth look kind of pretty? Almost like obsidian. I can have them, right? Can you make me a necklace with them?”

Jain grinned and took out her dagger. Setryn also joined her.

“Give me half. I want one too.”

— Drgonak kazhack!

The liquid monster shouted again.

“I’ll make whatever you want. Just make sure to capture it for me.”

“Okay.”

I left it to the Chameleon Troupe and used [*Constraints and Amplications*] on the [*Dimensional Entropy*].

Koooong!

The machine shook again after the second amplification.

— *Craaaaa!*

The liquid monster charged forward, but Boss and Jin Yohan quickly stopped it. Jain and Setryn’s daggers flew out while they tied it down.

We activated the [*Dimensional Entropy*] amidst this chaos.

* * *

[*Korean Border*]

“Oi, Chae Joochul.”

Heynckes spoke from behind Chae Joochul, who focused on circulating magic power without looking back. Morax literally

stomped from one corner of Korea to another.

“Joochul, that’s enough.”

Heynckes bitterly smiled and looked at the sky that burned a dark red. *That’s enough.* These two words could be interpreted in two ways. One, they had given it their all. Two, they could no longer stop Morax.

Over 30,000 heroes participated in this battle and the end drew near.

Heynckes and Chae Joochul had lost. They stood a chance when Baal and Morax first descended, but everything changed after Baal’s second summoning. The tides of battle shifted and they couldn’t freely fight in such a location.

— *Uaaak!*

— *Kuaaa!*

A massacre broke out around them. The heroes couldn’t withstand Baal’s army because of its sheer numbers.

“I’ll buy as much time as I can.”

Heynckes raised his sword and walked forward. Chae Joochul finally looked at Heynckes, who imbued his steel armor with even more magic power.

“Deal with the army however you can. You have to save your granddaughter at the very least.”

— *Kuaaak!*

Meanwhile, the screams of heroes continued. Blood dyed the ground red and severed limbs lay everywhere like rocks. Chae Joochul gave Heynckes a solemn look.

“This isn’t a matter that can be resolved by retreating.”

“That doesn’t mean we should all die here. If we retreat, a time will come when we can fight back.”

Click— A metallic ringing resounded as Heynckes equipped his helmet.

“Are you not worried about the side effects?” Chae Joochul muttered.

Heynckes smirked at the Immortal’s rare show of worry and gathered his magic power. Chae Joochul furrowed his brows and could tell Heynckes was using every bit of his remaining lifeforce for this final Steel Spirit.

“I’ll take care of this myself. Retreat with the warriors who are still alive...?”

Something strange and mystifying suddenly occurred.

Jiing!

A beam of light shot up from the ground. Soon, more beams appeared.

Shooooo...

The brilliant light broke through the battlefield and traveled into the sky.

“What’s...”

All the demons and heroes momentarily paused at the curious light.

Everyone simply stared and something else appeared from within the light a few seconds later.

Guoooo...

An engine erupted from the sky and a huge shadow covered the entire wilderness where the battle took place. All the heroes looked up.

— This is Genkelope. We have arrived according to the commander's orders. Now commencing support fire.

The [*Genkelope Vessel*], a spacecraft beyond Earth's capabilities, appeared in the clouds.

Chapter 352

Pieces (3)

[Paris, France]

Astaroth's barrier around Madrid had been lifted. As many feared, he came out with a powerful army and reached Paris in no time.

Ah Hae-In traveled there to stop him, but Paris had already been reduced to ruins when she arrived. His army trampled the city and slaughtered numerous humans. The victims endlessly screamed and heroes became helpless against the devil.

Ah Hae-In bit her lip at the sight of her former hometown. Anger surged in her heart as she witnessed the brutality. *I'm glad I didn't bring Evandel.* She thought to herself. However...

Hiiing!

A unicorn suddenly cried out. It had brought Ah Hae-In here at Evandel's command and shuddered at the horrible scene. Evandel had ignored her master's warning and shared the unicorn's vision.

"Evandel!" Ah Hae-In shouted at her.

The unicorn trembled and sank to the ground after Evandel cut off her connection.

"Damn it."

Evandel's spirit beasts felt their master's agitation and lost control. They threw themselves at the devil's army. Everyone turned their attention to Ah Hae-In and she had no choice but to summon her beasts.

The azure dragon and the black turtle, two of her most adored summons, responded to her call.

— I-it's Duchess Ah Hae-In!

— The reinforcements are here!

The azure dragon flew in the sky while the black turtle occupied the ground. The French heroes noticed the cardinal beasts and cheered. The all-out war between the beasts and devil began.

Kwang!

The spirit beasts and demons violently clashed. Explosions occurred everywhere and the cries of spirit beasts mingled with the screams of demons. The situation didn't favor humans as the spirit beasts lost their chain of command and went berserk.

“Evandel!”

Ah Hae-In sent Evandel a mental transmission, but she didn't reply. The cruel war had been too much for the young girl. Some of the spirit beasts that felt Evandel's agitation left the battlefield thinking she might be in danger.

“Evandel! Hang in there, Evandel!” Ah Hae-In shouted.

The air suddenly stretched and every sound slowly faded. Ah Hae-In could feel the particles moving in the atmosphere. It felt quite strange, so she stopped to look around. The world slowed like her senses and the spirit beasts froze with their claws pointed forward. The rays of demonic energy also froze in the air.

“It seems this has become quite the trouble.”

A voice flowed into her ears and she turned around in surprise.

“Ah?”

Ah Hae-In widened her eyes at the old man with thick gray hair and deep eyes.

“You’re...”

She recognized him and felt his magic power before. She would never forget such a pure and marvelous power. Oh Jaejin had arrived, the world’s first and last 10 star magician and a member of the Nine Stars.

“It’s been a while.”

Oh Jaejin faintly smiled. Ah Hae-In became speechless. They first met 20 years ago at a magic tower. Oh Jaejin led the Seoul magic tower back then when she couldn’t even control the simplest magic yet.

One day, he suddenly left. The grand magician had always been known for his peculiar behavior. Everyone thought he would return, but he never did. The first and last grand magician disappeared from the world.

“Grand Magician Oh Jaejin”

Ah Hae-In couldn’t believe her eyes. Oh Jaejin hadn’t publicly appeared in years despite the shocking rumors that he suffered from dementia or had been castrated. However, he now appeared in front of the devil’s army.

“Yes, it’s good to see you too, Ah Hae-In.”

“Pardon? *Ah*, of course. H-how did you get here? N-no, actually, what have you been d-doing u-u-until now?”

Ah Hae-In couldn’t speak properly. Nevertheless, the grand magician replied with a smile.

“A young man came to see me a few months ago. He told me he needed my help.”

Kim Hajin’s medicine had cured his dementia, but it took a long time to reclaim the magic he lost over the years. He also had a difficult

time persuading his wife who always worried too much.

“I was hiding because I needed a little more time, but that’s all in the past now. Move over. I’ll deal with him.”

Oh Jaejin walked past her and she looked at his back. The old man’s back felt as big as a tower.

He held a long tree branch like a cane and lightly shook it. The world stopped. Everything except Ah Hae-In and Oh Jaejin ceased to move. This mesmerized her. She couldn’t help but admire such astonishing skill. Oh Jaejin, the 10 star magician, defied logic and nature to create a miracle. He could control the expressions in time. In other words, every movement in the world.

* * *

[Essence of the Strait – Underground Facility]

I also activated *[Buster Call]* at the same time as the *[Dimensional Entropy]*. Stigma hadn’t fully recovered, but I summoned the Genkelope Vessel through overclocking.

“Are you done?”

Jain asked and I nodded.

Andromalius ranked last, but could still be considered a devil. However... *Crunch! Crunch!* Droon’s Mimyo currently ate it alive.

“Don’t overdo it, Mimyo. You might get a stomachache later.”

Droon patted Mimyo, who wiggled his ears. It felt quite mind-boggling to see. I bitterly smiled and spoke to Horner.

“Horner, are you there?”

— Yes, sir. Everyone is on standby.

His voice never failed to ease my mind. Moreover, the entire ship and even the soldiers had been greatly upgraded when I checked with my thousand-mile eyes.

“How are things down there?”

— Not so good according to the supercomputer. We’ve detected two powerful devils.

I only summoned the ship 10 seconds ago, but the supercomputer already calculated everything.

I tried to conceal my surprise and replied.

“Got it. We’ll be there.”

— I’ll open the portal.

A portal suddenly appeared in front of me. This technology never failed to amaze me.

— Come in. Your guest is waiting.

“My guest? What guest... *Ah.*”

I had a rough idea. I just activated the [*Dimensional Entropy*], so the timing fit.

“Okay, I’ll head over. Protect this place with everyone else.”

I told the Chameleon Troupe members who prepared to follow me.

Currently, the [*Dimensional Entropy*] became more important than anything else in the world. I needed to leave it in the hands of trustworthy people.

“Why should you have all the fun... *Sigh*, fine.”

Jain pouted at first, but nodded when Boss glared at her.

“I’ll leave it to you. Yoo Yeonha, follow me.”

“Pardon? *Ah...* Okay.”

I entered the portal with Yoo Yeonha while Boss looked at us.

[Genkelope Vessel]

I saw the Genkelope Vessel’s name engraved on the ship’s ceiling as soon as I entered the portal.

“Long time no see, sir.”

Horner greeted us with a welcoming smile.

“Long time no see. *Ah*, this is Yoo Yeonha.”

I introduced her and they shook hands.

“Let’s get moving. We don’t have much time.”

“Yes. Please follow me, commander.”

We followed Horner to the control room and saw the battlefield below.

“Many heroes are currently fighting.”

Horner pointed at Baal and Morax’s locations. The situation didn’t look good even at a glance. It looked more like a one-sided slaughter than a war. The number of monsters and demons hadn’t decreased at all while heroes quickly fell.

“They don’t really care about us, do they? Even though this ship is huge,” I curiously asked.

“We’re currently in stealth mode, so the enemy can’t see us,” Horner replied.

“Really?”

“Yes, we’ve been waiting for your order. Should we proceed?”

Horner looked down at the demons with a sour expression. He burned with anger because his hometown in the Tower of Wish had also been captured by demons.

“Yes, let’s go.”

“Thank you. Genkelope’s soldiers, get ready.”

Horner ordered them when I gave permission. Immediately, the ship lifted its stealth mode and opened its hangar.

Shooong...

Kwaaaaaaa!

Hundreds of fighter jets flew out.

“So this is where you were, Kim Hajin.”

Someone called my name and stood beside me. I knew who had arrived without even looking.

“Yeah, it’s been a while.”

“You bet. I mean... Long time no see. My name is Tomer from the empire.”

She seemed much stronger than the last time we met and wore a luxurious armor and cape.

* * *

[Korean Border]

Shin Jonghak looked up in a daze. A pillar of light rose from the ground and a huge warship appeared in the sky. It began bombing the demons. Not just Shin Jonghak, but many of the heroes couldn't understand the situation.

“Oi.”

A woman approached the dazed Shin Jonghak. He flinched and swung his spear towards her, but she easily blocked it.

“Why?”

He glared at her and asked.

“Why what?”

Jin Sahyuk mysteriously smiled and he frowned.

“Why are you here?”

“*Hmm? Ah*, it's nothing serious.”

Jin Sahyuk awkwardly scratched her cheek. Honestly, she wanted to run away and escape from Morax. She could easily return to Akatrina with the dimensional stone.

Unfortunately, Morax would never give up on her. He would follow her to Akatrina if she didn't take care of him now. Jin Sahyuk went to Shin Jonghak for this reason.

“Well, do you remember what Bell said about Shin Myungchul leaving you something important?”

Shin Myungchul might lead to a clue that could defeat the devils. Shin Jonghak showed some interest.

“Yeah, he did say that. What about it?”

“*Ah*, nothing. I just remembered something important.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak grabbed the Conqueror Spear. Jin Sahyuk hadn't said a word yet, but he knew she would insult Shin Myungchul. *I'll kill her before she does.*

However, Jin Sahyuk placed a hand on his shoulder without a word. He frowned at her hand before scowling at her.

“I think I figured out what Shin Myungchul left you.”

She announced after grabbing his attention.

“What?”

She had a dream today about Eren and Prihi. She regretted those memories from Akatrina and Morax physically manifested from that regret. It felt quite traumatizing, but Jin Sahyuk realized Shin Myungchul's legacy thanks to it.

“Are you serious?” Shin Jonghak suspiciously asked.

“I don't lie, so just shut up and follow me.”

Jin Sahyuk muttered and grabbed him by the shoulder. Then she activated her authority without waiting for his reply.

Shin Jonghak felt like being sucked into something. He opened his mouth, but no sound came out. He also grew nauseous, but couldn't vomit. Around 30 seconds passed in that uncomfortable state.

“...!”

He opened his eyes again. “What, *haa, haa*. What the hell?”

He looked around while panting, but everything looked pitch-black except for Jin Sahyuk.

“Dammit. Oi! Where the hell am I?”

“Where do you think? We’re inside your mind.”

“What? What does that even? What the hell are you talking about?”

Shin Jonghak grew angry instead of confused. Jin Sahyuk left him alone to vent and looked around the darkness.

“If I’m correct, you’ll soon meet that Shin Myungchul you love so much.”

Chapter 353

Pieces (4)

“...”

Shin Jonghak silently stared at Jin Sahyuk. Her words about meeting Shin Myungchul captivated him more than anything else. Of course, he found it hard to believe.

“You said we’re inside my head?”

He asked the most basic question first. Currently, only darkness surrounded them. Jin Sahyuk claimed this space resided in his mind, but he couldn’t just accept that. Despite his doubts, she nodded without hesitation.

“Yes, I’ve recreated your mind to my liking.”

Reality Manipulation had many applications such as this. Jin Sahyuk observed his mind and recreated it to uncover Shin Myungchul’s legacy within his consciousness. He seemed dissatisfied with the whole setup because of the empty view.

“I for one think this space suits you. It’s pitch-black,” she said with a smirk.

“What did you say?”

A vein popped out from his temple and he almost stumbled back. Several objects rose from the darkness beneath his feet.

“W-what are these?”

These objects represented his ego: Kim Hajin’s sculpture of him, the youngest high rank hero certificate, Xiang Yu’s Conqueror Spear, and

even a statue of Chae Nayun. However, the door behind everything held the most significance. The iron gate had his grandfather's name inscribed on it: [*Shin Myungchul*].

“Follow me.”

Shin Jonghak stood in awe as Jin Sahyuk walked towards the gate. He doubted her intentions and closely followed. He also didn't forget to cover Chae Nayun's statue with his coat so Jin Sahyuk wouldn't misunderstand.

“*Hmm...* Myungchul. Don't you think that's a pretty corny name?”

She banged on the iron gate a few times and looked back at him. He didn't say anything and began pondering his existence. He knew quite well how the public perceived him. They called him the youngest high rank hero, Desolate Moon's vice leader, heir to the Jinsung Corp, and a handsome man who could beat most celebrities in looks. All these descriptions felt good, but Shin Jonghak never forgot his roots. Only he could take pride in being Shin Myunchul's grandson in this vast world.

“Are you saying my grandfather is behind that door?” Shin Jonghak asked. He had several questions as Jin Sahyuk nodded.

“Yes, probably. I think Shin Myungchul sealed a part of his soul in the deepest corner of your consciousness. Just like I did.”

Until recently, Jin Sahyuk's memories of Akatrina had been sealed inside her. She did that on purpose because she didn't think she could face her current life with the burdens from her past life. Thankfully, this experience served as a clue. She suspected Shin Myungchul used a similar method.

“It's not that I trust you, but—”

Shin Jonghak gulped. He doubtfully looked at her and reached out towards the gate. Then he tried to push it open, but it wouldn't budge. His efforts seemed futile even as he groaned.

“Try using your magic power,” Jin Sahyuk interrupted.

He leered at her, but poured his magic power into the gate. It responded and finally moved. *Oooong...* The iron gate vibrated and smoothly opened like a clam.

Kiik— Koong!

A heavy sound rang out. Shin Jonghak looked at the other side with his feet firmly planted on the ground. He gulped and could feel his heart sink as if something heavy just dropped on top of it.

A man stood on the other side and Shin Jonghak could clearly see him. His shoulders seemed wide as a mountain and he stood straight as a river. His long hair flowed and Shin Jonghak felt a shiver down his spine. The mere sight of that man completely stunned him. Shin Jonghak gulped again and slowly turned to Jin Sahyuk.

“If this is some kind of trick...”

“I told you. It’s not.”

Jin Sahyuk sounded annoyed.

He glared at her one last time before crossing the gate’s threshold. Something strange suddenly happened. The man awkwardly moved like a broken puppet. Then he slowly raised his head and their gazes met. A barely visible smile spread across the man’s face. Shin Jonghak felt as if his body had been set on fire.

Shin Myungchul, the hero who left an everlasting impression on him, stood there.

* * *

[Chancellor of Germany’s Private Bunker]

Valac’s army devastated Eastern Europe and finally reached Germany. Two devils had attacked Europe: Astaroth in the west and Valac in the east. Astaroth destroyed Paris and Germany didn’t stand a chance against Valac. As a result, the devils took complete control of Europe.

“We’re at our limit. Berlin can’t hold out any longer.”

Jenes, the Chancellor of Germany, pitifully announced. His hands trembled as he sent the footage of Berlin’s defense barrier to Yi Gongmyung.

—...

Yi Gongmyung carefully studied the footage. As Supreme Commander, he had to map out a strategy that could lead to victory.

— It’s coming down.

He didn’t have much to say. The demons would soon break through Berlin’s defense. Their army swiftly ravaged Poland to arrive at Berlin. The defense barrier, a product of cutting-edge magic engineering, would soon crumble.

“Can we at least evacuate the people?” Jenes asked.

Yi Gongmyung shook his head. The enemies had seized both the east and west. That meant the citizens couldn’t travel by land and billions of people couldn’t evacuate through portals. They had run into a dead end.

“What do you expect me to do then!” Jenes shouted and began to tear up. The guilt from not being able to save his people weighed heavily on his heart. Yi Gongmyung could only sigh.

— Please hold on for a little longer. There’s not much we can do right now. Baal, Morax, and a third devil have also invaded Korea. I’m afraid the situation here isn’t so good either, but I’m sure we’ll come up with something...

The chancellor clenched his teeth. Despair and disappointment replaced the rage in his heart. He thought about the current situation again. Currently, he resided in an underground bunker in Korea. Germany’s commander-in-chief, along with his cabinet members, had abandoned their people and evacuated to a foreign country. It felt hypocritical to worry about the people he left behind.

“I understand...”

The screen that showed Berlin suddenly turned white as the chancellor spat out words of resignation. Then he widened his eyes.

“W-what’s going on?”

He exclaimed in German. It didn’t take long to understand what just happened. The end had finally arrived and the demons had succeeded in destroying Germany.

“...”

Jenes closed his eyes and clenched his fists. The cabinet ministers inside the bunker reacted similarly. The white screen slowly faded and the blinding light disappeared. Berlin reappeared, but the scene looked different from before. They suddenly heard a strange voice from the speaker.

— The time has come for us to strike.

Jenes’ jaw dropped in awe.

— The time has come to show our bravery and recover our homeland.

The voice resounded and soldiers in uniform appeared beyond the barrier. These soldiers seemed even more unrealistic than the demons occupying Germany.

— We shall advance and slay evil without hesitation.

They couldn’t comprehend the scene unfolding before them.

“Commander?”

Jenes called out to Yi Gongmyung with his gaze still locked on the screen. The supreme commander didn’t respond because he had been observing several countries besides Germany. The soldiers who arrived in Germany only represented a fraction of their numbers. Rays

of light descended across the world and reinforcements from another dimension arrived. These soldiers from Crevon possessed unimaginable strength and came to fulfill their promise. Jenes recognized the man at the front.

“C-Commander! Ki Parang, Ki Parang is here!”

Jenes pointed at the man in front of the army. Even Jenes had heard of him because celebrities inside the tower also became celebrities outside. Yi Gongmyung finally replied while looking at the soldiers on the screen.

— Yes, I see him.

“What does this mean?” Jenes urgently asked, but Yi Gongmyung remained silent. The soldiers began to advance and Ki Parang’s sword slashed out waves of magic power. The crowd cheered when they saw his attacks devouring the demons.

— Ki Parang, Kim Yusin, Gwanchang... Most of them are elite knights from Crevon. I’m having trouble grasping the situation myself, but it seems luck is on our side. Chancellor, please assist them as much as you can.

Yi Gongmyung announced and Jenes turned to the battlefield. Their commander seemed to be Kim Yusin, who currently swung his sword. The magic power from his blade formed thousands of human figures. These magic soldiers formed an army of their own and moved according to Kim Yusin’s command. They protected the German heroes and attacked the demons.

“...”

The chancellor clenched his fists as he watched. These reinforcements had turned the tables and overpowered the demons. He ordered his men to assist Crevon’s army as much as possible. A glimmer of hope began to bloom in the hearts of people all over the world.

* * *

[Genkelope Vessel]

I postponed my meeting with Tomer because of the dire situation. We headed to the control room with a huge holographic screen that displayed the heroes from Crevon.

Tomer snapped her fingers and proudly announced.

"China has Lü Bu and Zhang Liao. Japan has Musashi. Kim Yusin and Ki Parang are in Germany and Lancelot has arrived in the U.S. My soldiers and the imperial army amount to approximately 200,000 soldiers."

"That many?"

Their numbers surprised me. I only roughly described these historical figures in the original novel and never thought they would actually appear.

"Yes, a lot of them have been living in hiding in Crevon. They offered to help when I explained the situation."

"Oh..."

I looked at the screen. Musashi Miyamoto, Lü Bu, Lancelot, and Silla's Hwarangs currently fought on the battlefield. All of them used to live on Earth and their souls revived in the tower after death. Now, they slaughtered the devils and demons to protect their former home.

"What do you think? Should we sit back and relax?" Tomer shrugged with a relaxed expression.

"No." I shook my head. This still might not be enough. We needed even more for the final battle against Baal. I decided to finally use my secret weapons.

"You should go help Suho for now."

"Suho? Kim Suho?"

"Yeah."

“And what do you plan to do?”

I smiled and took out a card from my pocket. I could only secure one copy even with my superhuman luck.

“What’s that?” Tomer tilted her head.

“It’s a 9 star card. You know, from the Card Kingdom.”

“9 stars?”

Tomer frowned as if doubting my words. Apparently, cards had become quite famous in Crevon. They even established a direct trade route to the Card Kingdom after taking control of the 9th floor.

“How is that even possible? The most our Empress could get were two 8 star cards.”

I showed her the 9 star card to resolve her doubts and her eyes immediately widened.

[Legend on the Mural] [Individual] [9 star] Effective Good ● A legend will manifest to assist you.

“Woah, is that for real? Hey, come on. Hand it over. Let me take a look.”

“No way.”

Tomer reached out, but I didn’t intend on giving it to her and hid it away.

“Oh, come on! Just give me one peek.”

“Enough.” I held the card with my fingers and injected stigma into it.

“Let’s see what we’ll get.”

The card began to tremble. I let go and it slowly rose into the air.

Paat! It flashed and disappeared.

1 second, 2 seconds, 3 seconds passed, and...

“...?”

“What the hell?”

Tomer and I looked at each other in shock. I blinked in confusion, but she seemed proud to have figured out my trick.

“*Aha*, I see what’s going on. That card was fake, right?”

“No, it wasn’t.”

Chapter 354

Final Name (1)

Blood soaked the earth under the dark sky. Corpses piled into mountains and intestines scattered on the ground. Baal, the perpetrator, seemed apathetic at the most horrendous massacre in human history. It simply felt like killing ants to him.

KWAAAAA...

Magic power surged and Baal turned to the source. Kim Suho swung his sword, but Baal easily defended with a single hand. Kim Suho persisted even though he couldn't match this transcendent devil.

“—!”

Kim Suho shouted and poured his all into the sword. However, Baal easily parried his blow again. *Clang!* Demonic energy clashed with the holy sword. Then another sword suddenly slashed between them.

“You bastard!”

Chae Nayun swung her magic sword that became as huge as Morax. She had immensely extended the blade with magic power to reach Baal. The devil stretched his demonic energy into a thin string and simply shattered her sword by destroying its core.

“...”

A smile flickered across Baal's face as Chae Nayun's huge sword disappeared. Now, he could clearly see the ones hidden behind it. Countless heroes, each with unique weapons and powers, charged at Baal. He recognized them: Rachel, Yoo Sihyuk, Yoo Jinwoong, Aileen, Nicholas... Suddenly, he grew tired as he recalled their names and faces.

Baal regretted synchronizing with Bell. These ants wouldn't have bothered him if it weren't for Bell's memories.

He slowed the time around these heroes instead of facing them. Baal carefully observed everyone in this frozen world. They looked determined as if nothing could break their resolve to protect this world. He pondered the concept of a novel as he looked at them.

Would he fall here as fate intended? If so, what did he destroy all those different worlds for? Did he live all these years just for this moment?

“...”

Baal looked at the sky in silence. White specks of dust drifted slowly in the dark. These specks became rays of light that poured towards the earth. Each of these rays represented a portal with reinforcements from another dimension.

Baal bitterly smiled at the scene.

What is this? Has god responded to the humans' prayers? Then where was this god when I destroyed the other worlds?

This kind of contemplation didn't suit a devil. Baal closed his eyes and the world returned to normal.

“Baal...”

Kim Suho called his name and glanced at Morax in the background. Baal blankly stared at Kim Suho and had several questions for the hero.

Do you know where you came from? What if you were just a toy? A doll designed for the sake of entertaining higher beings? Will you still sacrifice your life to kill me?

“...”

Baal didn't ask and Kim Suho never answered. The devil already knew

Kim Suho's answer based on Bell's memories.

— It doesn't matter who I am or what this world is. I'm just protecting the people who are precious to me.

Kim Suho would most certainly say something like that.

“Sir Suho, so this is where you were.”

Crevon's troops lined up behind Kim Suho, who firmly stood with his sword in hand. Most of them consisted of knights, but also some priests and magicians. Kim Suho glanced at them and nodded.

“Very funny.”

Baal scoffed and examined the world before him. Morax still seemed to be in perfect shape and their demonic armies remained. Still, these humans stubbornly resisted. A huge metallic object in the sky bombarded the demons and others who didn't exist in this world descended through rays of light.

— Old man.

Letters suddenly appeared in front of Baal and he recognized the sender as Leraje.

“Where are you?”

— I can't help you.

Baal clenched his teeth.

“Where are you?”

— It wouldn't be a bad idea to withdraw here.

“Don't make me say it again.”

Baal growled and didn't bother hiding his anger.

However, Leraje kept insisting.

— You’ve already lost your castle. Don’t push yourself too hard. Why don’t you just give up this time?

Baal’s castle served as an important medium between the phenomenon realm and the transcendent realm. He no longer possessed infinite demonic energy without his castle and the number of soldiers he could summon decreased as well. His castle had already been destroyed by a certain man.

“Leave.”

Baal cut her off. Vual had already died and Vassago and Leraje had no intentions of cooperating with him. Victory would no longer be guaranteed, but he didn’t intend to stop. Even if he would die here...

“I’ll destroy this world by myself.”

Baal stepped forward with determination. Kim Suho and thousands of others turned to Baal. The devil faced them head-on and transformed into his true form.

Chweeek!

Arrows, spears, and swords pierced the devil’s body. Baal felt more perplexed than pain. These ordinary weapons managed to cut through his demonic energy and wound his flesh. Baal widened his eyes and turned to where the attacks came from. He almost felt astonished by the sight.

“...!”

A magician stood there. Baal knew her name even without relying on Bell’s memory. Shimurin, the grand magician, had somehow appeared.

“How...”

Shimurin didn’t arrive alone. Soldiers from the other world that escaped destruction also came to Earth through Shimurin’s magic.

These soldiers all aimed at Baal with their exorcism weapons.

“*Hmm...* This world sure is humid.”

Shimurin muttered and stepped forward. Baal remained silent and tried to grasp the present situation. Shimurin had died a long time ago. He had never experienced anything like this in thousands of years.

A voice suddenly flowed into Baal’s ears.

— You brought this on yourself, Baal.

He recognized Vassago’s voice, the rank 2 devil. She continued as if none of this surprised her.

— You regenerated the first world you once destroyed. The only way to overcome the law of causality and descend was to destroy that world again. However, the world you regenerated didn’t end this time. Someone protected that world and now its people are hunting you down.

Baal silently turned to Shimurin and the other humans from the Republic of Leores and the Arunheim Kingdom. He held contradictory feelings towards them. Baal considered them insignificant, but also missed them at the same time. The devil hunter Harin, knight Airun, the magician Shimurin, and the prince once called Krisbell.

A smile spread across Baal’s face as he looked at his old friend.

* * *

[Essence of the Strait’s Underground Bunker – Yoo Yeonha’s Office]

Yoo Yeonha sat in an office full of holographic screens broadcasting live events around the world. Everyone fought the same war under different skies. East Asia, Oceania, America, and Europe... Every continent experienced death and destruction like an infectious disease.

“Focus on saving lives. We have enough food and medicine in the

bunker.”

— Roger.

Yoo Yeonha ordered her people while thinking about the war. She continued to perform her duties as Essence of the Strait’s chief officer.

“I think the [*Dimensional Entropy*] is safe now.”

Yoo Yeonha heard a leisurely voice and slowly raised her head at Jain leaning against the wall.

“We’ve worked pretty hard. Do we get anything?”

Yoo Yeonha frowned. She didn’t mind rewarding them, but Jain’s appearance bothered her. Jain currently looked like Kim Hajin.

“Don’t worry. You’ll receive plenty of rewards.”

“What’s with the sour face?”

“It’s your disguise.”

Yoo Yeonha muttered and Jain smirked. The Chameleon Troupe member slowly approached Yoo Yeonha while disguised as Kim Hajin.

“I said stop. Enough with the jokes.”

Yoo Yeonha blushed as Kim Hajin’s face neared hers.

“What do you think? It’s amazing, right? I mean my disguise. I can even change my voice.”

Jain grinned and caressed Yoo Yeonha’s cheek. Yoo Yeonha gulped at the warm hand that felt like Kim Hajin’s.

— Chief Officer!

A voice suddenly called and Yoo Yeonha pushed Jain away in surprise. Jain clicked her tongue.

“W-w-what?” Yoo Yeonha replied to her worker.

— Please take a look at this.

The informant showed Yoo Yeonha a video of a forest near Vladivostok. Two humans, no two humanoid monsters appeared in it. Her hair stood on end when she recognized them.

“Is this...?”

— Yes.

The informant gravely announced.

— It’s Orden.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha stared at Orden and felt her head painfully throb. Orden pushed through the grass with a clear destination in mind. He headed towards Korea where the battle with Baal currently took place.

“Ah...”

Orden, who used to be humanity’s worst enemy, reappeared at the worst time. He returned to destroy Earth for good. Yoo Yeonha sank to the floor in despair, but Jain simply smirked.

— There’s something strange about them.

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t focus on the words that followed. She thought everything would be over now and barely held on until the news about Orden arrived.

If I’m going to die like this, if everything is going to end... Wouldn’t it be better to say what I want before I’m gone for good?

Yoo Yeonha picked up her smartwatch instead of planting an apple tree.

Chapter 355

The Final Name (2)

Shin Jonghak looked at Shin Myungchul in his consciousness. The time around them seemed to slow. Shin Jonghak controlled this space, so time actually did slow in reality.

Shin Myungchul straightened up and Shin Jonghak stiffened. He missed his grandfather so much. The man who guided his life... His hero stood in front of him, but Shin Jonghak couldn't move or speak. He could only watch Shin Myungchul as if this mirage might disappear at any moment.

— It's been a while.

Shin Myungchul spoke in the same old voice he missed so much. Shin Jonghak stood in a daze like a statue. The grandfather patted his grandson on the shoulder and continued.

— Jonghak, I have a lot to say. First, let me apologize. I'm sorry for being a horrible grandfather.

Shin Jonghak looked him in the eyes. He used to only look up at his grandfather, but now they stood at the same height. Shin Myungchul seemed old, but still graceful and strong at heart. His grandfather continued with a kind smile.

— And... *ah*, I'm afraid I'm not good with words. What I meant... Jonghak, I've lived inside you for a long time. I've felt and experienced the same things as you.

His voice sounded soft like a grandfather reading bedtime stories. Shin Jonghak felt a torrent of emotions in his heart.

— When I was alive, and even now, your love always distressed me. It's too good for a coward like me.

He didn't dare to tell his grandson the truth. The betrayal Shin Jonghak would feel worried Shin Myungchul more than his own suffering.

— I'm sure you know the truth by now and don't need my explanations. Jonghak, I'm not a hero. Millions have died because of me. I've brought disaster to the world.

Shin Myungchul calmly confessed and Shin Jonghak nodded. *I know.* Shin Myungchul could hear his grandson's thoughts.

— However, I still harbor a sense of relief in my selfish heart. After all, I would've never met you if I hadn't gone back in time.

Shin Myungchul bitterly smiled.

— That's why I can't truly regret my decision. It would mean denying my love for you.

Shin Jonghak felt tears streaming down his face. Shin Myungchul wiped away his grandson's tears with big and rough hands.

— Jonghak...

Shin Jonghak silently nodded and Shin Myungchul continued.

— Are you happy with who you are?

The two men fell silent and Shin Myungchul kindly smiled. Shin Jonghak nodded after a brief moment, but retracted his answer. It took him a while to admit the truth and shake his head.

— It's good that you've come to terms with it. Always be true to yourself and live without regrets. It's nothing big, but I've left something to help you. Before that, I have a favor to ask.

Shin Myungchul placed a hand on Shin Jonghak's shoulder. His hand weighed heavily on Shin Jonghak, who felt overwhelmed just looking at his grandfather. Shin Jonghak resolved to grant his grandfather's wish no matter what, but didn't expect the words that came next.

— Please, be the one to correct me. Tell the world the truth after everything is over. Tell them it was my selfish greed that almost destroyed the world. You should be the one to do so.

Shin Jonghak began to tremble and widened his eyes. He couldn't believe what he just heard. Shin Myungchul had always been his role model. His grandfather's past didn't matter. He would continue to admire Shin Myungchul because of their memories together. Naturally, Shin Jonghak couldn't imagine a future where Shin Myungchul's name became tarnished.

Shin Myungchul bitterly smiled and placed a hand on Shin Jonghak's head. Then he slowly stroked his grandson's hair like he always did in the past.

— Please, Jonghak. This is my last wish. Of course, you're free to refuse and I'll still give you my legacy. However, I'd really like you to do it.

Those soft words broke Shin Jonghak and tears suddenly welled in his eyes.

“...”

Shin Jonghak clenched his teeth, but tears already ran down his face. His legs trembled and began loudly sobbing. Shin Jonghak lowered his head in embarrassment and sorrow. He wailed miserably like a child and Shin Myungchul stared at his grandson for a long time.

Finally, the boy stopped sobbing and nodded in the empty silence.

* * *

Baal thought back to his youth. It must've been 10,000 or 100,000 years ago. He used to be nothing. A thin film surrounded him and the beating of his existence began inside that film. He could see and feel the world around him. At the time, he hadn't become a devil or Baal yet.

However, he naturally became a devil as time passed. He couldn't recall whether he wanted to be good or evil. It just came to him one

day that he existed opposite to good.

He ripped through the film surrounding him with that belief. Immediately, he saw the transcendent realm full of stars. There, he earned the name Baal and learned to think by observing humans in other worlds.

Baal woke from his recollection and sighed. He never wondered about his origins, but had a vague idea of where he came from now.

[Returner Hero] [Views: 3,235,212] [Favorites: 21,325] [Word Count: 1,372,153]

Everything could be traced to a few words and numbers. A crude novel written by a human had caused all his years of solitude.

He recalled the world he saw in Bell's memory. One with no devils where religions could be considered mere beliefs. No magic existed that could affect the laws of physics. Humans dominated every other species. They didn't possess the ability to interfere with abstract concepts. Concepts couldn't exert power beyond the laws of nature. Humans couldn't stop time, which functioned fairly for everyone. This scientific world consisted of thorough calculations and logical rules with no room for magical interventions. Baal considered it quite plain compared to his world. The creator's world full of ordinary beings only had complex laws and principles.

"Hiyaaap!"

A loud shout brought Baal back to his senses. He opened his eyes and looked at the countless humans charging at him. He coldly smiled at their resolute appearances. All of them were nothing but characters in a novel.

Our existences are all in vain.

Baal looked at the distant sky. A huge chunk of metal floated above with Kim Hajin inside, the author who created this world.

He felt a surge of anger. Baal glared at the author and increased his demonic energy. He erupted like a volcano to fully descend. His

seething demonic energy covered the entire world, consuming all of nature, and drawing in all the characters into his barrier.

“—!”

Baal roared and vowed to himself once again.

I'll destroy your precious little world. I will no longer remain a mere toy.

His eyes turned crimson as darkness swallowed the world.

* * *

[Genkelope Vessel]

Shimurin appeared exactly 30 seconds later from where the 9 star card disappeared. *Did that mean the 9 star card summoned Shimurin? What kind of relationship did she have with the mural?* I felt confused and looked at the ground below.

“What the... They're all people from the other world.”

Tomer muttered as she observed the soldiers from Leores and Arunheim. I shrugged and faced her.

“Anyways, you should head down too.”

“You want me to come along?” Tomer raised her eyebrows and doubted whether they needed her help.

“Of course, we need all the help we can get.” I took out the Misteltein bullets from stigma's storage. The four long bullets faintly glowed.

“What are those?” Tomer asked as she glanced at them. I lightly rubbed the bullets before activating *[Synthesis]*.

[Fusing Misteltein bullets...]

The four bullets merged into one when the system message appeared.

I also spent my remaining SP to add the exorcism attribute to this final bullet.

“Whoa, they all became one.”

Like that, I created the ultimate bullet. However, this wouldn't be enough to bring down Baal. Tomer watched the entire process with fervent interest, so I showed her the bullet.

“This should be able to drive Baal into a corner at least once.”

It all came down to timing. When the strength of every hero united, when my luck guided the luck of everyone else, and all the world's power came together... Then I would fire this bullet. The timing would probably be when... *KWAAAAANG!* A huge explosion occurred and darkness swallowed everything.

“What?” Tomer quickly raised her head, but nothing could be done. The ship's floor immediately sank. No, the ship itself disappeared and the two of us fell from 4000 meters in the air.

“Uaaaaaah...”

Tomer screamed and I quickly summoned Spartan. He appeared like a hero and spread his wings to catch us on his back.

“Oh my god.” Tomer clutched her chest and panted heavily. Even a superhuman like her wouldn't survive a 4000 meter fall.

“...”

I nervously looked around. The Genkelope Vessel, the sky, the trees, and the grass all disappeared. Only endless darkness surrounded us. I discovered some familiar faces when I widened my eyes and looked further. Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, Yun Seung-Ah, Shimurin, Aileen... The sudden change in scenery surprised them too as they tried to comprehend the situation.

“Hey, where are we?” Tomer asked.

I used *[Observation and Reading]* to find out.

[Baal's Barrier – A space created by Baal for his descent on Earth. It resembles Baal's transcendent realm.]

Well, it seemed Baal had done something crazy.

“We’re inside Baal’s barrier,” I bitterly replied.

“*Huh?*”

“Looks like Baal brought us here.”

I turned to Tomer, who stared at me and chuckled.

“That means Baal is down there, right?”

“Correct.”

“Okay, well then—” Tomer playfully smiled and rolled up her sleeves. Then she increased her magic power.

“I’ll show you how I earned my nickname, the Ironblood Duchess.”

Her body burned blue. Her eyes, hands, heart, and hair... Azure flames engulfed everything. She looked like the epitome of superhumans only seen in cartoons.

“Okay, then I’ll...”

I nodded and loaded the Mistelin bullet into the Desert Eagle. I felt scared, but pretended to be fine and placed a hand on Tomer’s shoulder.

“Cover you from behind.”

“Cover me?” Tomer seemed dissatisfied for some reason.

“Yeah, I’m a sharpshooter. Remember?”

“Whatever.”

She shook her head and flew away at a speed faster than my bullets.

Chapter 356

Final Name (3)

[Shin Jonghak's Mind]

Jin Sahyuk didn't exactly enjoy watching two grown men cry in each other's arms. Still, she decided not to interfere and didn't want to risk losing Shin Myungchul's legacy.

"*Ssp...*"

She watched Shin Jonghak wailing like a pig and wondered why he suddenly became such a crybaby. She crossed her arms and waited.

— It's time for me to go.

Shin Myungchul finally announced and Jin Sahyuk sighed in relief. Shin Jonghak shook his head like a baby, but his grandfather seemed resolute.

Shin Myungchul couldn't stay even if he wanted. His soul already began to fade. Shin Jonghak lowered his head and sobbed again when he saw his grandfather's legs becoming dust.

— Jonghak, look at me.

However, Shin Myungchul didn't fear death. He felt more concerned about his grandson than himself and only warmly smiled.

— Think of all the things you'll accomplish as a hero.

Shin Jonghak raised his head and tried to smile, but his face distorted with tears.

"*Pfft... Hmph.*" Jin Sahyuk quickly covered her mouth. She almost

burst into laughter because he looked like a squid.

— Jonghak.

Shin Myungchul stroked his grandson's head. Shin Jonghak stared at his grandfather the entire time to remember this moment forever.

— Take care. I'll always believe in you.

Shin Myungchul spoke his last words before scattering into dust. His remains danced in the air and seeped into Shin Jonghak's body.

Shin Jonghak closed his eyes and felt a certain power sinking into him.

"Are you done?" Jin Sahyuk asked.

However, Shin Jonghak didn't reply. He simply stood there and repeatedly breathed in and out to feel Shin Myunchul's legacy. Jin Sahyuk watched him for a while and quietly disabled her authority.

Crack! The sound of something breaking rang out. Shin Jonghak turned to Jin Sahyuk as the space in his mind disappeared.

"Thank you."

"*Huh?*" She felt genuinely surprised and never expected to hear those words from Shin Jonghak.

"Don't get me wrong. It's not like I did this for you." Jin Sahyuk shrugged.

"Then what's your goal?"

"That's none of your business."

The darkness faded and they returned to the normal world. Then they exchanged glances and stepped forward at the same time. Of course, they headed towards the battle with Baal. Shin Jonghak wanted to

correct his grandfather's mistake and Jin Sahyuk wanted to carry out her own plan. Fortunately, they didn't have to travel far.

Guooooo...

Demonic energy swayed in the distance. When Jin Sahyuk noticed it...

Kwaaaaaa!

Baal's energy raged like a storm and drove the entire world into darkness. He swallowed the sky, the earth, and everything in between. They found themselves inside a giant dome filled with an ominous silence.

"Looks like we're inside Baal's barrier."

Shin Jonghak concluded and Jin Sahyuk raised her eyebrows.

"This legacy thing must be something. It's rare for an idiot like you to notice so fast."

"Shut up."

He growled and ran towards the demonic energy's source. Jin Sahyuk dashed after him and they quickly reached the barrier's center. There, Baal finally revealed his true form.

"*Whoa...* What the hell?" Jin Sahyuk exclaimed in shock and the other heroes reacted similarly.

Baal's body had turned fluid like a sophisticated hologram or a ghost. He didn't look human anymore. Right now, he looked more like a dragon than a devil.

"Huh?"

Jin Sahyuk spotted a familiar face in the crowd and immediately doubted her eyes. He couldn't possibly be there. He couldn't possibly exist anymore. She widened her eyes in astonishment.

“Bell?” she muttered.

The man she had killed, Bell, seemed to be alive. He stood before her very eyes. Jin Sahyuk felt shocked when Bell heard her and turned around. Then he smiled and his lips began to move.

— Hey.

“Hey my ass!”

Jin Sahyuk wanted to run towards him, but...

“—!”

Baal howled in his true evil god form. Demonic energy filled the entire barrier from his single cry.

“Jin Sahyuk, you wait here.”

Shin Jonghak stepped forward and she blankly watched him in a daze. He mistakenly thought she felt overwhelmed by Baal and faintly smiled.

“Don’t worry. This is something I have to do.”

He heroically announced and grabbed the Conqueror Spear.

“It’s also something only I can do.”

Shin Jonghak’s magic power surrounded the spear and his energy felt much denser than before.

“Stay in the back. No, help the others evacuate.”

Jin Sahyuk slowly returned to her senses at his words. She blinked a few times and finally opened her mouth.

“Who do you think you are?”

“What?”

They glared at each other and another hero approached the pair.

“Jin Sahyuk? Shin Jonghak?”

They turned to the voice.

“I didn’t expect to see you two together. So you got caught in this too?”

Kim Suho greeted them and Jin Sahyuk also looked at Chae Nayun standing next to him.

Damn it. She was the last person I wanted to see.

Jin Sahyuk frowned.

Chwaaak!

A woman engulfed in azure flames suddenly burst onto the scene.

“*Hmm?* Kim Suho? And... Knight Commander Shin Jahyuk too?”

Tomer noticed them and paused.

* * *

I observed Baal far from the battlefield and covered parts of his barrier with stigma.

“*Phew...*”

Around 30 square meters of the barrier had become mine. This area wouldn’t be affected by Baal’s influence and he shouldn’t be able to detect me even in his transcendent form.

First, I transformed the Desert Eagle into a sniper rifle. *Clunk— Kiik—*

Kiik— The familiar sound of its mechanical parts rang out. The gun merged with aether and became as tall as a human. Then I settled into an appropriate position and loaded the Misteltein bullet.

— *Tap.*

Something suddenly touched my shoulder. Even aether failed to detect the mysterious presence. I felt my blood boil and my hair stood on end. However, I didn't panic. Instead, I had to quickly respond to this surprise attack. I surrounded myself with aether and looked back.

"*Ugh*, you got me there."

Boss appeared from behind and her lips faintly trembled. She clearly enjoyed my reaction. I frowned at her, but she simply shrugged.

"I didn't do anything. You misunderstood on your own."

"Whatever, how did you get here?"

Spartan slowly walked out from behind Boss and brought more people than just her.

"So where exactly are we, Hajin?"

Jain, Jin Yohan, and Hirano Arashi came as well. Jain held a woman who had fainted. I recognized the unconscious person as Yoo Yeonha despite the disheveled hair that covered her face.

"Did every Chameleon Troupe member get caught in this barrier too?"

"Nope. Just me, Boss, Jin Yohan, and Arashi. The others are still outside."

"*Mmm...* and her?"

"Oh, her?"

I pointed at Yoo Yeonha and Jain lifted her with a playful smirk.

“She passed out. I might’ve gone too far with my prank. Anyways, you should check your smartwatch! This girl sent you quite a long text.”

“Text?”

“Yep, it’s super long.”

I took out my smartwatch as Jain suggested. Indeed, I received a text from Yoo Yeonha. It almost seemed like a novel at first glance. I opened the message and tried to read.

Tap, tap—

Footsteps suddenly rang out and I raised my head. Boss had also been looking at my smartwatch and did the same. We all looked in the same direction and a cold silence immediately descended.

“Byul...”

Yi Yeonjun appeared and softly called Boss’ name.

* * *

[Korea – Gaesung]

Baal had captured the Korean border in his barrier. Right now, Cheok Jungyeong stood far away from the border and observed a city called Gaesung that demons had attacked. This city used to be the heart of Goryeo.

“Tsk.”

Cheok Jungyeong felt a strange sensation as if a hot lump had been thrown into his stomach. He didn’t care about the people of this era, but it felt weird to watch demons ravage his hometown.

Chweeek— Chweeek— Chweeek—

The sound of a bow being tugged rang out from next to him. Cheok

Jungyeong glanced at Jin Seyeon firing dozens of arrows at the demons.

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong crossed his arms and didn't move an inch. He pondered his own feelings when he heard that Baal attacked the northern part of Korea. Fighting Baal sounded funner than anything else, but Cheok Jungyeong came to Gaesung instead. His legs moved on their own and he couldn't understand why.

“How long are you going to just stand there?” Jin Seyeon finally asked. Cheok Jungyeong refused to answer, so she shouted at him.

“Stop watching and help me out!”

Cheok Jungyeong coldly looked at her. Any other person would've averted their gaze, but Jin Seyeon didn't turn away.

“There's about 100,000 of them, no?” Cheok Jungyeong quietly asked.

“100,000? You wish. The official estimation is 500,000.” She glanced at her smartwatch and replied.

“Yeah? Then I guess we can use her.”

“Use who?”

“You'll see. I don't even have to go out there.” Cheok Jungyeong chuckled and began muttering to himself.

“Droon, you see what's going on here?”

— Yeah, but it looks like Boss and the others got dragged into Baal's barrier.

Droon's voice flowed into Cheok Jungyeong's ears.

“Doesn't matter. Boss knows how to take care of herself. Are you

ready?”

— *Mmm...* How many?

“500,000.”

— *500000...* We’ll be cutting it pretty close. We could lose a city at worst.

“Just do it.”

Cheok Jungyeong pressed him and ended their conversation.

“Excuse me...”

Jin Seyeon wanted to ask about his plan, but something suddenly descended from above.

KWAAAANG!

A strange creature fell from the sky like a meteorite.

“What is that?” Jin Seyeon asked in bewilderment.

“Even you and I can’t handle 500,000. Don’t expect me to cut off 500,000 heads.”

Cheok Jungyeong turned to Mimyo. It had black skin, shining crimson eyes, and a pair of long ears above its head. It looked like a normal hare from a distance, but its existence could hardly be called simple. Mimyo came from a foreign dimension and didn’t belong in this world.

“That doesn’t answer my question. So, what is that?”

“The Chameleon Troupe’s ultimate weapon. I’m seeing it for the first time in a while too.”

Mimyo opened its mouth and a pair of sharp fangs gleamed.

“Ultimate weapon?”

Mimyo extended its claws, each as long as a baseball bat.

“That’s right. It can’t and shouldn’t be used recklessly.”

A monster that even Cheok Jungyeong couldn’t handle.

Jin Seyeon understood his warning and carefully asked, “May I know why?”

“Because it can’t be stopped until it’s fully satisfied.”

Cheok Jungyeong kept his gaze on Mimyo and Jin Seyeon also turned to the monster.

“Kuaaaaaa!”

Mimyo dashed onto the battlefield.

“What?”

Its speed couldn’t be seen with the naked eye. Mimyo rushed at the demons with its mouth wide open and sucked them all in.

“...”

Jin Seyeon couldn’t process the scene before her. Her jaw dropped and she became speechless.

“500,000 should be enough to satisfy it,” Cheok Jungyeong said with a smirk.

“What happens if it’s not satisfied?” Jin Seyeon gulped in fear and asked.

“Well, it’ll eat everything and everyone until it’s full.”

They couldn't recklessly use Mimyo for this reason. Even Droon couldn't control Mimyo when it went wild. Therefore, the Chameleon Troupe only used it during large-scale fights. Mimyo almost destroyed an entire city the other day.

"Eat? That's—"

"This is how we handle things. Leave if you don't like it our way."

Jin Seyeon tried to protest, but Cheok Jungyeong cut her off. She shut her mouth with a frown. Mimyo seemed to be their best chance at saving Gaesung.

"I'd like to evacuate the heroes and civilians first."

"Do as you wish. We've ordered Mimyo to attack only demons, but there's a good chance humans will get swept too."

Jin Seyeon nodded and ordered the heroes in Gaesung to retreat.

[This is a message from master rank hero Jin Seyeon. Heroes of Gaesung, please stop fighting and evacuate the civilians. This is an order. Save as many people as you can.]

Jin Seyeon placed her bow down and turned to Mimyo.

"KUWAAAAA!"

Mimyo repeated the simple actions of tearing and chewing. It tore the demons apart every time it swung its paws and heads disappeared every time it opened its mouth. The demons' attacks didn't affect Mimyo at all. The creature continued to eat with endless hunger.

"Huh..."

Jin Seyeon almost pitied the demons because of Mimyo's ruthlessness. She watched the massacre in a daze.

Chapter 357

Final Name (4)

[Baal's Barrier]

Yi Yeonjun appeared out of nowhere like a ghost. He stood about 20 steps away from me and Boss.

“It’s been a while,” he said with a bitter smile.

I glanced at Boss. She tried to appear calm, but felt a mix of emotions.

“...”

Boss silently stared at Yi Yeonjun. She already knew the truth that he had ruined her life, but couldn’t bring herself to completely hate him. After all, they spent 20 years together. Of course, she couldn’t instantly deny those two decades.

“Boss.”

I placed my hand on her shoulder and she looked at me. Her expression seemed cold. Perhaps she didn’t even know how she felt right now.

“I’d like to talk to you about something.”

Yi Yeonjun announced and Boss turned to him.

“What if we’re not interested?” Jain asked while studying Boss’ face.

Jain changed her arm into a sickle that looked like Kurukuru’s. She developed this secret technique to increase her physical strength and named it *[Monsterification]*. It couldn’t be considered an awakening, but an elaborate imitation of a humanoid monster.

“Move, you're not the one I'm interested in,” Yi Yeonjun flatly replied.

“Well that's obvious, but—”

Jain chuckled when he interrupted her.

“And it isn't Byul either.”

“...?”

Jain frowned and glanced at Boss before looking at me. I felt a strange sensation as I watched Yi Yeonjun.

“You...”

He pointed at me and I realized where my discomfort came from. He called for Boss first, but only ever looked at me.

“Kim Hajin, I'd like to speak with you.”

Boss lost her cool at his words and stretched her shadow towards him.

Whish—

A shrill sound pierced the air. Yi Yeonjun didn't dodge and her shadow penetrated his flesh.

“It's important.”

He simply continued.

“You...”

Boss finally ran out of patience and stepped forward.

“Don't you have anything to say to me?” she asked in a trembling voice.

Yi Yeonjun stared at her and shook his head. Boss' expression returned to being cold and apathetic.

“Kim Hajin.”

He called me again.

“I don't feel like chatting with you.” I shook my head. I didn't know what he wanted, but I didn't plan on letting things go his way. However, his next words...

“What if I said it's about your novel?”

My brain suddenly froze and it felt as if my breathing and heart all stopped.

Whish!

A familiar sound rang out and Boss' shadow pierced Yi Yeonjun's clavicle this time.

“Boss.”

I stopped her and stepped forward. I didn't know how Yi Yeonjun knew, but I had to keep his mouth shut.

“Hajin...”

Boss grabbed my wrist and I could see the grief and anger in her eyes. Yi Yeonjun's apathy infuriated her more than his betrayal.

“I know.”

I looked her in the eyes.

“I know what you're trying to say, but just give me a minute.”

I gently untangled Boss' hand from my wrist. Her heavy breathing subsided and she wore a nonchalant mask again.

“Thank you. It won’t take long.”

I walked towards Yi Yeonjun and Jain moved out of the way.

“...”

Yi Yeonjun stared at me with empty eyes. Perhaps those terrifying eyes once sparkled with innocence. Perhaps they never contained anything from the beginning. He spoke again as I neared.

“Don’t you think we need some privacy?”

“What?”

The darkness under my feet suddenly soared and swallowed the both of us. I found myself face-to-face with him. It seemed he had formed a barrier within a barrier.

* * *

[Baal’s Barrier]

“Hmm? Kim Suho? And... Knight Commander Shin Jahyuk too?”

Tomer looked at Kim Suho and Jin Sahyuk. Kim Suho studied Jin Sahyuk’s face while Tomer seemed happy to see the former knight commander. Jin Sahyuk found their attention rather uncomfortable and awkwardly scratched her neck.

“Ah, my apologies. *Haha*, I meant to say the former knight commander.”

Tomer corrected herself when Jin Sahyuk remained silent. Jin Sahyuk simply coughed and avoided her gaze.

“Hmm? Former knight commander?”

Kim Suho turned to Jin Sahyuk. *Jin Sahyuk used to be Crevon’s knight commander? Jin Sahyuk would rather die than work for others.*

“Ugh.” Jin Sahyuk sighed and hinted at Kim Suho to not ask.

“Well... anyways.”

They didn’t have time for that right now, especially not for indulging in Jin Sahyuk’s past.

“Let’s catch up later because—”

One more guest arrived. *Chwaaaaa!* A gust of wind cut off Kim Suho and Rachel appeared with her long, blonde hair.

“Whoa, Rachel’s here too?”

Chae Nayun had been glaring at Jin Sahyuk, but widened her eyes at the unexpected guest.

“Rachel, long time no see!”

Tomer had met her at Cube and they even worked together in Crevon. She welcomed the elementalist with open arms.

“Yes, it’s good to see you again. Windy? Please help them.”

Rachel greeted Tomer with a rather solemn look and cast the spirit’s blessing on them.

“—!”

Baal roared as if he had been waiting for this moment. His roar’s echo could be visibly seen as demonic energy came towards them like a tsunami.

KWAAAAA!

The wave of demonic energy surged from all sides. Kim Suho grabbed Misteltein and drew an arc in the air. He wielded his sword only once at an undetectable speed. That single attack completely erased the demonic energy.

He had severed the fact of Baal releasing demonic energy. This secret technique resulted from his two enlightenments.

His first enlightenment gave him the Sword Saint gift and the second one taught him this technique. He had always been able to cut everything, but never realized it.

He restricted this power in the past by thinking he could only cut physical beings and objects. The problem always lay in his mindset. However, he learned how to think outside the box to cut down even abstract concepts.

Of course, Kim Suho knew this technique wouldn't be enough against Baal. He had to go one more step beyond his limits to reach the ultimate state of swordsmanship. Then he could finally cut down Baal.

"You..."

Jin Sahyuk turned to Kim Suho in surprise. Chae Nayun and the others simply thought he had slashed away the demonic energy, but Jin Sahyuk knew better. She possessed Reality Manipulation and immediately recognized Kim Suho's authority. His power also interfered with the world's laws, an ability suitable for the main character. Naturally, Jin Sahyuk's mind drifted to the novel that Yi Yeonjun mentioned before.

"Don't flatter yourself."

Shin Jonghak interrupted Jin Sahyuk's train of thought. He grabbed the Conqueror Spear and walked past Kim Suho.

Kim Suho gazed at Shin Jonghak's back and could feel an unfamiliar force from his old rival.

"You want to make a bet?"

KOOONG! The Conqueror Spear pounded against the ground and Shin Jonghak stood with his back facing everyone.

"On who'll be the first to kill Baal."

Shin Jonghak seemed serious, but Jin Sahyuk only found him laughable. He still acted like the main character even after all this time. He hadn't changed much after meeting his grandfather and inheriting Shin Myunchul's legacy.

"Sure, let's make a bet," Kim Suho replied with a smile.

"So what's the prize going to be?" Shin Jonghak asked as he glanced at Chae Nayun. Unfortunately, she didn't notice.

Kim Suho opened his mouth after some deliberation. "*Mmm...* How about the loser calls the winner hyung for a month?"

The suggestion seemed random, but not for Kim Suho. His real age was at least 10 years older than everyone else and he always wanted to hear his friends calling him hyung or oppa.

"..."

Shin Jonghak's face distorted as if to say, *I'll never call you hyung.*

"It won't matter if you win. Are you scared?"

Kim Suho provoked him and Shin Jonghak shook his head.

"Let's do it."

Shin Jonghak's magic power surrounded the Conqueror Spear and Kim Suho also grabbed Misteltein.

"Alright, let's do this. Stay alive, okay?"

They loosened up the mood with light conversation and resolved themselves. Kim Suho stepped forward when a voice suddenly flowed into his ears.

— Kim Suho, can you hear me?

"*Huh?* Kim Hajin?"

Kim Suho muttered in surprise and the name caught everyone's attention. Chae Nayun quickly grabbed his wrist.

“What? Did you just say Kim Hajin? Where is he?”

— Hey, come save me.

Kim Hajin called Kim Suho for help.

* * *

[Paris, France]

Whiiish!

Ah Hae-In whistled for her divine beast and the azure dragon in the sky solemnly descended.

— *Krrr!*

The azure dragon snorted contently at the clear blue sky. It had wiped out all the flying monsters like gargoyles that covered the sky. Ah Hae-In gently patted the dragon's snout and approached the grand magician.

“Grand Magician.”

It felt thrilling to say those words. What she witnessed today indeed matched that title. Ah Hae-In tried to suppress her overflowing emotions.

“It was an honor to fight alongside you.”

“Oh, please.”

Oh Jaejin softly smiled and bent down as if to sit. Remnants of a broken bench swarmed towards him. The bench quickly reconstructed itself and Oh Jaejin slumped down on it. Once again, Ah Hae-In could only admire him.

“Likewise, it was an honor to fight alongside a talented magician such as yourself. It’s amazing you reached 9 stars with only summoning magic.”

“Y-Y-You flatter me.”

Perhaps he only meant to be nice, but Ah Hae-In couldn’t resist swaying in joy.

Oh Jaejin continued with a smile.

“I’m nearing my limit. I can feel my thoughts scattering and it’s getting harder to breathe by the minute. You and the other magicians will need to take over after this. Perhaps my old friends will lend you a hand. If they can afford to, that is.”

Ah Hae-In knew what Oh Jaejin meant by old friends, but only four of the Nine Stars still lived.

— Magician Ah Hae-In, you must come to Seoul immediately!

An urgent voice rang from her smartwatch. Kim Sukho, Korea’s former president and the Hero Association’s current chairman, called her.

“Mr. Chairman, I’m still taking care of the Paris incident.”

— That’s not my problem! Damn it, demons are invading my bunker! Come over at once...

He needed her to save him. Ah Hae-In turned the volume down and looked at Oh Jaejin, who shook his head with a chuckle.

“He hasn’t changed a bit.”

Ah Hae-In smiled and shouted into her smartwatch.

“Oh no! The demons are coming back to life!”

— What? What did you just say? Wait, that doesn’t matter. Just come

here right now...

Ah Hae-In took off her smartwatch and threw it on the ground. Then she turned to the devil Astaroth standing at the center of the ruins. Astaroth looked like a knight in armor and stared at Oh Jaejin with a huge sword. Oh Jaejin faced the devil from the bench.

“Well then, shall we proceed?”

The grand magician stood up.

Astaroth acknowledged this human’s strength and planned to confront him with everything.

“Allow me to assist you.”

Ah Hae-In joined Oh Jaejin and felt grateful that he also represented humanity.

Chapter 358

Final Name (5)

[Yi Yeonjun's Barrier]

Yi Yeonjun told me everything inside the barrier and his cold voice seeped into my consciousness. He knew I created this world as a novel.

“Do you believe all that?”

I tried to feign innocence, but it didn't work. Yi Yeonjun glared at me with his vacant eyes and I could feel his murderous intent.

“Baal is transcendent. He can easily distinguish truth from falsehood. He didn't deny your existence after discovering the truth about himself. Baal sought the origin of his existence all his life, but turned out to be nothing more than a character in a novel.”

I couldn't feel any emotions in Yi Yeonjun's voice.

“I want to ask you.”

His eyes darkened with rage. I waited for him to continue in this stifling silence.

“Are you the god of this world? Are you playing with us for amusement?”

What a futile question. He already lost the desire to live and gave up on everything. I understood. Like Yi Yeonjun, I once considered this world nothing more than a novel. However, I thought differently now.

“No.”

This world might've begun as a novel, but it became much more than words on paper. My existence here proved that fact.

"I'm not a god and this world isn't a novel."

Yi Yeonjun raised an eyebrow and narrowed his eyes at me. I could feel his hostility as if his eyes would tear me apart.

"You... deceiving me until the end."

His voice filled with anger and the barrier around us began to change. Space contorted and pounced at me.

KOOONG!

Aether reacted faster and resisted Yi Yeonjun's barrier.

I took out the Desert Eagle, but couldn't fire. He choked me with some sort of psychokinesis and the Desert Eagle stopped working. The trigger became stuck no matter how hard I pulled.

"I already know your toy's weakness."

He certainly did. A gun would only be a useless piece of metal if you couldn't pull the trigger.

— Kim Suho, can you hear me?

I sent a mental transmission to Kim Suho. Meanwhile, my fight with Yi Yeonjun continued. His powerful psychokinesis aimed at my neck and waist. I could only dodge and run away.

— Hey, come save me.

I sent another mental transmission and ordered Spartan to pick up Kim Suho.

"Uuk!"

Yi Yeonjun caught my index finger and crushed it. Fortunately, the bodyguard I requested arrived in time.

Kieeeeek!

Spartan shrieked and Yi Yeonjun looked up. Huge sword qi came flying towards Yi Yeonjun.

BOOOOM!

Smoke rose from where the sword strike exploded.

“Phew, I almost died back there.”

I sighed in relief and turned to the side. There, I saw Kim Suho who had arrived?

“What the...”

I frowned because the silhouette in the smoke didn't match Kim Suho's. It looked too small to be him. The hairstyle and sword size also seemed different.

“Hmm...”

A familiar voice came through the white smoke. My eyes immediately widened and my heart raced. Violent tremors spread throughout my body.

“Long time no see.”

The smoke cleared and revealed the person standing before me.

“Kim Hajin.”

Chae Nayun appeared instead of Kim Suho.

Meanwhile, Kim Suho ran towards Baal after receiving Kim Hajin's SOS.

"Oi, you sure about Chae Nayun?"

Jin Sahyuk asked. She seemed doubtful, but Kim Suho nodded without hesitation.

Chae Nayun insisted on going when Kim Suho told everyone about Kim Hajin's mental transmission. He complied because he trusted her.

"They'll be fine, so long as they don't fight with each other."

Kim Suho thought about those two. Chae Nayun should've arrived at Kim Hajin's location by now. *What would they argue about? What kind of conversation would they have?* He found it awkward just imagining their reunion, but sincerely hoped they could reconcile.

"Idiot. *Hmm?* Oi, stop."

Jin Sahyuk muttered before urging the group to stop. Kim Suho also noticed something off. They hadn't grown any closer to the devil in the distance. Baal seemed to be moving farther away as they ran.

"Something's not right."

"What?" Shin Jonghak hissed. He felt pissed off about Kim Suho sending Chae Nayun. However, he knew they shouldn't quarrel right now.

Kim Suho ignored Shin Jonghak and earnestly analyzed the barrier. Then they ran into a large group that consisted of around 100 individuals. Kim Suho and Rachel flinched because this group came out of nowhere.

"What the... Who are you?"

Kim Suho straightened his posture. The devil hunter Harin suddenly popped out from the crowd. She stood in front of Kim Suho with a bright smile.

“Suho!”

“*Huh?* Harin?”

Kim Suho finally recognized the group. They either belonged to the Republic of Leores or the Arunheim Kingdom. He happily greeted them individually.

“Kim Suho? Are you Kim Suho?”

A magician with long, ginger hair called him. He turned around and nodded at her.

“Yes, that’s me.”

“*Hmm.* I see. I’ve heard a lot about you from Kim Hajin. My name is Shimurin, the grand magician in charge of dimensions.”

“*Ah,* is that so?”

Kim Suho widened his eyes when he heard the guest mentioning a familiar name. He knew he could trust Kim Hajin’s friend. Again, he chose to ignore Shin Jonghak’s grumbling.

— Why is everyone so head over heels for Kim Hajin? What’s so great about him?

“Well then, we should hurry. We don’t have much time.” Kim Suho pointed at Baal in the distance.

“We don’t have time?” Shimurin frowned and tilted her head.

“That’s right. We’re in a rush.”

“What are you talking about?”

Shimurin smirked and pointed at Baal in his transcendent form. He looked like a dragon, but still seemed hazy like a silhouette. This form gradually grew clearer over time.

“He descended too quickly and hasn’t regained consciousness. He can’t maintain that form. That’s why he created the labyrinth barrier.”

“Pardon?”

Kim Suho blinked in confusion and Shimurin raised her eyebrows.

“It means we have enough time to strategize. I see you’re as dense as Kim Hajin.”

“Um... No, Hajin is way smarter than me.”

“That’s unfortunate.”

Jin Sahyuk approached a man surrounded by knights while Kim Suho and Shimurin spoke.

Tap— Tap—

Her footsteps rang out until she stood before the man that had accompanied her for the past 20 years.

“Halt!”

The knights escorting the man stopped her. She glanced at them and turned to him. She always hated his smile.

“Enough with that ugly smirk, Bell.”

Knight Commander Airun angrily stepped forward. She grabbed her sword, but Bell stopped her.

“It’s okay, Airun. We have a lot to talk about. You may leave.”

“I can’t, Your Highness. This woman has disrespected you—”

“It’s fine.”

Bell softly, but firmly spoke. Airun glared at Jin Sahyuk and left without withdrawing her hostile gaze. Jin Sahyuk didn't pay any attention to her.

"You'd better explain what the hell is going on."

Jin Sahyuk didn't know whether to feel angry or confused. The fact that Bell returned still shocked her. She placed a hand on his shoulder.

"I won't hesitate to kill you again if you don't explain."

Airun could clearly hear Jin Sahyuk's threat.

"You ruffian, how dare you?"

Airun raised her sword and the other knights did the same. *Clang*—They unsheathed their swords and sharp metallic sounds rang out. The atmosphere suddenly turned serious and tension filled the air. Kim Suho and Shimurin turned to them in surprise.

"Sure." Bell seemed calm as ever and smiled at Jin Sahyuk.

"I do want to tell you how I survived."

His smile contained pure joy. Bell truly rejoiced at the fact that he finally escaped eternity. Now, he could carry on with his life and see it to the end.

"I believe we can reach a happy ending."

Bell declared as Jin Sahyuk doubtfully glared at him.

* * *

[Baal's Barrier – The Chameleon Troupe's Camp]

"Mmm..."

Yoo Yeonha finally woke up. Her ears worked fine even in her

semiconscious state. *Koong, koong, koong*. She heard thumping sounds.

“*Huh?*”

She opened her eyes and saw a ceiling made of magic power. Azure magic power swayed like the ocean’s surface.

Yoo Yeonha lowered her gaze and saw Jain watching her. She flinched and rose from the bed with fake coughs.

“*Cough cough...* Where... am I?”

“You’re at our camp.”

“Camp?”

“Yep, Arashi made it.”

Yoo Yeonha looked around and found herself surrounded by magic power. She could feel it in the air too. This structure resembled a magical fortress.

“It’s a fortress.”

“It sure is.”

Indeed, the magic artificer Hirano Arashi had created this place. Arashi built this fortress after Boss said she wanted to wait for Kim Hajin at the same place.

“What are you... doing here?” Yoo Yeonha asked while rubbing her temples to fend off the headache.

“We’re waiting for Hajin to return,” Jain replied.

“Hajin... Kim Hajin?”

“Yeah, because I have to show him this.”

Jain playfully smirked and pulled out a smartwatch. Yoo Yeonha immediately recognized it and frowned.

“That’s mine.”

“That’s right.”

“...?”

Why does she want to show my smartwatch to Kim Hajin?

Yoo Yeonha wondered while still feeling drowsy.

Fortunately, Jain kindly explained.

“Look, it’s the text you sent to Hajin.”

[Dear, Kim Hajin. Hello, this is Yoo Yeonha...]

Yoo Yeonha’s face turned bright red like a ripe tomato on the verge of bursting when Jain read the first sentence.

“NO!”

She screamed and jumped at Jain.

Chapter 359

Final Name (6)

“I’ll go!”

Chae Nayun instinctively shouted when she heard from Kim Suho that Kim Hajin called for help. She could finally repay Kim Hajin for all the times he saved her and would definitely regret it if this chance slipped by.

Kieeeeek!

A sharp shriek rang out and everyone looked at the barrier’s ceiling. A huge eagle circled above them.

“That’s...”

Kim Suho assumed Kim Hajin had sent the eagle, but felt like he had seen it before.

“Chae Nayun?”

“Gotcha. *Oi!* It’s me! I’m right here!”

Chae Nayun shouted at the eagle after Kim Suho urged her. The giant bird flapped its wings and descended. Her intuition told her this eagle would take her to Kim Hajin. She placed her worries aside about seeing Kim Hajin and grabbed Spartan’s legs.

The eagle smirked and picked her up. They instantly reached their destination after teleporting.

“Ah...”

Chae Nayun looked down while hanging onto the eagle’s legs and

spotted Kim Hajin. He ran around in a black uniform like a rabbit.

“...”

She felt ready to meet him, but her heart stopped when she saw actually him. Unfortunately, she couldn't waste any time. *Kwang! Kwang! Kwang!* Several explosions rang out and all the attacks flew towards Kim Hajin. Chae Nayun realized he would die if she didn't jump in.

Guoooooooo—

She gathered magic power that violently swirled around Balmung. The legendary greatsword greedily absorbed Chae Nayun's magic power and increased in size. She jumped down and swung her sword as big as a pillar. Balmung crashed into Yi Yeonjun.

Kwaaaaang!

Chae Nayun cracked Yi Yeonjun's head and perfectly landed. Then she turned to Kim Hajin and saw his face despite the smoke.

How long had it been since she last saw him? Complicated emotions rose in her. Chae Nayun's heart raced and her breathing grew heavy. However, she couldn't be distracted by silly feelings right now with the enemy behind her.

“What are you doing on the ground?”

“...”

Kim Hajin remained silent while sitting on his butt. She could see the confusion on his face and bitterly smiled.

“Come on. Stop being so pathetic.”

Kim Hajin only rose after a long silence.

“Cough cough.”

He awkwardly coughed and she recognized his old habit. Kim Hajin checked the Desert Eagle and glanced at Chae Nayun.

“I’m here to save you.”

She said as she tightened her grip around Balmung.

“Really?” he replied in a cracked voice.

“Yeah, I know you asked for Kim Suho, but I wanted to come instead. You and I have unfinished business.”

Chae Nayun did her best to remain calm and Kim Hajin nodded with a faint smile. She felt sad for some reason. What could possibly cause this pain? She stood beside him while suppressing her emotions.

Yi Yeonjun stood up covered in blood from Chae Nayun’s earlier attack. He surrounded himself with a sturdy barrier so they couldn’t launch another surprise attack.

“It feels like forever since we last fought together.”

Chae Nayun smiled at Kim Hajin. Then she activated her flying sword technique. *Clang!* Her magic power rang out and dozens of magic swords bloomed like a lotus flower. Kim Hajin silently stared at her and nodded with a bitter smile.

“It sure does.”

* * *

[Baal’s Barrier]

Baal continued to reconstruct himself. From a distance, this process looked like lightning intertwining in the air and black fog forming strange shapes. His premature descent led to an imperfect state that emitted demonic energy from time to time. This demonic energy released like a waste product and Kim Suho erased it with Misteltein every time it came out.

“Do you expect me to believe you?”

Jin Sahyuk didn't even care about Baal as she glared at Bell.

“Yes.”

Bell calmly nodded and a small smile spread across his lips.

“You have to believe me. I'm proof of my own story. As you can see, I'm alive and well.”

He explained everything to Jin Sahyuk. How he survived and returned to this world. His miracle resulted from hundreds of coincidences along with a certain man's extravagant luck.

“I came back from the void inside Baal.”

The transcendent devil had to rebuild the first world where he contracted with Bell to fully descend on Earth. He invented this trick to minimize the universe's interference and force of deterrence.

Baal reconstructed the first world and connected it to Earth via the demon realm gate. He successfully weakened the universe's deterrence by forming a pathway between the two worlds. The next steps consisted of destroying the first world, collecting the energy from that process, and completing the descent at his castle.

The plan went awry when Baal's castle collapsed and he lost the means to destroy Earth. He had no other choice but to hastily descend with the first world intact.

However, he overlooked the fact that the first world contained the grand magician Shimurin. The genius Shimurin would acquire the magic of dimensional travel in 30 years if she survived. That time frame rapidly quickened when she gained the luck called Kim Hajin. Shimurin managed to complete her grand dimensional travel in just 3 days. Indeed, Baal's hasty decision came back to bite him.

“*Hah*, so you're saying all this happened because of luck?”

“No, not all. I’m largely indebted to Kim Hajin, who you like very much.”

Jin Sahyuk scowled at Bell’s sarcasm. He shrugged and continued.

“Anyways, my point is I came back to life because Baal made a rash decision. His chances of winning have become much slimmer now. He’s quite emotionally unstable after discovering his origin of existence.”

“Origin of existence... You mean the novel?”

Jin Sahyuk whispered and Bell solemnly nodded.

“That’s right. Baal is a transcendental being, so he can easily distinguish the truth from lies. That also means he possesses an unbelievably big ego. When he found out about being merely a character in a novel...”

Jin Sahyuk knew what Bell would say next without hearing it. Even she found it hard to believe that this world turned out to be a novel.

“Tsk...”

She sighed in frustration and her thoughts drifted to Kim Hajin again. *Should I treat Kim Hajin as a god then?* She wondered. *Probably not.* Kim Hajin acted like any other human. He was an ordinary and imperfect being. A god wouldn’t let something as trivial as *[Synchronization]* control him. Jin Sahyuk still hadn’t forgotten about *[Synchronization]*.

“Anyways...”

Bell turned to Kim Suho with a mysterious smile. The Sword Saint deeply contemplated while staring at Baal in the distance.

“Baal can’t win against the main character.”

“Main character my ass.” The veins in Jin Sahyuk’s temples swelled.

“Haha, so Sahyuk...”

Bell turned back and pointed to her chest where she hid the dimensional stone from Baal.

“When are you going to use that?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t reply. She needed more time before making a final decision. She couldn’t help Akatrina’s citizens and rebuild the country by herself. She needed a reliable servant to help her.

“All done. The analysis is complete.”

A woman’s low-pitched voice rang out. Jin Sahyuk turned and saw Shimurin drenched in sweat. The grand magician smiled in satisfaction after analyzing Baal’s labyrinth barrier.

“Everyone, get ready to march.”

Shimurin declared, and the 117 people moved in perfect order. Jin Sahyuk nonchalantly followed the crowd as Bell whispered into her ear.

— I’ll help you get Kim Hajin if you still want him. You already know the truth, right? How this world can cease to be a novel?

Jin Sahyuk stiffened and a chill swept over her body, but she continued walking without replying. She hadn’t made up her mind yet.

* * *

[Manchurian Plain – Crevon’s Military Base]

Araha, Empress of Crevon, looked at the view below from a hilltop. Iron fences surrounded the campsite with tents lined up in an orderly fashion. The imperial army’s base with Crevon’s finest soldiers seemed

impenetrable.

“I believe diplomatic ties and alliances should be supported by mutual benefits.”

Araha spoke to France’s president, China’s president, Japan’s prime minister, and other heads of state in front of her.

“Historically, no partnership can be established without the consideration of interests from both sides.”

She called for a meeting after arriving on Earth and leaders of several countries gathered to discuss a treaty. Imperial magicians far stronger than Earth’s magicians easily summoned these leaders from their underground bunkers.

“Everyone, what do you think?”

Araha asked and the crowd nodded without hesitation. The empress softly smiled.

“Good.”

She didn’t intend on providing free aid to Earth. She wanted to establish a diplomatic relationship and proclaim rules to bind both worlds. She wanted Earth to respect Crevon as a country.

“Did you all sign?”

A pile of written oaths lay before her. Only 30 nations currently participated, but she expected the number to eventually rise to 190. She couldn’t believe this world had 190 countries. Araha felt a sense of superiority and contempt.

“All set. This completes a temporary alliance between Crevon and Earth. We’ll discuss the details at a later date. Oh, and I hope you’ll abide by this treaty at all costs.”

Signing the interim treaty served as the first step towards peaceful diplomatic relations. Of course, she couldn’t bring much from outside

into the tower. However, Crevon could eventually exercise external influence on players.

The treaty focused on an article regarding criminal extradition. They had no methods of catching criminals who fled to Earth, but things would change now. Araha felt excited about finally being able to punish players for crimes in Crevon.

“Will Crevon's forces be immediately dispatched to the battlefields?”

Japan's prime minister desperately asked. Araha glanced at him with an elegant smile.

“Haste makes waste.”

She wanted to hold off for now. Araha coughed and stood up.

“Line up, soldiers of Crevon.”

She looked down at the campsite and announced.

The Crevon soldiers immediately gathered. Their spears, swords, and bows reflected the sun's brilliant rays.

“The time has come for us to offer salvation.”

Crevon's imperial army of the 30,000 finest soldiers would've made history had they been born on Earth. They roared for their empress and shook the atmosphere.

“Let's help our poor allies overcome their circumstances as soldiers of a great nation.”

Araha's brief speech moved their hearts. The imperial army crossed the Manchurian Plain with their horses and griffins. The heads of state watched the scene in awe as Araha sat back in her chair with a smile.

“I heard many demons are still on Earth.”

“Pardon? *Ah*, yes. You’re correct,” France’s president replied.

More than 100 million demons currently rampaged across Earth.
Araha smiled in satisfaction despite the situation.

“Well then, look forward to the future.”

More enemies only meant greater glory.

“We’ll turn things around.”

Araha and her army felt confident in winning.

Chapter 360

Final Name (7)

[Baal's Barrier – Chae Joochul and Heynckes]

Heynckes' armor clattered and Chae Joochul's cane creaked every time they moved. This symphony would be complete with their voices, but they didn't feel the need to open their mouths. They have lived long enough to not be bothered by silence.

"This barrier seems to be a labyrinth."

Heynckes finally spoke. They had walked for quite a while, but hadn't come any closer to Baal. Chae Joochul paused and nodded.

"You knew that and didn't tell me? Aren't you wicked?"

Heynckes playfully smiled, but his comment didn't affect Chae Joochul at all. The Immortal nonchalantly continued to walk. Heynckes shrugged and followed his friend.

"It's no fun being with you."

Baal's barrier swept them away like everyone else and they found themselves together after opening their eyes.

"*Hmm...* This situation reminds me of the old days. Remember the Leocrad dungeon?"

Heynckes asked with a sigh. Being with Chae Joochul made him recall the past, whether it was good or bad. Chae Joochul used to be even more annoying than now. Dealing with a psychopath-in-progress felt more frustrating than the present Chae Joochul who already lost 90% of his emotions.

“...”

Chae Joochul paused and suddenly thought of a way to escape this labyrinth. He closed his eyes and increased his magic power. However, his gift came from nature and couldn't be activated in its absence.

“Ah, so yours doesn't work here either?”

Heynckes smirked. Chae Joochul released his magic power again without looking at Heynckes and some kind of miracle occurred. Nature transpired from Chae Joochul's magic power.

“Whoa...”

Chae Joochul's magic power transformed into golden soil that covered the earth. The entire scenery turned into a field with a stream after 3 minutes. The green field and river continued to expand along with Chae Joochul's magic power.

Heynckes quickly grasped Chae Joochul's intentions. The stream would split into several branches and analyze the labyrinth. The branches would then serve as guides not only for them, but also for the other heroes.

“You... have the most beautiful power in the world.”

Heynckes muttered in awe, but Chae Joochul remained nonchalant. He continued to walk and expanded nature with every step.

It saddened Heynckes that Chae Joochul lost the most precious thing after acquiring the most beautiful power. The Immortal could no longer love.

“Joochul, wait for me.”

Thankfully, a man who lacked emotion also lacked the need for purpose in life. Chae Joochul couldn't feel the loneliness of not being able to love. Therefore, it would be pointless to pity him.

“Come on. Let’s go together.”

Heynckes followed him and nature continued to sprout wherever Chae Joochul went. The Lord of Steel enjoyed the sight of green grass and trees consuming the barrier. For a moment, he felt as if a gentle breeze brushed his cheek.

* * *

Meanwhile, Kim Suho and others followed Shimurin. They grew closer to Baal with every step thanks to the grand magician’s guidance.

“—!”

Baal roared again and Kim Suho immediately swung his sword. The crescent sword wave from Misteltein erased the demonic energy.

“Uuk...”

Perhaps that last attack placed too much strain on Kim Suho’s body. He suddenly felt dizzy and knelt to rub his temples.

“Are you all right?”

Rachel and the others worriedly approached him.

“I’m fine.”

He replied, but felt nauseous and his shoulders stiffened. Kim Suho instinctively knew he could only do this 3-4 more times. He raised himself and tried to contain his nervousness.

“Are you tired?”

Bell asked and Kim Suho bitterly smiled.

“No, you’re not tired.” Bell shook his head with a big smile.

“Excuse me?”

“Your mind thinks you are, but you aren’t. You can’t grow tired, at least not inside this barrier.”

Kim Suho tilted his head and couldn’t understand. However, Bell didn’t bother to explain and kept walking. Shimurin led them with her eyes closed and proceeded with extreme caution because they would have to start from scratch with one wrong step.

Everyone paused when they reached a certain point. They raised their heads with stiff expressions at the enemy in front.

“Morax.”

The devil suddenly revealed his huge presence. Jin Sahyuk looked at him and felt a sharp pain in her chest.

“It seems he got caught up in this too.”

Shimurin faintly smiled. Morax acted like Baal’s bodyguard within this barrier. He would buy time for Baal’s reconstruction.

Claang—

Everyone drew their weapons and aimed at Morax.

Guooooo...

Morax let out a low, dismal groan. Jin Sahyuk felt as if he was crying for some reason.

“Get ready...”

Jin Sahyuk clenched her teeth. Morax possessed incredible strength, but wouldn’t be able to match Airun, Harin, and everyone else from the first world with the inherent ability to resist evil.

“Everyone—”

“Wait.”

Jin Sahyuk stepped forward before they charged at Morax.

“I’ll take care of him.”

She declared in front of their confused faces.

Everyone turned to her, but she only looked at Kim Suho. Jin Sahyuk knew what Kim Suho wanted to say as they made eye contact.

“You mean alone, Knight Commander Shin Jahyuk?”

“It’ll be a tough fight.”

Rachel and Tomer objected, but Jin Sahyuk remained firm.

“I can only say this is what I have to do. Above all, we’re running out of time. Your first and foremost priority should be stopping Baal. You shouldn’t waste time here.”

Jin Sahyuk shook her head and explained. She had a point and it sounded reasonable enough to convince everyone.

“Jin Sahyuk...” Kim Suho looked at her with complicated emotions and also recalled Plerion’s fall.

“Who said you could call my name?”

She crossed her arms and sharply responded.

Kim Suho couldn’t help but smile at her arrogant comeback. He felt relieved by her unwavering attitude.

“Fine.”

He finally nodded. They had no choice but to comply. Everyone wished her luck and moved on. Surprisingly, Morax didn’t stop them and only focused on Jin Sahyuk. She waited until everyone left before approaching Morax.

“We’re finally alone.”

However, a man approached after she spoke. Jin Sahyuk turned around with a grimace.

“Why the hell are you still here?”

“A little delay won’t affect my victory.”

“What?”

Shin Jonghak wanted to help even though she never asked for anything after he met his grandfather.

“I’m trying to help you, idiot.”

“Just shut up and leave—”

Morax began to move before Jin Sahyuk could dismiss Shin Jonghak.

Guuuuuo...

The giant devil roared like a beast and swung his enormous arms.

KOONG!

* * *

[Yi Yeonjun’s Barrier]

Chae Nayun swung Balmung and her fiery magic power flew straight at Yi Yeonjun. Balmung came from the front and her flying swords attacked from the sides and rear. As such, her attacks couldn’t physically be dodged. However, Yi Yeonjun managed to fend them off with his psychokinesis. *Kiiik*— Chae Nayun’s magic power collided with an invisible wall and dissipated due to the friction.

“That was pretty cool,” she calmly muttered.

“Let’s see how long you can last.”

She could repeat the previous attacks dozens of times thanks to her *[Sea of Magic Power]* gift that drastically increased her magic power capacity. Chae Nayun possessed endless stamina and specialized in prolonged battles.

Whoosh—

Yi Yeonjun tried to crush her by shrinking the barrier, but she managed to push the walls away. Kim Hajin fired the Desert Eagle when Yi Yeonjun briefly lost focus.

Kwakwakwa!

Countless basilisk bullets flew towards Yi Yeonjun, but he dodged them and glared at Kim Hajin.

“...”

Yi Yeonjun could feel his anger boiling. This world’s creator stood before him, but he only felt disappointed. He hated the fact that a human like himself created everything. This creator looked neither graceful, elegant, nor radiant.

Kwaaaaa!

What have I lived for? Yi Yeonjun wondered while blocking Chae Nayun’s attacks from all sides.

He desired everything because he came into this world with nothing. He wanted to rule Pandemonium and everything else he could see. Only possessions gave him meaning in the pit of despair called life. Greed and obsession helped him survive. Otherwise, Yi Yeonjun would’ve lost his purpose in life and died a long time ago.

Suddenly, he recalled the face of his most precious treasure. Her jewel eyes and long black hair swayed like waves. However, Yi Byul had been stolen by the man before him. Such a trifling man robbed him of everything. Yi Yeonjun’s rage turned into tears that streamed down his

cheeks. He planned to blow up the barrier and kill everyone inside, including himself. His life had only been part of a novel, but Kim Hajin's life held real meaning. Killing Kim Hajin would be his first and last meaningful act.

“—!”

Yi Yeonjun roared and tried to detonate the barrier with his remaining magic power. The barrier began to crumble and everyone inside would soon die. However, he couldn't freely move as he wanted. The barrier stopped shrinking and Yi Yeonjun's vision grew blurry. He collapsed and spurted black blood.

“Ah...”

Yi Yeonjun muttered and couldn't breathe anymore. His limbs became limp. *How?* Yi Yeonjun wondered. *What kind of trick is this?* Kim Hajin hadn't moved an inch, so he couldn't understand what happened.

Suddenly, his eyes reflected the treasure that once belonged to him. Yi Byul looked much more beautiful than he recalled. Her cold eyes looked down at him and he stared at her with his half-closed eyes. He tried to take in every bit of her beauty. She... was too good to be the last thing he saw. Yi Yeonjun never blinked as he died.

Chapter 361

Final Name (8)

Psh!

A black blade pierced Yi Yeonjun's stomach and he helplessly collapsed like a puppet with severed strings.

“...”

I lowered the Desert Eagle and looked at Boss standing behind the fallen Yi Yeonjun. Blood dripped from her hand.

“Ah...”

Yi Yeonjun cried out and tried to move his neck. He hardly struggled to survive, but wanted to see Boss as long as possible. Maybe he wanted to know who killed him or wanted to see her one last time. I couldn't figure out his last moments and didn't care.

I wondered how Boss entered the barrier and quickly found out when Spartan popped out from behind her leg. He clearly brought her here even though I didn't ask. Boss might've asked instead or perhaps Spartan made his own decision to save me. I didn't know the exact details, but Spartan looked extremely exhausted after teleporting multiple times.

“What's going on?”

Chae Nayun looked at me and Boss in surprise. She raised Balmung thinking Boss might be another enemy, but Boss didn't give off any hostility. Chae Nayun slowly lowered her sword and looked at me.

“Hey.”

She called me and I answered with a bitter smile.

“It’s been a while.”

“...”

Chae Nayun silently stared at me as she carefully chose her words. She finally spoke, but only to postpone everything.

“Let’s catch up later. We don’t have time right now.”

She muttered with a bitter smile.

Her words saddened me. How much time did I have left in this world? Would I be able to sort everything out with her before the end?

“No, wait.” Chae Nayun frowned and suddenly changed her mind.

“Hey, you!”

She shouted and grabbed me by the collar. I couldn’t help but smile even though she surprised me. I always liked her unpredictable attitude.

“You ass— I mean, stupid... person... who’s always running away.”

Chae Nayun sounded a bit awkward while trying not to swear.

“Do you have any idea what you mean to... And... *Ugh*, just tell me. Explain everything to me.”

Boss suddenly moved and carried Yi Yeonjun over her shoulder.

“What does she need that dead body for? Wait, more importantly, who is she?”

Chae Nayun flinched and whispered to me.

The barrier immediately dissolved when Boss left with Yi Yeonjun's body.

"Boss! You're b—"

We returned to Baal's barrier and the other Chameleon Troupe members welcomed Boss. Jain ran to her with a smile, but her expression stiffened when she saw Yi Yeonjun's body over Boss' back. Boss silently nodded and placed the corpse on the ground.

"I don't know what to say."

Jain mumbled and examined Yi Yeonjun's body. Boss' shadow reflected in his wide-open eyes and Jain closed them with a sigh.

"Is that Nayun?"

Yoo Yeonha had been resting in the fortress and suddenly shouted. Only then did Jain notice one more person besides me and Boss. Chae Nayun turned to Yoo Yeonha in surprise.

"Yeonha?"

Their eyes met and the two briefly hesitated before rushing into each other's arms. I watched them for a while and turned to Arashi's fortress.

[Arashi's Magic Fortress] — A magic fortress built by Hirano Arashi, the master of fortresses. Will increase attacks from within the fortress by 20%. Will increase defense against attacks from outside the fortress by 20%. A Master's Dignity: Will enhance summoned beasts. External Automatic Artillery...

The fortress provided several benefits, but I would have to look at them later. I had more important tasks right now.

"..."

Boss stood in a daze while looking at Yi Yeonjun's body. No sadness, joy, or resentment could be seen in her eyes as if Yi Yeonjun's

emptiness had infected her. I slowly approached, but she avoided my eyes.

“Yi Byul.”

I whispered her name and she flinched. Her lifeless eyes looked at me, still as beautiful as obsidian, but they lost their sparkle. I wanted to hold her in my arms.

[The final arc will now begin.]

A sentence suddenly appeared as if to remind me of what had to be taken care of first.

[The completion of this arc will unlock ???]

The final destination of my long journey. I clenched my fists to properly finish this arc and end everything. Only then could I define my existence. I decided to save my feelings for that final day.

“...”

I held Boss’ cold and trembling hands that seemed to cry for her instead.

“Hey, Boss.”

I softly asked while tightly holding onto her.

“Do you still remember my name?”

* * *

Koong!

Morax slammed his fist onto the ground. Jin Sahyuk recalled the past as she dodged Morax’s attacks. She thought of her half-brother, Prince Puharen, the legitimate heir to Akatrina’s throne who feared becoming king.

“Puharen...”

Jin Sahyuk called his name. The prince didn't want to be king, but the kingdom's tradition couldn't be easily ignored. Puharen's servants wanted him to rise to the throne.

They never gave him a chance to decide and wanted a king they could easily control. They only cared about their power even as demons rampaged the streets and the kingdom fell.

“I'll save you from them.”

She lied to her innocent brother and threw him into a dungeon where he stayed until he died.

“I'm sorry.”

Jin Sahyuk floated in the air and muttered. Puharen, no, Morax gazed at her. What a pitiful being. Her brother, the victim of her greed and ambition, couldn't even properly rest after death.

Morax suddenly appeared before her and she couldn't dodge his fists this time.

Kwaaaaa!

Shin Jonghak thrust his spear and pushed Morax away.

“Haaa...”

Jin Sahyuk deeply exhaled as her heart raced. She turned to Shin Jonghak and reproached herself for being caught up in the past.

“Stay focused. You'd be dead if it wasn't for me,” Shin Jonghak said with a smirk.

“Guess you aren't completely useless.”

Jin Sahyuk replied and collected herself with another deep breath. She

had always sacrificed morality for her ambitions and even murdered her brother without hesitation. Nothing would change even if she regretted it now.

“Rest in peace,” she muttered. However, an unexpected pair of guests appeared.

“What the hell?”

Jin Sahyuk spotted the two silhouettes between Morax’s legs. One looked like an insect and the other...

“Orden?”

The monster king Orden finally arrived.

* * *

Kim Suho followed Shimurin. The number of demons increased as they neared Baal. They encountered several difficult battles, but won without casualties thanks to Aileen, Yun Seung-Ah, Yi Youngha, and many other heroes who joined them along the way.

“So you’re a magician from another world?” Aileen asked Shimurin. The grand magician nodded, but didn’t say anything and concentrated on guiding them.

“Well, I don’t like chatting either. Let’s just walk.”

Aileen pouted and walked beside Shimurin. The heroes pushed forward amidst the tension. How long had it been? They finally arrived at the barrier’s center and felt as if demonic energy penetrated their bodies. The pressure seemed to crush their hearts.

“Ah...”

“That’s...”

Many exclaimed in amazement and horror. Baal looked much larger

when they finally arrived. The heroes felt overwhelmed by the mere sight of him. Demonic energy flowed from his body and kept them from getting too close. Fallen heroes scattered under the devil's feet.

“...”

Kim Suho stared into Baal's eyes, which looked like two black holes. They contained numerous worlds within them. Everything Baal had ever destroyed could be seen and the fallen worlds screamed in agony. Kim Suho felt enraged and grabbed Misteltein. The god-slaying tree branch had transformed into a holy sword to strike down evil after Kim Suho's enlightenment.

"Glad to see everyone again."

A voice brought Kim Suho back to his senses. Everyone turned and saw master rank heroes Yoo Sihyuk and Yoo Jinwoong. Dozens of other heroes also gathered around Kim Suho and his friends.

"How did they escape from the labyrinth?"

Shimurin muttered in confusion. So many managed to find their way without her help. She soon found out when nature suddenly appeared in the barrier. Soil covered the dark void where everyone stood and the empty sky turned blue. Two men appeared beyond the beautiful landscape. Everyone turned to them as they walked all the way to the center.

"*Haha*, it seems we have more than enough comrades here."

Heynckes spoke first and Chae Joochul remained calm as always even at the sight of Baal.

"Say, would you all care to listen to this old man? I've fought in many wars and I'd like to make some suggestions based on my experiences."

Heynckes announced and the other heroes, including Kim Suho, nodded without hesitation. They all admired Hyenckes, one of the Nine Stars. However, Airun came from a different world and seemed hesitant. She looked at Heynckes suspiciously and whispered to Bell.

“Would it be wise to trust him? Your Highness, please consider taking refuge in a safe place.”

She hoped to persuade the prince to leave the battlefield, but Bell turned her down with a smile and looked at Kim Suho.

“No worries. We’re going to win this fight.”

Bell sounded extremely confident, almost as if he had seen the future. Airun felt perplexed and cautiously asked, “What do you mean?”

“Look over there.”

Bell pointed to Kim Suho, who held onto Misteltein while listening to Heynckes. Bell felt confident because Kim Suho had been designed to win this fight from the start. Baal chose to descend inside a barrier to avoid the world’s interference, but that had been a mistake. The world could also influence someone else besides Baal.

“After all, he’s the main character of this world.”

Kim Suho also suffered from the world’s influence like Baal and it weakened his power too.

“Main character?”

“I don’t expect you to understand.”

The world’s deterrence limited Kim Suho’s power to a human level, but that constraint no longer existed in this barrier created by Baal. What would happen now without the world’s interference? Kim Suho’s power would no longer be bound by the limits of this world. Baal had unknowingly removed Kim Suho’s shackles by bringing him into this barrier.

“I’m just saying he’s going to win no matter what.”

Baal’s defeat had been predetermined by fate. Yes, fate. Everything came from a novel with a prearranged beginning and end.

"Do you understand?"

Heynckes finished explaining and the heroes lined up for the upcoming battle.

"Good. Now let us pray to God as we prepare for this final battle."

Heynckes solemnly declared and raised his steel sword.

Chapter 362

Final Name (9)

“Do you still remember my name?”

I asked while holding onto Boss’ hand. She stared at me before tilting her head. Then her expressionless face grew flustered. I felt quite happy at her reaction, but pretended to be disappointed.

“You forgot?”

“Hajin...”

Boss murmured with a somewhat dissatisfied look. She didn’t seem to be in a joking mood. However, I asked again and didn’t feel satisfied with just my first name.

“My last name too.”

Boss’ eyebrows briefly perked up before she answered.

“Kim Hajin...”

That felt like more than enough evidence of my existence here. I had an idea of what the final [???] would be.

“Why are you suddenly asking me that?”

“No reason. Anyways, thanks.”

I raised Boss’ hand and she flinched as if she just realized we held hands this entire time. Her cheeks turned red, but she collected her composure and let go.

“Go, I want to be alone right now.”

She shooed me away like a fly and I turned back with a bitter smile. Boss glanced at me several times before forming a shadow coffin. Jin Yohan, Arashi, and Jain approached her. I didn't wait to see what happened next. I stopped at the magic fortress located in the area that I previously purified. My thousand-mile eyes could see through even a master artisan's work.

— By the way, who are those people, Yeonha?

— Ah, you've heard of them, right? They're from the Chameleon Troupe.

— Yeah, I worked with them during the Orden mission.

— Yep, that's them. I hired them.

Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun spoke to each other. Then Chae Nayun glanced outside.

— Is that woman also part of the Chameleon Troupe? She seems... rather close with Kim Hajin.

— Oh, that? Well, you know, Kim Hajin did a lot of work in the shadows. They must be acquaintances.

— They're too touchy for just acquaintances...

— Maybe they're close acquaintances.

Yoo Yeonha effortlessly tricked Chae Nayun and lied without batting an eye.

“Whew...”

I took another deep breath and closed my eyes before entering the fortress. Then I checked my slowly recovering stigma. More than two streaks had returned thanks to the *[Orb of Regeneration]*. I focused one

streak into my eyes and my vision immediately expanded like a satellite. I looked down from a lofty height and quickly spotted Baal.

Kim Suho, Chae Joochul, Rachel, Heynckes, Aileen... Almost every hero had gathered to fight Baal. I even saw Shimurin, Harin, and Bell.

I watched from a distance and found it quite funny since this perfectly suited an extra. For now, I would simply assist them as a sharpshooter. However, Chae Nayun would awaken her true potential against Baal.

I coughed before entering the fortress. Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun stopped chattering.

"What were you doing?"

Chae Nayun stood next to Yoo Yeonha and awkwardly scratched her head. Yoo Yeonha noticed our strange atmosphere and bitterly smiled.

"You don't need to know. It's about time we go back," I answered her.

"Y-Yeah, I was just about to..." Chae Nayun replied while furrowing her brows. She seemed dissatisfied with something.

"I'll be back soon, Yeonha."

Chae Nayun stood up after tapping Yoo Yeonha's lap. Yoo Yeonha also tried to get up, but I stopped her.

"You stay here. You're even weaker than me."

Yoo Yeonha immediately pouted. Her protruding lips looked like a bird beak. "At least let me say goodbye."

She held Chae Nayun's hand and whispered something. Chae Nayun laughed as if she had been told a joke and Yoo Yeonha sat back down.

"Okay, you can take her now."

I left the fortress with Chae Nayun. She tried to leave immediately, but I grabbed her wrist.

"Wha—" Chae Nayun jumped like a cat when I touched her.

"W-What! What is it?"

"I have something to give you."

I faintly smiled. I needed to give it to her before she left.

"G-Give what?"

I silently took out a necklace from my pocket. This carefully crafted diamond hung on a blue string and would replace what she should've had in the original story. I called it the *[Magic Power Amplification Diamond Necklace]*.

"..."

Chae Nayun's jaw dropped at the necklace. It brightly shone even inside the barrier's darkness.

[Magic Power Amplification Diamond Necklace] [Pinnacle Grade] [Masterpiece] A famous dwarf is presumed to have crafted this work enchanted with special effects. — High Rank Magic Power Amplification — High Rank Magic Power Circulation — High Rank Mental Interference Immunity

It should be equal to or even above Homer's Ring thanks to the high quality materials. I also blessed it with stigma's magic power before placing it in Chae Nayun's hand.

"..."

She blankly stared at it as I tapped on her shoulder.

"You can tell how good it is, right? Be sure to give it back later."

"Huh?"

Chae Nayun raised her head before looking at the necklace again. She seemed to be checking the effects rather than its appearance. Soon, she smiled and nodded.

"Right, there's no way something like this would be a gift. Alright, thanks. It should help out."

Chae Nayun wore the necklace for its utility and a change immediately occurred.

Guooo... A blue aura surrounded her and magic power currents blew in every direction. As expected, Chae Nayun suppressed her amplified magic power with a single breath.

"*Whew*, done. What about you, Kim Hajin?"

I tapped the Desert Eagle in my hand. "I'll support all of you with this."

I would do my best to search for an opening and drill the god-slaying bullet into Baal.

"What a scaredy-cat." Chae Nayun grinned. The truth didn't offend me and I simply nodded.

"You know me. I always run away or shoot from a distance."

"And you're going to do that until the end?"

Chae Nayun stared into my eyes. I could sense her true feelings and honestly replied.

"Yeah, but maybe I'll stop running away after everything ends."

"..."

Chae Nayun silently thought about my words and tilted her head.

"So you're saying you won't run away after this, right?"

"Yeah."

I'm okay with that. Chae Nayun murmured before laughing out loud.

"Then see you later."

She said her final goodbye and spotted Chae Joochul's nature rising in the distance. Chae Nayun took off to that final destination without turning back.

* * *

The heroes assumed a loose formation. Going all out would only result in their deaths, so they took it slow to understand Baal's attack patterns first. Bell thought it sounded like a good plan. Baal hadn't fully descended yet, so his attack patterns would be simple. The heroes could slowly chip away at him without any sacrifices.

Bell called it the toothpick tactic because they hoped Baal would eventually fall after being endlessly pricked.

However, not all toothpicks could be considered the same and some couldn't even be called toothpicks. For example, Kim Suho could cut apart Baal's demonic energy and directly affect the true body.

"Haa... Haa..."

Unfortunately, Kim Suho seemed to be reaching his limits. He became drenched in sweat and barely held on to his sword. Most importantly, he had used up most of his magic power by now.

Bell clicked his tongue as he watched Kim Suho. The Sword Saint suffered from a mental barricade. He wasted too much magic power when he could face Baal alone if he just changed his mindset. Bell couldn't help him with this problem. Kim Suho had to realize it for himself.

"How troublesome. I can't see an end to this," Heynckes muttered.

Unlike Kim Suho, Heynckes and Chae Joochul didn't specialize in attacking non-physical beings. Most heroes couldn't damage Baal's true body. Other than Kim Suho, only Rachel and Aileen could somewhat contribute. Thankfully, those two women also surpassed mere toothpicks.

“...”

A faint tremor shook the barrier. Some heroes didn't feel anything, but Bell certainly felt it. Baal's heartbeat had quickened.

"Hmm..."

Bell wondered if he should escape to preserve the life he finally reclaimed or stay and watch this spectacle. However, his old friend Baal didn't give him the chance to decide.

— Pathetic insects who cannot even touch my true existence.

Baal's murmuring resounded from what seemed to be his mouth. All the heroes widened their eyes and Baal glared at them with his piercing gaze. His eyes contained a vast darkness and transcendent power of destruction. Just staring at his eyes caused a few heroes to collapse.

— Why struggle to continue such pitiful lives?

The transcendent devil that couldn't exist in the material realm successfully descended.

— Death suits all of you much more.

This sentence signaled the war with Baal as he infused the power of destruction into his breath. A storm of demonic energy brewed and this same breath attack had destroyed countless worlds in the past. It swallowed everything in the barrier.

Kim Suho swung his sword with what little power he had left, but he didn't quite make it.

Tadadak—

A campfire crackled and shadows danced on the ground. Kim Suho found himself in a silent cave with his king, the ruler of a ruined kingdom. He couldn't recall if her name was Priha or Praha. He didn't care and didn't even know his own name.

Kim Suho offered the food he cooked to his king. He simply cooked potatoes with herbs in an earthenware pot. Fortunately, he found two potatoes today.

Jin Sahyuk blankly stared at the dish before taking a bite. Then she quickly devoured it. Kim Suho didn't expect any leftovers for himself. It would be more than enough if he could relieve his king's hunger. Right, he thought that should've been enough.

However, Jin Sahyuk confessed what should've never been said.

I killed your master to obtain you. It was all an elaborate plan to cut you off from Puharen and gain your loyalty. I could've saved your master, but I killed him to save more money. I could save a hundred more subordinates with that money.

Kim Suho still didn't understand why Jin Sahyuk told him. Did she feel grateful or did she just want to confess her sins before dying?

Regardless, Kim Suho became furious. Rage surged from the bottom of his heart even though the world already fell apart. No, he raged because the world fell. The concept of a king or knight no longer existed. Everything had fallen, so he could do whatever he wanted. After all, the concept of nobility no longer had any use. Kim Suho thought this as his hands trembled. Finally, he pounced on Jin Sahyuk and cursed for the first time in his life.

Their scuffle continued for a long time. They ran out of the cave and eventually reached a dead end. A frightening cliff stood before them, but the two entangled children didn't notice it.

Like that, they fell from the cliff.

Who killed who? Did Kim Suho kill Jin Sahyuk or did Jin Sahyuk kill Kim Suho? They both reincarnated, so it didn't matter.

However, Kim Suho wondered as he fell to his death. Why did he have to feel such pain? Why did this world only have despair? Why did Jin Sahyuk confess her sins in the end? Wouldn't it have been better if she just kept quiet and peacefully died?

Kim Suho had no way of finding out, but the surprisingly simple truth would make someone chuckle. Today, Kim Suho finally found out. This world had been a novel created by an author.

This information and mysterious narration entered his brain. The insidious voice didn't belong to a fairytale and the frightening emptiness couldn't be a documentary.

"..."

Kim Suho slowly opened his eyes. *Tadak, tadak*— He heard the sound of something crackling.

"*Auuk*—"

He got up with a groan and looked around.

"*Ah*."

A short mutter escaped his mouth. Everything had been destroyed. The ground burned instead of a campfire and a fog carried the scent of death. Chae Joochul's nature had turned into a swamp of demonic energy. Countless heroes collapsed on the ground, either dead or unconscious.

With a single breath, Baal had materialized destruction within the barrier.

— You've woken up.

A voice resounded. Kim Suho looked up and saw Baal's true body gazing down at him. Kim Suho would describe him as a black dragon,

often referred to as the harbinger of destruction in legends and myths.

Baal's reptilian mouth moved.

— I've looked through your memories. How painful. You must've received mine as well, no?

Kim Suho fell silent. As Baal said, he saw a few memories that entered him.

— *Returner Hero.*

Kim Suho's shoulders instinctively flinched now that he knew what those two words referred to.

— What purpose did that title serve?

Baal's form suddenly shrunk. His giant, draconic body became small as a puppy. Baal looked like a cute lizard and walked to Kim Suho.

— I want to ask if you know the answer, main character.

The lizard made a joking expression.

— Are you disappointed? Are you angry? Are you confused?

Kim Suho's mouth remained shut.

— Main character, you should already know the author of this world.

Kim Suho didn't know, but soon found out. Information about Kim Hajin poured into his brain. Kim Hajin had created him and mapped out his personality. Kim Hajin wrote everything about his life. All his misfortunes, joys, and growth had been for the satisfaction of others. The existence named Kim Suho had been created for entertainment.

— Don't tell me you think this is okay? That you can continue to live in a mere novel. Such foolishness will not be tolerated.

Kim Suho recalled how Kim Hajin had always been unreasonably kind to him. He thought about their friendship and finally understood the real reason.

— That won't be the case. Why? Because the author's task will come to an end if I die.

Kim Suho stared at the chattering Baal.

— This is the final arc, Kim Suho. The final arc! This world will come to an end when the curtain closes. Everything will stop for eternity.

Baal spoke with a grin. *The final arc*. A novel would end when it reached its conclusion. The world within the novel wouldn't continue despite the readers' curiosity.

— Main character, I know how to save this world. A method to let it continue. You should know too.

"..."

Kim Suho didn't reply and Baal pointed at Misteltein.

— The method lies in your sword.

Baal suggested Kim Suho point the god-slaying sword at someone else.

— Entrap the author's soul in this world forever. This world will stop if the author leaves, but if his soul stays... I will split his soul into pieces and scatter them across the world. Then this world full of life will continue.

Baal believed Kim Hajin's soul formed the core of this world.

— Kim Suho, become the sword that slays god for the sake of this world. We will all become complete existences if he dies. I will gladly accept you as my equal and bring eternal riches and fertility to your world. Wouldn't that be the true method of protecting and saving this world?

Baal's long speech finally ended. He stepped back and stared at Kim Suho while floating in the air. Kim Suho remained silent and blankly stared at Baal. Like that, a long time passed.

— And your answer?

Baal wanted to know what Kim Suho thought and couldn't read the main character's mind. Of course, he didn't care if Kim Suho disagreed. This barrier still trapped the so-called creator. Baal felt like he could kill Kim Hajin within this barrier, so he would simply continue if Kim Suho refused. Kim Suho simply served as a sure method to kill the creator.

However, the Sword Saint thought differently from Baal. No, perhaps they might be quite similar. After all, Kim Suho felt an innate desire to cut out Baal's eyes.

"Haaa..."

Kim Suho took a deep breath and shook off this desire. He recalled the past that he experienced as a dream.

— You! Let me go! I am your king! You dare...

— Shut up! You beggar!

— W-What? Beggar? I saved you when you were a beggar, yet you dare say that!

Two children loudly argued. Kim Suho failed to protect Puharen and killed Prihi with his own hands. His final memories tainted his existence.

However, he received a chance to atone for his past sins. He didn't want to fail again at protecting what he cherished.

He could still recall that day 20 years ago when he arrived on Earth as a baby. He didn't have parents in his previous life, but the parents in this life named him Suho. His name meant, *to protect*. He felt as if fate played a trick on him. Regardless, he didn't want to become a hero.

He couldn't see himself as one after murdering the person he swore to protect.

As time passed, he felt the invisible hand of fate constricting him. That feeling intensified every time he saw, touched, or swung a sword. The existence known as Kim Suho carried the will of the sword.

He realized something as he grew up. Perhaps this fate began from his name.

He heard the answer to his suspicions on TV from a well-respected hero named Shin Myungchul. The great hero stood in front of a group of children and gave a speech Kim Suho would never forget.

— Everyone, do not forget. A gift isn't a special right, but a duty. With great power comes great responsibility.

Kim Suho decided on his path after hearing those words. After all, he probably reincarnated into this world for a reason. He didn't view himself as the chosen one or a savior. He just felt... a duty to protect.

"Baal..."

Kim Suho only became more certain about his beliefs. He had been born to protect everyone.

— How disappointing.

Baal realized Kim Suho's decision and emitted demonic energy powerful enough to instantly vaporize a human soul. However, Kim Suho severed it in half with one swing. No, perhaps he didn't even take out his sword.

—...!

This surprised Baal, who quickly transformed into his dragon form.

To Kim Suho, Baal's transformation seemed like a pufferfish growing bigger out of fear. Honestly, Kim Suho pitied the devil.

"Thanks, I found out because of you."

Kim Suho gently smiled. It didn't matter if Baal spoke the truth and this world turned out to be a novel. He felt grateful for what he had and for being able to live again. Moreover, he trusted that Kim Hajin wouldn't abandon this world.

"I... have to defeat you."

Kim Suho calmly spoke, but boiled with rage inside. Countless corpses and barely breathing heroes scattered around them. Kim Suho's fury surpassed its limit and turned into a deathly calm.

"To protect this world."

He swung his sword to make his previous thought a reality and aimed at Baal's eyes.

— You just made the worst possible deci...

Baal seemed to smile, but couldn't finish his sentence. He waited for Kim Suho to attack and suddenly lost an eye when the Sword Saint swung through the air.

— *Ah?*

The devil felt doubt rather than pain or rage. *Why? How?*

"This world isn't something you can destroy even if it's a novel. There are people I need to protect and that's enough for me."

— You insufferable mortal!

Baal shouted in anger and shot his demonic energy forward. Even now, Baal didn't think he could lose. He possessed an infinite amount of demonic energy in this barrier. He would win with time as Kim Suho ran out of magic power. However...

"Too light."

Kim Suho simply erased Baal's demonic energy with the wave of a hand. He didn't even use Misteltein.

—!

Baal roared and increased his demonic energy. A terrifying storm brewed in the air and shot out, but even against a force capable of devouring a world...

"Your attack is too light compared to the weight of your existence."

Kim Suho seemed completely relaxed.

— You!

He's looking down on me! A mere mortal is looking down on me! That cannot be tolerated. That must not be allowed. How can a mere human threaten me?

Baal felt resentment for the first time.

"Let me ask."

Kim Suho slowly approached and Baal backed off.

"Were you created to live so pitifully?"

—...

Baal stopped emitting demonic energy. Kim Suho's arrogance also drove Baal's fury into a certain calm. Baal turned cold and thought about how Kim Suho suddenly reached transcendence.

"Wait, wait."

A cheerful voice suddenly rang out.

"I'm here too, Kim Suho!"

Chae Nayun shouted while shaking Balmung in one hand. Kim Suho stared at her, but the surprises didn't end there.

"*Keuuu—*"

Someone painfully stretched and stood from the ruined scenery. The hero covered in steel, Nine Stars Heynckes, finally regained consciousness.

"Ah, you're still alive as I thought! Oh, my disciple is here too!"

Heynckes exclaimed as he looked at Kim Suho and Chae Nayun.

"..."

Soon, Chae Joochul also rose without a sound. He straightened his bent back and neck. Then he clasped his hands behind his back. His traditional outfit became tattered, but his skin underneath showed no signs of injury. His body looked even more perfect than Kim Suho's, especially considering his age.

"Aigoo, my head..."

Aileen got up next and furrowed her brows. She massaged her temples and looked like a caterpillar because of the bags underneath her eyes.

"Thanks, Earthy. You saved me."

Rachel also stood up after Earthy's barrier protected her.

"*Keeeu...* Where has my honor as a leader gone?"

Yun Seung-Ah smiled at Kim Suho, who slowly turned around and stared at them. Many other heroes also got up one by one. The vast majority remained unconscious, but they hadn't lost to Baal yet. Kim Suho had no reason to fight alone.

"Why the hell is he so strong?"

"Ah... Damn it. I'm out of magic power."

"Hey, Kim Suho. Are you alright?"

Kim Suho faintly smiled at their voices and they approached him one by one. Soon, everyone stood together and gazed at Baal. Their will and fighting spirit hadn't been destroyed in the slightest.

—...

Baal chuckled as he stared at them like ants. An unimaginable fury rose in his heart. It had to be greater than the combined rage of everyone in this world. Then Baal narrowed his remaining eye at them.

Kim Suho took out the holy sword that contained his will to protect.

The human and devil began their final fight for their desired endings.

Chapter 363

Ending (1)

[Morax and Jin Sahyuk]

Jiing— A vibration rang out and Jin Sahyuk shook her head. Demonic energy exploded from an unknown location and burned her skin. She quickly purified the demonic energy with Reality Manipulation. The demonic energy turned blue before disappearing into the air.

"Are you okay?"

Jin Sahyuk turned towards the somewhat arrogant voice. Shin Jonghak looked at her with his spear in hand. He seemed to have been unaffected by the demonic energy explosion.

"..."

Jin Sahyuk silently got up and checked on Morax. The devil suffered slash marks all over. Most of his fingers had been severed and black blood covered his giant body. A human would've died by now, but Morax still lived.

"Interesting."

The voice that resounded didn't belong to Shin Jonghak or Jin Sahyuk. Shin Jonghak tightened the grip around his spear while Jin Sahyuk tied her disheveled hair into a ponytail.

"These beings called devils are truly fascinating. Not as much as humans, but quite intriguing nonetheless."

Orden murmured as he looked at Morax. His eyes flickered with curiosity and Jin Sahyuk found it shocking.

"Did he go crazy after coming back to life?"

The bastard appeared out of nowhere and simply stared at Morax. Orden didn't do anything and simply stood there observing. Then the monster king faced Jin Sahyuk.

"Do you need help, human?"

"..."

Jin Sahyuk shrugged him off with a grin. "You can help by screwing off."

Kurukuru stood next to Orden and flapped its wings. The humanoid insect seemed to be threatening Jin Sahyuk. *How dare you!* It seemed to say, but Orden suppressed Kurukuru.

"It's too interesting to pass by, no?" Orden dryly replied.

"I didn't know you talked so much."

Orden found the situation quite interesting. Likewise, Jin Sahyuk felt interested in Orden's drastic change. He looked smaller and possessed a sense of humor now.

Whoosh—

Shin Jonghak's spear flew through the air. He glared at Jin Sahyuk with a displeased look.

"Orden doesn't seem to be an ally or a foe. Just focus on the devil, Jin Sahyuk."

Morax moved again and oddly screeched before swinging his arm. Shin Jonghak swung his spear and pushed the devil away. Black light flickered from the tip of Shin Jonghak's spear. This power belonged to Shin Myungchul and had now been passed to him.

"Hmm..."

Jin Sahyuk believed their chances of winning had increased. However, she didn't want to kill Morax yet.

Whoosh—

Morax punched again, but Shin Jonghak struck back with his spear. The black light from the spear traveled through Morax's fist and bound his entire body. It burned and purified everything. Shin Myungchul had acquired this power by atoning for his sins and it boasted an undeniable advantage against one type of opponent. Shin Jonghak became the natural enemy of demons with this new power that could purify demonic energy.

"Oi, hold down that guy's body. Don't burn everything."

However, Jin Sahyuk refrained from killing Morax and lightly jumped.

"What? Wait, where are you going, dumbass?" Shin Jonghak shouted, but she didn't answer. Jin Sahyuk slowly flew up and landed on Morax's shoulder. Morax knew his large body held certain advantages and disadvantages. The devil's shoulder became a disgusting mess because he transformed his skin into a scorching swamp of demonic energy.

Jin Sahyuk's shoes instantly melted when they touched Morax's shoulder. However, her feet remained unaffected because of Reality Manipulation. She wouldn't be able to last long, but should be fine for a few minutes.

"Wait for me, Puharen."

Jin Sahyuk muttered as she glared into Morax's giant eyes. Then she took a deep breath like a diver before a jump.

She swam through the demonic energy swamp and jumped into Morax's pupils. Jin Sahyuk entered his consciousness like she did with Shin Jonghak.

— Crevon's army is sweeping through every region of Earth. They set out from the Steppes of Manchu two days ago and stretched out to the east and west, defeating every demon army. That's not all. In Paris, Grand Magician Oh Jaejin, 9 star magician Ah Hae-In, and her disciple Evandel...

Evandel watched the TV in her cabin. Public broadcasts had been cut off after Baal's descent and only restored today. Many broadcasters reported hopeful news around the world. Evandel calmed herself as she listened.

— Astaroth, the devil in the west, has been defeated by Grand Magician Oh Jaejin and Ah Hae-In. Valac in the east has been pushed back by the German government and Crevon's Hwarang.

At first, this war scared Evandel. However, she learned something new after watching all these heroes risk their lives. Their sacrifice and commitment taught her an important lesson.

Many people fought to protect the world, the animals, the land, and the people. They stood up no matter how many times they fell and didn't give up despite being afraid. They did their best to overcome their fears.

Evandel decided to admire them starting today. Not only that, she swore to follow in their footsteps. The weight of the word hero increased in her heart and she set a new goal for her future self.

— The less hostile Leraje and Vassago have shown strange signs of protecting citizens of their land. The world government and Hero Association have chosen not to antagonize them.

Ssk— Ssk— A strange noise rang out. Evandel tilted her head and looked around the cabin.

— *Ah*, we've just received additional reports. The demon army that invaded Gaeseong has reportedly been annihilated by an unknown creature. Witnesses described the mysterious creature as a black rabbit...

Ssk— Ssk— Evandel strained her ears and carefully listened. It sounded like words being written, but where did it come from? Evandel thought for a moment before realizing something and turning around.

— Humanity seems to be heading towards victory against the demons, but danger remains. The Nine Evils who serve the devils are still alive and well. The rank 1 devil, Baal, is currently at the Korean Border...

Ssk— Ssk— Someone sent a message through the communication letter she treasured. Evandel quickly sprinted to the letter and picked it up.

[Evandel, are you there?]

"Aaah!"

Her eyes widened at those four words. Evandel swallowed hard and tightened her grip.

[It's me, Hajin. Kim Hajin.]

She almost burst into tears when she read them. No, Evandel did burst into tears. *Huaaaang*— She held the letter in her embrace while crying. Then she looked at it again.

[Are you doing well?]

"Un! Un! Un!"

Evandel shouted before realizing her voice couldn't reach him. She jotted down a reply and the pencil in her cute hands drew adorable characters.

* * *

[Un! I'm doing well! What about you, Hajin? Are you okay? I want to see you!]

I smiled in Arashi's fortress as I read the communication letter. I felt like I could hear Evandel's voice through the text.

[I'm doing fine. Soon...]

I fell into thought as I wrote. *Could I safely return to Evandel?*

"Haaa..."

I planned to do everything in my power to tie the final knot. I could still revive one more time even if I died. However...

[Everything's almost over, so be a good girl and listen to Master Ah Hae-In, okay?]

I changed my words after hesitating for a while. Evandel immediately replied in her cute, childlike tone.

"Why are you laughing like that?"

Boss peeked up from the bottom of the ladder. I sat on the second floor while she climbed from the first. Boss narrowed her eyes at the letter when she arrived. I covered it with my hand.

"I'm mentally preparing for the war that's about to begin."

It might look like fooling around, but I still kept a close eye on Baal through the thousand-mile eyes. It would be difficult to kill him in one attack. I could only sit here and wait for the right opportunity.

"What about you, Boss? Are you done?"

"Yeah..." Boss sat next to me and muttered somewhat bitterly.

"I plan on burying Yi Yeonjun's corpse in Pandemonium later."

"Got it."

I also nodded with a bitter smile. Yi Yeonjun had committed horrible

deeds and destroyed the happy life Boss could've lived. I couldn't fault him for that in good conscience. After all, I created Boss and her past only materialized based on my writing.

"I might've led a normal life if it weren't for him."

Boss muttered as she looked into the distance. I simply remained silent. Boss couldn't have led a normal life because I created her.

"But..."

She glanced at my hand. Then her hand slowly moved towards mine like a caterpillar.

"But... you know..."

I took the initiative and grabbed her hand because she moved so slow. Boss flinched at first, but soon smiled.

"I was able to meet you."

My heart jumped and I wondered if she could hear it. I raised my head and stared at her in a daze. Boss did the same.

"..."

"..."

I felt a strange sensation rising inside me. It could've been sadness, gratitude, or love. Even if my settings created her past, the current reality had long departed from my novel. Maybe it didn't matter anymore. I couldn't write about what would unfold in the future and no longer knew anything. Perhaps I had finally been freed from the restraints of this world being a novel.

"Boss."

I squeezed her hand and set all those thoughts aside. I only wanted to do one thing right now and slowly leaned towards her. Boss didn't

avoid me and seemed to be waiting as she slowly closed her eyes.

"We're all down here."

Jain's voice suddenly interrupted us. Boss jumped in a fluster and pushed me away. Then she glanced down.

"*Hmm?* What are you two doing up the... *Aak!*"

Boss threw a shadow rock at Jain before approaching me again. Then she quickly set the previous mood.

"Hajin, what should I do from now on?" Boss asked as she played with my hand.

"What do you mean?"

I knew why she asked, but she had to decide for herself.

Boss grew somewhat frustrated and returned to her usual self.

"I lived to fulfill Yi Yeonjun's wish. Reforming the Chameleon Troupe, killing people, and stealing treasures... They were all for him, but now..."

Boss stopped and suddenly closed her eyes. She didn't finish no matter how long I waited. I bitterly smiled and pulled her towards me. We didn't kiss, but our embrace felt even softer.

"It's fine."

I pointed to the Chameleon Troupe members waiting on the first floor. They worked with Yoo Yeonha to prepare what I asked for.

"You have them. Look for it with your comrades if you don't have a goal or purpose. Without killing people this time, so you can all be happy."

The most ideal solution might not have been the best answer, but Boss

smiled at my corny line and looked into my eyes.

"..."

Once again, I felt convinced that I wanted her to be happy. My heart raced as I watched her smile. I wanted her to laugh. I... I loved everything about her.

And that's what saddened me more.

* * *

The atmosphere grew tense as the battle against Baal broke out. A rather odd word interrupted this cold silence.

"Grandfather."

Chae Nayun spoke and everyone, including Baal, turned to her. She seemed upset and the apathetic Chae Joochul didn't know how to react. Then the Immortal gently smiled at his granddaughter as he had always done.

"Grandfather..."

However, Chae Nayun didn't smile. Instead, she glared a bit resentfully at him.

"We need to talk when this ends."

Her tone felt sharp as thorns. Chae Joochul didn't know why she seemed angry, but he nodded anyway.

"Baal."

Then Kim Suho stepped forward.

—...

The devil looked down at Kim Suho and thought about the youth's

sudden transcendence because of the barrier. However, Kim Suho didn't wait for him to finish thinking.

“—!”

The heroes roared with all their hearts and charged at Baal.

Baal observed them with his narrow eye. Heynckes' Steel Spirit slashed his skin. Chae Joochul's storm struck him in the face. Rachel's elementals and Aileen's Spirit Speech formed a dragon that bit his neck. Chae Nayun's gigantic sword slashed his chest.

However, Baal didn't react. Kim Suho's sword would nullify any of his attempts at countering. He simply focused on calming his heart to avoid wasting any energy.

Baal continued to think even as he bled. Perhaps he felt desperate and toiled like a human to find an answer. It may have been humiliating, but he soon arrived at a reasonable answer.

Baal had caused this situation himself by cutting off the world's deterrent force to fully descend. The space inside this barrier became isolated from the world's interference, which also affected Kim Suho. The Sword Saint could only transcend because of the main character's authority.

—...

Baal remained silent amidst the barrage of attacks and searched for one person, Kim Hajin. The foolish humans refused his offer, but he believed this world would end if Kim Hajin died. Baal would die as well when that happened.

— Where are you...

Baal couldn't find him and probably wouldn't for all of eternity because Kim Hajin hid in the barrier's crack.

— *Hah?*

The devil let out a short cry. *Chwaaaaack*— He could hear something slashing his heart. A giant sword had invaded his true body. Baal stared at the sword piercing his skin and the woman holding this sword.

"*Uhahaha*, how is it? Painful, right?"

A lowly human, a swordswoman named Chae Nayun, smiled at him. Baal reeled from the anger.

— I admit. I cannot defeat all of you.

He muttered with a cold fury. This declaration felt humiliating, but one option remained.

— Did you forget?

He could just destroy the barrier that caused Kim Suho to transcend. Baal would no longer maintain his true body, but Earth still had devils and demons under his control. It felt unpleasant to receive help, but Baal didn't care about his pride anymore. His subordinates would destroy Earth for him.

— I might die, but I am the evil god who can never be annihilated.

Baal glared at Kim Suho's unwavering eyes and prepared to destroy the barrier. An author might have described this as an act of self-destruction. Even Kim Suho's authority shouldn't be able to stop him from detonating the barrier. Baal chose to destroy his true body without hesitation.

No, he tried to.

Chapter 364

Ending (2)

[Puharen's Inner Mind]

Jin Sahyuk slowly opened her eyes, but only saw darkness. Puharen's inner mind felt cold and empty. The negative emotions in the air constricted her.

Jin Sahyuk relied on her senses as she walked to a certain flickering presence.

“...”

She suddenly stopped after endlessly walking. Her intuition told her she had arrived at the correct spot where the wavering soul called for her. Jin Sahyuk opened her palm and a small light floated up. It partly illuminated her younger brother's dark mind and she found him squatting and trembling in the dark.

“Ah...”

Her breath halted and fire surged from the bottom of her heart. It seemed to burn her entire body. Jin Sahyuk endured the pain and looked at Puharen. His thin, frail body looked cold and only a bottomless darkness could be found in his lifeless pupils. He hadn't grown in the slightest and remained a child. Jin Sahyuk committed his appearance to memory so she would never forget.

“Puharen.”

Her voice couldn't reach him and scattered in the air. Puharen had been stuck in this dark place for dozens of years. She already knew meeting him wouldn't change anything.

“Puharen.”

Still, she called his name. Jin Sahyuk bit her lips and pondered as Puharen refused to move.

What were you doing here all alone? Were you resenting me or looking for your mother who already died?

Jin Sahyuk bent down and slowly reached out. Her trembling fingers touched Puharen’s face and the coldness stung her heart as though she touched a corpse.

She called the child’s name once again.

“Puharen.”

Puharen’s inner mind shook, but this small tremor came from an outside impact. He didn’t have much time left if his inner mind had deteriorated to this state.

She could seek forgiveness later. For now, she had to hurry and placed a hand on Puharen’s shoulder.

“I know I have no right to ask for forgiveness.”

Puharen would never forgive her and she would never be able to atone for her sins. So why? Baal’s words popped up in her head for some reason. Everything had been decided beforehand because they lived in a novel. The settings created by that man caused her previous actions and Puharen’s current state.

Jin Sahyuk laughed in a mocking tone.

“But you know...”

No, Baal’s words just sounded like a lame excuse. A way to pass on one’s failures to another in the form of resentment. However, Jin Sahyuk considered herself a king who didn’t make excuses. Funnily enough, Kim Hajin had helped her achieve this realization. He shattered her principles and reforged them as she begged for her life.

“I’ve always wanted to tell you something.”

Magic power surged from her hand on Puharen’s shoulder. He didn’t even turn to look because his dull eyes already lost the ability to see.

“I’m sorry.”

Jin Sahyuk finally apologized.

With that, she released her magic power. The authority of Reality Manipulation seeped into Puharen and his shoulders faintly shook.

“Hurt me all you want inside my heart for eternity.”

Jin Sahyuk closed her eyes and calmly murmured.

Her magic power shot up like flames and spread to every corner of Puharen’s body. He scattered away like dust or a midsummer night’s flower. Almost as if he never existed in the first place.

With this, Jin Sahyuk killed Puharen for the second time. However, it felt different this time.

“Haaa...”

She took a deep breath and sucked in Puharen’s remains. Then her body flashed with a blue light.

She came up with this after seeing Shin Myunchul. Morax had trapped Puharen’s soul and Shin Myungchul lived on in Shin Jonghak’s inner mind. Who said she couldn’t do the same? She felt confident in succeeding.

I am a king above a devil.

As a king, I will embrace Puharen. This place is too desolate. I don’t know if my heart will be any warmer, but I can’t let you be imprisoned here. I should be the one to free you since I made you like this.

You can bother me all you want and let your soul cry out. I won't complain even if you cut apart my heart.

“Let's go. Together.”

Of course, she didn't ask for Puharen's approval and simply abducted him. Jin Sahyuk ended up using a Jin Sahyuk-like approach.

Tzzzt...

Puharen let out a small sound as he seeped into Jin Sahyuk's heart. Immediately, her body became overloaded. Puharen's soul clashed with hers and caused a pain any human would struggle to endure.

However, Jin Sahyuk endured this heart-wrenching pain even as she coughed mouthfuls of blood.

Koong!

A thud rang from outside when Puharen's soul reached Jin Sahyuk's heart. This impact felt far clearer than the last.

She could also smell a familiar scent. That man finally stepped in. Jin Sahyuk closed her eyes and felt relieved.

Chwaaaaa...

Soon, Morax began to crumble and couldn't maintain his form without his host.

Jin Sahyuk felt Puharen's emotions as Morax scattered away into dust. Uncontrollable pain, resentment, and sorrow... She faintly smiled and accepted all of it with her body.

She could only describe her current expression as a king's smile. Her former scribe would've surely called it that.

Jin Sahyuk lost consciousness while thinking of such unimportant things.

The barrier slowly contracted, the sky narrowed, and the ground cracked. The heroes in the area could easily tell Baal's intentions and fought even harder.

Steel Spirit and Spirit Speech, magic swords and elementals, spells and punches... They poured everything towards Baal.

Chae Joochul's nature caused several explosions inside the devil. Heynckes sliced off Baal's thick skin. Chae Nayun raised her magic sword to support the falling sky.

"Don't come down... Damned ceiling! *Uaaaaah! Kkuaaaaaa!*"

Her action might look funny, but it served an important purpose. Only Chae Nayun could delay the barrier's contraction with her giant magic sword and overwhelming magic power capacity.

"Huup!"

Kim Suho swung Misteltein to cut Baal's will itself. However, that couldn't be easily destroyed even after Kim Suho slashed off the devil's arm, skinned him, and tore off his wings.

Kim Suho thought about destroying the barrier that isolated them from the world's interference. However, his authority couldn't destroy it because it granted him his current transcendent state.

— It's futile.

Baal knew this too and spoke with a tone of ridicule.

Meanwhile, the barrier's destruction continued. Soon, it would completely contract and explode from the compressed density and pressure. Not even Baal would survive.

The heroes inside would die, but Baal would return to Earth one day. His death would only be temporary and not his complete annihilation. Earth wouldn't escape from his destruction.

Baal guaranteed his victory from the beginning.

— It's your loss.

The devil sinisterly smiled and twisted his hand. The sky inside the barrier crumbled even quicker.

Kwagwagwagwa...

Baal could see the despair in the heroes' eyes as the thunderous destruction rang out. He grinned and an ecstasy welled up in his heart.

Then a mysterious voice rang out from the ceiling.

“Futile? Says who?”

This somewhat dry voice immediately drew everyone's attention. The heroes felt confused and Baal's eyes also widened in shock. He turned towards the voice.

“You're wide open right now because of all the attacks you've received. You should be weaker without your outer skin, right?”

Only then did Baal look down at his body. Demonic energy leaked from numerous cuts and cracks on his skin. His demonic energy surged to form a barrier, but Kim Suho instantly nullified it.

— Y-You... until the end!

As Baal raged at Kim Suho...

“Let's see if you can take this. It'll be a bit different.”

BOOM!

A thunderous noise shook the barrier. Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, Rachel, Yun Seung-Ah, Heynckes, Chae Joochul, Baal, and Bell... Everyone stared at the bullet that formed a white rift in space. The bullet

emitted a brilliant light before digging into Baal's heart.

Pzzzt!

—...!

Baal's eyes widened as the bullet reached his heart. Then the barrier stopped contracting. The impact had cut off Baal's will from the barrier.

— *Kuuuu... KUAAAAAAK!*

Baal coughed a mouthful of blood. Reddish-black liquid flowed from the dragon's mouth. The devil refused to believe it even as he writhed in pain. This bullet contained the universe's deterrent force. Such a thing couldn't exist.

“—!”

Baal roared and pinpointed where the bullet came from. He finally found that damned man. That arrogant, lazy man continued aiming at him.

Baal opened his mouth and breathed out demonic energy mixed with blood. His breath filled with killing intent followed the bullet's previous path, but...

“Nice try.”

Kim Suho slashed it into nothingness and smiled at Baal.

Baal also stopped attacking and looked in contempt at Kim Suho.

—...

A heavy silence descended as the hero and devil glared at each other. Did they feel disgust, resentment, or resignation? Unknown feelings flickered in their eyes.

The cold silence didn't last long. Soon, Baal let out a hollow chuckle.

— Real cheeky... Makes me want to destroy everything...

Kim Suho didn't let Baal continue any further. He never let his guard down as an ironclad rule.

“—!”

The Sword Saint swung his sword with a spirited shout. Many heroes did the same after seeing Kim Suho's all-out attack. Baal simply watched them.

“Break!”

Aileen shouted with her Spirit Speech. Chae Nayun's greatsword emanated a terrifying amount of magic power. Yun Seung-Ah's white flower sword bloomed in every direction. Shimurin's grand magic shook the earth. Harin's exorcism spell could penetrate even Baal. Yoo Jinwoong's crimson electricity flowed through the air. Yoo Sihyuk's wolves leaped towards the devil's neck. Heynckes' sharp Steel Spirit, Chae Joochul's emotionless nature, Rachel's fairy sword Galatine and her elementals, Yi Yongha's inextinguishable flames...

Everything bolstered Kim Suho's brilliant sword strike.

Chapter 365

Ending (3)

[Baal's Barrier]

I transformed the Desert Eagle into a sniper rifle. The handgun expanded with its familiar mechanical sounds. The barrel fused with aether extended forward and the muzzle pointed towards the existence in the distance.

I thought about where to snipe Baal: the heart, the head, or the eyes. None of them looked like weak points. After all, not even the god-slaying bullet could easily pierce Baal's defense.

The god-slaying bullet didn't possess enough power to penetrate his outer skin. It couldn't cut through everything like Kim Suho, push forward with brute force like Chae Nayun, or distort reality like Jin Sahyuk. It could deal critical damage to a devil that reached divinity, but would have to find a way through first.

“...”

I mulled over my options, but soon realized I didn't need to.

“—!”

Baal focused on self-destructing by collapsing his barrier. He no longer cared about the heroes' attacks, so his outer skin tore apart as the battle continued. Demonic energy trickled like sand from the cracks. The barrier's destruction quickened because of his sacrifice, but that didn't matter to me.

Click—

I loaded the god-slaying bullet into the chamber. Then I increased

stigma's magic power to the limit. I poured every ounce and used overclocking to add even more. For a moment, it felt as if my soul would be sucked out and my mind violently shook.

“Hajin.”

Someone suddenly touched my shoulder.

The voice held onto my consciousness on the verge of scattering and a gentle touch embraced my cheek. I could see Boss warmly staring at me.

“Thanks.”

I snapped out of my daze and slowly took her hand off. Then I tightened my grip around the trigger.

“Boss, I hope you didn't forget. You still remember my unique skill, right?”

I could barely speak with stigma's immense pressure, but eked out some words.

“I do.”

“Even if it looks like I'm dead...”

I increased stigma's magic power again and it blazed around me like wildfire. Overclocking took the magic power from my heart and my extracted lifeforce seeped into the bullet.

“I won't... really die.”

Boss bitterly smiled and nodded. The charging finally completed. Any more would be impossible even if I risked something greater than my life. It would truly be the end if this didn't work.

[Stigma has been overclocked to 1353%.]

A system message notified me that I expended an additional 13.5 streaks of stigma. I felt relieved for some reason after putting my all into this god-slaying bullet.

— It's futile.

Baal arrogantly muttered. I gazed at Boss one last time and grinned towards the battlefield.

— It's your loss.

Baal declared his victory and I finally stepped in.

"Futile? Says who?"

I blurted along with a mouthful of blood as stigma continued to suppress me. Baal immediately turned and looked at me. His eyes looked terrifying, but I didn't feel afraid. My bullet would pierce his heart and annihilate him.

"Let's see if you can take this. It'll be a bit different."

I pulled the trigger as I stared into his eyes. *Kwaaaaaa!* A huge explosion erupted and a powerful shockwave shook the barrier. I'd never heard such loud gunfire before.

"*Uk!*"

The immense destructive power came with a critical side-effect. The god-slaying bullet tore the Desert Eagle apart. Some of the shrapnel struck me, but Boss blocked most of it.

Chwaaaaa...

The god-slaying bullet brilliantly flew after destroying the Desert Eagle. I could see the beautiful trail it left behind. Unfortunately, I wouldn't be able to witness the result.

"..."

My body staggered and saliva flew out of my mouth. Perhaps, it might've been blood. My vision spun and I lost control of my limbs.

— Hajin! Hajin!

I told her I wouldn't die, but Boss still worried. Her agitated voice rang out before disappearing from my consciousness. It felt like sinking into a bottomless pit even though Boss held me. Someone kept pulling me down. Someone I didn't know called for me. Blue words appeared in the darkness as my consciousness faded.

[The Final Arc...]

I read the system message as I endlessly sunk. I had a strong hunch about a certain meeting when I woke up. Then I finally lost consciousness in this unpleasant atmosphere.

* * *

[Korean Border]

An ordinary green field replaced Baal's territory and the sun shone across the blue sky. The land lit up in dazzling greens and yellows.

"Wow."

Kim Suho exclaimed at the beautiful sight and wondered if he might be dreaming. The previous battle didn't feel real as he lay on the ground and admired the scene.

"Ah!"

Reality soon struck and Kim Suho tried to get up, but his body wouldn't move. He had used all his energy and couldn't even lift a finger anymore. He barely managed to tilt his head and check his surroundings.

There, he found Baal. Unlike him, Baal didn't lie disgracefully on the ground. The devil had a deep cut across his body, but stood upright and glared at Kim Suho.

“Did we lose?”

Kim Suho chuckled almost subconsciously.

Such a thought briefly lingered on his mind.

“Kim Suho.”

A somewhat familiar voice rang out and only then did he look beyond Baal.

First, he saw Crevon’s army filling the horizon. Lü Bu and Ki Parang, Lancelot and Kim Yusin, even the Empress Araha... They radiated a golden light brighter than the sun.

Next, he saw a giant castle and ship floating in the sky. It seemed to be Medea’s magic castle and the Genkelope Vessel. Others also arrived.

“Over here.”

Kim Suho’s shoulders flinched as he turned over. An incredible number of heroes stood there. Essence of the Strait, Creator’s Sacred Grace, Desolate Moon, Frost Sanctuary... Chae Nayun smiled as she stood alongside the Temple of Justice members and executives from various guilds.

“Don’t you... ever get tired?”

Kim Suho felt surprised at how Chae Nayun could still stand after using so much magic power. She possessed a ridiculous amount of stamina.

“Now isn’t the time to get tired!”

Chae Nayun shook her head and reached out to him. Kim Suho grabbed her hand and stood up. Then the duo backed away as Baal watched them with sunken eyes. Chae Nayun pointed her sword at the devil.

“It’s round two. Wait, or is it round three?”

Baal bitterly smiled at her words and knew his defeat had been decided. Resignation filled his heart.

The devil’s heartbeat gradually slowed after being pierced by the god-slaying bullet. Baal didn’t have much time left and only felt regret now. If his defeat had been decided by fate... If this expedition had been created so he could never win... If his existence would only suffer defeat...

“How regrettable.”

Then he would’ve liked to rampage more and drive the humans to a corner. Maybe he would’ve found a tiny possibility of victory with a more violent approach.

“Baal.”

Someone called his name and he turned to Bell, who looked just like him. Bell’s gaze only contained pity and Baal lamented this situation. Not only did he fail to achieve his desire, but a human also pitied him. No, he refused to give up.

“Lower your head, Bell. My fight hasn’t ended yet.”

Baal snapped at his old friend and released his demonic energy. He still had enough to bring a few humans with him. It would be unfitting of a devil if he gave up without doing anything.

“Baal!”

A roar rang out and aroused his fighting spirit. Baal turned towards the voice and spotted Shin Jonghak on a hill not too far away. The devil recognized Shin Myungchul’s grandson and recalled the human who once made a contract and summoned him to this world. *Koong*—Baal’s heart faintly pulsed. He could feel Shin Myungchul’s soul in Shin Jonghak’s heart.

“Haaa...”

To meet the human who summoned him at this time. Could this also be fate's mischief?

Baal quite enjoyed this one. He genuinely smiled and gathered demonic energy into his hand.

"I came to collect your head!" Shin Jonghak shouted and aimed the Conqueror Spear at Baal.

Why did he make so much noise? Baal didn't like how Shin Jonghak acted like a fool, but accepted it with a hearty laugh. No matter the case, a sweet and perilous battlefield lay before him. The end of his expedition neared. Defeat would mean death and annihilation. Even so, that would be fine.

"I will come to you this time."

Baal stepped forward to obtain the one thing he never experienced, true death.

* * *

[Essence of the Strait, VIP Hospital]

Kim Suho slowly opened his eyes. Bright sunlight blurred his vision and a gentle breeze tickled his skin. He jumped and touched his stomach after briefly enjoying the calm.

"Whew."

Kim Suho sighed in relief. It seemed he hadn't died and woken up in the afterlife.

"You're up?"

A familiar voice rang out and Kim Suho tilted his head to the side.

"Yoo Yeonha?"

“Good. You recognize me. It wouldn’t have been surprising if you lost your memory after that injury.”

Yoo Yeonha faintly smiled and nodded.

Kim Suho stared at her in a daze before raising his upper body. The area around his solar plexus hurt, but he endured it.

“Don’t worry about me. What happened to Baal?”

Kim Suho asked as he tried to recall what happened. He repeatedly slashed away at Baal’s demonic energy. Then a demonic energy spear pierced his stomach as he grew tired. His memory ended there.

“Who knows?”

Yoo Yeonha mischievously avoided the question and Kim Suho grew slightly frustrated. Yoo Yeonha’s presence likely meant the situation had been taken care of. He couldn’t hold back his curiosity and turned on the news with the TV remote.

— Earth now faces a critical crossroads after Baal’s annihilation.

“Baal... died?” Kim Suho sighed in relief and asked Yoo Yeonha.

“*Mmm...* He disappeared along with Bell,” Yoo Yeonha vaguely replied.

“He disappeared?” Kim Suho furrowed his brows.

“Yeah, no one knows where he went. It looked like he died, but we have no way of confirming it. Bell suddenly ran away when the battle ended and disappeared with Baal.”

Bell and Baal. Kim Suho didn’t know the relationship between those twins, but Yoo Yeonha seemed to know everything.

“I heard from Grand Magician Shimurin about their relationship,” Yoo Yeonha explained with a grin.

“What? Tell me!”

— Orden has returned to Vladivostok. The citizens there have welcomed their guardian deity with open arms.

“W-What’s that? O-Orden?”

The report on TV surprised Kim Suho. He urged Yoo Yeonha for another explanation, but she simply shrugged.

“Why ask me? Aren’t you the one who let Orden go?”

“...”

Kim Suho flinched and shut his mouth. Indeed, he never confirmed whether or not Orden died. He even lied about it when the Hero Association asked him because Orden and Kurukuru reminded him of Jin Sahyuk and himself. Unlike his past self who tried to kill his master, Kurukuru tried to save Orden. Kim Suho couldn’t bring himself to cut down Orden, but he confirmed that Orden stopped breathing.

“It’s fine. Orden is our ally now.”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly projected someone’s contact information from her smartwatch. The name read, *[Orden]*.

“*Huh?* What’s that?”

“How is it? I bet I’m the first one to get Orden’s number.”

“*Haaa...*”

Kim Suho didn’t know how to react to the proud Yoo Yeonha.

“Anyways, do you want to come out? Nayun, Seung-Ah, and everyone else are in the lobby.”

A smile spread across his face when he heard those two names. Then

his expression stiffened when he recalled a certain person.

“What about Hajin?”

“Oh, you don’t have to worry about him.”

“He’s here too?”

“No, he’s in a safer place.”

Yoo Yeonha spoke with a bitter smile. Kim Hajin belonged with the Chameleon Troupe, so he should be in a safer place. After all, that Boss person seemed to like Kim Hajin more than anyone else.

“...”

Kim Suho pondered about the memories Baal showed him. How should he treat Kim Hajin from now on if Hajin really created this world as the author?

“Kim Suho?”

He became startled and quickly raised his head.

“What are you thinking about?” Yoo Yeonha suspiciously stared at him.

“*Huh? Ah.*”

Well, he could worry about that later and talk to Kim Hajin when they met.

“Nothing. *Um*, let’s go see everyone else.”

Kim Suho got up while clutching his stomach. Yoo Yeonha offered to help, but he refused and stood by himself. He grew curious as to how he survived after receiving such a serious injury.

“Oh, that? You know Yi Yuri, right?”

“Hmm?”

“The girl you saved a long time ago. You know, back at the museum.”

“Ah!”

“She has the authority of healing. You would’ve been dead if not for her.”

The girl he saved with Chae Nayun back in Cube. He heard she was someone important, but never expected that.

“I’ll have to thank her later. Along with gifts, of course.”

Kim Suho opened the door with a grin.

“What?”

The hospital’s fancy hallway with golden marble floors and chandeliers stunned him. Several people gathered around the circular couches and luxurious chairs.

“Oh, Kim Suho! Are you alright?”

Chae Nayun shouted after spotting him first. She laughed before holding up the child under her armpit.

“Look! Isn’t she cute? This is the kid Rachel gave birth to! Her name’s Evandel!”

“Aah, aah, aaaang...”

The child Chae Nayun introduced struggled to escape. Rachel stepped in to retrieve Evandel and embraced her.

“Don’t raise her like that! Also, I didn’t give birth to Evandel. She...”

Rachel stopped as Evandel looked at her with teary eyes. She hadn’t given birth to Evandel, but saying this again would probably hurt the

little girl's feelings.

"You didn't? Then what?" Chae Nayun mischievously smiled and asked.

"..."

Rachel couldn't say anything and let Evandel go. Evandel flew over to Yun Seung-Ah, who gently patted her.

"*Hahaha*, there's our hero!"

Kim Suho recognized the aged voice before even turning around.

"So, how's your body?"

Heynckes raised his left hand and asked. His right hand had already turned to steel and he could no longer restore it.

"I'm fine, but your arm..."

"I'm fine too. It's normal to lose control of one arm at my age. Well, I'll let you go. This old man needs some more rest."

"Yes, sir."

Kim Suho said goodbye to Heynckes and sat next to Yun Seung-Ah. Several heroes remained in the lobby: Yoo Sihyuk, Ah Hae-In, Yoo Jinwoong, Yi Yongha, Aileen, Nicholas, Chae Nayun, Evandel, Yi Yeonghan... All their voices rang out in a cacophony that made it hard to hear.

"*Argh*, stop provoking me!" Aileen suddenly shouted and pushed someone away.

"*Ehem*. What's wrong with a master wanting to see her disciple's injuries?"

Ah Hae-In grabbed Aileen's head with a scowl. *Aah, aaaaaaaah!*

Aileen struggled with her arms and couldn't bring herself to use Spirit Speech.

“Suho?”

A gentle voice called him and he turned to Seung-Ah. The girl named Evandel sat in her embrace. Yun Seung-Ah held up Evandel's hand and waved.

“Say hi. This is Evandel, a future 9 star magician. Evandel, this is Kim Suho. My guild's second-in-command.”

“Ah, yes. Hi, Evandel.”

“Un, he, hello...”

Evandel seemed shy and quickly hid behind Yun Seung-Ah. She looked incredibly adorable like a smaller version of Rachel. Kim Suho smiled and tried to get closer.

“Evandel just gets cuter every time I see her.”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly appeared and pushed Kim Suho aside. She skipped over to Evandel. However, Yun Seung-Ah narrowed her eyes and blocked Yoo Yeonha.

“You only met her today.”

“But I saw her a long time ago.”

Kim Suho watched their power struggle with a chuckle. He could hear the news report from the TV in the corner.

— We will march forward. After enduring Baal's great evil, humanity will...

Kim Suho turned to watch the TV.

— But before that, there's something I need to say. Something I need

to correct.

Shin Jonghak stood on a podium and declared on TV.

— As Shin Myungchul's grandson and as this world's hero...

A smile emerged on Kim Suho's face.

...

Something brushed past Kim Suho's temples. He briefly felt a strange, unpleasant feeling and stopped listening.

Shin Jonghak's introduction went on for too long as he spoke about when he was 3 years old.

No, the unpleasant feeling didn't come from that. Kim Suho felt as if something had changed. The feeling just now seemed to have twisted the world somehow.

It bothered him, but he couldn't investigate the fleeting sensation anymore. Kim Suho furrowed his brows and returned to his seat.

However...

It seemed the others also felt the same sensation.

"W-What was that?"

"I, I don't know..."

Chae Nayun and Rachel tilted their heads in the middle of their quarrel. Evandel and Yoo Yeonha did the same. Evandel stopped moving and widened her eyes like a robot with a dead battery. Yoo Yeonha rubbed her cheeks against Evandel's and suddenly furrowed her brows while looking around.

However, they seemed to be the only ones who noticed this sensation. Everyone else in the lobby acted normal even though they all

possessed similar perceptions.

Kim Suho faced the ones who felt something.

“Hey, Chae Nayun. What just happened?”

They couldn’t figure out what changed. Perhaps they would never find out. *Drrrrk*— The hospital door suddenly opened and more people rushed in.

“Ah, you were all here!”

Medea, Crevon’s Empress Araha, and her generals suddenly appeared. They brightly smiled and joined everyone.

“I, Empress Araha, have something to say to everyone.”

Araha waited for the heroes to give her their attention. After all, she greatly aided them as Crevon’s empress.

“Hello? Everyone?”

However, they only briefly looked at her and went back to talking.

Chapter 366

Decision

[Chameleon Troupe's Sanctuary]

Boss gathered every Chameleon Troupe member to the sanctuary. The cave Kim Hajin modified in the past remained in excellent condition. It looked spotless and even better than before thanks to the goblin tablet's servants.

Boss made a simple announcement. As expected, everyone took the grave content quite lightly. The Chameleon Troupe would be disbanded.

“What are you going to do from now on?”

Jain approached Cheok Jungyeong after their short ceremony. Cheok Jungyeong glanced at her from the couch before shrugging.

“I don't know.”

It only made sense to disband considering why they formed the Chameleon Troupe. Boss wanted to avenge Yi Yeonjun, but after they learned the truth... Well, everything become quite a mess.

“Where's Boss? What's she doing?”

Cheok Jungeong asked and Jain grinned while shaking her head.

“Boss? She's not our boss anymore. She's our club leader now.”

Jain projected a hologram with her smartwatch.

[Social Club – Colored Calves] [Club Leader – Yi Byul] [Club Member – 6]

“I’ll send you an invitation too.”

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong looked displeased, but turned on his smartwatch to receive it. Jain continued with a bright grin.

“Yesterday, she buried Yi Yeonjun’s corpse in Pandemonium. Today, she said she’d atone for her sins for the rest of her life.”

“Atone for her sins?”

“Yep. Apparently, she made a promise with Hajin.”

“Atone how?”

“I don’t know, but Boss has enough wealth to feed a country. It’ll be perfect since there are lots of orphans right now.”

“...”

Cheok Jungyeong silently sighed. *Atoning for one’s sins*. Could they do something like that? The sin of killing a thousand couldn’t be washed away if they saved a million. The people they had to seek forgiveness from already died. The only forgiveness would be to offer their own heads.

“Why? You want to do it too?”

“No.”

Cheok Jungyeong immediately replied and Jain felt slightly surprised by his quick response. Then he stood up. *Koong! Koong!* His huge body created inhuman rumbles perhaps because he just returned from killing the remnant demons.

“I’d rather have someone kill me out of vengeance than do that. Well, I doubt anyone can kill me.”

“Pft...”

Jain faintly smiled. Honestly, she agreed with Cheok Jungyeong. Boss might be the only one who considered atoning for their sins. Everyone else had killed far too many to turn back now.

“Well then, why don’t we go do some work?”

“Work?”

Jain made a suggestive smile and Cheok Jungyeong narrowed his eyes. She took out a thick envelope.

“What’s this?”

“Mmm... Probably the incident Boss wants to make right.”

Cheok Jungyeong snatched the envelope and opened it. The first page read, *[Data Related to Kwang-Oh Incident]*. Cheok Jungyeong looked at Jain without even reading the document.

“You know I don’t read. Explain.”

“Mmm... Well, it’s simple. You know there are secretly three association heads, right?”

Cheok Jungyeong nodded. Yi Yukho officially led the Hero Association, but Kim Sukho and Yoo Jangwon also worked in the shadows. Kim Sukho used to be the president of Korea and Yoo Jangwon had retired as a master rank hero.

“We’ll kill them all.”

“All three of them?”

Cheok Jungyeong widened his eyes. Jain clapped her hands and continued as if he shouldn’t have been surprised yet.

“Yep, also Chae Joochul and Yoo Jinwoong.”

“What? Chae Joochul and Yoo Jinwoong?”

“Why? Are you scared?”

Jain licked her lips and provoked him. Cheok Jungyeong stared into her eyes before smiling and bursting into laughter.

“*Uhahahaha!* Jain, I didn’t know you were so feisty!”

Cheok Jungyeong could practically feel his muscles heating up from excitement. He didn’t care too much about Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho, but Chae Joochul and Yoo Jinwoong? He saw them as perfect opponents for someone of his skills.

“When are we starting? What’s the plan?”

“We don’t need to do anything. Kim Sukho is already looking for us. He’ll come to us eventually.”

“*Uhaha*, he’s looking for us? Really?”

That felt even more surprising. Who would’ve thought the prey would search for the predator?

“Yep, we used to be his hunting dog a long time ago. He wants to bury that past.”

What a stupid old man. Jain murmured as she shook her head.

“So who’s participating?” Cheok Jungyeong asked with a big grin.

“Droon, Kaita, Jin Yohan, Khalifa, and Setryn. Arashi wants to focus on research and Yoo Kyunghwan said he’ll be retiring to live peacefully with his lover.”

“Then... *Cough.*”

Cheok Jungyeong glanced at Jain and seemed to have something to say.

“We’re missing... a few people.”

“Right.”

“So would it be okay to bring someone with us.”

“*Hmm?* Who? I think we have more than enough.”

“*Mmm...* You see, I know a thing or two about this Kwang-Oh Incident...”

Their conversation suddenly came to a stop. A strange sensation brushed past Cheok Jungyeong and Jain, but they couldn’t figure it out. The dull Cheok Jungyeong paused and felt something had changed.

“Right, this Kwang-Oh Incident...”

He couldn’t remember a name.

“What is it? Just say it.”

“No... *Um*, what was his name? The seat of black...”

“Hajin?”

“Oh, right, Hajin. Is this related to Hajin?”

Hajin. For a moment, he couldn’t recall that name. He could never forget, so why? Did he hurt his head while fighting?

“Yeah, you’re right. That’s when Boss met Hajin for the first time. She killed everyone in the evacuation shelter except Hajin,” Jain informed him.

“Anyways, I know someone else who’s related to that incident.”

“Really? Who?” Jain pretended to be surprised and perked up her ears.

“I doubt she’ll want to work with trash like us, but... it’s Jin Seyeon.”

“What? Jin Seyeon?” Jain actually felt surprised this time.

“Yeah.”

Jin Seyeon told Cheok Jungyeong all about it during their stay at the colosseum. She tried to evoke his sympathy by revealing her past so she could dig further into the Chameleon Troupe’s involvement with the Kwang-Oh Incident. Of course, that didn’t work because Cheok Jungyeong didn’t know much about it.

“Jin Seyeon has a grudge against them too. She said her father died because of them.”

Jain stared at him before making a strange smile.

“Interesting. I’m fine with it, but there might be no deaths if she gets involved.”

The masterminds behind the Kwang-Oh Incident should be Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho. Then Chae Joochul, Yoo Jangwon, and Yoo Jinwoong would follow in order of responsibility. Jin Seyeon might try to resolve this matter in a moral way if she interfered.

“I know, but it’s nice to have someone like that. Kind of like that guy... *uh*... the black seat.”

“Hajin?”

“Right, right. It’s more fun with someone like him. You know, different opinions clashing and creating unexpected situations.”

Cheok Jungyeong grinned and Jain also smiled. However, Jain smiled for a slightly different reason. Jin Seyeon would undoubtedly suggest capturing and punishing the perpetrators by law. Cheok Jungyeong’s hopes of fighting until one side died wouldn’t occur. Despite this, he still wanted to invite her. Jain could guess why and that made her smile.

“Fine, let her know. I doubt she’ll readily agree though.”

“She will if I tell her. Anyways, I’ll contact her.”

Cheok Jungyeong turned on his smartwatch.

[Jin Seyeon]

She had given him her number. He felt reluctant at the time and thought he would never call her. Cheok Jungyeong pressed the call button with a relaxed smile.

Tu— Tu—

His heartbeat quickened as the dial rang. He pretended to be oblivious as to what this meant while secretly telling himself it would be a competition. After all, Jin Seyeon was a master rank hero.

* * *

I revived for the second time with my unique skill, *[Clockhand of Fate]*. It didn’t feel any better than the first time. The fear and pain of death lingered on my mind. This time, I even experienced my life flashing before my eyes. Strangely enough, most of what I saw came from this world. Not my original world, but the one I currently lived in.

Perhaps I had completely changed. The me from Earth and the me from this world would be impossible to compare. The one from Earth could be considered a real extra. No one special in any way and just an author losing his popularity. However, in this world...

“Agh!”

I felt a sharp pain from my heart, almost as if to scold my self-reproach. I clutched my chest and rolled on the ground. Thankfully, the unbearable pain soon disappeared.

“Haa, haa...”

I took several deep breaths and regained my calm. I found it strange that no one came looking for me. After all, I made quite a ruckus just now. Only then did I look around my surroundings.

“Where am I?”

I couldn’t find anyone. Boss, Jain, Kim Suho, Cheok Jungyeong, Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, Rachel, Evandel...

I lay on the white, soft ground like a field of snow. It didn’t feel cold at all as I picked up a handful of snow. *Ppk— Ppk—* I could mold it, but it felt warm.

The sky had turned dark, but the stars brightened the area. It felt like I could grasp those crystal clear stars if I just reached out.

This beautiful scenery absorbed me and I didn’t think about the system alerts until some time later.

“Oh right, the system.”

I hadn’t read several messages.

[The final arc, Final Name, has been completed.] [All SP has been retrieved.] [▷??? has now been revealed.] [▷Decision] [You may now make a decision as the author...]

Ssk— I heard footsteps on the snowy field and immediately turned. A man I didn’t recognize walked towards me. He looked ordinary in every way. Neither his face nor physique stood out.

“Nice to meet you, Kim Hajin. I’ve come to fulfill my promise since the final arc has ended.”

However, his extraordinary words shook my heart. I looked at him while sitting in a daze on the ground. He nonchalantly smiled and bowed.

“I am the co-author. Thank you for clearing the story I continued.”

All sorts of thoughts came to me, but I didn't voice them. They floated like bubbles and only stayed in my head. He seemed to have read my mind and answered what I wanted to know most.

"*Ah*, you must be wondering who I am. I'm someone with a similar job. I guess you could call me a scenario writer. The official title is a dimensional author. *Ah*, it's not a job that exists for the purpose of satisfying someone. As I said before, it's a self-gratifying job. Unlike you, I'm not from a pinnacle ranked dimension, so my job is determined at birth. A so-called vocation, if you will. I'm not a human, but a universal existence."

I couldn't understand because he threw out too much information. He chuckled and waved as I blankly stared at him.

"*Haha*, of course, we're nothing compared to your kind. A universal existence might sound grand, but we're only beings derived from novels of pinnacle ranked dimensions. Well, we're in a better spot than others since we can create lesser dimensions. I'm sure this isn't enough to answer your questions, so I'll explain as simply as possible."

Cough. The man cleared his throat and poured out another flurry of words.

"I was born a long, long time ago to create a dimension. I wandered around trying to find one to create, but it seemed impossible with my power. I needed an author's permission. Something only a creator from a pinnacle ranked dimension possessed. However, I could only observe a pinnacle-ranked dimension at the time. I worked hard for thousands of years and that pinnacle ranked dimension finally succeeded in reaching the digital world. It was truly a stroke of luck from the heavens."

The man pretended to wipe the sweat from his forehead.

"Really, what a relief. I was just as lucky as you, Hajin."

A lightbulb suddenly lit up in my head.

"T-That homosapiens@neighbor.com?"

“Yes, exactly. That’s me!”

The man clapped and I snapped out of my daze.

“So... you’re some sort of universal existence that can create dimensions. You were looking for novels to materialize and chose me?”

“Yes, correct!”

“W-Why? Why my novel?”

“Ah, it’s not because I wanted to. If I had a choice, I would’ve loved to materialize a masterpiece like *The Silmarillion*. However, not many authors would allow a published work, especially a serialized one, to be remade. As I said before, we cannot create without the author’s permission. Honestly, I couldn’t recreate a masterpiece like *The Silmarillion* even if the author gave me permission. I simply lack the ability to do so. I needed a poorly written novel with enough structure and elements to not be embarrassed about. Ah, ignore that last part, cough.”

The man spoke at length again, but one word bothered me.

“Wait, permission?”

“Yes, many dimensional authors exist where I come from. However, not many aim for a pinnacle ranked dimension like me. For the record, one day in a pinnacle ranked dimension is equivalent to one year for us. In other words, the 6 months you ignored my email was 180 years for me. Ah, it’s not like I resent you for that. I can only send an email once every 90 years. That would be about 3 months in a pinnacle ranked dimension.”

“N-No, that’s not what I’m talking about.”

I became dumbfounded. *He couldn’t do anything without my permission?*

“Permission? What permission? What about all the changes you made? You changed them however you liked!”

“Eh? What do you mean? You gave me permission, remember?”

“What? Permission?”

“Yes! You clearly stated it in the email! You don’t know how happy I felt when you approved with those three sentences!”

My head instantly turned blank. *Deng*— A bell seemed to ring in my head. *All this really happened because of that email? My life changed so much because of three sentences?*

“Honestly, it might’ve been a bit unfair because those three insignificant sentences you wrote gave me an entire world.”

Tak! The man snapped his fingers and a string of messages popped up in the air.

[Pinnacle Ranked Dimension – The ultimate and most stable world where Kim Hajin and other authors live.] [High Ranked Dimension – Omitted] [High-intermediate Ranked Dimension – My world] [Intermediate Ranked Dimension – The world of your novel, The Returnee Hero.] [Low-intermediate Ranked Dimension – Omitted] [Low Ranked Dimension – Where your minigame character, Litrain, lives.] [Lowest Ranked Dimension – Omitted]

“This makes sense, right? This is how dimensions are ranked. I observed your pinnacle ranked dimension for about 10,000 years. That would only be 20-30 years in your original dimension.”

The man snapped again and the messages in the air vanished.

“Your pinnacle ranked dimension truly has all kinds of people. Lazy people, grieving people, loving people, murderous people, excited people, content creators... I felt envious of all of them. You once thought you were just an extra no different than a speck of dust, right? However, you’re like a main character who shines brighter than anyone else in the eyes of real extras like me.”

“No, that’s not the problem. Right... so... you’re saying those three sentences changed my life like this?”

An empty chuckle escaped my lips. The co-author smiled and looked at the sky.

“Yes, and that is also unfair. An email you thoughtlessly replied to actually created a world.”

“...”

I shut my mouth and didn't care to hear any more of his explanations. I would only continue to sigh at my fate. We had a more important matter at hand.

“Whatever, so what's going to happen now?”

“It's simple. You must make a decision. You can leave the world of your novel or stay.”

“I see...”

I noticed my shaking voice. I expected something like this, so I already prepared some questions.

“What happens if I leave this world?”

“The novel will stop without the author and this world will crumble as a result.”

“What? All of it?”

I became dumbstruck and my hair stood on ends. The man nodded as if it wasn't a big deal.

“Of course, isn't that obvious? I'm not the one maintaining this world. It's you from the pinnacle ranked dimension, the one with a noble soul. Without you, a mere intermediate ranked dimension will instantly stop and slowly rot until it disappears.”

The man lightly sighed and continued.

“However, you’ll safely return to Earth. Don’t worry about the passage of time. Less than 10 days should’ve passed in the pinnacle ranked dimension. Maybe not even a day. I’m not too sure about the exact metrics of time. Oh right, I can also erase all your memories of this world if you’d like!”

A hollow laugh escaped me and I clutched my head. Meanwhile, the man continued.

“Please remake this world in prose if you return to your world. I’d like to read it too. That single novel will be far greater than all the worlds I’ve created combined—”

“Greater, my ass.”

I gritted my teeth and cut him off.

“Pardon? *Ah*, you must not have understood—”

“I did, you piece of shit. That’s why I’m angry. This world... the world you created... is far greater than mine.”

A third-rate author who couldn’t even meet his daily release times and eventually went on hiatus. I could never write a novel greater than this world. Plus, I didn’t think I created this world anymore. I only lived in it.

“*Hmm...* I see.”

A small smile spread across his face and he turned serious.

“Then what is your decision?”

“I’d like to ask something first.”

It might be more important than anything else.

“Can I die in this world? Am I immortal like Baal?”

“No, you can die. This world won’t stop even if you do because your soul will remain and maintain this world. That’s why Baal wanted to kill you.”

“Haaa...”

A sigh escaped my mouth. I didn’t have a choice from the beginning when I arrived in this world and came to love its people. I already made my decision and actually felt relieved with a bittersweet smile.

“Of course, you can choose to remain here. However, I wouldn’t recommend it because you’ll become a dimensional existence of a much lower rank! Plus—!”

The man’s face frighteningly stiffened and he raised a finger.

“You will no longer be an author. That means you’ll lose everything you obtained with the author’s power. This includes personal relationships in addition to your abilities.”

“...”

I became speechless because that sounded truly frightening. My head turned blank as a sheet of paper. The emptiness filled with everything I built. The faces of countless people flashed by.

“Now, choose. You don’t have much time left. Ten minutes in this world equals a day outside.”

The man urged me, but I didn’t respond. My decision would’ve been simple if he visited on the first day when I hadn’t even become Kim Hajin yet. I would’ve immediately returned.

“Ah...”

How could he ask this now? After so goddamn long? I spent too much time here. To forget everything and let it crumble... I... I’ve come to care too much about this world.

“...”

I began to walk and delayed my decision. My footprints pressed into the snow.

“Where are you going?”

The co-author asked and I briefly replied, “I’m going back.”

“To where?” he asked back.

My vision blurred and small droplets fell onto the field.

“Home,” I replied with tears in my eyes.

“And where is home?”

“...”

I couldn’t answer. I could hardly stand and simply continued on the white path. I walked and walked. Only traces of tears and footsteps lingered on the snowy field. The co-author’s voice rang out from behind. It shook my ears like an empty echo.

“Your existence will slowly fade from memory.”

I should eventually reach home on this path. I didn’t know where that home would be, but I would certainly arrive there. I told myself to walk. *A little more, a little more...* I didn’t want to be miserable. I didn’t want to regret anymore.

Chapter 367

A Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (1)

A woman with a bow walked through a tranquil forest where demons had stopped people from entering. She came here for the first time and constantly checked her smartwatch for directions. However, she didn't look nervous at all.

She finally arrived at her destination after treading the grassy field for some time. A small log cabin stood among the trees and vegetation.

The woman stood in front of the wooden door with no decorations.

"Huuu..."

She grabbed the doorknob after a deep breath, but a person inside opened it first. The woman stepped back in surprise.

"Oh, you're here."

Another woman greeted her with a bright smile as if they used to be old friends. However, the visitor didn't enter and simply stood outside the cabin. She looked beyond the smiling woman's shoulders. The Divine Archer's vision unfolded and Jin Seyeon spotted several familiar faces. Some she had only ever seen through documents.

"Don't just stand there. Come in."

Jain kindly welcomed her. Khalifa, Setryn, Jin Yohan, and Cheok Jungyeong sat in the room. Jin Seyeon opened her mouth after confirming the present Chameleon Troupe members.

"No, not yet. I haven't accepted your offer."

“Really? Then why are you here?”

“I have a condition. I’m willing to cooperate so long as you agree.”

“Oh? And what’s that?” Jain asked with a giggle.

Koong— The cabin shook and Cheok Jungyeong rose from his seat in the dark. His head almost touched the ceiling and Jin Seyeon swallowed hard. However, she spoke without wavering.

“There will be no killing. They’ll be punished according to the law.”

The five inside the cabin gazed at her. Jin Seyeon felt her muscles tense as she waited for Jain’s response.

“*Mmm...* We expected as much.”

Thankfully, Jain didn’t seem to be against it. She seemed to be saying, *Try it if you can.*

The rumors seemed to be true. The Chameleon Troupe supposedly had an ironclad rule to resolve any disagreements through fighting. The victor always had the final say.

Jin Seyeon believed in her abilities, but Cheok Jungyeong would be a tough opponent. Of course, that didn’t mean she had zero chances of winning. She brought [*Huang Zhong’s Bow*] precisely because of this rule.

“*Huhu.*”

Jain pondered while rubbing her chin and suddenly smiled. Jin Seyeon sharpened her senses and grabbed her bow.

“Sure, let’s do that,” Jain agreed.

“In that case... *Eh?*”

Jin Seyeon took out her bow when she registered Jain’s words and

became dazed. *What did I just hear?* She blankly stared at Jain and tilted her head.

Jain repeated it once again.

“We’ll do that. No killing. Only justice. Everyone is okay with that, right?”

The other members acted even weirder. Jin Seyeon thought Cheok Jungyeong would disagree, but even he nodded.

“Then you’ll be working with us, right?” Jain grinned.

“*Huh? Ah, wait!*”

Jain grabbed Jin Seyeon’s hand and pulled her into the cabin.

* * *

[Essence of the Strait, Chief Officer’s Office]

Five days had passed since the victory against Baal. Yoo Yeonha sat in her chair and stared out the window. The reddish-black sky returned to its original color. Just looking at the endless blue sky warmed her. The birds chirping, the fluffy clouds, and the blazing sun all seemed so beautiful.

“*Huuu...*”

Yoo Yeonha shook off these feelings and turned back to her desk with a mountain of documents. She had to take care of all these post-war matters.

Yoo Yeonha clenched her fists and encouraged herself despite being overloaded with work. Essence of the Strait would rise above Korea and become ruler of the world once they took care of everything.

Yesterday’s newspaper caught her eye as she focused on the documents.

[Shin Jonghak's Confession – Shin Myungchul's regression brought upon this disaster!]

“...”

Her heart grew heavy as she looked at it. Shin Jonghak's confession caused a huge stir around the world after Baal's annihilation. As a result, Shin Myungchul's previous position as a saint greatly changed.

However, Shin Jonghak greatly contributed against Baal and decided to donate most of his family's wealth towards rebuilding and dealing with the existing demons. Most importantly, Yoo Yeonha's terrifying media manipulation helped Shin Myungchul avoid becoming trash that should burn in hell (as Jin Sahyuk put it).

“Sigh...”

Yoo Yeonha moved the newspaper to the corner of her desk. She suddenly recalled her father, who promised to make a certain announcement soon.

Jiing—

Her smartwatch vibrated. It came from her secretary, Jin Sechan, who had been living in the Republic of Leores. He only just returned thanks to Shimurin's power and also worked as a secretary there.

— This is Jin Sechan.

“Yes, go ahead.”

— The demons have launched a surprise attack in Seoul. Their commander is one of the New Evils and their goal seems to be the demonic energy gem under the association's management.

“Is that so?”

Yoo Yeonha rested her chin on her palm. The threat of Baal had disappeared, but demons remained. They chose to stay and live here despite Baal's defeat. Some even joined the djinns to make

Pandemonium their home.

A new term called the New Evils had been coined. The Nine Evils had collapsed during the war, but the few members who survived formed a new organization.

“We don’t have to worry if it’s Seoul. Kim Suho happens to be there. Ah, but send some people over just for show.”

— Yes, understood. About what you said before regarding the Chameleon Troupe Foundation...

“The Chameleon Toupe has disbanded.”

— My apologies. The Yi Byul Foundation is proceeding smoothly.

The Chameleon Troupe disbanded, but Yi Byul remained as Yoo Yeonha’s partner. Yoo Yeonha fervently recruited her and thought Yi Byul could act as an Essence of the Strait hero after a little background tweak. After all, Yi Byul seemed interested in the job.

“What about it?”

— Well, it’s about the scale of her wealth... I’ll send you the details.

“Got it.”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t think too much about it, but doubted her eyes when she saw what Jin Sechan sent.

“She amassed quite a fortune.”

Yi Byul’s wealth surprised even Yoo Yeonha. The former Chameleon Troupe leader owned more than 10 private islands. Her wealth amounted to hundreds of trillions of won if one included all her treasures, artifacts, stocks, and World of Wish items. The value of these assets would only increase as time passed.

“Oh? She’s also a majority shareholder in our companies? She should

be able to single-handedly feed all the war orphans with this much.”

Yi Byul’s assets included stocks of Essence of the Strait’s subsidiaries. She invested on a business scale rather than an individual one. That woman sure seemed greedy.

— We’re managing her assets as efficiently as we can, but the sheer scale makes it slightly difficult.

“Be as honest as possible and donate most of the profits. Make sure you watch the employees so they don’t do anything stupid out of greed.”

Yi Byul used to lead the Chameleon Troupe. Doing something underhanded could get them all killed.

— Yes, understood. Then we’ll focus on rescuing children.

“Great.”

— I’m hanging up.

Yoo Yeonha stretched after the video call and picked up her smartwatch. Rachel had messaged her.

[Rachel – Photo]

“Ah, this.”

Yoo Yeonha quickly tapped the message. As expected, a picture of Evandel popped up. The little girl must’ve just eaten cake and had whipped cream all over her mouth.

“She... She’s too cute.”

Yoo Yeonha stared in a daze and typed a reply with trembling shoulders.

[Hiding something so cute... God, why is she so cute? Oh yeah, didn’t you

say Evandel liked dolls? Next time we meet—]

“Mmm?”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly felt as if she forgot something and blushed from embarrassment. She only wrote out a message, so why did she feel so embarrassed? She couldn't figure it out no matter how hard she thought. Then she erased the message she already wrote and got to the point.

[You don't have to use Evandel to convince me. The conference will happen. I'll take a portal over at 6 P.M. in two days. I'll be generous with England, but don't go overboard with your requests.]

Yoo Yeonha didn't wait long for Rachel's reply.

[Of course, Evandel and I are eagerly waiting. ^-^]

The message came with two more pictures of Evandel. The cute girl jumped after a butterfly in the first and took a nap with Hayang in the second.

“Wow... Ah.”

Yoo Yeonha briefly melted from the cuteness, but quickly coughed and went back to work.

* * *

[Seoul – Road to Gwanghwamun]

A limousine and a regular car couldn't be compared. A regular car went *clunk clunk* and a limousine went *shooong* like a snake. Obviously, people would choose the latter because of their natural instinct to survive. After all, *shooong* went faster and felt safer than *clunk clunk*.

“Ah... mmm, ah. Mmm. Ah, mmm...”

However, a mutant who defied nature existed. Kim Suho sat in the back of the limousine and twisted in discomfort. He squirmed for a long time like a child holding in his pee before finally speaking out.

“I think it’ll be faster for me to get off and go on foot.”

“No, this is an official business matter at an official setting.”

Kim Suho’s secretary firmly refused. As expected of the witch who formerly served the demon king, she thoroughly took care of her master. Kim Suho awkwardly scratched his neck.

He just returned from Manchuria’s battlefield and headed towards the Hero Association. Only 5 days had passed since Baal’s annihilation and demons remained in Pandemonium.

The association was hosting a banquet today. Kim Suho didn’t want to go, but the former president, Kim Sukho, insisted. Yun Seung-Ah also wanted Kim Suho there and he felt slightly indebted to Kim Sukho for the scholarship that helped his family.

“*Cough.*”

Kim Suho didn’t resist and unfastened his two suit buttons. He looked out the window at the clear blue sky and the Han River. Kim Suho thoughtlessly turned after watching the surface that glistened like jewels.

“...!”

He faced a woman who suddenly appeared and naturally sat next to him. How should he describe it? It felt rather terrifying like a horror movie. Kim Suho’s heart jumped, but he tried to remain calm.

“Where are you going?”

The ghost... no, Jin Sahyuk asked. Kim Suho glanced at his secretary, who stole glances at them from the rear-view mirror. It didn’t look like she would kick Jin Sahyuk out.

“The association.”

Kim Suho leisurely replied and Jin Sahyuk’s eyebrows perked up.

“You? Why are you diving into politics?”

“It’s not politics. It’s not like it’s a meaningless conference either.”

“Honestly, I don’t care about you. What about that guy?”

Jin Sahyuk asked and Kim Suho fell into thought. *That guy? Did she mean Shin Jonghak?*

“Jonghak should be in Africa right now.”

“No, not him idiot.”

Jin Sahyuk furrowed her brows and Kim Suho tilted his head.

“Then who?”

“That guy. You know, that guy.”

“Stop being cryptic. Who’s...”

Kim Suho suddenly paused and felt an unpleasant sensation in his head. Something hovered on the tip of his tongue, but he couldn’t figure it out no matter how hard he thought. He couldn’t recall someone he forgot.

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to hide him. I won’t bring him to my world.”

Jin Sahyuk said with a shrug. Kim Suho only grew more confused when Jin Sahyuk acted like this.

“...?”

She continued in frustration at Kim Suho's dazed expression.

"I'm leaving alone, okay? I don't want to involve an unrelated person."

Only then did Kim Suho think of something to say.

"You're leaving? To Akatrina?"

"That's right. Unlike you, I have a strong attachment to my homeworld."

Jin Sahyuk's voice carried a rueful pride. She wanted to return as soon as possible and only remained on Earth to make preparations like gathering food.

Kim Suho stared into her eyes, which no longer looked bloodthirsty. Instead, they looked deep and full of life now. Her eyes shone with a righteous will.

Kim Suho bitterly smiled and shook his head. "I miss our homeworld too."

"Yeah, because your homeworld is Earth. Stop playing with words and tell me—"

"No."

Kim Suho cut her off and she scowled at him.

"I miss Akatrina too. That's my homeworld. I'm still using the swordsmanship I learned there and living by the principles I set there. I can't erase Akatrina from my heart no matter how much I deny it."

"..."

"So I've decided to accept it. My life in Akatrina... wasn't the happiest. Honestly, it felt quite miserable. However, I don't resent the world because of that. After all, I'm here today because of Akatrina."

Kim Suho's short life in Akatrina mostly consisted of betrayal, sorrow, despair, and frustration. Some happiness and love existed as well. He finally felt like he could accept all these memories, but Jin Sahyuk angrily punched the back seat.

"Shut up. I don't care about that. I need to know where that guy is—"

Kiiik— The limousine suddenly stopped. All the cars in front stopped as well or hit the guardrail. Then an explosion rang out and shook the surroundings.

Kim Suho quickly opened the door and went out to assess the situation. He spotted demons flying over the Han River.

"Jin Sahyuk?"

"What."

Kim Suho held up his scabbard as she approached.

"You'll help, right?"

"What?"

"Why are you so surprised? Didn't you help us when we fought Baal?"

"Are you mad? Why should I? I have my hands full with Akatrina."

Jin Sahyuk narrowed her eyes and Kim Suho chuckled before sincerely pleading.

"Your former servant humbly requests of you."

Jin Sahyuk paused as she prepared to leave. Kim Suho formally spoke to her for the first time and she scrutinized him with emotionless eyes. Soon, a big grin emerged on her face.

"A request from a servant who killed his king..."

Kim Suho also smiled at her words. A servant who killed his king and a king who killed her servant. Jin Sahyuk didn't apologize and Kim Suho didn't expect an apology.

“This benevolent lord shall grant your request.”

Jin Sahyuk would always act like Jin Sahyuk. No king in the world would apologize to their servant.

“Thank you very much. Also... I'm sorry about the past... *Pft.*”

Kim Suho chuckled and took out Misteltein. The sword's brilliant light illuminated the Han River.

“You sure have a nice sword. Of course, that just means you're weak without your weapon.”

Jin Sahyuk also chuckled and released black magic power that transformed into her armor. Countless spears and swords also appeared in the air. Meanwhile, the demon army charged from the sky.

Kwaaaaa—

Jin Sahyuk fired her weapons and tore their bodies apart. Kim Suho also sent his sword strikes towards the fearless demons who didn't recognize their opponents. He couldn't recall anything as he swung his sword and looked at Misteltein slicing his enemies in half.

What was it? Wasn't there something important about this sword? Memories with a precious person... So why? Why can't I remember?

Kim Suho forgot, but wanted to remember. He desperately wanted to recall, but—

“*Kuhahahaha!* So you're Kim Suho!”

A roar interrupted his thoughts. A powerful enemy appeared and blocked Kim Suho's path.

“It’s good to see you!”

He seemed to know Kim Suho and Kim Suho also recognized him.

A demon wrapped in black metal. It looked like he wore a ridiculous spandex suit. His 3 meter height, monstrous muscles, and intimidating face made him the most famous New Evil. They called him the Iron Evil Lord. He had attacked 28 high rank heroes and 20 of them lost their lives. This opponent couldn’t be taken lightly.

“I shall be the one to kill you!”

Kim Suho stopped thinking as iron nails flew towards him.

* * *

I found myself at the Seoul station when I opened my eyes. Boss probably didn’t abandon me here, so it must be the co-author’s doing. I felt grateful since the co-author said my existence would slowly fade from memory. That meant Boss would forget me even as I stood in front of her. Being here like this felt better than seeing her forget me.

I checked today’s date on the newspaper covering me. Around 6 days had passed since Baal’s annihilation. Next, I checked what I still had. As expected, everything disappeared. My gifts, authorities, arts, physiques, skills, SP, the system, DP, items... Everything I obtained through the author’s power no longer existed.

I felt lost and didn’t know what to do. The reality I tried to deny flooded in like a tidal wave and I slightly teared up.

However, I didn’t plan on sitting here and crying. I already experienced death twice. I lost everything, but I still had my memories and the tough mindset I built. Still, it took me a day to leave the Seoul station.

Thankfully, this world had one place where I could stay. The apartment I first woke up in that belonged to Chundong. I headed there thinking what if. The 90 square meter home greeted me like it did when I first opened my eyes in this world. I had returned to where everything began.

“Sigh...”

I slouched on the couch and watched TV.

— The threat of Baal has disappeared, but a troublesome force called the New Evils has risen. The world’s greatest hero academy, Cube, has officially announced its revival.

The news reported all the current events.

— Hero Shin Jonghak has decided to concentrate on subjugating the New Evils. Shin Myungchul’s actions led Baal to this world, but the public is still rooting for Shin Jonghak. One can easily tell how pure-hearted he is by revealing his grandfather’s sins and trying to atone under the sun.

Yoo Yeonha’s media manipulation clearly played a part in controlling public backlash.

— Hero Chae Nayun! Are you expecting to become a master rank hero? Everyone from the association is expecting that.

— *Huh?* N-No! Now’s not the time to think of such things. We have a lot of reconstruction ahead. People to protect and rescue. Lots of enemies to defeat. I want everyone to focus on that. Ranking heroes for fun can come later. Anyways, I’m going back to work.

Chae Nayun finished her interview with the necklace I gifted her around her neck.

— A nameless angel is supporting children who lost their families during the war. The donation amounts to a trillion won even by rough estimates.

That must be Boss. I lay on the couch and kept my eyes on the rectangular TV. I looked at the people who would lead brilliant lives in a world that no longer remained a novel. Then I wrapped my hands around my face in happiness and sorrow.

— Iron Evil Lord has been defeated after attacking the Han River.

Creator's Sacred Grace will continue to fight the demons with courage and determination!

Kim Suho stood on a podium while discussing the recent attack on Seoul.

"Well..." I murmured as I looked at Kim Suho.

"I'm sure I can survive somehow."

This wasn't my first rodeo as an extra. I always meant to live like someone who didn't exist. I made my decision, so I shouldn't regret or cry about it. I just had to start over from scratch.

"Ah, should I try applying as a background actor or something?"

I think I'd be a pretty good actor.

I turned off the TV and got up. Then I ordered some delivery after drinking a water bottle from the fridge. The spicy braised chicken cost 23,000 won. Thankfully, I could survive a month without starving with Kim Chundong's money. After that, I'd probably have to look for a part-time job.

A stifling silence filled the room after I ordered the food and made it feel quite lonely.

"..."

I picked up a chopstick from the kitchen's utensil holder. Suddenly, I recalled my *[Master Sharpshooter]* gift and lightly threw the chopstick. It didn't fly at a terrifying speed and simply fell on the ground.

"Haha, obviously."

I tried the same thing a thousand times already. I should just accept it by now. Kim Hajin as a character had disappeared.

Ding—

The bell suddenly rang.

“*Huh?* The delivery’s here already?”

Since when did spicy braised chicken take 3 minutes to arrive? I tilted my head and opened the front door.

“Hello?”

I couldn’t see anyone, but my foot bumped into something.

“What’s this?”

I furrowed my brows at a huge package about the size of two fruit boxes. I kneeled and spotted a small letter attached to the side.

[This is my final gift.]

“*Eh?*”

Dokun— My heart skipped a beat. I carefully looked around the hallway before taking the box. I couldn’t lift it and had to drag it inside.

“*Haa, haa...*”

Even something so simple made me gasp for air. I brought it to the living room and considered ripping the tape apart with my bare hands before grabbing a pair of scissors.

“*Huuu...*”

I took a deep breath and cut the tape. Then I opened it.

“...”

I became speechless and complicated emotions welled up in my heart.

The package contained a black suit engraved with a lotus symbol and a beautiful silver gun. The equipment I used had returned.

“...”

I blankly stared at them before hitting the box with my head.

I didn't cry. I refuse to believe I did. I just felt grateful. Grateful he would leave me with at least this. Maybe he would send me more gifts if I expressed my gratitude.

“Ah... hurgh... Uk...”

Strange sounds that represented my true feelings came out of my mouth.

Chapter 368

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (2)

[Kim Hajin's Apartment]

I carefully placed the Black Lotus Uniform and Desert Eagle on the couch. I longingly stared at them for a while and looked inside the box again for anything else. A small, black box sat on the bottom. *A box inside a box?* I tilted my head and unwrapped it.

“Mmm?”

It contained a smartwatch and a small envelope. First, I took out the smartwatch. The strap and case had been luxuriously decorated with obsidian. Yoo Yeonha had it custom-made for me.

I turned it on. It seemed to function properly and still recognized me as the owner. I could see my ID as Kim Hajin along with my bank accounts, stocks, and other personal assets in the *[User Wallet]*. Then I checked how much money I had.

“Eh?”

I couldn't help but gasp since my accounts had more than I thought. My bank account alone held 30 million won. I also possessed 10 shares of Essential Pharmacy, 10 shares of Essential Dynamics, and 10 shares of Essence of the Strait totaling 60 million won. It couldn't be compared to what I had before, but I felt extremely grateful.

“...”

I suddenly recalled something as I looked at my stocks. I would always sell them to Boss whenever she sulked. Essence of the Strait's unlisted stocks couldn't be acquired even with money. These trustworthy

stocks always cheered up Boss. The corners of her mouth would twitch and her face would redden even though she said she didn't need them. She looked so cute without even trying.

“Tsk...”

I set down the smartwatch as my old memories caused ripples that formed into a tidal wave. I felt like I might faint and leaned against the couch. Then I sank deeper and began to miss everyone too much. *Evandel and Rachel, Chae Nayun and Kim Suho, Yoo Yeonha and Boss...* Even the friends and family from my homeworld.

Well, I never had any close friends. Still, I wanted to see my parents again. I couldn't imagine how they would feel after finding out I disappeared.

Stop worrying. I decided for myself. This world's time flows differently. Less than 100 days would have passed there even if I die of old age.

I justified my choice again.

“Eubebebebebe...”

I slapped my cheeks and already decided not to regret it. I couldn't just stay here so pathetically.

I forced myself up and wore the Black Lotus Uniform. I had grown a little shorter and the uniform touched the ground. The moment I thought this— *Whish!* The uniform automatically shrunk to fit my body. It seemed the functions remained.

“Hmm.”

I looked at myself in the mirror before placing the extremely light Desert Eagle in the holster. Then I sat on the couch and thought about what to do from now on. I couldn't come up with anything and surfed the internet on my smartwatch.

“She said it had internet connection, right?”

Yoo Yeonha kept bragging that this smartwatch featured higher tech than most computers on the market.

I placed the smartwatch on the table and switched to its desktop mode. A hologram keyboard and monitor projected in the air. A certain website caught my attention as I browsed the web portals.

A smile emerged on my face when I saw a webnovel site.

“Should I write a novel?”

If I wrote the past ten or so years I experienced as a novel... No, it probably wouldn't be that fun. I had no plans to write a novel ever again.

I threw the thought away and searched for other websites. I mainly focused on job boards for some work. I wanted to feel alive again at the very least.

[Welcome to Korea's biggest mercenary website – Desert Soul.] [Open Recruitment for Mercenaries] [Mission Requests] [Check/Cancel Missions]

“Mercenary?”

It felt quite tempting. I had the Desert Eagle for offense and the Black Lotus Uniform for defense. It would be difficult for most attacks to penetrate the uniform's defense. However, I no longer possessed my sharpshooting. I also didn't want to jump back into battle when I barely escaped that life.

“Oh right, there was something else.”

I went back to the black box and recalled the small envelope that came with the smartwatch. It felt quite thick.

“Let's see...”

I felt a bit lonely and muttered to myself as I tore open the envelope.

“Huh?”

A small droplet fell from it and clung to my body. I felt surprised at first, but immediately became grateful. I recognized the formless weapon and first unique item I ever obtained in this world. It looked smaller now, but aether had undoubtedly returned.

“It’s nice to see you again.”

I stopped myself from tearing up and accepted aether’s familiar sensation. Aether stuck to me like glue, but the envelope still felt thick. I wondered what else it contained and peeked inside.

“This is...”

I reached in and pulled out a sheet of paper. The surface of this coupon-like paper with strange handwriting read:

[Physique Acquisition Coupon – Medicinal Memory Physique]

“Pft...”

I couldn’t help but laugh. This seemed to be the last gift from the co-author.

I didn’t know why he chose the *[Medicinal Memory Physique]* when I also had *[Master Sharpshooter]*, the *[Magic Dysfunction Physique]*, *[Random Consolidation System]*, and *[Parkour]*. Well, I couldn’t complain. The co-author only left me with this, so I had to plan my future with it in mind.

I returned to the hologram monitor and searched for a keyword on the *[Help Wanted Cafe]*.

[Search] – [Essential Pharmacy] [15,321 posts with “Essential Pharmacy”]

— The open recruitment notice for Essential Pharmacy is out. Looks like they’re hiring a large number this time. Is anyone looking to apply?

— Essential Pharmacy’s test is too hard and unpredictable. Last time, I heard they asked about how to kill a dragon or something.

— I heard the salary for researchers is quite high. And because of the war against the New Evils...

“That’s right.”

I nodded after reading the posts for about 3 minutes. I could best utilize the *[Medicinal Memory Physique]* with this. I killed too many people in this world. At first, I justified it by saying I only killed characters in a novel. Then I told myself it had been necessary after recognizing this world as real.

Perhaps the co-author left me this physique to save others. Rather than kill...

What Kim Suho once told me resounded in my ears.

Everyone in this world is a main character.

He was right. I could lead my own life even if everyone forgot about me. Perhaps I might be able to live more faithfully than before. At the very least, the current me wouldn’t treat this world as a novel.

With a grin, I gripped the *[Medicinal Memory Physique]* coupon. *Chweeek*— I ripped it in half and a blue current flowed into my body.

“Whew...”

The medicinal effects I memorized before had disappeared, but that didn’t matter. I could just start over again.

“Let’s see...”

Chak, chack! I energetically clapped and accessed the website.

Around 5 minutes later...

Essential Pharmacy's open recruitment required an educational background.

That made sense. What pharmaceutical company would accept someone who didn't attend medical school? They didn't even list such an obvious requirement on the employment site.

"*Sigh*... Well, I don't want to give up. Guess I'll apply to the sales department or something."

* * *

[England – Buckingham Palace]

Rachel stayed in a private office with Evandel, who busily talked to her friends over a video call.

"*Un*, see you later! I have lots of time now!"

— Evandel, you're famous! Are you sure?

"*Mm*! Don't worry. I have time! *Heehee*."

— Yay! Then we'll be waiting for you!

Evandel brightly smiled at her friends and Rachel had a rather random thought. Did young kids always use exclamation marks? No, she thought about something else. Rachel furrowed her brows and forgot.

"*Un*, see you!"

Evandel hung up and blurted out again.

"I miss you."

I miss you. Rachel didn't know what that meant. Recently, Evandel kept sleep-talking and saying those words out of habit. She would say it in the middle of eating, showering, and even running around.

“I miss you.”

Evandel would only tilt her head when Rachel asked who she missed.

Tok, tok—

Someone knocked on the door and the royal court’s secretary spoke.

— She is almost here.

Yoo Yeonha would soon arrive and Rachel walked out with Evandel. The prime minister, his cabinet, and other parliament members also gathered in the garden.

“Don’t be nervous, Princess. The negotiation looks favorable.”

The prime minister kept trembling despite saying this.

“Don’t be too nervous either, Prime Minister.”

“Hahaha, nervous? Never. I’m never nervous. Hahaha.”

Yoo Yeonha’s limousine appeared 5 minutes later with an incredible entourage. After getting off, Yoo Yeonha entered the meeting room and received a warm welcome from them. She replied to the prime minister’s joke extremely coldly.

“Now, let’s begin the negotiation. Before that, why is there a kid here?”

Yoo Yeonha slightly lost her calm when she spotted Evandel sitting inside the room full of suited politicians.

“Princess Rachel?”

Yoo Yeonha’s sharp gaze turned to Rachel.

“Yes?”

Rachel repeatedly blinked and pretended to be oblivious. Evandel also blinked at Yoo Yeonha while sitting on a chair that looked too big. The little girl couldn't quite place her arms on the table and Yoo Yeonha found this incredibly cute. However, the Queen of Seoul refused to mix business with pleasure.

"This is an important negotiation meeting. Please leave Evandel out of it."

"No, Evandel is here because she wants to be a part of it."

Rachel spoke and looked at Evandel.

"What?" Yoo Yeonha frowned. This princess wanted to use a kid for negotiation?

"Evandel wants to become a hero in the future and the English Royal Court plans to support her as much as possible. After all, she possesses great talent. We hoped, through this meeting, that Evandel could become a member of a Korean guild and an English guild."

Yoo Yeonha's shoulders turned stiff at Rachel's words. She racked her brain before clearing her throat and nodding.

"I see. Well, I've heard of our little hero's accomplishments. You did great, future hero Evandel."

"*Eh? Ah, hehehe...* Th... thank you..."

Evandel tried her best to not laugh at the praise. Yoo Yeonha also lightly smiled and spread out the documents she brought.

"Then let's begin the negotiations and also discuss future hero Evandel's guild status."

* * *

[Korea, Seoul – Chae Joochul's Mansion]

“We’re here, Grand Hero.”

The driver’s voice woke Chae Nayun. She finally returned after completing a mission and narrowly opened her eyes. Drool dripped from her mouth and tears flowed down her cheeks. She wondered why she cried.

“Ah, thanks. *Yaawn*.” Chae Nayun wiped away the tears and drool.

“What time is it?”

“1:30 A.M.”

“Wow, really? I fought for 18 hours? No wonder I feel so tired.”

“Why don’t you form a team too? It’ll significantly reduce your exhaustion.”

“*Hm? Ah*, no. I like being alone.”

Chae Nayun’s official position became Grand Hero. It equaled a team leader position and she held one of the highest ranks in Essence of the Strait. She could form a team, but almost always completed her missions alone. Chae Nayun didn’t know why either. She simply thought she had to.

“You can go back. I’ll leave on my own tomorrow, so rest up.”

“Yes, thank you.”

Chae Nayun got off and walked past the front door as usual. However, a certain presence caught her attention. Not an assassin, but someone who always stood out. Chae Nayun stopped and turned in his direction.

“*Oi*, crazy woman. It’s been a while.”

A huge figure with terrifying muscles and protruding veins appeared from the dark. A human monster that seemed impossible to kill with a

blade. Chae Nayun reached back to grab Balmung.

“Ah, don’t be so wary. My business isn’t with you.” Cheok Jungyeong waved and proudly walked to the front door.

“What business do you have with me?” Chae Nayun didn’t relax and spat out.

“I told you. My business isn’t with you. I’m here for your grandfather.”

“Grandfather?”

“Yep, I came to make your grandfather atone for his past sins.”

“What?”

“Don’t pretend like you don’t know about the Kwang-Oh Incident.”

Chae Nayun flinched. She knew about it. Killing innocent people to silence a political opponent. Hiding all records of it and manipulating the media. They committed a truly heinous massacre. *And... And... Mmm... What was it? Wasn’t there something important?*

“So tell me. Where is your grand—”

An arrow suddenly struck the back of Cheok Jungyeong’s head. It must’ve been quite strong since his head bent forward at a 90 degree angle. Cheok Jungyeong remained in that position for a while before gritting his teeth and glaring back.

“That stupid woman... Does she think she’s the leader now?”

“Don’t be so violent.”

A voice rang out from the sky. The startled Chae Nayun quickly turned in that direction. A hooded archer sat on top of a pine tree near the mansion.

“Sorry for visiting so suddenly, Chae Nayun.”

The archer spoke and lifted her hood.

“This is something that must be done. We wanted to get your opinion too, so excuse our rudeness.”

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened in shock when she saw the archer’s face.

“Senior Jin Seyeon?”

“Yes.” Jin Seyeon faintly smiled.

“Nice to meet you again, junior Chae Nayun.”

“W-Why are you here? Rather, what relationship do you have with this crazy muscle-pig?”

“Muscle-pig? Are you out of your—”

Tak— Jin Seyeon lightly landed and walked to Chae Nayun. Then she spoke with a stiff expression.

“I know this might be sudden, but I wanted to ask for your opinion.”

“Opinion? Mine?”

Chae Nayun replied in a daze and Jin Seyeon seriously continued.

“I’ll get to the point. We plan to rob Essential Pharmacy and return Chae Joochul’s emotions.”

“*Huh?*”

Jin Seyeon skipped a few explanations and Chae Nayun’s already empty head turned even blanker.

Chapter 369

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (3)

Three people sat across each other in a dark forest. They each took one of the chair-sized rocks conveniently placed there.

Jin Seyeon explained her plan to the confused Chae Nayun, who asked several questions before finally understanding.

Jin Seyeon wanted to oust the association's corrupt political figures. Returning Chae Joochul's emotions would only be the start.

“The association's executives have even cooperated with djinns for their safety and wealth. They even used children as a means of delaying their aging and for mass destruction despite knowing the dangerous side effects of gifts. They've also threatened countless countries and caused several wars to monopolize dungeons and artifacts.”

“...”

“Nayun, they're no longer an association of heroes. Now is the time to correct everything. The world is still troubled by Baal and the New Evils, but that only makes this the perfect chance. The association might collude with the New Evils if we let them be. After all, a clear enemy is needed for them to maintain their strength.”

Chae Nayun dropped her head and remained silent. Cheok Jungyeong furrowed his brows and stepped up.

“Wait, so we're not going to fight Chae Joochul?”

“Yes, we'll join hands with him instead.”

It would be impossible to pass justice on the association with just the Chameleon Troupe's power. The Chameleon Troupe members possessed incredible strength, but nonexistent political power. Jain's gift would greatly help in that regard, but it wouldn't be enough.

"Join hands with my grandfather?" Chae Nayun asked with a depressed voice.

"Yes, Chae Joochul doesn't have any emotions. He must've had a reason for helping Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho back then. You can see from the records that Daehyun rose even higher after that incident. Their relationship won't last forever because Chae Joochul has no emotions."

Jin Seyeon planned on taking advantage of this. Until now, Chae Joochul maintained a mutually beneficial relationship with the association's executives. However, he would undoubtedly push them away if they became useless and clear evidence supported this.

Chae Nayun hesitated.

"Grandfather won't regret his past actions even if that happens."

Chae Joochul played a huge role in the Kwang-Oh Incident, but he never felt any sadness or guilt.

Jin Seyeon shook her head. "You're wrong, Nayun. Essential Pharmacy is developing medicine to counter the side effects of gifts."

"W-What? A medicine to counter side effects?"

"Yes."

Jain obtained this information after infiltrating Essential Pharmacy. Jin Seyeon continued in a serious tone.

"Nine Stars Heynckes and Oh Jaejin have already used this medication. Heynckes possessed a few samples that cured their side effects and donated the rest to Essential Pharmacy, who are currently conducting more research on this subject."

Chae Nayun widened her eyes. “T-Then when the medicine is done...”

“Yes, Chae Joochul will regain his emotions.”

“Haaa...”

Chae Nayun’s jaw dropped, but she suddenly closed it. She began to worry because she didn’t know the original Chae Joochul.

What if her grandfather had always been a merciless villain? What would she do then? What if his emotionless state made him less of a threat to society? If he killed humans as he pleased and treated love, sympathy, and compassion as nothing...

The possibility crossed her mind. However, Chae Nayun steeled her heart and clenched her fists. She decided to believe in the kindness Chae Joochul showed as her grandfather. She had to repay that person.

“Okay, I’ll help.”

“Thank you.” Jin Seyeon gratefully bowed from the bottom of her heart.

“Sorry for making such an unreasonable demand even though you aren’t related to this incident.”

“Huh? No, I’m also...?” Chae Nayun couldn’t finish. *The Kwang-Oh Incident*. The evil deed committed by her grandfather. A tragedy that had to be brought to justice. There had been something more to it...

“Uk!”

A sharp pain suddenly struck Chae Nayun. She clutched her head and kneeled.

“Nayun?” Jin Seyeon became startled and grabbed her.

This brain-splitting pain wouldn’t disappear as Chae Nayun continued

to think. She had forgotten something important. She didn't know what, but her heart naturally ached for him...

"Are you okay? Nayun? Nayun!"

"..."

The hammering pain finally disappeared and Chae Nayun blankly stared at the worried Jin Seyeon.

"Are you okay?"

"Yes? Ah, yes. I'm fine..." Chae Nayun fiddled with her necklace and a question popped up in her head.

This necklace... Didn't someone give it to me? It wasn't a present, so I have to return it. Who was it? Who am I supposed to return it to?

Chae Nayun slowly closed her eyes. She didn't faint this time, but meditated to recall something.

* * *

Kim Suho stood in front of the guild leader's office for a meeting.

[Creator's Sacred Grace, Leader – Yun Seung-Ah]

Her nameplate shone with a green light.

Tok, tok—

Kim Suho knocked on the door. Yun Seung-Ah opened it and greeted him with a smile.

"Come in."

He formally bowed and walked in. He thought this every time, but the guild leader's office looked like a domed stadium. The walls formed a circle and the round ceiling also protruded up.

“Did you have a meeting?” Kim Suho asked as he looked around the messy office. Their guild’s performance and ranking appeared on the board.

“Yep, look at that. We’re doing quite well, right?”

Yun Seung-Ah sat at the head of the table and joyfully laughed. Kim Suho sat next to her and glanced at the rankings too.

[Rank 1 – Essence of the Strait] [Rank 2 – Desolate Moon] [Rank 3 – Creator’s Sacred Grace] [Rank 4 – Frost Sanctuary]

“Essence of the Strait is impossible to overtake now, but we managed to obtain the rank 3 spot after the recent assault on Oedo Island Cave.”

She sounded proud and bitter at the same time. Creator’s Sacred Grace managed to reclaim some of its former glory, but the gap between them and Essence of the Strait could no longer be closed.

“We can’t catch up even if they stop working for the next 10 years. Don’t you think that’s unfair?”

Yun Seung-Ah grumbled as she brewed two cups of tea. Kim Suho spoke with a faint smile.

“It’s something to be happy about if we consider them our ally. Anyways, why did you call me?”

“Ah, you see... The association made a request. It’s an assassination order.”

“Pardon? Assassination?”

Kim Suho furrowed his brows. He never expected to hear about an assassination from the association.

“Yep, the association head personally requested this. You’ve heard of the Chameleon Troupe, right?”

“Yes.”

“They want us to eliminate that group.”

“Huh?”

Kim Suho became dumbstruck. The Chameleon Troupe committed several crimes, but also helped humanity during the war against Orden and Baal. They had already been pardoned because of that. He would agree to arrest them, but assassination?

“Did you agree?” he sharply asked.

“No, not yet. However, it would greatly benefit us. Enough to obtain the rank 2 spot...”

Yun Seung-Ah stole a glance at him as she sipped her tea. Kim Suho felt something from her eyes and nodded.

“Rank 2, how?”

“Remember all the dungeons that recently appeared? The association head said he would give us the right to monopolize the top 10 dungeons.”

Indeed, that offer sounded tempting. Kim Suho rubbed his chin and pretended to think about it. Then he brushed his hair back and stood.

“That doesn’t sound bad. No, it’s quite tempting. I have something else to do right now, but I’ll listen to the details later.”

“Yeah, okay. I’ll think about it positively if that’s your opinion. You seem busy, so you can go.”

“Yes, understood.” Kim Suho left the guild leader’s office.

“Huuu...”

He took deep breaths as he leaned against the door. A loud voice rang

out and he glanced to the side at Yi Yeonghan guiding a group of Cube cadets.

“Look, it’s the future vice leader! Say hello, kids! He’s the hero who saved the world, Kim Suho!”

“Ah, hello everyone.” Kim Suho bitterly smiled.

“W-Wow! Kim, Kim Suho!”

“S-Sword Saint Kim Suho! I’m your biggest fan!”

“Woowooow!”

The teenagers in their first years at Cube hollered and ran up to him. Kim Suho wryly smiled and took hundreds of pictures with them.

* * *

Tik— Tok— Only a clock could be heard in this silent apartment room. I continued to drink the 500,000 won red ginseng extract.

“So bitter.”

It didn’t have any special medicinal effects either. The cheaper ones sold in stores must be even less effective. I recorded the effects in a notebook.

[Low Rank Red Ginseng — Will faintly recover vitality. Has no effect on increasing physical abilities.]

My ability to view the system and my stats disappeared, so I developed a habit of writing what I felt. Currently, I noted 14 different medicines in my notebook. Most of them turned out to be like the red ginseng extract.

“As I thought, this isn’t enough.”

I threw the extract away and lay on the couch.

“Sigh...”

A week passed since I regained the *[Medicinal Memory Physique]*. I'd been living with a great sense of helplessness. I would feel motivated and suddenly unmotivated several times throughout the day. An emptiness would always replace my motivation. I could memorize medicinal effects, but couldn't acquire any useful ones. The resume I submitted to Essential Pharmacy's sales department had also been rejected.

“Geez, I'm going to commit suicide at this rate.”

I even had a horrible case of insomnia. I would dream about the past and constantly wake up to the point that I feared sleeping.

“Tsk.”

I clicked my tongue and turned on the TV.

— The portals connecting different countries have just been restored. Portals to America and Europe are now fully functional...

News regarding the portals came out.

“Should I leave this place?”

Recently, I'd been thinking about leaving this apartment. I felt like I had to leave like when I first entered Cube. After all, this place only served as a starting point.

Honestly, I thought about it after obtaining the *[Medicinal Memory Physique]*. This physique required me to consume rare herbs rather than products on the market.

However, I waited in case someone might come looking for me and secretly hoped someone would regain their memories. Of course, I knew such an empty wish wouldn't come true. Almost 10 days had passed and I had to admit it now. I had disappeared from this world.

“Huuu...”

I raised my upper body and turned on my smartwatch. The portal to Europe had been restored and I checked my bank account. I had enough to travel the mountains of multiple countries. I also possessed the Desert Eagle, Black Lotus Uniform, and aether in case of any dangers.

“Right.”

I nodded resolutely while looking at my smartwatch. I couldn’t enter Essential Pharmacy, so it would be better to consume different herbs while traveling and make my own medicine. Applying for a job after gaining some experience would be more helpful.

“Let’s go. Right now.”

I murmured and stood up. I made up my mind and didn’t hesitate. The time to leave the starting point had come.

“See you, Chundong. *Heh*, what am I saying? I should pack.”

I almost forgot. I didn’t have stigma anymore, so I had to pack from now on. *Ssk— Ssk—* I picked up a luggage bag and threw in everything useful: clothes, food, my ID, smartwatch, the Desert Eagle, etc.

Chapter 370

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (4)

Rustle— Rustle— I walked through a messy path. The abundant weeds tickled my knees and the rocks everywhere stuck to my feet like magnets. Countless leaves fell every time the wind blew and the sun blazed down on everything.

No one would ever hike this steep Yaksi Mountain in North Hamgyeong Province. It truly embodied nature's ruggedness and stood an astounding 2650 meters due to the Great Change in the past. Many herbs famously grew here because of the high magic power density.

I thought about heading to the Alps, but didn't have a passport. I decided to come here until I received a new one. Well, as long as this mountain's owner didn't discover me.

Yaksi Mountain belonged to Chae Joochul. Naturally, I infiltrated this place. Perhaps a part of me also hoped to be discovered.

However, today marked the seventh day since I lived on this mountain. No one discovered me yet. Not even patrols, which private properties often had. I wondered why and looked it up on my smartwatch. The biggest reason turned out to be the war against the devils. Apparently, Chae Joochul had mostly abandoned this mountain.

I happily roamed around and looked for all sorts of herbs. I climbed a steep precipice to harvest a lion leaf on a cliff's edge. I crossed a habitat full of wild beasts to search for a creon. I also fought monsters to protect a memory apricot I managed to obtain with great difficulty. It all felt physically exhausting, but my mental health seemed better now. I fell asleep without any dreams.

“Oh?”

I spotted a shiny herb while roaming around like always. I darted towards the light and came across a beautiful flower. It emitted a blue light with a bud surrounded by white petals.

I didn't even know this flower's name or if it could be an herb. However, my smartwatch knew. I took a picture and searched for it on the *[Herb Encyclopedia]*.

[Cloud Seeker] — An ordinary flower. One might mistake it for an herb because of its appearance, but no detailed effect has been recorded. It induces a stomach ache upon consumption.

I had to try it to be sure despite the information. I transformed aether into a trowel and dug up the cloud seeker. Then I ate it without hesitation.

“Argh, my stomach.”

Immediately, I felt a slight pain. I could somewhat feel the hidden effects when I closed my eyes and savored it. I opened my notebook filled with information about herbs I found on this mountain.

[Macorong — Memorization Progress: 100%. This herb has no effects by itself, but can cure various illnesses when mixed with other herbs.]

[Creon — Memorization Progress: 60%. An addictive herb that can sharpen the 5 senses. Helpful for battles.]

[Sorrowful Sunlight — Memorization Progress: 100%. Can easily cure external injuries.]

[Lion Leaf — Memorization Progress: 50%. Will increase testosterone levels for 2 hours. I felt like I became a lion as the name suggested.]

[Magic Power Forget-Me-Not — Memorization Progress: 100%. Has excellent effects for stopping bleeding and healing wounds.]

[Memory Apricot — Memorization Progress: 95%. Effective at recovering

memories and brain cells. Has a high chance of being used to treat dementia.]

I added [Cloud Seeker] to the list.

[Cloud Seeker — Memorization Progress: 30%. Has an effect related to purification. I will have to eat about 3 more to be sure.]

Rustle, rustle—

I sensed a presence and took out my Desert Eagle. Soon, two men and a woman appeared from the bushes underneath the slope. They looked like kids in their late teens or early 20s. They screamed and raised their hands when they saw my gun.

“Who are all of you?”

“D-Don’t shoot! We’re from a village nearby. *Um*, we’re here to harvest herbs.”

“Herbs?”

I furrowed my brows and examined them. They only had a shovel and scythe hanging from their waist belts. Their clothes looked ragged and shabby as well. We stood at the foot of Yaksi Mountain, but they didn’t seem prepared to climb this mountain.

“With those weapons?”

“We, we, *uh*, we don’t have any weapon like yours.”

The trio trembled in front of the gun and I continued to investigate them without letting my guard down.

“What do you need herbs for?”

“*Um*, our mother is sick. We’re siblings. Our mother got poisoned by demonic energy. The doctor said there was no way to treat her and heroes don’t care about small villages like ours. So, we, *uh*... we

wanted to...”

Ebebebe— The oldest one got tongue-tied and stopped talking. I couldn’t blame them. After all, my gun looked quite intimidating.

“Tsk...”

I clicked my tongue and lowered the gun. The trio immediately plopped on their butts. I didn’t even fire it, but they acted terrified.

“Your mother got demonic energy poisoning?”

“Yes? *Ah...* yes.”

The girl spoke this time and I deeply contemplated. The *[Cloud Seeker]* did possess a purification effect of all the medicinal herbs I memorized so far.

“*Hmm...* I found a flower that could purify demonic energy poisoning.”

“*Ah!* Really?”

Their eyes widened, but I felt a bit guilty.

“However, I ate it.”

“*Ah... ah...*”

The disappointment on their faces couldn’t be described. I chuckled before fixing my posture and staring at them.

“I have some medicine that might help. Do you want to try it?”

“Medicine? Y-You’re a doctor?”

“Well, I guess you could call me a pharmacist.”

“...”

The trio fell silent and exchanged glances. They seemingly mulled over what to do. The decision should be pretty easy though.

I began to assemble the medicinal effect in my body as I kept an eye on them. I separated and extracted the medicinal effect to create a medicine that only consisted of demonic energy purification.

Next, I released it outward. I concentrated the medicinal effect onto my palm and manifested it. A stem sprouted from my hand and formed a fruit-like pill.

This process used quite a bit of stamina. Just making 2 pills made me sleepy and making 4 would cause me to faint. My body became a natural pharmacy after I developed this method using my physique. I thought a lot about my only special ability and came up with different ways to use it.

“Take it.”

I threw the pill at the trio. They jumped in surprise, but caught it before it touched the ground.

“It’s only a prototype, so it’s not perfect. Still, it’ll be better than going up this mountain and getting eaten by wild beasts. At least, your mother won’t be left alone to die.”

“Ah, yes. Thank you. We understand.”

“Good. By the way, do you use social media?” I suddenly asked. The trio stood in a daze before quickly nodding.

“Ah, yes. We have smartwatches, so uh... we use social media.”

“What’s your ID?”

“Excuse me?”

“What’s your ID?”

“Ah, yes, yes.”

I took down the oldest brother’s Stargram ID. He seemed to only know how to say yes.

“Good, I’ll remember this ID. Post something once your mother is cured. I need to know whether the prototype worked.”

I suddenly recalled the past. Back then, social media provided an excellent source for SP.

“Oh, a post?”

“Yep, write this.”

I continued with a grin. “That a handsome, mysterious pharmacist helped you.”

* * *

Preparations for the revolution currently took place. Chae Nayun focused on her hero work while receiving evidence from Jin Seyeon regarding the association’s corruption, hired assassinations, and other illegal activities.

Chae Nayun safely stored the evidence to bring it to Chae Joochul. However, someone eventually found out. Not a stranger, but Chae Nayun’s close friend and guild superior, Yoo Yeonha. Chae Nayun didn’t know how Yoo Yeonha discovered her though.

“That’s why I’m here with Yeonha.”

Chae Nayun finished explaining why she brought Yoo Yeonha to the Chameleon Troupe’s cabin. Of course, her explanation only consisted of, *I don’t know how she knew*.

Jain and Jin Seyeon stared at Yoo Yeonha with dumbfounded

expressions. Yoo Yeonha spoke while sipping on her coffee.

“You don’t have to rob Essential Pharmacy. After all, I’m in a similar situation as you. However, there’s just one problem. Copying the cure to side effects is too difficult. Unfortunately, we lost many researchers during the last war.”

The recent great war caused 1.5 million casualties in Korea. A huge wave of sorrow swept the peninsula.

“So you can’t make the cure?” Jin Seyeon asked.

“We’re not sure. We’re looking for talented individuals, but it’ll take a while. Making Chae Joochul regret his crimes will take a while, so I suggest taking down Kim Sukho first. He already knows our plan to attack him.”

Yoo Yeonha already saw herself as part of the Chameleon Troupe. This made Jain tilt her head.

“*Our* plan?”

“Yes, Kim Sukho is also trying to bring me down with you. Something about Essence of the Strait getting over its head. It’s a good thing we secretly recorded him. Anyways, he’ll attack us soon.”

Yoo Yeonha smirked as if she found Kim Sukho’s attempt laughable.

“Attack, you say. When?” Cheok Jungyeong asked.

“I can’t be sure, but it’ll be soon. Kim Sukho will put out irresistible rewards to attract guilds and even the New Evils.”

Splooosh— Something swayed like water and Yoo Yeonha turned around in surprise. The man named Cheok Jungyeong made a sinister smile and his huge muscles twitched. Yoo Yeonha couldn’t imagine a more perverted scene. She fell into a momentary daze, but soon realized his excitement stemmed from a competitive spirit.

“Remember this, you can’t kill the heroes. The New Evils are fine, but

don't do anything that might paint you as the villain. Only then can we bring down Kim Sukho."

"Ha, really. Why is everyone telling me not to kill? Don't you know the real fun of a fight is—"

Jin Seyeon covered Cheok Jungyeong's mouth and he barely held back from biting her hand. Meanwhile, Jin Seyeon politely bowed.

"We think the same. There's no reason to kill heroes oblivious to the truth."

Cheok Jungyeong looked dissatisfied, but nodded in satisfaction when Jin Seyeon told him he could fight the New Evils to his heart's content.

* * *

[Seoul, Korea]

Home of the world's most famous guilds and state-of-the-art magic engineering. The ultimate destination for the richest and most powerful on Earth, but this city currently focused on reconstruction.

— We're finished with repairs here.

— How are things developing?

— The restoration is going smoothly, but the architecture is lacking. We need time to rebuild the magical structure's functions.

The devils and demons destroyed Seoul's skyscrapers, but the restoration proceeded quickly thanks to magicians and agents with gifts related to construction.

"Where is that guy?"

Jin Sahyuk floated in the sky and looked down at the city. She didn't watch the restoration, but scoured the streets for someone.

Of course, she searched for that man. She hadn't seen him recently as if he vanished into thin air. She couldn't find a single hair even when she followed the people close to him. Worse, they all acted like they didn't know him. Almost as if he didn't exist in the first place.

Jin Sahyuk tried using private investigators and the Violet Banquet, but all records related to him had been mysteriously purged. Nothing. Not a single trace as if someone wiped his record clean. She caused a scene for them to find him, but they refused her requests.

She didn't know anything other than his name. She never tried to find out about his life, where he lived, or his background.

Jin Sahyuk didn't know how to politely ask for help or draw a portrait for investigators. One person with psychometry could look into her head, but she refused to let someone like that into her brain.

"Son of a bitch. You hid because you thought I would kidnap you and bring you back? What a coward."

"Who are you searching for so much?"

A red-haired magician floated next to her. Shimurin, the master of dimensional magic, didn't return to her homeworld and remained.

According to Shimurin, she traveled around simply out of curiosity. Jin Sahyuk hired her thinking she perfectly suited the task. Shimurin's dimensional magic would also be of great help to Akatrina.

"There's this guy."

Jin Sahyuk glanced at Shimurin.

"Do you have to meet him?"

"I don't have to, but I want to before I leave. You see, he taught me a valuable lesson I could never forget."

He humiliated her with a thorough defeat and broke a wall in her heart. Jin Sahyuk would've never learned the most valuable life lesson

without him.

As such, she wanted to say something before she left. A conversation without any ulterior motives might not be the right way to put it. Honestly, she wanted to hear everything about Kindspring. She wanted to take Kindspring with her and live the rest of her life with him if he existed within Kim Hajin's inner mind like Puharen lived inside Morax.

"A man who taught a valuable lesson to a tyrant... I'm curious too. So you'll wait until you find him?"

"No, I won't delay the plan just because of him."

The time to return to her homeworld steadily approached. Puharen continually scratched her heart and the dimension stone from Baal neared its expiration date. Once the time came, Jin Sahyuk would return to Akatrina with all the food and weapons she amassed. She wouldn't hesitate or look back.

"*Hmm...* Shimurin, didn't you know him too? Don't you want to talk to him?"

Jin Sahyuk suddenly recalled hearing about Shimurin's relationship with that guy. To be precise, she heard Kim Hajin played a vital role in completing the dimensional magic.

"*Hmm?*"

However, Shimurin seemed to want to claim the achievement for herself and didn't mention anything about him.

"Who are you talking about?"

The grand magician only fiddled with her hair and pretended not to know.

"About Kim Hajin."

Jin Sahyuk muttered his name, but Shimurin looked confused.

“Kim Hajin? Did I meet someone by that name?”

“What are you talking about? Kim Hajin is the one who completed your dimensional magic...”

Jin Sahyuk suddenly stopped talking. A bolt of lightning seemed to strike her. She stared at Shimurin and looked down at Seoul. Then she became convinced. What had been a faint thought became a hard brick.

Kim Hajin hadn't hidden from her. His friends didn't pretend to not know him either. This entire world had forgotten his existence.

Jin Sahyuk naturally realized why this didn't affect her. Only she knew both Kindspring and Kim Hajin and the secret about synchronization.

Chapter 371

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (5)

Three months had passed since the Great Devil War ended. This war forever changed faiths, cultures, values, and ways of living for everyone around the world. Its impact matched the Great Change, if not greater. Nations cooperated beyond borders because they still shared common enemies like the New Evils and the devils, Leraje and Vassago.

Multiple apartment buildings lined up a complex in Korea's North Gyeongsang Province as if to reflect this peaceful international atmosphere. This healing city under the *[Colored Paper Charity Foundation]* had been created by Yi Byul.

Tens of thousands of war victims lived in these apartments. Hospitals, schools, convenience stores, playgrounds, and other amenities surrounded them. This 10 square kilometer plot used to be a forest inhabited by monsters. Now, it has transformed into a welfare city inhabited by 100,000 children and 30,000 adults. Yi Byul's terrifying wealth funded an entire city.

"*Ahaha*, then... would it be possible to see the foundation head?"

However, hyenas naturally flocked to money. Countless businessmen gathered to meet the person who single-handedly possessed trillions of won. They added the words, potential investor, to the foundation head because of her wealth.

"No."

Of course, Yi Byul refused most meetings. Only 2-3 lucky businessmen succeeded in meeting her by coincidence. She had no interest in investing, but rumors regarding her appearance spiraled out of

control.

“We didn’t come here to ask for investments. In fact, we wanted to donate too—”

“Then give it now.”

“Uh...”

Droon treated the chaebol quite coldly. Sim Hawon wore a luxury business suit and would’ve received the best treatment in most places as Bingjung Corporation’s successor. However, they treated him like an ordinary person here.

Droon didn’t greet these guests alone. Yi Yuri, his fiancée, stood next to him.

“Well, I expected as much. Director Kim?”

Director Kim handed a check to Sim Hawon, who showed the astronomical amount with nine 0s to Droon. The foundation head possessed more than enough wealth to buy this man’s business, so Droon didn’t bat an eye.

“How is it? I heard the Colored Paper Foundation has been full of life lately, so we prepared this. I thought—”

“Thank you.”

Yi Yuri, who remained silent until now, suddenly stepped up. She brightly smiled and snatched the check out of Sim Hawon’s hand.

“What?”

Sim Hawon blinked and stared at Yi Yuri. Meanwhile, Droon praised her with his eyes. She spoke as she placed the check into her pocket.

“We’ll put it to good use towards more medicine.”

For the record, Droon and Yi Yuri served as heads of security, teachers, and doctors here. They grew into fine adults who could support others while relying on each other.

“Uh... Well, *cough*.”

Sim Hawon fought the strong urge to spit out, *You arrogant little brat!*

“Then can I see her? The foundation head, I mean.”

Droon laughed at his question.

“We’ll think about it.”

His voice contained a hint of playfulness. After all, the check had nine 0s.

* * *

Droon climbed a small hill behind the housing area after they left Sim Hawon. The blue sky looked like a painting and green grass swayed in the gentle breeze. He spotted a woman with long, flowing hair amidst this beautiful scene.

She kneeled in front of a tombstone and stared at it. Her dark hair fluttered like clouds. She had thick, beautiful eyelashes and eyes that shone with a dark light. It looked like she came straight out of a painting.

“Why do you stare at this tombstone every day?” Droon walked up and sat next to her.

She slightly tilted her head as if thinking and shook her head. “It’s not every day.”

“It’s practically every day.”

A gentle breeze blew.

“Who knows.”

She spoke while straightening her hair.

“This person is already dead. He was evil too.”

Droon couldn't understand her attachment to this tombstone that read, *[Yi Yeonjun]*. He couldn't understand no matter how much he thought. Would he know when he grew older?

The woman faintly smiled and shook her head again.

“It's not this person. I'm looking for someone else.”

“And who's that?”

“I don't know.”

Droon furrowed his brows and glared at her. However, she gently spoke with conviction.

“I'll find out soon. After all, looking for people is my specialty.”

“What?”

“Yes, I'll remember soon. I believe I will without a doubt.”

Droon became speechless as he stared at Yi Byul. She had changed too much from her past self. She didn't react no matter how rude he acted. Her face briefly stiffened when he flicked her forehead, but she still smiled like a fool. Of course, this punishment only came from a game they played. Droon didn't hate this new Boss. It would be a lie if he said he didn't miss the past, but he knew they couldn't go back.

“Then... let me try too.”

Droon playfully smiled and glared at the tombstone. Boss smiled and offered him a seat.

“Ahaha, here you were. I finally found you.”

A voice resounded from behind them. Droon pretended to be surprised and looked back. Sim Hawon, Bingjung Corporation’s successor, walked up the hill.

“Droon, did you bring him here?” Yi Byul asked.

“Eh? No, no, no. I would never. He must’ve come here on his own, but how? Does he have good intuition?”

Droon shot up and planned to chase the man away.

However, the man already saw Yi Byul and his entire body went stiff. He stared at her in a daze and murmured in a fleeting voice.

“So the rumors were true. My god. How can there be such a beautiful ___”

However, Yi Byul didn’t give him the chance to finish. Her shadow extended like a tentacle and dragged him away by the waist.

“Uaaaaah—”

“Oh, looks like noona hasn’t lost her touch...”

“This place is off-limits to non-administrators. He must not have read the sign. I sent him there so he could read it.”

Yi Byul turned back to the tombstone. *Someone more important than [Yi Yeonjun]*. She thought again to remember and search for him.

* * *

Yoo Yeonha built a personal mansion in Seoul’s Dongjak District. It looked fairly big and fancy, but she considered it rather plain considering her wealth. In the mansion’s main room, Yoo Yeonha listened to a tape Hassan-i Sabbah recorded last night.

— Essence of the Strait has grown too big. We should've suppressed them when we had the chance, but that doesn't matter. They'll fall from grace soon enough.

Kim Sukho's voice rang out.

— How can you be so sure?

Yi Yukho asked.

— How? Their heroes suddenly killing civilians, djinns amidst their ranks, corruption with Essential Pharmacy's new medicine, and so on...

— *Hmm?* They have djinns among their heroes?

— *Hahaha*, friend, when did you grow so naive? We'll just have to make some if there aren't. The new hunting dogs I found made contact with the New Evils. We should be able to strike a deal with them easily like last time.

Kim Sukho spoke when another voice interrupted him.

— Essence of the Strait won't be so easy. Especially that young woman, Yoo Yeonha.

This voice belonged to the power behind the curtains, Yoo Jangwon. Kim Sukho dismissed his concerns.

— What are you worried about? Yoo Yeonha is too young. Plus, Yoo Jinwoong has deep relations with us. Chae Joochul doesn't seem to favor them either. Yoo Yeonha will lose everything before she realizes it. It's time to snap the baby hen's neck who doesn't know her place.

The recording ended there. Yoo Yeonha felt thankful she knew Hassan-i Sabbah. Who else could record a secret conversation on the Tower of Heroes' highest floor?

“Baby hen, he says.”

Kim Sukho sure knew how to infuriate someone. Yoo Yeonha clenched her teeth and understood where his confidence came from. He ruled over Korea for dozens of years and didn't place anyone in his eyes. However, his arrogance would be his demise. After all, twisting a rooster's neck wouldn't stop the sun from rising. No, they wouldn't even be able to accomplish that.

"Sechan?" Yoo Yeonha called her secretary.

— Yes.

"How is the preparation for the party?" she asked with a smile.

— It's going smoothly.

Jin Sechan replied with a faint chuckle.

"Great."

Yoo Yeonha had scripted an elaborate scenario. She slowly turned and spoke to the women staring at her from the couch.

"Next Saturday, I'll host a party at the Yoo family's mansion. It'll be called the Post-War Societal Leaders' Ball or something like that. I'd like to go with a name that doesn't sound too snobby."

Yoo Yeonha wanted to take care of this matter in one fell swoop. The coup d'etat would successfully round up all the corrupted executives and become a revolution. Not only the chairman, but they would arrest every corrupt individual. This party would serve as the stage for their punishment.

Yoo Yeonha pictured the revolution in her head.

Yoo Jinwoong's whistleblowing during the party would reveal the association's corruption to the world. Then they would immediately catch those executives.

The Chameleon Troupe played a vital role in this. As Chae Joochul and the association's former hunting dog, they would expose the evil

deeds committed by Kim Sukho and the corrupt executives.

Kim Sukho might call the New Evils or use his new hunting dogs to escape. Regardless, the heroes of this generation consisting of Aileen, Kim Suho, Yun Seung-Ah, and many others would suppress them.

Her plan seemed flawless as long as she didn't let her guard down.

She only worried about her father, Yoo Jinwoong. They already spoke about his grave sins. He acted as Chae Joochul's hunting dog on more than one occasion besides the Kwang-Oh Incident. As such, it would be impossible to pardon him with her power.

However, her father gladly accepted his punishment. He already resigned as guild leader and even gave up his coveted master rank position with the excuse that he felt his limits during the Great Devil War.

She couldn't fail now. She had to succeed and make amends.

Yoo Yeonha spoke with determination, "Distribute the invitation letters only to the 300 people on the list. About 900 will participate since they can each bring 2 guests."

— Understood.

"Place our heroes around the mansion. Confirm everyone's invitation before letting them in and don't let them leave once they enter."

— Yes, of course.

"Don't forget to make sure the electronic manipulation is working. Jamming them won't do. We need to make sure they see a different internet. For that, you'll have to set up a broadcasting station and a base station. Don't worry about the costs and feel free to use however much you want."

— Understood, as you command.

Yoo Yeonha ended her communication line. Then she turned to the

two women on the couch.

“I’ll be hosting a grand party.”

“*Hehehe*, great! I’m a big fan of parties!” Jain enthusiastically replied. Jin Seyeon sat next to her and seemed deep in thought.

“Is Yun Seung-Ah coming too?”

“Probably?”

“*Hnng*... I’m not good with her.”

“Won’t you be disguised anyways?”

“I don’t know how, but she can see through my disguise.”

Kkeeung. Jain stretched and murmured in a tired voice, “This is interesting. It’s perfect as the Chameleon Troupe’s last mission.”

A bittersweet smile emerged on her face.

* * *

The plan smoothly progressed.

The VIP party Yoo Yeonha hosted became a noteworthy event. They personally invited the elites among elites like Chae Nayun. Ordinary elites had to beg those with invitations. Only 300 had been invited with each bringing 2 guests.

[Jonghak said he won’t be coming.]

Chae Nayun received Yoo Yeonha’s message at home. She worried even though Shin Jonghak said that. Knowing his personality, he might wait until the most crucial moment and steal the spotlight.

“*Huuu...*”

She had to focus on herself. Chae Nayun turned off her smartwatch and took a deep breath. She stood in front of a wooden sliding door. Her grandfather, who had committed too many sins, resided beyond that door.

Chae Nayun had something to tell him. She wrote it down and practiced dozens of times, but could no longer remember anything. No, she didn't need to. She decided to convey her feelings as his granddaughter. Everything would come from the bottom of her heart.

Her grandfather no longer possessed emotions, but that might make convincing him easier. Previously, he said he only felt 1% of his emotions. It seemed meaningless, but wouldn't that 1% mean more when it came to his family? Chae Nayun betted on the possibility of this advantage.

Knock, knock.

She knocked and could hear a brush being set down after about 3 seconds. Did her grandfather practice calligraphy?

— It must be Nayun.

“Yes.”

— What are you doing here?

His voice sounded warm, but carried something else. Chae Nayun clenched her fists and spoke after a deep breath.

“Grandfather, I need to say something.”

— *Hoho*, is that so?

Chae Joochul spoke like a normal grandfather proud of his granddaughter for visiting him.

— Then come in.

Chapter 372

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (6)

Chae Nayun sat facing Chae Joochul, who gently smiled at his granddaughter. She clenched her fists on her lap. Chae Joochul remained still and waited for her to speak. The atmosphere didn't feel heavy at all. In fact, it seemed warm and gentle. Even so, Chae Nayun felt more nervous than ever.

Eventually, she opened her mouth.

"Grandfather, I want to ask something."

He nodded and her expression stiffened. Chae Joochul hid his expression too. She looked into his eyes as deep and dark as the abyss.

"Do you remember... the Kwang-Oh Incident?"

Chae Joochul didn't show the slightest hint of emotions and Chae Nayun suddenly grew afraid. However, she didn't stop.

"Do you remember the countless people you've killed, Grandfather?"

She mustered the courage to speak and said everything she knew. The relationship between the association's chairman and Chae Joochul, the countless people they killed, colluding with djinns, all the schemes to maintain their authority, etc. The thoughts she suppressed erupted one by one.

"Senior Jin Seyeon's father, Jin Younghwan, must've known the association colluded with djinns."

The light in Chae Joochul's eyes grew deeper as she continued.

However, Chae Nayun didn't back down.

"I found it strange when I thought about it. Cube had so many djinns. Sven, Yoon Hyun... I don't know why I didn't think of it before. Djinns shouldn't be created so easily from a military academy for future heroes."

The djinns at Cube naturally aroused the public's interest and reminded them that only heroes could stop djinns. Djinns based their activities around Pandemonium and heroes assembled around the association. More people relied on heroes as these djinns went wild. Naturally, the Hero Association grew more powerful than any other government body.

"Grandfather, answer me."

Chae Joochul remained silent and Chae Nayun waited for the reply she hoped to hear.

Silence filled the air until Chae Joochul finally spoke.

"I remember. I know about it."

His voice still lacked emotion. However, Chae Nayun felt a small ray of hope.

"The association used djinns to solidify their political power and I lent them a hand."

"Why? Why did you—"

"Because that seemed like the right choice at the time." Chae Joochul's voice carried a hint of warmth.

"Right choice? You said the right choice?" Chae Nayun clenched her teeth and felt like she couldn't continue. Her stomach squirmed and she grew nauseous. *Tak!* Chae Nayun put down all the evidence she brought.

"Here's a list of all the corruption the association has committed. It

includes all the evidence and the Kwang-Oh Incident.”

“ ... ”

“They used djinns, deceived heroes, and killed countless civilians. You’re saying this is right?”

Chae Joochul stared at her before nodding and Chae Nayun flinched.

“G-Grandfather, you...”

She brushed her hair back with her trembling hands. The words, “You’re trash,” came out of her mouth. However, Chae Joochu remained silent and only stared at the evidence. He slowly reached forward and picked it up. Then he softly murmured.

“That might not be the case anymore.”

“Wha—?”

Chae Nayun became tongue-tied and scowled at her grandfather. Chae Joochul continued while facing her funny look.

“Nayun, the era determines what is right and wrong. No one enforced righteousness at the time. The Nine Stars possessed the power to keep the association in check, but grew tired from the never-ending fights against monsters and feared their own side effects. Shin Myungchul maintained a good balance while he lived, but no one went against the association after he died.”

Being emotionless made Chae Joochul calculating. He based his decisions on the era. Reaching the top as part of the system or resisting with a low chance of success. The scale obviously favored the former. He spoke while staring at Chae Nayun.

“However, it seems like the era is changing once again.”

His voice didn’t sound high or low. He spoke in a monotonous tone.

“Both you and your father will be negatively affected if the era changes. You might lose what you’ve always had. Is that okay?”

Gulp— Chae Nayun swallowed hard and already expected this. Chae Joochul seemed much calmer than she anticipated. He didn’t refute her accusations or criticized her.

“What about you, Grandfather? Are you okay with it?” she calmly asked.

He didn’t smile and simply nodded. He clearly gave his permission.

“Really?”

Convincing him went unexpectedly easy. Chae Joochul took out a small notebook from his desk drawer while Chae Nayun sat in a daze.

“Nayun, you know I don’t have any emotions left.”

He handed the notebook to his granddaughter.

“It’s hard to notice. You lose yourself before you realize what’s happening.”

Chae Nayun took the notebook.

“I set a standard to never lose myself when I finally noticed the changes.”

She opened the notebook with only one page and a single sentence. Chae Nayun stared at it in a daze.

— The most important thing to me, Chae Joochul, is family.

Her thoughts froze and she couldn’t take in the sentence. Her head creaked and she looked at Chae Joochul, who appeared as emotionless as ever.

“This sentence is quite alien to me. I can’t even recall what thoughts I

had when I wrote it.”

Why did he write it then?

“Your grandfather isn’t someone who uses the word family often. That, I remember.”

Chae Nayun could feel the warmth from the wrinkles on her grandfather’s emotionless face.

* * *

[March 28th – Essence of the Strait, Chief Officer’s Office]

Yoo Yeonha sat at her desk and inspected the plan once again. She had too many variables to consider. Kim Sukho didn’t suspect anything according to Hassan-i Sabbah, but she couldn’t relax. She couldn’t sleep after sending out those invitation letters and used all sorts of fatigue medicine and Tower of Wish skills. She would rather ruin her body while alive than regret in the grave.

— Chief Officer, a rumor might catch your interest.

Essential Pharmacy’s HR department called her. Her sharpened senses relaxed and she picked up the call.

“Rumor?”

— Yes, take a look at this.

HR sent over a social media post and Yoo Yeonha narrowed her eyes.

[crwekdl] [♥] [There’s a pharmacist living in a cabin deep in the Swiss Alps. His miraculous powers can cure any illness. He helped cure my daughter’s incurable disease...]

“A pharmacist living in a cabin deep in the Swiss Alps... What's this? Some sort of urban legend?”

— That’s also what we thought at first, but too many people have claimed to meet this pharmacist. We plan to go there ourselves. This person might be the talent we’ve been searching for.

“*Mmm...* Well, I won’t stop you. Go ahead.”

Yoo Yeonha hung up without thinking too much. Then she looked at the calendar again. The party would be held on April 15th. They had 3 weeks left. What should she do until then? Yoo Yeonha took a deep breath and turned on her smartwatch. Rachel sent a few pictures of Evandel with an eagle.

— What’s with the eagle?

Yoo Yeonha asked and couldn’t hold back her curiosity. Rachel immediately replied.

— *Ah*, this eagle came to see us. We worried at first because of its size, but it’s actually kind and gentle. Evandel easily tamed it and they’re practically best friends now.

— Interesting, what’s its name?

Yoo Yeonha yawned while chatting and slumped over her desk. Not sleeping for a week seemed like too much.

— Evandel named him Spartan.

“Spartan?”

What kind of name is that? Yoo Yeonha smirked and slowly closed her eyes. Her chin rested on the desk and drowsiness flooded in.

“Spartan... *Pft.*”

She mumbled and began dreaming.

[April 2nd – Creator’s Sacred Grace, Vice Leader’s Office]

“Hmm...”

Kim Suho rubbed his chin while looking at the invitation letter from Yoo Yeonha. This *[VIP Invitation Letter]* had been all the rage recently. Rumors stated that those who participated would walk a royal road in the future.

Kim Suho didn’t care too much. He had other things to take care of like civilians suffering from the war. He thought they shouldn’t celebrate so early.

“I guess I should still go.”

Both Yoo Yeonha and Yun Seung-Ah strongly advised him to attend. Yoo Yeonha even said she would never talk to him again if he didn’t show up.

“Sigh...”

Kim Suho looked at his computer monitor with a long list of missions.

[Demons have appeared in Gangwon-do...] [A colosseum for demons has been built in Pandemonium...] [The New Evils’ subordinate group, Iron Armor Eccentrics, has appeared in Gaesung’s sky...]

Heroes had to take care of several tasks after Baal’s annihilation. However, the missions the association assigned him felt strange. They seemed like important missions, but didn’t solve any of the core problems. It felt like they wanted him to ignore Pandemonium and the New Evils.

Kim Suho brushed his hair back and thought about the association. The international organization that created the hero occupation and ranked them. *What did they plan on doing?*

— Hey, Kim Suho!

A loud voice rang out and Kim Suho sat up in surprise.

— *Uhahaha*, look at you all surprised.

A big screen popped up and Aileen's face appeared uncomfortably close.

"Aileen?"

— Yo, it's been a while.

She acted as youthful as always.

"I thought you were busy playing Leraje's game. Is it fun?"

Kim Suho said with a grin.

— What? Fun? I'm doing work. The Temple of Justice has to grow faster than Leraje's guild and crush them.

Leraje's game took the world by storm. Some people even gave up on real life to spend all their time in virtual reality.

"Really? Well, why did you call me?"

— *Ah*, it's nothing much. I just wondered if you were participating in that party.

She meant Yoo Yeonha's VIP party.

"Yeah, I'm participating," Kim Suho simply replied.

— *Un*, I see.

— Suho, it's been a while.

Yi Yongha peeked in from the side. Kim Suho also caught a glimpse of Nicholas. It seemed all the Temple of Justice members just logged out of Leraje's game.

“Are you all coming to the party?”

— Yes, of course.

“Then I’ll see you there.”

— You should try this game too. It’s incredibly fun.

— *Ah*, move!

Aileen shoved Yi Yongha’s face out of frame.

— Anyways, we were planning a reunion. Chae Nayun, Heynckes, Rachel, and everyone else who fought against Baal. What? An attack? Those fuckers! *Ah*, we’re hanging up! Guys, we’re logging in!

Something must’ve happened in the game and Aileen angrily hung up.

“They must be pretty busy.”

Kim Suho looked at the black screen and shrugged. As he returned to work...

Whish—

The wind blew from behind him and the chilly air grazed his neck.

Didn’t I close the window? Kim Suho tilted his head and turned around.

“What?”

His eyes widened at the unexpected guest standing there.

“Oi, Kim Suho.”

Jin Sahyuk stared at him and wagged her finger. She wore a strange smile that made him listless. He hadn’t seen her in a while, so he thought she already returned to Akatrina.

“That party sounds like fun. Why don’t you bring me too?” Jin Sahyuk smirked.

“Of course, you can’t say no.”

She added before he could say anything.

Chapter 373

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (7)

[April 4th – Portal Station]

Rachel and Evandel arrived in Korea through the international portal. Rachel wore an ordinary business suit and Evandel wore her magician's hat and cane. Her fashion clearly screamed, *I'm a magician!*

Everyone looked at them as they left the VIP pathway. Civilians who recognized Rachel began taking pictures with their smartwatches. However, Essence of the Strait's guards showed up before anyone could take more than one or two photos. They quickly guided Rachel and Evandel to a limousine.

"We hope you have a safe trip."

"Thank you."

Rachel got in the limousine first after the guards' warm welcome. Surprisingly, someone waited inside. Rachel flinched when she met this person's eyes. If anything, she expected Yoo Yeonha to meet her. However, Chae Nayun came instead.

"Yo."

Chae Nayun grinned at her. Rachel nodded without saying much, but Evandel trembled at the sight of Chae Nayun. The little girl practically had a seizure.

"Fufu, Evandel looks so cute today too."

Chae Nayun's smirk terrified Evandel.

“Anyways, hurry on in. I have something important to tell you.”

Rachel glanced at the hesitating Evandel and Chae Nayun reached forward to grab Evandel’s small wrist.

“Don’t worry. I won’t do anything bad.”

“*Huaaang!*”

Evandel couldn’t resist Chae Nayun’s superhuman strength.

“You got the invitation letter to the party, right?”

Chae Nayun asked Rachel, who nodded.

“Don’t bring Evandel.”

“...?”

Rachel tilted her head. She didn’t bring Evandel just to visit Essence of the Strait, but also to attract international investors. After all, Evandel needed astronomical resources to advance her incredible spirit beast magic.

“We already decided to invest in Evandel’s stronghold and research costs, so don’t worry about that.”

Chae Nayun spoke as if she read Rachel’s mind and suddenly pointed at Rachel’s feet.

“Wait, what’s up with that bird? Where did it come from?”

Rachel followed Chae Nayun’s gaze towards the bird sleeping like a coiled snake.

He followed me all the way here? Rachel faintly smiled.

“This is Spartan.”

“Oh, this is Spartan?”

“Mm.”

“Where did you find him? He looks like an eagle.”

“I’m not sure, but I’m also curious. So is Evandel.”

“...?”

Rachel stared at Spartan with a gentle gaze. She felt a mysterious warmth in her heart when she looked at him, but she didn’t know why. This feeling made her cozy and comfortable like finding a precious lost item.

“What are you talking about?”

Chae Nayun furrowed her brows at Spartan and Rachel. However, Rachel didn’t say anything. Evandel picked up Spartan and held him in her embrace.

“Spartan, be careful of this unni...”

“What did you say? He has nothing to worry about. You want me to hug you more?”

“Ah, n-no!”

* * *

I settled down in the Swiss Alps. The scenery I’d only seen in movies looked even more beautiful than I imagined. I could barely take my eyes off it. The blue sky, green fields, and snowy mountains looked more vibrant than anywhere else. I called this place home for the past 3 weeks.

I built a little cabin comfortable enough for one person with aether’s help. Then I wandered around the Alps while using this cabin at the end of a cliff as my base. I found more herbs to record and manifested

a medicinal pill every day to store in a bottle.

The number of visitors who came to my cabin increased as I spent my time like this. Most seemed to be tourists, hikers, martial artists, and explorers.

At first, they only looked at my cabin from afar. After about a month, one courageous group finally knocked on the door.

I warmly welcomed them. It seemed they had been injured while climbing. One had been bitten by a poisonous snake and his leg suffered from necrosis. Another suffered from a crushed shoulder. I introduced myself as a pharmacist and gave them my pills when they asked for help. They left the next day fully recovered.

After that, rumors of a Cliff's End Pharmacist spread. Not many visitors came because of the dangers and some probably gave up in the middle of the journey.

"You'll get better with this."

However, a small child came to visit me today. This child dreamed of becoming a hero and told me about his sick younger sister. I asked about her symptoms and he told me she suffered from osteosarcoma, a cancer that produced immature bones. I gave him a pill called Cloud's Touch. When consumed, the magic power within this pill would race through one's veins and eliminate all the cancer cells.

"Thank you so much!"

The child thanked me in crude Korean and left. He also gave me a dagger as payment. Apparently, this treasure had been passed down in his family. I stored it away without checking its authenticity.

For the record, I earned about a billion won from the pills I made so far. I never asked for compensation, but a strange rumor spread that the Cliff's End Pharmacist took a patient's most precious object as payment.

The occasional patients who visited seemed quite wealthy. Naturally, they gave me incredibly expensive objects.

“Huuu...”

I became alone again and looked out the window with a sigh. The Alps scenery seemed beautiful as always. However, I slowly grew used to this beauty. Eventually, a year would go by, then two, and three... What would I be doing then? What should I seek in life?

I suddenly felt frustrated and turned on my smartwatch. Then I accessed Violet Banquet after checking the ordinary community forums. Surfing the internet became a blissful routine with so much time on my hand.

[Do you think someone can infiltrate the VIP party?]

[It would be easier to just buy a slot...]

Posts regarding Yoo Yeonha's VIP party flooded Violet Banquet. People tried to make fake invitation letters, attempts to purchase invitations, estimates on how much it would cost, etc.

“Sigh...”

I felt even more frustrated looking at this. *If I could attend this party... if they saw my face... would they remember me?*

A false hope still remained. I wouldn't be able to say anything in front of them. They wouldn't remember me either. I had to forget just like them.

Tok, tok—

“Hmm?”

I shot up after someone knocked. More than one visitor a day felt unusual. I opened the door and saw 5 men wearing suits under the dark sky. Immediately, I became alert until I recognized one of them and became dazed. He no longer knew me, but I knew him.

“Hello.”

“...”

He respectfully bowed as I stood in a daze.

“My name is Jin Sechan. We’re from Essential Pharmacy. Would you happen to be the Cliff’s End Pharmacist?”

* * *

[April 15th – Yoo Family’s Mansion]

“Haaa...”

Yoo Yeonha took a deep breath in front of the main room. Her heart pounded.

Her father should be behind this door. What could he be thinking? Did he feel afraid too or had he accepted his fate without resenting his daughter?

Yoo Yeonha clenched her teeth and slowly opened the door after a knock.

“...”

She saw Yoo Jinwoong’s back from the slowly widening gap. He seemed to be organizing documents. Yoo Jinwoong turned around and bitterly smiled.

“Ah, you’re here.”

He treated her like usual. However, Yoo Yeonha couldn’t smile. How could she? After all, they would soon say farewell.

“...”

“It’s fine, Yeonha.”

Yoo Jinwoong spoke first when his daughter kept staring at him. He

mischievously smiled like a teenager.

“You’ll still have your mother even when I’m incarcerated. She’s more proud of you than ever. I’m sure you won’t notice a troublemaker like me disappearing.”

Yoo Yeonha hadn’t told her mother about the plan yet. The fewer people knew, the better.

“Are you okay, Dad?” Yoo Yeonha carefully asked. Yoo Jinwoong lightly smiled and nodded as if she shouldn’t have even asked.

“Of course, I’m happy I can do this.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t reply. As Yoo Jinwoong’s daughter, she knew he dreamed of becoming a master rank hero respected by everyone. He wanted to be an idol for children who looked up to heroes. After today, his dreams would be thoroughly crushed and his name would be disgraced for eternity.

“Yeonha...”

Yoo Jinwoong turned serious since Yoo Yeonha’s complexion didn’t get any better. Then he calmly spoke.

“I’ve been living with regrets my entire life. About the Kwang-Oh Incident and everything else I’ve done. However, there was one time when I did what my conscience told me.”

Yoo Jinwoong slowly closed his eyes and recalled the distant past.

“I saved a child because of you. Right, the one who saved him wasn’t me. It was you, so I’ll listen to you this time too. The conscience that holds me true to myself... is you, Yeonha.”

Yoo Yeonha shut her mouth as her tears welled up. She had to hold them back. It would be disastrous if she cried. She couldn’t mix personal feelings with business.

As such, she began thinking about something else. The child Yoo Jinwoong mentioned. Who was this child?

Yoo Yeonha asked with a tearful voice, “That child. Do you think he’s still alive?”

“Probably, he’s the same age as you. I’m sure he’s living a wonderful life.”

Yoo Jinwoong walked towards her with a suitcase and she watched him in a daze.

“Yeonha, don’t give up and don’t be sad.”

He placed a hand on Yoo Yeonha’s head. She felt his big, warm hand and dropped her head. She didn’t want him to see her tears. Perhaps Yoo Jinwoong thought the same and patted his daughter a few times.

“Thank you.”

He left with those words and Yoo Yeonha stood frozen for a while. All sorts of thoughts swirled in her head. However, she didn’t have time to leisurely ponder them.

“Oi, the party’s starting soon.”

Jain’s voice woke her up. Yoo Yeonha wiped away her tears and turned around. Jain, disguised as Yoo Jinwoong, stared at her.

“I have to greet people like this and leave later, right?”

Yoo Yeonha nodded before heading to the hallway and looking out the window. Limousines carrying the world’s elites arrived one by one.

“Yes.”

“Ok, *huhum. Kuhuhum. Huhum...* Yeonha, do I sound okay?”

Jain changed her voice after a few coughs. She sounded just like Yoo Jinwoong. Yoo Yeonha had to resist the goosebumps rising on her back.

“You sound just like him.”

She checked her outfit one last time. Her dress, ring, hair, makeup... She looked perfect as the party's host.

“I'm ready. What about you guys?”

“We're ready too. Khalifa will come back after dropping your father off.”

“Perfect.”

Yoo Yeonha deeply sighed. Finally, they would put an end to this. Humanity won the Great Devil War and they would change forever by settling the past era's corruption.

— Master, Yi Yukho and Kim Sukho are coming. It seems they'll participate in the party. However, Yoo Jangwon remains in his mansion.

Hassan-i Sabbah's mental transmission rang out. Yoo Yeonha already expected Yoo Jangwon wouldn't come.

“That's fine.”

Jin Seyeon said she would make sure everyone received lawful punishment for their sins. Of course, that included Yoo Jangwon. However, Yoo Jangwon hadn't committed any wrongdoings on the surface. Something metaphysical like justice couldn't apply to him. As such, they prepared a different method.

“The Chameleon Troupe will be paying him a visit.”

They would use a thoroughly physical concept, violence.

He would meet one of the most horrific members in about 3 hours, Cheok Jungyeong. Dozens of high rank heroes guarded his home, but none of them would pose a problem.

“Now then.”

Yoo Yeonha clapped and the Chameleon Troupe appeared one by one. She smiled at them.

“Let’s start the party.”

Chapter 374

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (8)

Kim Suho wore a swallow-tailed coat to the party. Most distinguished guests busily spoke to each other and he couldn't join any conversations after arriving 40 minutes late.

Kim Suho walked through the grand hall and spotted Yoo Sihyuk, Yoo Jinwoong, Nicholas, and other famous heroes. The heroes he saw on TV at a young age all gathered here.

“Ah, if it isn't our superstar hero!”

Someone approached Kim Suho while pretending to be friendly. He slightly flinched and turned to see the former Korean president, Kim Sukho.

“Hello, Professor Kim Sukho.”

He heard from Yun Seung-Ah that Kim Sukho enjoyed being addressed as professor. Kim Suho followed her advice and a smile bloomed on the former president's face.

“*Hahaha*, nice to meet you. I heard you came late because of a mission.”

“Yes, my apologies.”

“No need. I arrived slightly late myself.”

Kim Sukho heartily laughed and other distinguished guests gathered around him. Kim Suho recognized them from the list that Yun Seung-Ah sent. They all belonged to Kim Sukho's faction.

“Where are my manners? Suho, let me introduce you. This is the chief of the association’s evaluation department, Kim On.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kim On. I’ve heard a lot about you, high rank hero Kim Suho.”

Kim On reached out with a strange smile. As the name suggested, the evaluation department ranked and evaluated heroes. They held quite a powerful authority since a hero’s fame and salary depended on their rank.

“Nice to meet you. I’m Kim Suho.”

Kim Suho awkwardly shook his hand. Next, he met the chiefs of the administrative department, state affairs department, international aid department, etc. Kim Sukho joyously laughed after Kim Suho shook hands with everyone.

“*Hahaha*. Oh right, Chief Kim. Aren’t there a few empty slots for the master rank hero position?”

“Yes, a few died during the war. We also expelled a few others for not answering summons during the war.”

“*Tsk*, draft dodgers... Such shameless heroes. Too many of them are blinded by money and fame. Back in my day, people became heroes to save one another. No one cared about the money and fame.”

Kim Sukho unhappily muttered before smiling at Kim Suho.

“We need more heroes like Suho.”

“Thank you for the compliment.”

Kim Suho wryly nodded. The lights suddenly turned off with a click. Was it an event or an attack? A small spotlight shone on the party hall’s south side while everyone warily stood.

“What?”

Kim Sukho and the other distinguished guests turned in that direction. The curtains lifted over the empty stage and revealed the party's host, Yoo Yeonha. She acted with befitting decorum and greeted the guests.

"Nice to meet you. My name is Yoo Yeonha. I'd like to thank all the distinguished guests here. Of course, I will be visiting each of you personally."

Then she cut straight to the chase. Yoo Yeonha didn't want to diverge from her scripted scenario.

"First, Temple of Justice's chairman, Aileen. Your courage served as a powerful beacon for humanity during the war against Baal. We admire you from the bottom of our hearts."

Yoo Yeonha spoke with a gentle voice. The spotlight suddenly shone on Aileen, who flinched in the middle of eating chocolates and quickly wiped her mouth.

Clap, clap, clap—

Yoo Yeonha clapped first and the entire room filled with applause. The flushed Aileen didn't know what to do and repeatedly bowed.

"Next is Rachel, whose elementals saved countless with their powers. You must've saved hundreds of thousands."

Clap, clap, clap—

It seemed to be the time for pleasantries. Kim Suho clapped as he watched Yoo Yeonha's speech.

"Thank you."

Rachel bashfully smiled and several men blushed at the sight of her.

Yoo Yeonha continued to praise the distinguished guests with a silver tongue. Yun Seung-Ah, Yoo Sihyuk, Chae Nayun, Yi Yongha, Kim Suho, and even Shin Jonghak who didn't attend. Kim Suho felt his heart growing warmer as he listened.

“What bullshit.”

However, Jin Sahyuk seemed to think otherwise. Her sudden appearance surprised Kim Suho, but he calmed down and whispered into her ear.

“Be quiet.”

“Who are you to tell me what to do?”

“What?”

“You shut up.”

“Geez...”

The corner of Kim Suho’s mouth twisted up. Meanwhile, the wholesome praises came to an end.

“There are two people left.”

Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho knew it would be them. They quietly laughed and drowned themselves in the moment. For a second, they even thought it might be okay to leave Essence of the Strait alone.

“Professor Kim Sukho.”

A grand spotlight shone on Kim Sukho. He waved and shook his head when everyone turned.

“And the current chairman, Yi Yukho.”

A second spotlight shone on Yi Yukho, one of the association’s founding members and its current chairman. Yi Yukho reacted the same as Kim Sukho.

The guests thought this would be the end and waited for Yoo Yeonha to conclude.

However...

“And finally...”

Yoo Yeonha announced one more person. She gestured at the main door while everyone stood flustered. A spotlight shone on the door and everyone turned towards it.

Kiik—

Soon, the door opened and Chae Joochul the Immortal appeared. No, not just Chae Joochul. Dozens of heroes followed him and surrounded the party hall. The waltz playing in the background died and the sound of footsteps replaced it.

“Let me introduce you all.”

Yoo Yeonha continued while ignoring the atmosphere that suddenly turned cold.

“This is the Four-Colored Immortal, Sir Chae Joochul.”

Chae Joochul slowly walked up the stage.

“Thank you.”

He received the microphone from Yoo Yeonha and looked at Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho. Then he gazed at everyone around them. The executives from each association department including evaluation, administrative, peacekeeping, state affairs, and general affairs... All of them participated in the corruption.

Chae Joochul read the document he brought without the slightest change in expression.

“Kim Sukho, Yi Yukho, Kim On, Yi Wanho, Jin Jaesoon, Jee Yonggu, Gospel, Meizarn...”

He read the 27 association executives' names. Yoo Yeonha came up

with this list after tireless hours of investigation.

“The above 27 gathered here today.”

Chae Joochul finished calling them out. He briefly paused and looked at the party hall. The light in his eyes seemed to pierce one’s mind. Chae Joochul spat out a sentence that instantly shattered the frozen atmosphere.

“You are under arrest for attempted assassinations, conspiracy to commit murder, massacring of civilians, collusion with djinns, and other crimes.”

“What?”

“You will be relieved of your duties as of this moment. You have the right to remain silent and...”

Chae Joochul read their Miranda rights in the silent atmosphere. The distinguished guests listened to his dry voice as if entranced.

“W-What the hell does that mean?”

Kim Sukho shouted first and glared at Chae Joochul with bloodshot eyes.

“Chae Joochul, what authority do you have to—”

“It is one of the authorities you gave to the Nine Stars.”

A deep voice cut off Kim Sukho’s frantic shouting. Soon, another person walked up to the stage. The old man’s left arm and right leg had turned into steel and he couldn’t even walk without a cane.

“The authority of the Nine Stars. I’m sure you’ve heard of it.”

Heynckes grinned at Yi Yukho and Kim Sukho.

“Each member of the Nine Stars has authority equivalent to an

international investigation agency. Isn't that the clause you wrote? Joochul here is an investigator I hired."

Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho immediately roared.

"Chae, Chae Joochul! Do you think you can get away with this?"

Kim Sukho desperately shouted. Heynckes might be difficult, but he planned to bring Chae Joochul down with him. He had a lot to reveal given their history together.

However, Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho had no choice but to shut their mouths.

Tap, tap—

Another man followed Chae Joochul up the stage and stopped their shouting.

"This is proof."

He served as one of the association's authority holders. Yoo Jangwon handed Chae Joochul an envelope with the evidence.

"Everything is inside here."

"You, you!"

Kim Sukho quickly realized the situation as a seasoned politician. Yoo Jangwon and Chae Joochul had betrayed him. Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho shook with rage. However, Yoo Jangwon ignored them like dogs on the street and continued.

"The Kwang-Oh Incident, Leork Incident, Augsburg Collapse Incident, and other big and small incidents caused by djinns... These two masterminded all these incidents to maintain their authority. The evidence is already being broadcasted all over the world."

Yoo Jangwon clapped and a huge holographic screen appeared

onstage.

— I am here today, not as hero Yoo Jinwoong, but as a fellow human being. I am here to confess the evil deeds I have committed.

Yoo Jinwoong stood in front of the media: YTV, MBN, KSB... He confessed in front of the entire world and Kim Sukho's jaw dropped.

When did Yoo Jinwoong get there? Wasn't he just here a moment ago?

Kim Sukho turned to Yi Yukho after watching the screen. They exchanged an obvious message and would struggle until the end now that they found themselves in a corner.

"Don't move!"

Kwaaaaa! A greatsword formed with magic power separated them. An intense heat rose from the crack in the ground and prevented them from joining hands. Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho gulped at Chae Nayun's power that far surpassed the rumors.

"This is Essence of the Strait's Chae Nayun. The government has given me the authority to arrest the association's lawbreakers and to punish and judge them in the process. Resisting will not be tolerated."

"I'm sorry to tell you, but I haven't been convicted yet. I'm no lawbreaker."

Chae Nayun didn't even pretend to hear Kim Sukho. She seemed ready to behead him if he made one wrong move.

As expected of Chae Joochul's granddaughter, she's crazy. Kim Sukho shrugged and kneeled on the ground.

"Then excuse me."

Yoo Jangwon descended from the stage during this chaos.

"Wait! Stop him! Stop him too! We didn't commit any crimes! He

controlled us and now he's controlling you!"

Kim Sukho shouted and pointed at Yoo Jangwon. However, Yoo Jangwon quickly escaped and prepared to switch disguises again.

Ssk—

Cold steel touched her neck.

"Oops..."

Jain raised her hand and a woman appeared from behind a pillar.

"It's been a while, Jain. Do you have time today? I'd like to have a little chat."

Yun Seung-Ah slowly moved her sword and nicked Jain's neck.

"Uh... Well... can we chat later? I'm a bit busy right now. I have to make them quickly give up..."

"I can't do that. I need to hear something too."

"Hear? Hear what?"

"Oh? You're pretending you don't know? I want to cut you up the more you do this, bitch."

Blood flowed down Yun Seung-Ah's sword and a sharp pain spread throughout Jain's body. Jain gritted her teeth and pondered, *Should I push her sword away or hear this woman out?*

Unfortunately, she didn't have the time to weigh her options.

KWAANG!

The mansion's roof suddenly collapsed. Countless flying monsters and New Evil members appeared. *Kieeek! Kieeek!* Their ferocious cries rang out as demonic energy spread. The sudden attack surprised

everyone. Jain glanced at Yun Seung-Ah.

“Why don’t we chat after everything ends? I’ll keep my promise this time. This is my retirement mission, you see.”

Yun Seung-Ah didn’t reply. Then something broke and a huge sonic boom occurred from magic power clashing with demonic energy.

“Huuu...”

Yun Seung-Ah released Jain.

“I won’t give you a chance next time if you don’t keep this promise.”

“Okay, okay. I already know your phone number. Just wait.”

“Shut up and call me when you’re done.”

Yun Seung-Ah ran towards the party hall and Jain changed into that person to finish the job.

The person Kim Sukho feared and wanted to kill. The reason he caused the Kwang-Oh Incident. Jain disguised herself as Jin Seyeon’s father, Jin Younghwan.

* * *

[Underground Bunker – Mansion]

Yoo Yeonha evacuated to the underground bunker. She would be useless in battle and the New Evils would definitely target her. Chae Joochul and Heynckes would take care of the rest.

“Haaa...”

She sighed and turned on the TV as her father’s press conference came to an end.

— I will spend the rest of my life atoning for my sins.

He proudly reached out and the police restrained him with handcuffs that suppressed his magic power. Her company, Essential Dynamics, had invented that equipment.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha couldn't watch her father being taken into custody. She turned off the TV and bitterness welled up inside her. She felt like vomiting and her heart ached from an emptiness.

Did they have to do this? Was it worth abandoning her father? Fish couldn't live in water too pure. Perhaps it might've been okay to compromise.

“Sigh...”

Yoo Yeonha helplessly picked up her smartwatch. Then she checked her past conversations with her father.

[What are you up to, Yeonha?] [I had a little to drink.] [I want to see you.]

Her father sent numerous messages, but she didn't respond to most of them. She began to hate herself for not replying.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid...?”

She smacked her head and blamed herself when she suddenly found a long message without any recipient. She had undoubtedly sent it, but couldn't recall. Yoo Yeonha curiously tilted her head and clicked it.

Soon, her face grew redder than an apple and she exploded from embarrassment.

[Hello, Kim Hajin. This is Yoo Yeonha. Today has been a difficult day. Well, maybe not for you, but it sure has for me. Maybe that's why. The days I spent with you as my trusty ally are popping up in my head. I feel embarrassed, tired, and a little annoyed. However, they're quite precious memories now that I think about them. Right, I'm thinking about you right now...]

“W-W-What the hell is this?”

Yoo Yeonha clutched her head. *I'm thinking about you right now? What kind of third-grader confession is this?* The unimaginable embarrassment caused her brain to melt.

In her utter embarrassment, she faintly recalled what she forgot and why she felt so empty.

“Ah...”

The reason she cast light on the Kwang-Oh Incident and went so far as to abandon her father.

“Ah...?”

Yoo Yeonha pressed her temples.

“Ah, ah, ah.”

Someone's face faintly surfaced in her mind. Someone she shouldn't forget. Someone she couldn't forget.

That someone's face overlapped with the most embarrassing string of text she ever read and filled her empty head.

Chapter 375

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (9)

Kim Suho calmly reacted to the New Evils' ambush because no demon could withstand the Sword Saint's authority. He simply swung his sword and cut them apart.

Dozens of enemies met their end every time Misteltein flashed.

"Oi, Kim Sukho, did you call them too?"

"No, it's not me!"

Heynckes and Kim Sukho's voices rang out from the battlefield. Kim Suho glanced at them as he swung his sword.

"Then who called them if it wasn't you?"

"You idiot! The invitation stated both the party's time and place. I'm sure they figured it out by themselves!"

Kim Sukho roared, but Heynckes looked doubtful.

"*Mmm...* Well, it doesn't matter. You'll end up taking the blame anyways."

"W-Wh, what did you say?"

Kim Suho took his eyes off this poetic scene of justice and focused in front again. Several enemies remained. A demon with multiple arms and legs charged at him. It released thin, sharp strings of magic power like a spider, but Kim Suho unleashed his magic power and incinerated the strings. Then he pierced the demon's heart with his

sword.

“Oi.”

Jin Sahyuk called Kim Suho as the demon’s black blood splashed on his forehead. She looked completely at ease.

“What?”

Kim Suho shouted back as he sent sword strikes flying. Jin Sahyuk chased his lightning Misteltein with her eyes. He brandished his sword to the right and calmly reacted to a New Evil member’s sudden attack from the left. Jin Sahyuk didn’t pay attention to his swordsmanship, but to his sword itself.

“That sword, who gave it to you?”

“What do you mean... *Huup!*”

Kim Suho grunted and a fierce gale shot from his sword. His attack instantly blew away the demons encircling him. Then he charged towards the closest demon and took care of them one by one.

“You didn’t receive it from someone? Then did you obtain it alone?” Jin Sahyuk asked.

“Why are you asking me that?” Kim Suho shouted as he swung his sword.

“Because I just don’t think this is right.”

Jin Sahyuk rubbed her chin while staring at the back of Kim Suho’s head. She seemed to be thinking, *Just what the hell is inside his brain?*

“What?”

“No, never mind. It looks like you won’t remember for the rest of your life.”

I should try just in case... Jin Sahyuk murmured and transformed into a cluster of energy to invade Kim Suho. She had been making good use of this inner body infiltration technique ever since developing it.

“Wait, you...”

Kim Suho didn’t have time to resist. Jin Sahyuk’s technique caught him off guard and he suddenly stopped. He felt something sharp going through his head.

“Jin Sahyuk, what are you doing—!”

He wanted to scream at her to get out, but the fight hadn’t ended yet.

“Auwk!”

A demon appeared out of nowhere and grabbed Kim Suho’s head.

KWANG!

The demon smashed him into the ground. A powerful shock struck his brain, which allowed Jin Sahyuk to explore his brain easier.

* * *

“Ee, eek!”

Kim Sukho screamed as Heynckes took him into custody. The former disgraced president released his worn-out magic power and pushed Heynckes away. Kim Sukho took this opportunity to escape.

“Kua, kuaaa.”

He ran as if his life depended on it and seemed to think his safety would be guaranteed if he escaped the party hall.

“Tsk.”

Heynckes simply watched and didn’t even bother chasing. Rather, he

pitied the frantic Kim Sukho.

“Hua, hua, hua...”

Kim Sukho left the party hall without any hindrance and ran through the hallway.

“Uek!”

Suddenly, he tripped on something. Kim Sukho flew into the air before falling disgracefully. He subconsciously turned to see what had tripped him.

“...?”

Then his expression stiffened.

“Uh... uh... you...”

Strange sounds escaped his mouth as if his tongue became paralyzed. His head hurt and his thoughts froze. Someone who shouldn't be here, no, someone who couldn't be here stood in front of him.

“It's been a while, President.”

The calm voice echoed out. Memories Kim Sukho forgot surfaced from the deepest corner of his mind. Jin Younghwan hadn't aged a bit and looked as he did in the past.

“You, you...”

Kim Sukho violently shook as he pointed at Jin Younghwan, who spoke with a grin.

“It's nice to see you again. You thought I died, right? Ah, I might have. Who knows... maybe I'm just an illusion from your guilty conscience. Then again, I doubt you'd have any guilt. That must mean I'm real.”

Kim Sukho froze in shock as cold sweat dripped from his disheveled

hair. He simply stared at Jin Younghwan in a daze.

“Now then, why don’t the two of us have a little talk?”

Jin Younghwan wanted to continue, but Kim Sukho already lost it.

“Eeeek...”

He strangely screeched before collapsing with his eyes rolled back. Foam even came out of his mouth. Jin Younghwan raised his eyebrows at this scene.

“What a coward.”

How could someone who killed so many be such a coward? Did he kill people without fearing they would ever come back to bite him?

Jain kicked the unconscious Kim Sukho in the stomach before turning around. She slightly jumped in surprise.

“Oh, you were watching?”

Jin Seyeon stood there and bitterly stared at her father. Sorrow and nostalgia filled her heart even though she knew it was Jain.

“Please cancel that disguise now.”

“Hm? Oh, okay.” Jain undid her disguise and Jin Seyeon continued with a deep breath.

“Yun Seung-Ah is looking for you.”

“Oh, yeah. I’m sure she is.”

“Are you not going to see her?”

“Nope, of course not.” Jain brightly smiled and Jin Seyeon dumbfoundedly glared at her.

“She probably knew I wasn’t going to come back when she let me go. *Mmm*, I guess you can call our relationship a MacGuffin. Besides, I still have important things to do.”

Jain slicked her hair back.

Jin Seyeon wanted to criticize her with, *That’s just an excuse—*

Dudududu—

However, helicopters resounded from above. *Wiing— Wiing—* Sirens also rang out.

“*Mm*, hear that? It’s time for us to run.”

Jain smiled and Jin Seyeon sighed without a choice.

Outside reinforcements finally arrived 10 minutes after the New Evils attacked.

* * *

— This is an unprecedented exposé of corruption. The fact that the Hero Association’s chairman and Korea’s former president colluded with djinns is taking the world by storm. Yoo Jinwoong and Chae Joochul’s confession and whistleblowing have confirmed the association executives’ dealings with djinns. Naturally, the Hero Association has collapsed into chaos. A retired hero, Yoo Jangwon, also stood out in this incident as a whistleblower...

Pantheon, a Temple of Justice subsidiary, normally served as a resting place for the Temple of Justice heroes. However, it now became the headquarters of an investigative agency.

World governments realized the need for a thorough investigation due to this scandal’s sheer scale and designated the Temple of Justice. The public didn’t oppose even though the Temple of Justice belonged to the association because they trusted Aileen.

“*Hmm...*”

Chae Nayun sat on a couch in the Temple of Justice's lobby while fiddling with her necklace. The New Evils had been suppressed and the corrupt association members had been arrested. All this took only half a day.

"Finish this without dragging it on. They'll launch a counterattack if we don't end things within 24 hours."

Yoo Yeonha had said and they succeeded.

However, Chae Nayun didn't feel refreshed for some reason. She felt stuffy instead, but not because of the Chae family's involvement in the corruption. She already steeled herself to this fate when she discovered the truth regarding Chae Jinyoon.

She had forgotten something important and always subconsciously fiddled with her necklace. This sense of disharmony only grew stronger as she touched the necklace. Someone had given it to her. She had to return it, but couldn't remember who. An unpleasant forgetfulness swept her mind every time she would almost recall.

— *Kieeeeeek!*

"Ah, geez!"

A shriek rang out and the startled Chae Nayun raised her head.

Rachel sat in the same room to testify and became shocked too. Spartan had been sleeping on her lap and suddenly shrieked.

— *Kieeeeeek! Kieeeeeek!*

"S-Spartan? W-What's wrong?"

— *Kieeeeeek! Kieeeeeek!*

It looked like he had a seizure.

"H-Hey! Do something about him!"

The other heroes present as testifiers furrowed their brows. Yoo Sihyuk, a close friend of Yoo Jinwoong, scowled especially hard.

“Spartan, Spartan...”

— *Kiee...*

The bird finally stopped when Rachel grabbed his wings and whispered in his ear. Then he began pecking Rachel’s smartwatch. What started as, *tk— tk— tk—*, quickly transformed into *tudududududu!* Spartan became a woodpecker that evolved into a power drill.

“W-What now?”

Rachel turned on her smartwatch and wondered if she missed something, but couldn’t find anything unusual. She only saw a message from a VIP friend. Right, the message came from Yoo Yeonha.

“What is it?” Chae Nayun curiously asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Looks like that woodpecker wants you to check your smartwatch. Did you get something?”

“I received a message from Yeonha, but that’s it...” [1]

“Yo, can you choose between polite or casual speech instead of mixing the two?”

Rachel repeatedly blinked at Chae Nayun and lowered her gaze to Yoo Yeonha’s message without replying. Her face immediately stiffened and her entire body froze like a rock as she fell into deep thought.

“What? What is it? Did something happen?” Chae Nayun’s eyebrows perked up.

“...”

Rachel didn't reply.

“Hello? Can you hear me?”

She continued to ignore Chae Nayun.

The slightly offended Chae Nayun furrowed her brows and turned on her smartwatch. She received countless new messages, but Yoo Yeonha's stood out. Chae Nayun clicked it without much thought.

Immediately, she made the same shocked expression as Rachel. Her mind and body also froze. Only her eyes slowly moved up and down while reading.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha's text message contained a certain ordinary, yet unordinary name.

Chae Nayun couldn't recall this name, but it felt familiar. She subconsciously clutched her necklace and slowly raised her head. Rachel also received the same message and stared at her.

“This Kim Hajin... who is he?” Rachel asked when their eyes met.

Chae Nayun couldn't answer. They both needed time to deeply reflect.

* * *

— A month has passed and the trial continues. Kim Sukho and Yi Yukho claim to be innocent as the public criticizes them. Yoo Jinwoong has admitted his wrongs and has been convicted of multiple charges. Chae Joochul stands in a slightly unique position. Taking into account how he acted as one of the whistleblowers, his contributions during the war against Orden, and his worsening physical health due to his age and participation in the Great Devil War...

“Things sure are changing.”

I remained at my cabin by the Alps’ cliffside and watched TV while eating some cereal. The month-long [*Hero Association Corruption Gate*] had yet to die down in the news.

“Huuu...”

It didn’t feel so bad looking at a world progressing towards a story that shouldn’t have existed. I felt quite happy. Not only did this world defeat Baal, but now they eliminated the tumor known as the Hero Association. This setting with the association executives colluding with djinns... No, I should stop referring to such things as settings. I shouldn’t even use that word anymore. After all, it only made me sad.

Tok, tok—

Someone knocked on my door. *A guest?* I turned off my smartwatch and stood up. I still lived a life of leisure as the world rapidly changed.

Tok, tok—

Today’s first guest seemed quite impatient. I almost opened the door, but paused with my hand on the knob. I let out a faint breath and couldn’t help but think, *Could it be?* I laughed and shook my head.

For the past month, I kept anticipating something in the corner of my mind. An empty hope that they would remember and come find me. I knew it would be impossible.

So I opened the door without expecting much.

Kiik—

The wooden door creaked open and revealed two people. The blonde, blue-eyed women turned out to be strangers as expected. The woman on the right gulped before opening her mouth.

“Ah... um... Are you... the Cliff’s End Pharmacist?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

I spoke casually on purpose. It didn’t seem realistic or charismatic for a mysterious pharmacist living on a cliff to speak politely.

“Ah, I see! Wow, really, we finally...”

The two women cried while hugging each other.

“I’ll chase you out if you keep crying.”

“N-No! We’ll stop crying!”

I led them inside once they stopped crying and asked about the patient’s symptoms. They said poison from the venomous Albahara snake caused it.

The Albahara snake’s venom led to unavoidable death even in this world with scientific and magical knowledge. Death wouldn’t be instantaneous and the victim would suffer 3-14 days before dying. No known antidote existed.

“Do you have that snake’s venom or its tooth?”

“Ah, yes. Just in case.”

The duo came well-prepared. They took out the snake’s venom, multiple teeth, and even its scales from their bag.

“We canceled our qi reinforcement after killing its mother and the baby hiding nearby ambushed us. We let our guard down.”

“I see.”

“Yes, the Albahara snake has weak teeth. So long as you maintain your qi reinforcement at all times—”

“Yeah, yeah. Alright, you can leave.”

“Pardon?”

I retrieved the materials and sent them outside.

“I don’t like showing people my manufacturing process.”

“Ah, yes. Understood!”

I swallowed the Albahara snake’s venom as soon as they left.

Detoxification happened automatically when I analyzed poison. I considered it the simplest function of my *[Medicinal Memory Physique]*.

“Auu, it hurts.”

The *[Medicinal Memory Physique]* stored the Albahara poison’s antidote after about 3 minutes. I immediately materialized the antidote as a pill and shouted.

“Oi! Come in.”

The two women quickly returned and I handed them the antidote. They didn’t doubt my pill in the slightest. They simply cried and handed me an expensive jewel, a blue diamond.

“Thank you!”

Both of them left after bowing 90 degrees.

“Yeah, take care.”

I sat in my chair again after sending them off and turned on my smartwatch.

— Essence of the Strait’s Chief Officer Yoo Yeonha announced her retirement, but the guild’s fierce dissuasion made her retract her statement. Many are sending Yoo Yeonha and Yoo Jinwoong’s family words of encouragement and sympathy...

My smartwatch projected a TV screen, but the news didn't seem that interesting. I stared at Yoo Yeonha holding a press conference and changed the channel.

— The Kwang-Oh Incident is a key subject in this matter...

“Ah.”

I immediately turned off the smartwatch. Honestly, I hoped the Kwang-Oh Incident would help. Memories of me had been wiped from everyone's minds, but I hoped someone would remember once they heard about the Kwang-Oh Incident. Unfortunately, that didn't happen.

A month passed, but no one came to find me.

That goes without saying. The false relationships I built through the author's power should disappear. After all, this world couldn't be considered a novel anymore. I couldn't be called the novelist Kim Hajin, but just an insignificant Kim Hajin.

“Sigh...”

Tok, tok—

Another knock rang out. It seemed to be the second visitor of the day.

“Lots of visitors today, huh.”

I stood up again and walked to the door. The visitor this time seemed even more impatient. Perhaps they urgently needed help.

“Alright, alright...”

I opened the door without hesitation.

Whish—

Black hair fluttered in the Alps' cold wind. A dazzling sunset dyed the

sky orange as she looked at me. The scenery looked truly beautiful. So unbelievably beautiful I couldn't think of anything.

1. Rachel mixes polite and casual speech here. 📖

Chapter 376

The Story That Shouldn't Have Existed (10)

I looked at her standing outside the door. The world fell silent and the space around us seemed to contract and expand on its own. My body refused to move and I wondered if I was dreaming. This couldn't be real. I closed my eyes hoping she wouldn't disappear and prayed that I wouldn't wake up in bed. Then I opened my eyes again.

“...”

She stood in the same spot. I really couldn't think. The huge shock fried all my brain cells, so I remained frozen and just stared at her.

Suddenly, I got cold feet. What if she just came for my pills like the other visitors? She should've forgotten about me, so did I have to treat her like a stranger?

However...

“I told you before, didn't I?”

Her voice flowed into my ears.

“I would never forget.”

Her eyes shone like jewels as she cried. I had never seen her cry before.

“I told you I wouldn't forget.”

She sobbed and I didn't know what to do. Tears also flowed down my cheeks. Seeing her cry shocked me just as much as her arrival.

Should I comfort her first or silently embrace her? What should I say?
How should I approach her?

She walked into my arms as I hesitated like a fool.

“Ah...”

A short mutter escaped my lips. Her scent tickled my nose as our bodies touched. I felt like fainting and desperately wrapped my arms around her.

“Kim Hajin.”

She said my name. Yi Byul said my name. She looked at me like a kitten with her hands on my chest.

“I remember you.”

“...”

I smiled and a great sense of relief overcame me.

This person remembered me. Yi Byul came to find me.

“Thank you. Really.”

We tightly embraced each other.

However...

My smile froze. What if the co-author suddenly appeared? What if he said an error occurred and took away her memories again?

I looked at Yi Byul rubbing her face on my chest. I didn't know if she tried to wipe her tears or simply felt too happy. Well, probably the former since the Boss I knew would die from embarrassment. *Ah*, she just blew her nose too.

I just wanted to live in this moment without any worries, thoughts, or

concerns. Just the two of us reunited forever.

My prayers seemed useless. I felt another presence approaching the cabin. No, it sounded like fierce shouting.

Kieeeeeek!

An eagle's cry echoed out.

I looked at the cabin ceiling while holding Boss. An old habit from when I could still see through objects with my Master Sharpshooter gift. I couldn't see beyond the ceiling anymore, but could guess who also arrived.

"Huhum..."

Yi Byul left my arms and stood next to me. She prepared to greet the others and stood with dignity like the usual Boss after crying just a moment ago. Then she turned and looked at me. I could still see the traces of tears around her eyes.

"Hajin."

I tilted my head and she coughed a few times before proudly declaring.

"I'm the first one who found you. Remember that. Yep, I'm the first. The first... ufufu."

Her playful smile looked so pure.

I also smiled and kissed her.

* * *

"Sigh..."

Jin Sahyuk furrowed her brows at those two people hugging. She hated tears and touching reunions like this. Of course, she had enough

sense to not bother them. No matter how unsightly she found it, they had triumphed over the world.

“I didn’t even need to help,” Jin Sahyuk muttered.

Kim Hajin’s existence had undoubtedly been erased from this world. No one remembered him and no records remained. He had been banished and isolated.

Jin Sahyuk could only make an uncertain conjecture. She guessed that Kim Hajin had been erased, but Kindspring remained inside him. As such, people involved with Kim Chundong possessed the potential to remember Kim Hajin.

Jin Sahyuk came to tell Kim Hajin about this potential and received information about Kindspring.

However, it seemed she didn’t need to do anything. Kim Chundong obviously had a deep relationship with the Kwang-Oh Incident. Those who knew about the incident would recall Kim Hajin due to Kim Chundong’s past.

Of course, denser people like Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak would never recall Kim Hajin because they didn’t have any connections with Kim Chundong. They might notice something off and slightly recall with their sharp senses, but they would never remember everything about Kim Hajin.

“What an unstable world.”

Jin Sahyuk sighed with a hint of self-deprecation. How could a world be so full of loopholes? How pitiful that she existed in such a world?

— What are you going to do from now on?

A voice rose from Jin Sahyuk’s heart. It sounded cold and resentful.

“*Mm*, that’s what I wanted to ask him. What happened to Kindspring and what will happen to my world?”

Jin Sahyuk closed her eyes and looked into her inner mind. The frozen Puharen stared at her in a carefully decorated room.

“After all, he’s the one who created this world.”

— Then why aren’t you asking him?

Puharen learned how to talk, but hadn’t completely healed. He certainly hadn’t forgiven Jin Sahyuk yet either. If anything, he could now directly attack her.

“I thought this world abandoned him, but there’s someone in an even worse situation.”

Jin Sahyuk smirked. The world may have abandoned Kim Hajin, but its people remembered him. Kim Hajin should be able to live a peaceful life.

That didn’t apply to Kindspring, who lived a life of solitude without parents before being transported to Akatrina. The deep darkness inside him partially disappeared when he served Prihi, but even Prihi abandoned him in the end. Two different worlds had abandoned Kindspring and no one remembered him.

Jin Sahyuk couldn’t accept that. She planned to erect a statue of him after reconstructing her kingdom so his name would be remembered forever as her most loyal servant. She would inscribe his name along with hers onto the first page of Akatrina’s history book.

Before that, Jin Sahyuk believed Kindspring still lived. She believed they would have a miraculous reunion once she returned to Akatrina.

“Alright, let’s go back home.”

— Are you really going back there?

Puharen asked.

— You’ll die if you do. You know what’s in that place.

“I won’t die.”

Jin Sahyuk lightly retorted and opened her eyes.

— I’ll kill you.

Puharen coldly replied.

“That doesn’t matter. I wouldn’t have made it here in the first place if I was going to die by your hands.”

— And that’s okay with you? Don’t you have lingering regrets in this world?

Jin Sahyuk flinched. Puharen may have been correct.

“Lingering regrets, you say...”

Jin Sahyuk didn’t want to admit it, but she couldn’t trick Puharen. It must be there if Puharen said so. After all, he could search her inner mind at will.

“I’ll deal with it. No regret is bigger than Plerion in my heart.”

Jin Sahyuk grinned and grasped the dimension stone.

— Then what is Bell doing? Is he in Akatrina?

Puharen spoke again.

“No, Bell... is doing something to return to his world.”

Bell. Jin Sahyuk became speechless every time she thought about him. He used Baal to revive his destroyed world. Jin Sahyuk didn’t know if he planned that or if things just turned out that way. She believed he intended so given his scheming cleverness.

“Puharen, you already found out about Bell?”

— Yep, I'll soon reach the deepest part of your mind.

“That might be a bit dangerous.”

— Dangerous? I told you. I'll kill you.

Woong—

A wavering portal formed next to Jin Sahyuk and a red-haired woman appeared. Shimurin had promised to support her.

Woong— Woong— Shimurin waved a staff purchased from the market.

“Are you ready?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk nodded before handing her the dimension stone.

The dimension stone from Baal was extremely unstable. It could only transport one person to Akatrina, so she required Shimurin's help.

“Alright... Jin Sahyuk.”

Shimurin asked once again before using the dimension stone to form a *[Dimensional Portal]*.

“Are you sure you won't regret it? If you leave, you won't be able to return.”

“No need to ask again.”

Jin Sahyuk imposingly raised her eyebrows.

“I am a king. No one can stop a king from returning.”

“Sure...”

Shimurin shrugged and activated her grand dimensional magic. The mystical stone fused with her magic power and glowed purple. Then it violently shook before scattering to dust. The tiny specks rose into the air with Shimurin's magic power.

Jiing!

It formed an oval wavering with purple light.

"Now then, King. Move your baggage through first."

Shimurin grinned.

"Getting a bit cheeky there with your tone."

"Didn't I tell you? A grand magician holds the same rank as a king."

"Tsk..."

Would it kill you to treat me with more respect?

Jin Sahyuk clicked her tongue and threw in 8 magic bags filled with food, robots, weapons, armor, and other daily necessities.

"Should we go now?"

Shimurin spoke as she looked into the portal. It still had enough energy after moving so much baggage. Enough to carry two people over. The grand magician smiled in satisfaction at her perfect calculation.

"Yeah. Let's go, Shimurin. To Akatrina."

As Jin Sahyuk prepared to step into the portal...

"What?" Jin Sahyuk paused after sensing a presence that appeared out of nowhere. She and Shimurin stared towards the cabin.

Kieeeeeek!

An eagle circled the sky above Kim Hajin's cabin as if it knew his location. Several others walked up the Alps' mountain path.

Jin Sahyuk's shoulders trembled. She didn't like them, but they had been through thick and thin together. To put it grandly, those heroes had fought against the world and triumphed.

"Haha..."

Jin Sahyuk chuckled as she stared at them, yet she didn't leave any words behind.

A single gust of wind shook the Alps' grassy field.

Whish—

The northern wind swept away what was previously there. Silence instantly descended. The wavering purple portal and the woman delicately smiling disappeared. Only their footsteps on the grassy field served as evidence that they existed.

However, the grassy field was far from lonely.

"Hua..."

Soon, more footsteps arrived with deep breaths. They belonged to those who remembered that person and came searching for him.

"Let's go. There's no need to make a big deal out of this."

A voice filled with pleasant nervousness rang out.

The wind seemed to carry a blue hue and a beautiful sunset cast over the sky.

They would soon reunite with him. The group looked forward to calling his name and slowly walked towards the cabin at the cliff's end.

Chapter 377

Epilogue (1), My Story

“Get up. Get up. Get up.”

A cute voice tickled my ears. It sounded like a bird chirping because of my drowsiness.

“Get up. Get uuuuup!”

My shoulders decently shook from those small hands. My drowsiness quickly faded, but I stayed still on purpose. I had to carefully stop my mouth from wriggling with joy.

“I said get up...”

Evandel shook me for a long time and crossed her arms. She glared at me with her perky eyes. Only then did I open mine and smiled at her pouting face.

“Ah, you’re up!”

“Yep, I’m up.”

I hugged Evandel while still drunk on sleep. She dug into my chest like a puppy and giggled adorably. I stroked her hair and faced the window. A green hill entered my view and the cozy sun illuminated the residential district.

The Colored-Paper Charity Foundation had constructed his healing city. I came down from the Alps 3 months ago and became an official pharmacist here.

“Hajin, I’m hungry. I want to eat breakfast.”

Evandel's squishy voice rose from my chest.

"Oh, you do?"

"Un, let's go!"

She grew big enough to use casual speech now. I got up from bed with a smile.

Rachel and Yi Byul sat staring at each other when we arrived at the cafeteria. Their expressions looked stiff as if they just finished a serious conversation. However, their faces instantly changed when they spotted us.

"You're awake? Good job, Evandel."

Rachel greeted us first.

"Un."

Evandel scurried up and sat between Rachel and Yi Byul. I sat on the opposite side facing them. Then I asked Yi Byul and Rachel.

"What were you two talking about?"

They exchanged glances before shrugging.

"We were talking about Evandel."

"After all, it's been 3 months since we all started staying here."

"Ah..."

Rachel and Yi Byul exchanged glances before faintly coughing. A strange air flowed between them, but I didn't dig further and reached for a loaf of bread on the table.

I nibbled on the bread and looked around at the people that made every day feel like a dream. They stayed by my side for the past 3

months without losing their memories of me. Right, 3 months had already passed since our reunion.

Many things happened during this time. Unsurprisingly, Yoo Yeonha masterminded most of it. She misunderstood like always after hearing I had been deleted from this world.

What did she say again? *So that's your sacrifice?* She blurted something incomprehensible and researched how to bring back my existence.

I found it cute at first as she gathered everyone who remembered me. This included nine others: Chae Nayun, Rachel, Evandel, Cheok Jungyeong, Jain, Droon, Jin Seyeon, and Yi Byul. Unfortunately, Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak didn't know about the Kwang-Oh Incident. They also lacked a vital key like Evandel and couldn't remember me.

After that, Yoo Yeonha began to experiment. She spent tens of billions of won before I could stop her. As expected, no solution could be found. Yoo Yeonha ended up offering me Essential Pharmacy's CEO position. However, I didn't think that position suited me and settled for being a researcher. I simply wanted to help as many as possible.

"How is it? Good?" Yi Byul suddenly asked. She must've baked this bread judging from her eyes full of expectation. I nodded with a smile.

"Yeah, it's good."

"I'm glad..."

Yi Byul sighed in relief. I found her quite cute and grabbed her hand under the table.

"Ah."

An embarrassed sound escaped her lips.

"Cough."

Rachel cleared her throat. Yi Byul flinched and quickly let go. I awkwardly scratched my head.

“How have things been, Rachel?”

“I’m still working on what I’ve always been doing: the revival of England and the English Royal Court Guild. That’s why I went to Cube all those years ago.”

Rachel sweetly smiled. She lived her life for her nation and guild. Now should be the perfect time after she greatly contributed in the Great Devil War. Talks of restoration gained traction in England.

“Of course, several hurdles exist. Lancaster is still alive too.”

“He is?”

I became dumbstruck. *That guy is still alive?*

“Yes.”

Rachel continued with a light smile.

“We have many problems to resolve. I felt afraid in the past, but I’m okay now. I’ve grown stronger thanks to Hajin and Evandel.”

“...”

That caught me off guard. I slightly flinched and Yi Byul’s eyes turned sharper. She glanced at Rachel before looking at me with puffed cheeks.

“Thank you.”

Rachel added. She only said two words, but I felt the meaning behind them. Her emotions seemed as transparent as her ocean eyes.

“I don’t think I’ve thanked you enough, Hajin.” Rachel leisurely shrugged.

“Uh... No, you don’t need to. I should be the one thanking you.” I nodded in embarrassment and ate my bread. Meanwhile, Yi Byul

spoke to Rachel.

“There will be a small meeting tonight.”

I looked up again and Yi Byul seemed nervous as she glared at Rachel. A faint chuckle escaped my lips.

“Rachel, you’re coming too, right?”

Yi Byul made it sound like a challenge, but her intentions were pure. Rachel knew this too and accepted the invitation with a smile.

I briefly stared at them before opening my mouth. “I’ll buy the groceries.”

“*Un?* Then me too. I want to go too.”

Evandel brightly smiled and raised both of her hands. Rachel’s eyes slightly widened.

“*Hm?* I don’t mind Evandel, but weren’t you going to Disneyland today with your friends?”

“*Aaah!* You’re right!”

Evandel recalled the promise with her friends.

“I guess we can buy groceries next time.”

She declared like a true adult.

* * *

The sun began to set at 5:30 P.M. I went out to buy groceries at a supermarket located in the city’s center. Young boys and girls filled the streets. I walked while listening to their cheerful laughter.

Then I suddenly felt a gaze on me. It came from the forest of zelkova trees on the city’s right. I grew nervous since I couldn’t even defeat

ordinary djinns now.

Soon, the mysterious person revealed herself and my worries disappeared. Chae Nayun stood at the border between the city road and the sky. She looked at me for a long time and confidently grinned.

“Have you been well?”

She greeted me like usual. I smiled and nodded. “Yeah, it’s been a while.”

We hadn’t met since our reunion at the cabin when she vanished with a few words, *I’m leaving*.

“Yeah, it has.” She crossed her arms.

“Wait, didn’t you say you would conquer the Tower of Miracle?”

This tower left many wounds on the world. It became a forbidden topic after Creator’s Sacred Grace failed their expedition. However, Essence of the Strait recently announced their plans to officially conquer it. The Tower of Miracle became the spotlight of attention once again.

“Yep, I’ll obliterate that tower.”

Chae Nayun raised her arm and flexed. I could practically see her oozing confidence.

“Pft. Yeah, I’m sure it’s possible for you. Oh right, I’m about to buy some groceries. Want to come along?”

I pointed at the supermarket in the distance. However, Chae Nayun shook her head.

“No, that’s not what I came for.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Well... the campaign is in 2 days. I might die, so I thought I’d tell you before I go.”

She brought up a frightening topic. Chae Nayun lowered her head and I furrowed my brows. The setting sun glowed behind her. She remained silent for a long time before muttering.

“Thank you for everything.”

“*Huh?*”

“Thanks to you, I didn’t have to see oppa becoming a devil. I picked up the sword because of you. You’re also the reason I became this strong.”

She spoke as if reciting lines she practiced countless times. I could tell she felt embarrassed because of her flushed face.

“Thanks to you, I also regained my real grandfather.”

“It’ll take him 20 years to fully recover with that medicine.”

A pill that reduced the side effects of gifts. I created the original using my settings intervention, so reproducing it had been extremely difficult. Essential Pharmacy finally succeeded in creating a tiny amount. They gave it to Heynckes and Chae Joochul, who regained a bit of his true emotions. I didn’t think Chae Nayun would mention it.

“Just accept my gratitude, bastard. You’re the reason I’m alive and standing here right now.”

“...”

I bitterly smiled. Looking back, I came to love this world because of Chae Nayun. She showed me it was more than a novel.

“It’s the same with me. The reason I’m here... might be because of you.”

“Is it? That’s good to hear.”

Chae Nayun walked up and stopped a nose-distance away. She looked straight into my eyes and scratched her cheeks before dropping her head.

“Then...”

She took a few steps back while looking at my feet and raised her head as though she finally came to a decision. Chae Nayun reached out and I instinctively flinched. Her action felt slightly intimidating.

“W-What?”

“Here.”

She opened her fist and a shiny object dangled down.

“Ah.”

I couldn’t help but exclaim. I gifted her this necklace a long time ago. She stared at it with a bittersweet expression.

“You lent it to me, remember? I should return it since the war is over.”

“It’s fine.”

I pushed her hand back. After all, I made this necklace for her.

“What? No, take it.”

“I said it’s fine. Just think of it as a gift from a friend.”

Chae Nayun paused and clenched her fists. Her face froze and her shoulders stiffened. She roughly brushed her hair back.

“You... you think we can still be friends?”

Her trembling voice trailed off as though she felt angry... no, sad. She hatefully glared at me.

“You should know. We can’t be friends.”

I remained silent. I couldn’t say anything right now. I could only wait for Chae Nayun’s choice one day.

“Do you know what kind of person you are to me?”

I shook my head and she stared with a sad smile.

“Most likely... I’ll continue to hate and love you until I die.”

Her voice sounded cold as ice and deep as the ocean. It carried an incomprehensible darkness.

“So, here!”

She reached out without giving me a chance to think.

“Take this, you bastard!”

“If you say so...”

“*Huh?*”

A shadow suddenly fell over her face when I agreed. I put on a bright smile and she playfully tapped my chest with the hand holding the necklace.

“Okay, take it.”

“I will, but not now. I’ll take it back after you return from the campaign.”

“What?”

“You heard me. I’m talking about the Tower of Miracle. You’ll need that necklace to succeed or at least increase your chance of success.”

Chae Nayun became dumbfounded and I laughed.

Honestly, the Tower of Miracle served as a MacGuffin in my story. I didn’t even write a rough outline about it. I only briefly thought, *What would happen if this was the reward?* It would be extremely unlikely.

However...

Would Chae Nayun be happy again if she possessed that miracle?

“Got it? Give it back after you conquer the Tower of Miracle. Don’t refuse just for the sake of it.”

I pushed her hand back and she furrowed her brows before reluctantly placing it in her pocket.

“So fussy... Fine, it’s true this necklace will be a big help.”

Chae Nayun grumbled and turned around. The sun had set before I noticed and the navy world dyed us in darkness. *Tap, tap.* Chae Nayun failed her objective and spoke with her back facing me.

“I’m going. See you again.”

“Yeah, live a happy life.”

I replied as I placed her leaving figure in my memories. I didn’t say, *see you again*, on purpose.

* * *

— How was Disneyland? Fun?

— *Un!* Super fun!

A rowdy noise woke me while I enjoyed a catnap on the balcony.

— I saw a flying pumpkin carriage!

I massaged my stiff neck and looked through the window at the living room. Evandel wore a fairy uniform with a fairy headband.

— The haunted house was too scary though...

I grinned at her cute appearance and finally noticed the person sitting next to me. I turned and faced Yi Byul, who stared at me from the balcony rail.

“Oh, you were watching me? You could’ve woken me up.”

I rubbed my heavy eyelids.

“Sorry...”

She suddenly apologized and her expression darkened too. I felt confused, but realized why my eyes felt so heavy. I had been crying and quickly wiped away the tears.

“Oh, this? It’s nothing. I must’ve had a bad dream.”

“...”

“Really, you don’t have to be sorry about anything.”

Yi Byul tightly grabbed my hand. Her cold hand shook and I knew what she must’ve thought. After all, I told only her the truth about me.

“You can leave whenever you want. I understand.”

“No, I’m not going anywhere.”

I flatly refused while looking into her eyes. She teared up from the guilt. I couldn’t say, *I can’t go*. For us, a big difference existed between not going and being unable to go.

“I’m staying here because you said you wouldn’t forget me. You found me first.”

“I—”

The balcony door suddenly shot open as Yi Byul prepared to say something. Evandel came running in.

“Hajin, Hajin! I’m back!”

She finished boasting to Rachel and came to me next. I exchanged glances with Yi Byul before heading to the living room. Several others gathered there: Rachel, Yoo Yeonha, Droon, Yi Yuri, and even eight of Evandel’s friends.

“Hey.”

Yoo Yeonha waved.

“Yo.”

I also half-heartedly waved. Yoo Yeonha became the most influential person on the planet, but visited at least once a week despite her busy schedule.

“Wait, Evandel?”

“Un?”

“Go play with your friends on the 2nd floor. The adults have something to talk about.”

“Okay! Can we all play games?”

“Only for 2 hours.”

“Yay!”

Evandel and her friends rushed to the 2nd floor. I sighed and sat at the

long table in the living room. A plate of steak steamed in front of me. Yoo Yeonha asked as Yi Byul and I took a seat.

“Nayun came and already left?”

“...” I silently nodded.

“Ms. Nayun came?” Rachel widened her eyes from next to Yoo Yeonha.

“You should ask him. He knows better than me.” Yoo Yeonha pointed at me.

“Yeah, Chae Nayun came and left. She mentioned the upcoming tower campaign and didn’t say much else.”

“Ah, right. The Tower of Miracle campaign is coming up. Ms. Nayun must be busy then.”

Rachel seemed a bit regretful.

For the record, Aileen became the Hero Association’s new chairman. Chae Nayun also became the youngest master rank hero in history. Many high rank heroes had been promoted to master rank. The honorable title went to Chae Nayun, who was 4 days younger than Kim Suho.

Rachel began addressing Chae Nayun respectfully because of this. The princess remained at high rank, grade 1 (world rank 79) and took formalities rather seriously.

“There you go again with Ms. Nayun... Just address her casually.”

Yoo Yeonha shook her head before facing me.

“Here, take this.” She took out a piece of paper.

“What’s this?”

“You rested a lot already. It’s time to start working.”

Yoo Yeonha mischievously smiled. That expression always made me anxious. *What did she do this time?* I swallowed hard and checked the contents.

[Press Conference Request Form]

“What? A press conference?”

“Yep, the patent for your cure to baldness has passed. There’s a reason you’re called the Miracle Pharmacist right now. Everyone is talking about you. You’re practically the savior of all men between the ages of 20 and 90.”

“What’s the press conference for?”

“Well, who knows? Maybe your existence in this world might return with this press conference.”

A chuckle immediately escaped me. *For a mere baldness cure?*

However, Yoo Yeonha sharply raised her eyebrows.

“No, I’m being serious. Your cure for baldness is a huge deal. It’s something that even magic failed to solve. Tens of thousands will swarm to it if you hold a press conference. Do you know how many in the world suffer from complete or partial baldness? In the west, over half—”

“Ah, geez. Stop. A mere baldness cure won’t—”

“Mere?”

“Oh, right. Didn’t you say you suffered from partial balding because of all the stress?”

“What? No, I didn’t! When did I say that?”

“Then take this back.”

I returned the document to Yoo Yeonha. She pouted and put away the request form.

“You didn’t come with Cheok Jungyeong?” Yi Byul suddenly asked. She seemed wistful for familiar faces.

“*Mmm*, no. They’ll become wanted targets again.”

“Wanted targets?” Yi Byul furrowed her brows.

“Yes.”

Yoo Yeonha looked out the window and stared at the distant sky. “Right about now... they should be in the underground prison trying to win over Yoo Jinwoong.”

“What?”

“*Huh?*”

My eyes widened. Yi Byul and Rachel also had similar reactions. Yoo Yeonha waved it off as though it wasn’t a big deal.

“It’s fine. This matter will be taken care of with utmost secrecy. We have already finished discussing it with the association’s chairman. Yoo Jinwoong received 15 years behind bars, but Chae Joochul got away scot-free. Maybe she felt bad about that and agreed to our offer.”

Yoo Yeonha shrugged before continuing.

“Honestly, Jin Seyeon came up with it. She’s completely a Chameleon Troupe member now. Something about protecting justice from the shadows. Well, she’ll become a thief and destroyer like the rest of them, but only against evil. Anyways, I’m happy. I don’t want my father rotting behind bars for 15 years.”

Sk, sk. Yoo Yeonha sliced her steak with her knife and fork.

“I’m sure he’ll agree. Traveling the world was his second dream.”

We stared at Yoo Yeonha as she placed a chunk of steak into her mouth. *Nom, nom.* She wiped her mouth with a napkin after gracefully chewing and swallowing. Then she set the knife and fork down.

“Now then.”

Yoo Yeonha rested her chin on her interlocked fingers. She made an evil, mischievous smile.

“That’s my current situation. Rachel is probably going to say something about her guild or whatever, so...”

Yoo Yeonha looked back and forth between me and Yi Byul.

“Why don’t I hear the story of you two?”

The room briefly turned silent. Even Rachel, Droon, and Yi Yuri looked curious. I grabbed Yi Byul’s cold and stiff hand. She seemed nervous.

“Well...”

I thought about the people I abandoned. My friends and family meant everything to me before I came to this world.

I might not see them again, but I didn’t regret my decision. I missed them every day and felt sad when I thought about my parents losing me forever. However, I wouldn’t have made this decision if I wasn’t sure.

“Our story...”

I thought about Chae Nayun, who wasn’t here. I thought about Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak, who couldn’t remember me. I thought about what I could do for this world. Then I looked at the precious person

next to me.

“We’ll have to write it from now on until it reaches a happy ending.”

I spoke like usual and smiled. Yi Byul and everyone else also smiled. That would be enough.

I became a different person in another world. I lost everything from my previous world, but the current me... No, we could all confidently say we felt happy with our loved ones.

Chapter 378

Epilogue (2), Their Story (Part 1)

“Huuu...”

Kim Suho took a deep breath in front of the temple’s gateway. The scene before him looked rather imposing. A surrounding wall prevented outsiders from entering and the marble columns endlessly stretched beyond the gateway.

The tall temple at the end of the stone road made him nervous. It resembled a temple from ancient mythology, but didn’t lack any modern functions. This oval structure built with ice glass shone a splendid blue. People called it the Temple of Nine Heroes. The Hero Association built it for the Nine Stars, who greatly contributed during the Great Change and the Great Devil War.

Today, Kim Suho had been invited to this incredible place that only the Nine Stars and their successors could enter. This invitation signified a passing of the torch.

“How does it feel to be a successor?”

The person accompanying him suddenly asked. Kim Suho turned to the side with a slightly nervous expression. There, Yun Seung-Ah smiled with her arms crossed.

“Well...”

Her smile made him relax. He softly smiled back and shook his head.

“I’m not sure. I feel like I still have lots to do.”

Kim Suho looked at the Temple of Nine Heroes and thought about Jin Sahyuk, who returned to Akatrina without a word. The ill-fated

relationship to his previous world had disappeared along with her. However, that didn't mean Kim Suho could forget her. He couldn't forget about Akatrina either.

He had yet to finish his task. His name, Suho, meant to protect and he would continue to fulfill this destiny.

"I see..."

Yun Seung-Ah bitterly nodded without knowing his thoughts.

Kim Suho would no longer be a guild member after joining the Nine Stars. However, she accepted this. It would take Kim Suho at least 10 years to grow into the position. She knew he couldn't be fenced inside a guild.

"*Mmm?* Suho, over there. Three more are coming over."

Yun Seung-Ah pointed at the path and laughed. Kim Suho turned around.

The three walking towards them all possessed a below-average height: a magician wearing a cape engraved with nine stars, the association chairman nicely dressed in a black suit, and Evandel with her magician's wand and hat.

"Yeah, I see them."

Kim Suho smiled.

Only Heynckes and Oh Jaejin still served as the Nine Stars. Four members, including Shin Myungchul, had already passed away. The remaining three lived in hiding after completely losing their powers. They would be reinstated once Essential Pharmacy fully developed the treatment for side effects. As such, the Nine Stars had four empty seats.

Their honorary positions of authority would've faded into legend if all nine heroes died. However, the Hero Association changed the Nine Stars into an official institution. Its empty seats now had to be filled.

[The Nine Stars check the association, the association remains conscious of the Nine Stars, and the Temple of Justice supervises the association.]

The Temple of Justice and Aileen decentralized the association's power to prevent corruption from happening ever again.

"You're already here."

The nine star magician, Ah Hae-In, approached Kim Suho.

"Hello, I hope you've been well."

"We heard the news. Congratulations."

Kim Suho and Yun Seung-Ah courteously greeted Ah Hae-In.

Oh Jaejin had nominated Ah Hae-In to be one of the Nine Stars since she recaptured all of Europe. The official announcement would be made next week.

"Yes, I'm sure you two know Aileen. This is Evandel."

Ah Hae-In glanced at Evandel. Kim Suho kneeled to eye level with Evandel, who tightly held Ah Hae-In's hand.

"Hey, Evandel. We've seen each other before. Do you remember me?"

Kim Suho greeted her first. However, the wary Evandel hid behind Ah Hae-In.

Honestly, Evandel slightly hated Kim Suho for forgetting Kim Hajin. (Ah Hae-In avoided being hated by pretending to remember Kim Hajin.)

"Evandel?" Kim Suho asked, slightly confused.

"Who are you?"

"It's me, Kim Suho."

"I don't remember you."

"*Hmm?* We met before, remember?"

"I don't know. *Hmph.*"

Evandel snorted and turned away, but Kim Suho found her adorable.

"*Haha.* Welcome, Evandel." Yun Seung-Ah spoke up this time.

"Who, who are you?"

"*Hmm?*"

Yun Seung-Ah seemed to be in the same position.

"You, you don't know me? Aren't you still friends with Haeyeon? You don't remember Haeyeon either?"

"I, I know Haeyeon... We're really close..."

Evandel hesitated between her loyalty to Kim Hajin and her sisterly love for Haeyeon.

"Seung-Ah, why are you here?"

Aileen hopped to them and asked. She looked back and forth between Yun Seung-Ah and Kim Suho. Her eyebrows moved up and down as if to tease them.

"What do you mean? I'm just accompanying him."

"Oh? Just that? I don't think so."

"Well, you're wrong," Yun Seung-Ah spat back.

"Well, you can leave now. Only the chosen can enter from here." Aileen placed her hand on the temple's wall.

"It's me, Aileen. I brought the kids, so let them in."

Beeeeep—

An out-of-place sound rang out and the gate opened. A blue road leading to the temple appeared underneath the marble roof and pillars.

"You two, follow me. The rest can wait outside or go back."

Ah Hae-In led the other Nine Stars candidates inside.

"We'll be back soon."

Kim Suho and Evandel said goodbye to Aileen and Yun Seung-Ah.

"*Mn*, see you later."

"Good luck with your evaluation."

Yun Seung-Ah and Aileen waved and sent them off.

Tap, tap... The gate closed after they stepped in. Yun Seung-Ah stared at the shut entrance with a tinge of regret.

"Oh right, wasn't there another candidate?" Yun Seung-Ah suddenly asked Aileen.

"Yep, but she's out on a campaign."

"Ah, right. Nayun said she'll be on the Tower of Miracle campaign."

"*Mmm*. Chae Nayun put in a lot of effort while a certain someone busily chased after a younger guy. She's doing fantastic thanks to that."

Unsurprisingly, Chae Nayun had been chosen as the fourth Nine Stars candidate.

Yun Seung-Ah thought about Chae Nayun, who should be fighting in the Tower of Miracle. She felt a mixture of bitterness, jealousy, and pride. After all, Creator's Sacred Grace had obtained the right to conquer the Tower of Miracle first.

"Unni, I'm surprised you're still working as the chairman. I thought you'd quit after a few days."

Yun Seung-Ah changed the subject.

"What? I knew I would do great from the beginning." Aileen furrowed her brows.

"Hey, come on. I thought you'd complain nonstop. Well, I guess you're doing well. Good luck."

Eudeuk— Aileen gritted her teeth. The loser would be the first to get angry.

"Good luck too, Seung-Ah. You'll be 2nd place for the next 1000 years. *Ah*, maybe that won't last long either. I heard the English Royal Court Guild is going up," Aileen snickered.

Yun Seung-Ah smiled, but smacked Aileen's shoulder.

"Ow, what did you do that for?"

"*Hahaha*, because it's funny. Such a good joke. Two thumbs up for you."

"..."

Aileen briefly stood silent before also laughing and pushing Yun Seung-Ah.

Pang!

"*Hehehehe*."

“Hahahaha, hahahaha. How funny.”

Yun Seung-Ah didn't stop laughing and pressed on Aileen's head. Aileen's smile instantly disappeared.

“Hey, you're going too far. I'm you're unni—”

“Hahaha, what do you mean? It's funny, isn't it?”

Aileen turned serious and tried to hit Yun Seung-Ah's hand away, but missed.

“Hey, you! Let go!”

“Hahahahaha.”

“Arggggh! Y-You!”

Aileen finally released her magic power after struggling in vain. Yun Seung-Ah defended with qi reinforcement.

“Unni, why are you suddenly using magic power?”

“You asked for it!”

“What? You're the one who provoked me first!”

Their childish bickering broke out in front of the solemn temple.

* * *

Meanwhile, Yoo Yeonha engrossed herself in research. Of course, it had to do with Kim Hajin. This research only took place in her head and could be considered a daydream.

She thought for a long time and finally opened her eyes.

“Baal's last resort... was to erase Kim Hajin's existence.”

She repeated these thoughts for several months and arrived at the same conclusion each time.

Chae Nayun reported that Kim Hajin's final attack dealt irrecoverable damage to Baal. It made sense that Baal would target Kim Hajin.

"Haaa..."

Yoo Yeonha couldn't help but sigh. Was it because she felt close to Kim Hajin or did another reason exist? For some reason, Yoo Yeonha couldn't get him off her mind.

A foolish man who always sacrificed himself until he lost everything. That was how she saw Kim Hajin. Her heart ached to see him laugh after all everything.

"..."

She felt frustrated and walked out to the balcony. She enjoyed standing here with a full view of Seoul below. A sense of admiration and awe filled her as she gazed at the city. Not from the landscape, but from all her accomplishments.

Some people said obtaining everything would leave one empty, but Yoo Yeonha disagreed. Only those who couldn't accomplish their goals said that.

Yoo Yeonha walked the straight road of ambition and arrived at the summit. However, she still felt full of spirits. She hoped to achieve even greater things in the future and far more difficult challenges awaited her.

"I'm going to overcome them all."

Yoo Yeonha muttered, but who did she say that to? Her father or Shin Jonghak, whom she used to like and gave up on? Maybe that person?

A voice suddenly resounded from her wrist.

— Vice leader, the regular report is here.

Jin Sechan contacted her with the scheduled report. Yoo Yeonha opened the file while leaning against the balcony's guardrail. The first matter was related to Shin Jonghak.

“Jonghak... is still in Africa.”

— Yes, he's planning a redevelopment mission with Orden.

Orden and Shin Jonghak. Yoo Yeonha didn't know how these two came to work together, but Orden left for Africa after forming a pact with the association. Shin Jonghak also traveled to Africa as part of his volunteer work.

“I'm sure Jonghak will be fine. We'll have to ask him about Orden's abilities later.”

— The next matter is regarding commerce with Crevon.

“Ah, this one is important.”

Yoo Yeonha established a trading post with Crevon that opened every month using the *[Dimensional Entropy]*. This huge event marked the next era for Essence of the Strait and Earth.

She discussed the matter with Jin Sechan until Seoul's scenery darkened.

“We'll discuss the rest during the next formal meeting.”

— Yes, understood.

Even so, they couldn't come to a conclusion. Yoo Yeonha hung up and the night sky surprised her.

“Time... flies.”

She suddenly got emotional.

The more time passed, the less she would have with others. Of course,

she would never forget her precious people.

“Oh, right.”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly recalled and looked at her smartwatch. It still contained the long message she wrote to Kim Hajin. This message shocked her enough to awaken her memories every time. She became dumbfounded as to how she ever wrote it.

Yoo Yeonha shook her head and went back to staring at Seoul’s scenery.

After looking at the city and the Han River for some time, she realized she didn’t miss anyone in Seoul.

“*Hmm...* Sechan?”

Yoo Yeonha turned on her smartwatch again and messaged her secretary.

“Empty my schedule next week, same time.”

— Got it. For that place, correct?”

“Yes.”

She didn’t know why, but seeing those people melted her fatigue and recharged her. Not just him, but the others also motivated her to work more. They acted like a fatigue recovery potion.

“*Huaa...*”

Yoo Yeonha breathed out in satisfaction and sank into a rocking chair on the balcony.

Whish—

A refreshing breeze blew and brushed past the smile on her face.

Yoo Yeonha lightly fell asleep in this cool night air.

* * *

Africa's sun rose to the middle of the sky. Shin Jonghak and the other pioneers clothed themselves with magic items against the strong light. They could comfortably work thanks to these air-conditioned turbans and capes.

However, even the best equipment had its limits. A desert monster's extreme heat attack caused their redevelopment plans to temporarily pause. The pioneers returned to their oasis camp before the sun reached its apex.

"Are you tired?"

Orden approached Shin Jonghak, who led the pioneers.

"It's hot."

Shin Jonghak soaked his head in the oasis.

"For humans, yes."

Orden had left Russia and found a place for himself here. He already formed a secret pact with the association. They showed great interest and wariness towards him.

Shin Jonghak led the pioneers and founded a city in Africa. They drove away all the monsters in this oasis and recovered the monster city Orden founded in the past. It couldn't quite be called a city after being destroyed by African monsters.

"Things will get better soon. It'll still be hot, but this absurd heat should disappear once we recover the capital."

"You already think this land belongs to you?"

Shin Jonghak asked as he glanced at Orden, who shrugged like a real

human being.

“I can’t help it. Many beastmen live in this place. Without me, Africa will be uninhabitable for the human race.”

Beastmen. The association renamed humanoid monsters into beastmen. Interestingly, the beastmen who survived originated from animals like cats, pigs, dogs, and cows.

Shin Jonghak buried his face in the water one last time before standing.

“You think humans can live in Africa?”

“That’s right. I plan on creating a country where humans and beastmen can live in harmony.”

“That’s a nice dream. Unfortunately, we live in a democratic world. Monarchy won’t be accepted in this day and age.”

“Recently, the people of England have been wanting to give the prime minister’s authority to the English Royal Family.”

Orden held great interest in world news. Shin Jonghak scratched his head since he didn’t know anything.

“A monarchy will not pose any problems if one can protect the citizens and make them happy. I want to make everyone happy, not just beastmen. I’ll stop any monsters who attempt to advance to Western Europe and the Middle East every year. That was part of my agreement with the association.”

“...”

Shin Jonghak didn’t have a clue about current affairs and politics, so he remained silent.

“I have one question. Where did that woman go?” Orden suddenly asked and had been curious about this.

“Woman? *Ah*, you mean Jin Sahyuk?”

“Yes, that was her name.”

The only woman Orden knew.

“Kim Suho said she returned to her home country,” Shin Jonghak smirked.

“I see.”

“Why do you ask? Do you have a crush on her?”

“I do not understand such feelings yet.” Orden faintly smiled and shook his head.

“I’m simply curious about what someone who believes herself to be a king is doing.”

“I see...”

Shin Jonghak also grew curious. From what Kim Suho said, Jin Sahyuk surprisingly came from another world and reincarnated on Earth. Apparently, she returned to her homeworld. No one knew whether she grew tired of Earth or just wanted to be a king again.

“I’m sure she’s doing fine as a king. She’s stro—”

Whoosh—

A beam of light shot up in the distant sky and cut off Shin Jonghak. He turned towards the Atlantic sky. The strange beams of light undulated like an aurora.

“Looks like they succeeded.” Orden voiced Shin Jonghak’s thoughts.

“The Tower of Miracle...” Shin Jonghak stood in a daze and muttered. He dusted off his cape.

“Where are you going?” Orden asked.

“Hyenas will flock to that place soon.”

Djinns always attacked after a successful tower campaign. They wanted to steal the reward in the best-case scenario. Even if they couldn't, they could kill some exhausted heroes. It shouldn't be any different this time.

“I'll protect them just in case.”

Shin Jonghak picked up his spear. They had set up a teleportation portal nearby and he should get there in 2 hours.

“W-Wait! Let me go too!”

A high-pitched voice rang out. Shin Jonghak turned around and saw their sole supporter, Yi Jiyeon.

“Let, let me go too! Take me with you!”

“You?” Shin Jonghak narrowed his eyes at her. Yi Jiyeon brightly smiled and nodded.

“Yes! A supporter has to follow the boss! It's been a while since I've been to Seoul... I want to go with you... Boss.”

Yi Jiyeon's face reddened as she muttered that last word. Shin Jonghak simply stared at her.

“I-If I can't, that's fine too...”

She couldn't meet his gaze and dropped her head. Shin Jonghak wasn't an idiot and knew the emotions behind her words.

“Do what you want.”

“Ah, really? Thank you!”

He coldly turned around and Yi Jiyeon chased after him as if he was the coolest person in the world.

“*Hmm...*”

Orden stared at them with interest and muttered with a smirk.

“What a complex emotion.”

He slowly followed Shin Jonghak and Yi Jiyeon. The pioneers had some free time, so going there shouldn't pose a problem.

“I'll go too.”

A conquered tower and interesting human emotions. Orden grew too curious to miss out.

“Do what you want.”

Shin Jonghak replied and Orden smiled at his apathetic tone.

— *Krrrr.*

Kurukuru slowly walked to Orden.

The loyal servant who followed any order appeared as Orden showed signs of leaving.

— *Krrrr.*

“Yes, Kurukuru.”

Orden, who once called himself the monster king, came to a realization.

Origin didn't mean anything when it came to life. The journey was more important than the destination, and the direction was more important than the origin.

“Follow me. We’re going on a short journey.”

Orden focused on one question, *What kind of life should I lead?* He no longer cared how he came to be. This caused a trivial, yet huge change in Orden’s heart.

Chapter 379

Epilogue (2), Their Story (Part 2)

Psss— Crumbled rocks fell on Chae Nayun's head like water droplets. They only tickled her cheeks and naturally woke her up.

“Uuu...”

She twisted from side to side before groaning.

“Uk... uueek!”

Chae Nayun felt sore all over. Even her internal organs ached. Thankfully, none of her injuries seemed lethal.

“Augh. Kuhuk.”

She coughed and held her side where the pain flared. Blood came out of her mouth along with some tiny debris.

“Fuuu...”

She relaxed her exhausted body and looked around. The expedition team had conquered most of the tower. There should've been only one stage left.

However, the floor suddenly collapsed as they passed through the final hurdle. Chae Nayun managed to push the others away, but...

“Sp.”

She failed to avoid it herself. Chae Nayun wiped the blood from her mouth and fixed her posture. Then she checked her smartwatch with countless messages from her comrades.

[Miss, are you okay?]

[We won the final battle, so please wait. We'll come rescue you right away.]

Chae Nayun almost responded, but put down her smartwatch.

“Haaa...”

She suddenly felt too tired. The tower, rewards, life, everything... She lost her motivation.

Chae Nayun felt eager and full of passion when she first entered the Tower of Miracle. She thought she could forget about complicated matters like Kim Hajin, Chae Joochul, and Chae Jinyoon.

However, she didn't feel a thing anymore. They would soon conquer the tower, but she didn't feel happy. She only felt empty, almost as if it would be better to just die.

Her shoulders slouched and she felt cold. Chae Nayun rummaged through her pockets, but couldn't find anything to chew or smoke. Her body began to heal on its own. She couldn't even die easily.

“Tsk...?”

She caught sight of something in the rubble as she clicked her tongue. It looked like a faint sparkle at first. Something bright within the mountain of rocks on the ground. It provoked a mild curiosity in her.

“What's that?”

Chae Nayun staggered up and slowly approached the light. The silver cluster grew clearer as she neared. It almost seemed to be calling for her.

Soon, she arrived at the source and looked inside the rubble with narrow eyes.

“What?”

A small rock buried within other grey rocks brightly shone. Chae Nayun reached in and picked it up without much thought. Then strange characters popped up in front of her.

[Miracle Stone] [Pinnacle Grade Miracle] ▷ One of the last rewards from the Tower of Miracle. — When used, the user will experience the pinnacle grade miracle known as regression. — The world before regressing and the world after regressing will remain separate and will not affect each other in any way.

“...!”

Chae Nayun stepped back in shock. Her trembling hands dropped the stone to the floor. *Koong*— It strangely reverberated, but the window in front of her didn’t disappear.

— When used, the user will experience the pinnacle grade miracle known as regression.

Regression. Chae Nayun blankly stared at this sentence and repeatedly rubbed her eyes. She thought something so absurd would disappear.

— When used, the user will experience the pinnacle grade miracle known as regression.

However, the message remained in the air. It shone even brighter and enticed her.

Gulp...

Chae Nayun swallowed hard, but shook her head. Even if this wasn’t a dream and the Tower of Miracle actually rewarded this, the tale of Shin Myungchul and the regression stone practically became a bedtime story by now. A miracle on the level of going back in time had side effects that couldn’t be undone so easily.

However...

Her body didn't listen to her brain. *It would be problematic if this stone falls into someone else's hands...* Chae Nayun justified it to herself and held the *[Miracle Stone]*. Its mystical power circulated on her palm and created a small gust of wind.

— When used, the user will experience the pinnacle grade miracle known as regression.

She tightened her grip around the stone and recalled a certain someone. Perhaps the *[Miracle Stone]* led her thoughts in that direction. She thought about her relationship with Kim Hajin, which became twisted from the very beginning. She hated him, yet loved him at the same time. Her love and hatred could never be undone.

However, a miracle to overturn her problem appeared.

Chae Nayun stared at the *[Miracle Stone]* in a daze.

“...”

She pondered if she had the right to choose a better ending. If she did, would that really be a better ending? Would she simply be running from reality?

“Pft...”

Chae Nayun didn't think for long. The answer seemed clear and she shook her head.

“After all you've been through...”

Honestly, this item was hard to pass up. However, it would bring disaster elsewhere without a doubt. As Chae Nayun stored the *[Miracle Stone]* away...

— Baal has already been annihilated and will not exist after the regression.

Chae Nayun froze and looked at the new message. Its bright light flowed into her eyes and whispered into her ears. This new message

seemed to settle all her worries.

The problem between Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin hadn't been Chae Jinyoon's death. It hadn't been their meeting either. The devil known as Baal had caused everything. Without Baal, Chae Jinyoon wouldn't have died. Then Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin would have no reason to fight.

Wiiing—

The smartwatch she dropped vibrated.

“Euu!”

Startled, Chae Nayun looked back and forth between the *[Miracle Stone]* and the smartwatch. She felt her teammates close by. *Koong—* The tower's shell collapsed and transformed into magic power that shot into the sky. This signified a successful tower campaign.

Chae Nayun didn't have much time to make a decision. She looked at the *[Miracle Stone]* in her hands.

— Live a happy life.

Kim Hajin's voice suddenly echoed in her ears. *Was it yesterday or the day before?* He said those words with sincerity.

“...”

Chae Nayun stared at Kim Hajin's reflection in the *[Miracle Stone]*. She thought about the happiness this stone could bring her. A bright voice and a bright face appeared in her heart.

The [Miracle Stone]. Regression.

Perhaps this might be her only chance at a happy ending. It could also be seen as escaping.

This item brought out a dangerous temptation and she looked at it for

a long time.

* * *

Bell opened his eyes when Chae Nayun discovered the *[Miracle Stone]*. He could sense the miracle assigned by Baal had been discovered.

“Looks like the regression stone has been found.”

Bell spoke to the existence inside him. However, no answer came as he waited. Only after a long time did something undulate within him and eke out a voice.

— I know.

Baal spoke and Bell faintly smiled. Currently, Baal had been reduced to an ordinary human’s soul. His true self had been annihilated and Bell simply absorbed a fragment of Baal’s consciousness.

Baal’s soul couldn’t be extinguished so easily. It could easily destroy a world like a bomb if it exploded. As such, Bell voluntarily took on the role of keeping Baal’s soul. To Baal, this served as the greatest punishment.

“Do you think that child will go back in time?”

A smile spread across Bell’s face. He asked out of pure curiosity. Baal seemed interested in the human known as Chae Nayun too.

— That would depend on her feelings towards that guy.

Baal simply replied.

It sounded as though he knew everything that would occur, yet seemed to be looking forward to the future.

“*Mmm...* Want to make a bet? I’ll bet 5 years that she won’t use it.”

Bell smiled and wagered.

— Then I'll bet that she does.

They used their lifespan as betting chips. Baal lost his body and authority, but could easily make one person immortal. He wanted to curse Bell, who dared to use him. Of course, Bell didn't want this and they began betting with 100 years at stake.

"Eii, there's no way she'll do it. Think about it. Shin Myungchul went back in time and allowed you to come to Earth. Chae Nayun is a good kid. She won't do it because of the dangers."

—...

Baal fell silent.

Soon, Bell felt a portion of demonic energy disappear from his chest and his face stiffened.

"Wait, that's cheating. What did you do?"

— Nothing.

"Nothing, my ass! *Aha*, you sent her a message, didn't you?"

A message that crossed dimensions. Baal created the regression stone, so he could easily message whoever possessed it.

"You did, didn't you?"

Baal calmly smiled as Bell shouted at him. The devil had employed a dubious method, but Bell hadn't seen him smile in a long time. He couldn't get angry and only furrowed his brows.

"Geez..."

— The bet still stands.

"Sure, my bet remains. Five years that she won't use it."

— I'll bet 10 that she does.

“Did you forget? Five years is the maximum.”

Bell smirked and leaned against the carriage.

“Your Highness, please prepare for the coronation.”

His servant's voice rang out from outside the carriage.

“Yes.”

Bell replied rather imposingly before looking at the mirror in the corner.

A face identical to his reflected in the mirror.

“What's your plan now?”

Bell looked at the mirror and asked Baal.

— If possible, I want to kill the bastard who became the new god. However, that's a distant dream in my current state.

“Can't you tell your friends? Leraje and Vassago are still fighting on Earth.”

— Those two have already been corrupted by Earth. They'll enjoy living as mortals to their hearts' content before returning to the transcendent realm.

“Strange devils, aren't they?”

— Strange? Most devils used to be angels at birth. They interacted and played with humans if they wanted.

Baal grumbled.

“Then why are you like this?”

— I was created to be defiant. Shouldn’t you know this too?

Kim Hajin made him like this. In a way, it seemed like a cruel fate.

“Touché...”

Bell shrugged.

“King Terhun’s coronation will now begin!”

A loud shout rang out when Bell felt slightly awkward.

Sssk—

The carriage opened from both sides. A royal road of the highest quality carpet spread out before him beyond the carriage’s red curtain. This path led to his throne. Hundreds of servants lined the sides and thousands of citizens looked up at him from below.

Bell slowly raised his head at his throne, which sat close to the sun above all others.

“Arunheim’s glorious ruler, King Terhun!”

A fierce shout resounded and Bell stepped out of the carriage. He walked up the stairs one by one.

“Oh, King!”

“Your Majesty Terhun!”

“Lord Savior who has overcome calamity and returned!”

Hundreds of thousands celebrated his coronation and their voices pierced the sky. As king, Bell kept their voices in mind. He wouldn’t betray them and make the same mistake again.

— Terhun, is that a new name? It's much better than Bell.

Baal muttered from inside his heart. Bell fixed his gaze on the throne and calmly murmured.

“Look forward to it. A mortal life is far more beautiful and fulfilling than you think.”

* * *

Everything had been destroyed in this world.

Jin Sahyuk stood on the barren black land and looked around. No signs of life could be seen. Grass became ash and scattered away. Demonic energy devoured the barely breathing earth. A reddish-brown hue dyed the trees and the sky had been stained purple.

“Tsk...”

Jin Sahyuk stared at this desolate landscape without a word. Three months had passed since she arrived. The home she knew had disappeared and not a fragment remained.

She recalled Earth as she stood on her broken home world. Lying on the grass and looking at the blue sky... Hovering in the clouds and looking at the ground... She denied it at the time, but the landscape she used to enjoy flashed before her eyes.

Kim Hajin or Kindspring. The man who carried all the mysteries of this world.

Jin Sahyuk closed her eyes and sighed.

Should I have seen him before I left? Should I have asked him for advice?

“Huuu...”

She shook her head and already resolved to live a lonely life. A king must not show weakness. A king must live and die with her country. If

this world died, then she would happily die with it.

“It’s a lot worse than I thought.”

Shimurin’s voice rang out. Jin Sahyuk slightly raised her head and looked at Shimurin, who drove the surrounding demonic energy away with the flick of a hand.

“You can go back if it’s too hard. You’ve already been here for 3 months.”

Jin Sahyuk told her.

“*Hmm?*” Shimurin glanced at Jin Sahyuk as if she hadn’t expected to hear this. Then she grinned and shook her head.

“It’s fine. A difficult problem only makes me more stubborn.”

“Don’t regret it later.”

Jin Sahyuk clutched her cape, the [*Cape of Alexander the Great*] she received from Kim Hajin.

“So, what’s your plan? Aren’t we in Plerion’s territory like you wanted?” Shimurin asked.

“It’s simple.”

Akatrina had fully undergone the demon realm transformation. Obviously, Jin Sahyuk had to find people. The demon realm transformation only occurred on the surface from what she observed on Earth. If anyone survived, they should be living deep underground.

“I will find my citizens underground.”

Jin Sahyuk carried everything she brought from Earth and moved. She didn’t have a clear destination despite her confident declaration.

The intuition she always believed in also went quiet today. Could it be

that even her intuition didn't trust her? Perhaps no one had survived?

"Haa... haa..."

Jin Sahyuk walked until demonic energy burned her lungs. She didn't use qi reinforcement or try to purify the demonic energy. Shimurin also possessed limited magic power.

She collapsed to her knees after 6 hours of walking.

Rustle— Rustle—

Something rubbed against the inside of her cape. Jin Sahyuk purified the demonic energy within her with qi circulation and dug inside her pocket.

However, she didn't feel anything.

She thought it might be the back pocket and rummaged through that one too. As expected, she found nothing again.

"Hmm?"

No, she felt something. It seemed to be a folded piece of paper.

Jin Sahyuk placed the paper on her palm.

What is this? Why is it here? She didn't know at first, but soon remembered.

She used this *[Infinite Communication Letter]* to communicate with Kim Hajin when they worked together. With this, she could message him.

"Hah."

Jin Sahyuk smiled at the letter. An unknown emotion welled up in her, but she resolved herself again.

[Can you see this?]

She wrote four words with her magic power.

“Ah, why am I doing something so useless...”

She immediately regretted it, but didn’t get the chance to lament.

“—!”

A screech rang out and the ground shook. Jin Sahyuk and Shimurin turned and saw a dinosaur-like monster. Its huge legs boasted terrifying muscles and it seemed as big as a castle. She had never seen such a huge monster on Earth. Jin Sahyuk set her bags down and released her magic power.

“What a tough world,” Shimurin muttered from beside her.

“That’s what makes it more exciting,” Jin Sahyuk replied as she stretched. The monster spotted them and prepared to charge.

“Let’s go.”

Jin Sahyuk formed hundreds of weapons with her magic power. Meanwhile, tiny words appeared on the *[Infinite Communication Letter]*. Jin Sahyuk couldn’t look because of the monster rushing towards them.

[I see it. Jin Sahyuk, right? What are you up to right...]

However, Jin Sahyuk could hear the soft sounds of words being scribbled. This proved that a connection to Earth remained.

“—!”

The monster charged while swinging its head. Jin Sahyuk had no fears. All her worries and troubles had been resolved. She even smiled in front of this monster splitting the earth.

She felt like she would find her people. She would find traces of fire or footsteps they left behind. Then she would rebuild Plerion with them.

Her hopes had been rekindled by the letter connected to Kim Hajin.

“—!”

Her magic power clashed with the monster. She temporarily expelled the surrounding demonic energy with Reality Manipulation and turned the sky blue. Jin Sahyuk shouted while standing arrogantly under the sky that regained its true color.

“I’VE RETURNED!”

Her voice sounded clearer and brighter than ever before.



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The Novel's Extra

WUXIA
WORLD

KW

The Novel's Extra

- 소설 속 엑스트라 -

- VOLUME 5 -

**-AUTHOR-
Ji-gab-song**

[Wuxiaworld]

Side Stories 1

Dream in a Dream (1)

The... enemy... do... can... no... think... that... wait... see... if... I...

An unintelligible mixture of sounds rang out. It resembled nails scratching a blackboard or a broken TV buzzing in the background.

Whatever the noise, it sounded quite disturbing and annoying. She didn't want to hear it any longer and squirmed with all her might, but it wouldn't stop ringing in her ears.

She had to open her eyes and wake up. It wasn't easy, but she managed to move her eyelids after focusing all her strength. Her eyelids twitched and she slowly opened her eyes. Silence finally descended like a miracle and a ray of sunlight shone on her. Rachel realized she had fallen asleep in a chair.

Now awake, she spotted a man sitting at the center of the vast empty room.

"I'll do it!"

He enthusiastically shouted while staring at her with his clear eyes.

Rachel looked at a document on the table in front of her and glanced sideways at the English Royal Court interviewers sitting in a row.

Dake, the guild's HR manager, spoke up.

"Alright, there's also a practical test if you pass the interview. Are you prepared for the practical test?"

Practical test? Rachel tilted her head and tried to recall. *Practical test... What was that again? No, what am I doing here in the first place? I know*

an interview is going on, but... Oh, right! The recruitment for the English Royal Court guild. We were worried since we didn't have enough talents.

“Yes, I have honed a particular skill to become the English Royal Court's shield. Please allow me to demonstrate!” the man shouted enthusiastically.

Rachel read through the document that contained his information and background.

[James Finley]

Physique: 179 cm, 75 kg

Age: 22, Male

Nationality: British Commonwealth

Abilities: Defensive Wall, Mana Rampage

Role: Warrior

Curriculum Vitae: Graduated 27th in Batch 2029 of La Guild Lumière, 6 months of probation, 6 months of training at Penzberg, Germany.

Remarks: Guaranteed hero appointment once accepted.

He graduated 27th from the best French guild, La Guild Lumière. Rank 27 at Cube would've guaranteed a hero position anywhere. However, he had to volunteer for a year to improve his resume. Fortunately, he only had to spend a year because he placed 27th at La Guild Lumière. He would've had to become a mercenary instead if he placed lower than 50th in other guilds.

“Yes, thank you for your enthusiasm.”

James Finley became the English Royal Court's top candidate despite a lackluster resume. Others would surely ask why they hired a graduate from the Lumière guild, but that was the English Royal Court's current

reality.

“Yes!”

Finley replied with a big smile before leaving the interview hall.

The hall became empty after the interviewees left. This majestic hall decorated with renaissance art felt like a shell of its past glory.

“Right, thanks for the hard work everyone. Vice Leader?”

Dake glanced at Rachel. She nodded and stood up. Only then did the other nine interviewers rise.

Rachel returned to her office to finish more tasks. The other interviewers walked down the corridor discussing the talents today.

— Quite a lot of heroes came to our recruitment.

— That seemed to be the case.

— Isn't this all thanks to Vice Leader Rachel?

“...”

Rachel booted up her computer as soon as she arrived at her office. Most guilds busily recruited at this time and dungeons also appeared all over England. The most important task had to do with the royal palace.

She felt lethargic like sinking into mud the more she worked. Around 103 individuals applied for the January recruitment, but barely 10 seemed immediately useful.

Most applicants simply wanted to become a hero. The English Royal Court could nurture them to become the future, but these applicants only considered the guild as a stepping stone to progress in their careers.

“Haaa...” Rachel sighed from her pent-up frustrations.

She poured her entire life and passion into this guild with no results to show for it. All her hard work felt futile. Were her goals unattainable from the start?

Rachel barely managed to stay afloat and not drown in this abyss.

She focused on some documents to distract herself from the pitiful reality. These documents all painted a grim future for the English Royal Court. However, these pieces of paper couldn't be compared to the shame they experienced in real life.

Rachel immersed herself in reviewing and approving the stack of documents. She finally took a break at four in the morning and checked online.

[HERO COMMUNITY]

Only academy graduates could access this secret information exchange site. It existed separate from the dark web and Violet Banquet. She spent at least 20-30 minutes every day browsing through posts for helpful tips and information.

Scroll... Scroll...

One post caught her eye as she scrolled down. She couldn't help but read through it.

[Forum: Different International Guilds]

[Is the English Royal Court guild still hopeless?]

— Radish Kimchi | 2030.12.30 | 22:49:36

[Has the English Royal Court guild made any developments? I think it's been 3 years since Rachel, Cube's rank 3 graduate, joined them. Are they still stuck in the gutter? I heard her rivals, Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun, are rising through the ranks at Essence of the Straits.]

[Comments]

[Yep! England is a mess right now and the guild is crashing along with it. It's only been 3 years since Rachel graduated, so she should still be a prospect. However, she's already become the vice leader. They must be short on staff to give her that position right away. Look at Essence of the Straits. Yoo Yeonha might be Yoo Jinwoong's daughter, but she started from the bottom and barely managed to become a team leader.]

[England, France, and Germany no longer stand shoulder-to-shoulder. France and Germany dominate England now. England is around the same level as Spain and Italy?]

[I think Switzerland is on the rise these days. They have quite the golden lineup with Sehit, Varga, Vals, Tilma, and Maritz. Also, I heard they have 3 potential prospects enrolled in Cube this year.]

[Oh, I completely forgot about Switzerland lol. They seem to have a bright future with those patriotic five. Anyway, England is a no-go.]

[I suggest joining them if you desperately need to become a hero. It won't be that difficult to jump ships later using the royal family's name lol.]

Tak!

Rachel roughly moved the mouse and closed the site. It didn't anger her since they dissed everyone in the Hero Community, including the site creator himself.

“...Suggest joining them if you desperately need to become a hero?”

Bam!

Rachel lightly slammed her fists on the desk. Those words annoyed her the more she thought about it. To be treated like a stepping stone felt too harsh since her other members could read this too.

“Radish Kimchi... Radish Kimchi...”

Rachel muttered as she accessed the community forum to search for

previous posts by Radish Kimchi. She suspected another guild hired this part-timer to slander them.

However, Radish Kimchi turned out to be just another academy graduate diligently asking around for a guild to join.

“...”

Rachel silently closed the site.

Then she suddenly recalled her schedule tomorrow.

[Afternoon – Lesson With Master Shin Yeohwa]

“Ah...”

Rachel weakly gasped as she thought about her elemental class with Shin Yeohwa. Of course, Shin Yeohwa was the best elementalist in the world. Rachel endured the harsh teaching and considered it a tremendous opportunity.

However, a single lesson cost over 1.5 million pounds. It originally cost 500,000 pounds, but the figure ballooned over three times in two years.

[Thirty-six million pounds of taxpayer money is being used every year for Vice Leader Rachel’s private lessons.]

Rachel recalled reading such an article. The country spent thirty-six million pounds, or fifty billion won, for her as an elementalist. She pondered what that actually meant.

Of course, the prime minister told me my strength is England’s pride and urged me to continue. However, that’s not going to solve any of the guild’s problems if only I grow stronger. I also don’t want to suspect master’s qualifications, but it feels like there’s more chatting and punishing than the actual lesson these days...

The completely exhausted Rachel looked at her Cube graduation photo on her desk.

“I wonder what he’s doing.”

She often thought of someone from time to time despite her busy schedule. He made quite an impact, but disappeared like a mirage. He could only be found in the first year photo and not in their second or third year ones because he suddenly dropped out. His decision perplexed everyone since he quickly rose through the rankings and caught the attention of several guilds.

Kim Hajin...

The things she went through with him seemed like a fleeting dream.

Rachel stared at the framed photos while reminiscing about her Cube days. The three years she spent there consisted of fierce competition and burdening responsibilities. That precious time allowed her to fully devote herself to growing. She thought she had already grown up, but was still just a kid back then. Only now did she truly become an adult.

Then could she be experiencing growing pains right now?

Rachel sighed as she leaned in her chair. Moonlight shone through the window and a cold chill enveloped her body.

Three years had passed since she graduated from Cube. She still had many desires, but suppressed them. She couldn’t even manage her current tasks and her failures caused an avalanche of additional work.

Rachel felt exhausted. Her will to not give up, her unfortunate patriotism, and her responsibility as the princess tied her down. The young vice leader slowly shut her eyes as darkness covered her face. Her straight back and rigid neck began to relax. Only the sound of gentle breathing filled the office.

The English Royal Court’s youngest vice leader fell asleep in her office like usual.

Side Stories 2

Dream in a Dream (2)

An emergency occurred around two in the morning the next day.

A flock of Yupis appeared in Essex's airspace and golems charged from the mountains towards Dagenham. Eleven other provinces suffered from a monster invasion. Fortunately, the heroes stationed there could handle it.

Rachel ran out with Galatine as soon as the mobilization order arrived. She summoned her wind spirit, Windy, when she received the coordinates on her smartwatch.

Windy created an updraft and Rachel soared on it like an eagle. It took less than 3 minutes to arrive at Dagenham, London. However, the huge golems had already wreaked havoc and destroyed the houses and roads.

Dudududu!

The soldiers stationed at Dagenham fired their rifles with mana bullets, but the golems' innate recovery speed posed a problem. They couldn't inflict any damage unless they destroyed the golems' cores.

Rachel pulled out Galatine and infused the royal family's treasured sword with her spirits.

"Gra!"

The golems instantly turned to her after sensing mana. She kicked off the ground and charged at them. They swung their long arms, but she dodged all their attacks and easily overpowered them thanks to her agility.

Shwaaa!

Rachel stabbed the golem's heart with Galatine covered in a silver flame.

"Geu..."

The golem growled before crumbling into dust with its core destroyed. Rachel used the crumbling golem as a stepping stone to jump even higher.

She confirmed eight golems when she arrived. Seven more remained.

* * *

The golems' remains scattered all over the place. Piles of mud, sand, cement, and metal littered the ground. Rachel brushed off the dirt while standing on a battlefield that resembled a landfill.

"I greet the English Royal Court's vice leader!"

A soldier stationed in Dagenham saluted her.

Rachel nodded and asked, "What's the damage?"

The English Royal Court's guild members appeared after she spoke. She glanced at the heroes and told the soldier. "Report the specifics to them."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The soldier replied with another salute.

Rachel immediately left for Essex. It would take at least 10 minutes even if she ran with all her might. She expected it would take more than 30 minutes to subdue the flock of Yupis, so she hurried.

A strange report popped up on her smartwatch when she prepared to summon Wendy.

[Essex, the flock of Yupis has been neutralized.]

“...?”

Rachel tilted her head and called the officer in charge of Essex. She thought the report had been an error and continued running while waiting for the officer to respond.

“Is it true the flock of Yupis has been neutralized?” Rachel asked when the officer picked up.

— *Ah*, yes. We’ve neutralized all of them. There’s no need for you to come, Vice Leader.

Sievert spoke from the other end. He belonged to the Rayton guild that ruled over England’s southeastern region and his arrogant tone struck a nerve.

“How is it possible that you’ve neutralized a flock of Yupis in less than 10 minutes?” Rachel asked with obvious skepticism.

— *Haha!* You don’t have to worry about that.

Yupis could be considered at least medium-low rank, grade 3 flying monsters. These distant relatives of harpies resembled eagles larger than adult humans. They would be difficult to deal with because of their vicious temperament and the fact that they usually appeared in flocks of more than twelve. The Rayton guild lacked the competence to neutralize an entire flock in less than 10 minutes.

“Can I trust your words?”

— *Ah*, of course. We have fully neutralized them, Princess. You should trust us from time to time.

Rachel bit her lower lip in anger before retorting, “I’m quite certain I’ve asked you to address me more carefully.”

— *Ah*, right, right. I apologize. I got carried away. It’s been a long time since we took care of a situation before you. I’ll make sure to

properly address you next time, vice leader of the English Royal Court!

“Just hurry up and send your reports...”

— Yes, yes. I’ll send it right away, Vice Leader!

Sievert sent her a video file. It showed a mountain of Yupis corpses piled on the ground. However, something seemed strange. Holes riddled their bodies and some sort of steam rose from the pile.

“...?”

Rachel squinted for a closer look, but couldn’t make sense of it.

Did someone compress their mana into bullets and rain it down on the Yupis? No, the Rayton guild doesn’t have anyone that talented. No one would waste their mana with such an inefficient method. Aiming for the Yupis’ hearts would’ve sufficed rather than drilling holes all over them.

Rachel subconsciously grumbled while inspecting the video.

“I wonder how much all of these will be...”

Yupis talons and feathers fetched a hefty price. A single Yupis corpse would easily net a whopping 300-400 million won. A well-preserved corpse, or one that possessed a horn and led the flock, would easily go for a jaw-dropping 1.5 billion won.

Most Yupis in the video had been so badly riddled with holes their hides would only serve as rags, but she continued inspecting until she finally found it. A large horn stuck out from a Yupis that seemed larger than the rest.

“...”

Rachel silently tapped the image.

Tap... Tap... Tap... Tap...

The horn's image enlarged and shrunk whenever she tapped it. Twelve corpses worth at least 200 million won surrounded the horn worth at least 1 billion won.

Sievert snickered in the video and gave two thumbs up while standing next to the mountain of corpses.

Rachel couldn't help but envy him since the golems she destroyed had no worth.

* * *

"I told you. That's not how you do it!"

Shin Yeohwa's high-pitched voice rang out and a sharp gust of wind grazed Rachel's hand.

Rachel flinched at the sudden pain, but endured without a sound.

"Why are you so stubborn? Will you continue to ignore what I taught you?"

Shin Yeohwa screamed while waving her hand all over the place. Her anger didn't quell as she berated Rachel.

"Are you looking down on me now that you're all grown up and sitting in a big chair? *Ha!* Are you?"

Rachel's movements hadn't been exactly what Shin Yeohwa taught her. She simply extended her hand and feet by a bit, but Shin Yeohwa raged like a beast at this slight adjustment.

"I'm sorry..." Rachel apologized as the back of her hand burned from Shin Yeohwa's spirit.

Shin Yeohwa gritted her teeth as if she still hadn't been satisfied with physically punishing her student.

“I accepted a nobody like you as my disciple, but you think you’re somebody now with your face plastered all over the media?”

“...”

Rachel dropped her head and didn’t utter a word. She knew well from experience that Shin Yeohwa would take whatever she said as an excuse.

“Tsk... Know your place. Hey, don’t you know? I’m so embarrassed to tell others you’re my disciple.”

Shin Yeohwa condescendingly spat while poking Rachel’s forehead.

Rachel immediately returned whenever Shin Yeohwa pushed her forehead. Shin Yeohwa would shove her head again whenever it bounced back.

“Come on. Why don’t you use your brain? You think I can go around telling people my disciple is the vice leader of a broke guild from a broke country? Why don’t you tell me?”

Rachel hung her head and bit her lower lips. Those words stabbed at her heart. *A poor country and a poor guild.* Shin Yeohwa knowingly struck at Rachel’s inferiority complex.

“Hey, I’m so embarrassed to meet my master. I can’t show my face because of my shitty disciple. Master Changwoon used to rub shoulders with the South Korean president. I’m also of the same prestige, but... *Sigh...* Why did the spirits have to choose you of all people? *Ah...* right... I hope you’re still not doing that shitty thing these days. Are you?”

Shin Yeohwa meant Rachel’s spirit sword. Rachel believed a spirit could harmoniously combine with swordsmanship. However, Shin Yeohwa stressed the purity of spirits and abhorred the idea of tainting it with swordsmanship. She made it clear to Rachel that such a blasphemous deed should never be committed. She never even allowed Rachel to try.

“Yes...” Rachel muttered.

“Tsk... I knew you still did that useless shit. I just can’t monitor you every second. Anyways, I dare you to try again. I’m going to expel you immediately. I’m sure you’re aware you won’t be able to set foot in Korea if I expel you, right?”

“...” Rachel continued to silently hang her head.

Shin Yeohwa glared for a while before sighing.

“Sigh... You’re quite the frustrating one. This is the end of our lesson for today. I don’t feel like teaching because of your attitude. Just make sure to do your assignment. No, it’s up to you whether you want to do it or not. I don’t care.”

Their lesson ended just like that as Shin Yeohwa turned around and left.

Rachel stood there without raising her head. She remained in the same spot for some time even after her teacher left. Her insides hurt and she felt something boiling deep in her guts. Rachel wiped her tears.

Pat... Pat... Pat...

Blood dripped from the wound on the back of her hand.

“Let me tend to your wound.”

An old butler appeared out of nowhere. He didn’t show any particular emotions as he applied a potion to the bandage and wrapped it around her right hand. She felt a stinging sensation as the potion seeped into her wound and healed it.

“There’s an emergency!” a staff rushed in and shouted.

“What’s the matter?” the old butler asked.

The staff handed a flyer to Rachel.

[The royal family of England. I still remember what happened 15 years ago. I hope you haven't forgotten my name...]

Lancaster sent them a message.

Side Stories 3

Dream in a Dream (3)

Lancaster's warning letter to England's royal family had been instantly leaked. Rachel had already informed everyone that whoever leaked the news would be severely punished. However, the guild members paid no heed to her words as they shared the news with outsiders.

Why did Lancaster obsess over the royal family? He used to place his country even higher than his family. Why did he do this now of all times? The general assembly would soon take place in Central Asia.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

Rachel swung her sword with all her might at the guild's training ground. Galatine vertically slashed through the air before suddenly twisting diagonally. Her movements looked refined and elegant. Her sweat sparkled under the light whenever she moved and nothing about her precise movements could be criticized.

Rachel trained while feeling distressed about Lancaster's warning. He openly threatened the royal family for the first time.

The guild executives suggested requesting help from the association, but Rachel refused. The royal family had to take care of their own business. They would end up as an international laughing stock if she sent a request asking, *Please subdue the criminal targeting the Princess!*

Rachel felt someone staring at her. She turned towards the training ground's entrance and spotted the old butler quietly watching her. She wiped the sweat off her forehead.

"It's only 3 weeks away, Princess."

The old butler warmly smiled.

He would turn 80 this year and only he could casually address her as Princess. He had served princesses even before Rachel and continued to serve the royal family.

“I am aware...” Rachel curtly replied.

Her emotions got the better of her because of her inferiority complex and the anxiety from everything going on.

The general assembly of guilds would occur at Central Asia's great hall. It would test their qualifications to enter the giant field there. They usually held these high-profile meetings in South Korea for safety measures. However, the entire agenda this time would discuss rights over the ownerless giant field. They chose to host it at the hall located at the giant field's entrance.

“Will you be fine with your security?” the old butler asked out of concern.

No portals connected England to Central Asia. Rachel would have to take a car or ride a horse from the closest countries, either India or China, to reach Central Asia. Traveling on land would be risky because of Lancaster.

“Yes, I have chosen trustworthy companions,” Rachel replied.

Most executives at the general assembly brought their own subordinates or hired mercenaries for protection. After all, heroes rarely worked as bodyguards. A hero's title couldn't be wasted on protecting a single figure. Most of them refused such work.

Mercenaries usually possessed the potential to become a hero, but slightly lacked the qualifications to become one. They could easily work as government agents and be deployed on battlefields. However, most of them preferred working as mercenaries to earn more than civil servants. They became the perfect candidates for guild executives to hire.

“Still, I can't help but worry since they're not experts at escorting. Protecting someone requires more than just force. Preventing an ambush is a hundred times better than winning a battle, but the

inexperienced would struggle to do that.”

Of course, Rachel asked around for mercenaries. However, the royal family didn't have sufficient funds to hire them. The price of skilled mercenary groups increased by several times because of the conflict between the 199 guilds.

“It's alright. I believe in our guild members, so don't worry.”

Rachel tried to ease the old butler's worries.

A part of her said those words to quell her own anxiety.

* * *

The guild's HR manager, Dake, thought about hiring mercenaries to accompany Rachel. She declined to hire outsiders, but he believed she needed at least one mercenary as a pathfinder. Central Asia's terrain underwent drastic changes because of a mana explosion. It would be extremely difficult to navigate without a pathfinder, who could reduce the risk of ambushes by half.

[What do you think of this person?]

A message arrived while Dake thought about who to hire. It came from Fermin, one of the guild members tasked with accompanying the princess.

[The link is over here. Please have a look.]

Dake tapped on the link to a mercenary group's website.

[Xtra]

— *Specializes in security, assassination, sniping, and pathfinding.*

— *We are not geographically limited when tasked with security or pathfinding.*

— *Our response may be delayed depending on the season.*

He had never heard of this mercenary group before.

The fact that they only operated through Violet Banquet would be more than enough to incur Rachel's wrath. Not because of her beliefs or honor as a hero since she already compromised those a long time ago, but because a high probability existed that djinns lurked in expensive mercenary groups on Violet Banquet.

What if he hired a mercenary group with a djinn? To make matters worse, what if Rachel found out? The Vice Leader would severely punish him according to the knight's oath he swore to uphold when he joined the English Royal Court.

Dake immediately called Fermin.

— Yes, Team Leader.

“Hey, why the hell did you use Violet Banquet? Don't you know how the Vice Leader would react?”

— *Huh? Ah*, that's because there's no one left. Every skilled pathfinder has already been swept while we were hesitating.

“Still... Violet Banquet is not what we need. What if they turn out to be djinns?”

— *Ah, hahaha!* No, you don't have to worry about that. If you look closely, there's a clause under assassination and sniping that's limited to djinns and monsters. They don't kill people, only djinns and monsters.

“*Hmm...*”

Dake understood now after taking a closer look.

— So, why don't we give them a chance? This Xtra is quite cheap and they have a good rating even though they seem a bit lazy.

“Lazy?”

— Yes, they established their group in 2026, but have only carried out 20 requests so far.

“Wouldn’t they have already shut down if that’s the case?”

A medium-sized mercenary group usually carried out 300 requests a year, but this one only completed 20 in 5 years. These numbers suggested their business would soon die or already died.

— No way. They replied when I sent them a message.

“Hey, forget about their reply or whatnot. Why are you insisting on this mercenary group in the first place?”

— I told you already. Their ratings are quite good.

“Then tell me how good their ratings are...”

Dake grumbled in disbelief.

How could a mercenary group that only carried out an average of 4 requests per year have a good rating?

— Team Leader, this mercenary group completed 16 of their 20 requests in their first year. However... take a look at this. I’ll send you the link to their reviews. I think they’re quite amazing!

Fermin’s link redirected to the most common information dealer on Violet Banquet, *[Al-Kharakah]*. The message read, *[Information Dr. Fmin purchased and forwarded to Rocallist. This message may be forwarded two more times for free.]*

A total of 9 reviews came attached.

*[ID – Reca****]*

[Rating – ★★★★★]

The best when it comes to escort protection in dangerous areas. I was able to safely pass through Pandemonium thanks to them. They identified all dangers beforehand and instantly neutralized any threats that appeared. Hmm... I can't really describe it in words, but... I felt like being in the safest place ever while traveling through the most dangerous area in the world.

Also, this mercenary constantly watched over us from a distance without appearing even once.

I will never forget this experience. You are truly a guardian angel.

*[ID – Witch****]*

[Rating – ★★★★★]

This mercenary is quite peculiar. They never appeared and aren't interested in the employer's appearance either. One might think they're rude or arrogant since you're paying them, but I dare say anyone who hires them will be very satisfied. There's only one mercenary running this business, but they have gained the right to be called a mercenary group after doing the work of an army. Truly a one-person army!

*[ID – Watermelon****]*

[Rating – ★★★★★]

There aren't any other reviews or comments, but I'm certain they'll become famous soon.

Additional Review: Is this place no longer accepting requests? I wanted to hire them again since they did an awesome job last time, but they haven't replied. It's been 3 months...

The reviews seemed as amazing as Fermin said. Dake knew reviews from *[Al-Kharakah]* couldn't be faked since every written word cost money. *[Al-Kharakah]* employed a simple system that required people to pay points to read reviews and seriously vetted all reviews before putting them up. Not to mention, they immediately banned anyone from accessing their network if someone lied or stated false information.

“What the hell...”

Dake grumbled at his new dilemma since Al-Kharakah gave credibility to the reviews. This ended up confusing him even more.

“Don’t you think someone tampered with these?”

He still found it too good to be true.

— No way. What kind of madman would tamper with Al-Kharakah? They would’ve been banned immediately after getting caught.

“Rather than that, it says there’s only one mercenary?”

— Yes, I heard this mercenary carries out all the requests alone! Isn’t that amazing?

The mercenary in question sounded even more absurd. No, why did this mercenary even bother to register as a group if they worked alone? They could’ve just registered as a standalone mercenary.

“What about the costs?”

— It’ll cost us 300 million won to hire this mercenary as a pathfinder. It’s quite worrying with Lancaster, so I asked how much for 3 months of escorting and security!

“And?”

— They gave us a discount since we’re from the English Royal Court guild. It’ll be 100 million won per month until the general assembly ends! Also, they asked for a 100 million won bonus if the request is successfully completed! The grand total will be 700 million won!

Fermin’s baseless confidence and enthusiasm struck a nerve in Dake.

“Forget about that. You better be prepared to write an apology and reflect on your actions, punk.”

— *Huh?* No, no, no, Team Leader! Wait a seco—

Dake hung up the call and furrowed his brows. However, his expression slowly changed as he deeply pondered in his chair.

Impossible... This mercenary could be one of Lancaster's ploys... Hmm... no... if Lancaster did prepare this over the last 5 years then there's no way he's going to offer a discount since that'll be a dead giveaway... Actually... he would've used that time and effort to plant a spy in our guild rather than go through this. Not to mention, that Fermin is quite dependable when it comes to things like this.

This mercenary became more trustworthy as he thought about it. Dake used Violet Banquet for over a decade, but had never seen all positive reviews for a mercenary group. Of course, they only had 9 reviews, which still made him skeptical.

“They don’t show their face...”

Dake muttered that sentence repeatedly in his head. Rachel wouldn’t find out if the mercenary never appeared. The English Royal Court could also use the discount since they couldn’t afford 700 million won for their Vice Leader’s protection.

Dake sighed and called Fermin.

— Yes, Team Leader? I was waiting for you to call back.

“Shut up... Make sure no one else hears about this. Keep the request the same.”

— The same? Do you mean the escort and security?

“Yeah, ask him to be a pathfinder as well as a bodyguard. Lancaster already sent us a warning, so there’s no reason to sit around and wait. I’ll pay the advance out of my own pocket. Make sure the Vice Leader doesn’t hear anything about this.”

— No, it’s fine! I can pay half of it too!

“No, you need to save up if you want to get married. Who’s going to marry you if you’re broke on top of your personality? I’ll just claim it from the guild after the request is finished, so don’t worry.”

Side Stories 4

Dream in a Dream (4)

I, Kim Hajin, did not procrastinate or neglect my training. I had earned enough to last a lifetime, so I had a lot of free time now. I decided to train since I couldn't die of sickness and only djinns or monsters could kill me.

I continued to survive. Sometimes, I told myself to quit playing the hero if I had to go through this all over again.

“Seup... Hooo...”

I kept thinking while working out. I could no longer return to my world. It happened quite suddenly. I wouldn't be in such despair if I did something wrong or if someone interfered and caused me to remain here. However, I just woke up one day and found multiple notifications.

[The Tower of Miracle has manifested!]

[The Tower of Wish has been resolved!]

[Baal has disappeared and the world is now safe.]

[All episodes have been completed.]

[You can now stay in this world forever.]

[Congratulations!]

Congratulations my ass... I felt like the sky had fallen.

What did I do to make Baal disappear? I wanted to ask the system, but it no longer replied after that day. Fortunately, my gifts and status

intervention remained. Nonetheless, I still felt devastated. I only kept my sanity all this time because of the hope to return home.

Ding!

A notification rang from my smartwatch.

[Rocalist has sent a request to Xtra]

[Distanced Escort to the General Assembly Hall]

— *Client: Vice Leader of the English Royal Court, Rachel.*

— *Reward: 300 Million Won for Pathfinding (100 Million Won Advance Payment), 300 Million Won for Escort and Protection (100 Million Won per month), and a 100 Million Won Bonus Upon Successful Completion.*

— *Warning: The Vice Leader should not be aware of your presence.*

[Please confirm the specifics with Rocalist.]

I received a request through Violet Banquet from none other than the English Royal Court guild.

“Hmm...”

It seemed one of their guild members wanted to hire me behind Rachel’s back. A Dr. Fmin contacted me last week through Violet Banquet and asked if I could escort their vice leader. However, I already lost interest in mercenary work 4 years ago. They did catch my interest when I heard Rachel’s name.

I’d been greatly indebted to her and she would always be a key figure in my story.

“Should I do it or not?”

I would have to protect Rachel from any threats and safely escort her to the general assembly hall. Then I would have to continue protecting

her until the event ended. My reward for all this would be a measly 700 million won.

“Seven hundred million...”

I subconsciously scoffed while looking at the ground. Rows of state-of-the-art equipment with manatech that featured holograms and gravity control aided in my workout sessions. I called this place Kim Hajin’s Training Room and it looked even better than most gyms owned by guilds.

It took me around 3 billion won to set all this up. The 700 million won the English Royal Court offered seemed like chump change. The dumbbell with manatech I just used cost more than 600 million won.

The training room doors flung open and someone cheerfully called.

“Hajin!”

I turned off my smartwatch and turned around.

Evandel entered with her friends. I counted 13 of them. They all looked cheerful and innocently giggled together.

“Hey, look at this. We just met Terrain unni just now.”

Evandel excitedly ran over and showed me a picture of her standing between a man and a woman. Evandel’s face flushed red and she nervously squirmed.

“It looks like you had a lot of fun.” I smiled at her.

“Yeah! It was really fun!”

A VIP screening of *Magic Girl Terrain*, Evandel and her friends’ favorite movie series, just premiered on the 47th floor of this building. Evandel attended this private screening today with all her friends. The two main protagonists immediately agreed to come when I offered them a hefty sum for a meet-and-greet.

I spent a normal life with Evandel after dropping out of Cube.

“It’s not bedtime yet. Is there anything else you want to do?”

“*Hmm...* Whatever my friends want to do!”

“Oh, you’re such a good kid. Evandel’s friends, what do you all want to do? Do you want to go to the waterpark?”

“YESSS!” they enthusiastically replied.

I felt like working at a kindergarten.

“Alright then, Manager?”

“Yes, I understand.”

The man standing behind the kids like a shadow replied with a bright smile before leading them downstairs.

“Have fun!”

“Okay!”

I stood in the middle of the training room after sending them off with a smile.

Our building in the center of Seocho^[1] had 107 floors and stood out the most among all the skyscrapers in the area. The walls featured floor-to-ceiling glass with a 360 view of Seoul and the Han River.

All of this belonged to me, Kim Hajin.

“I certainly earned a lot of money...”

I solely dedicated myself to making money for the past 5 years and tried to fill my empty heart when I couldn’t return home anymore. I devoted myself like a madman to at least live comfortably in this world.

I made money quite easily since I already knew the future. Honestly, I only needed the single fact that Essence of the Strait would skyrocket. Couple that with something called leveraging and I began minting money with no end.

Of course, simply knowing the future might not have sufficed. Yoo Yeonha made the first move and sought me out. She didn't personally visit, but contacted me through my Truth Agency.

Most high-profile people knew about the Truth Agency these days.

[We Know Everything...]

This simple, yet powerful motto boosted us to the top of the industry. People requesting our services reached the billions. Even famous guild masters and conglomerate chairmen did their best to be humble and respectful when dealing with the Truth Agency.

— Hajin-chan.

A familiar voice rang out from my smartwatch. It came from the Truth Agency's co-founder, Kim Hoseop, the chubby guy who stood next to me during our military agent graduation.

"Ah, you called at just the right time. I have something to tell you," I immediately replied.

— *Hmm?* What is it *nyang*?

"I received a request from the English Royal Court."

— Oh, is that so *nyang*?

"It's related to their vice leader, Rachel. I plan to accept it, so investigate the surroundings and let me know if anything comes up."

— Alright!

I ended the call and headed to the basement where Evandel and her

friends went when something reflected the moonlight and briefly blinded me. I blinked a few times and looked out the window to find a flock of gargoyles in midair.

“This is why I can never grow fond of this world,” I grumbled and sighed.

They hovered in front of the full moon and their skin shone like metal. They seemed to be looking for an opportunity to crash into the skyscraper.

Heroes would probably be deployed soon, but I wouldn’t wait since all the land and buildings around here belonged to me.

I took out the Desert Eagle and reinforced it with aether. Then I transformed it into a vicious sniper rifle. I opened the window and aimed at the gargoyles.

Click... Clack...

I immediately pulled the trigger. Six streaks of light shot out and flew in different directions before striking the gargoyles. They all died in midair after my bullets crushed their hearts.

I watched as their corpses fell and called the custodian.

“There are some gargoyle corpses outside. Please retrieve them.”

* * *

— The general assembly in Central Asia will finally begin in two weeks...

Rachel watched the news while waiting for the selection process to begin.

— La Guild Lumière from France, Panzerburg from Germany, Reisläufer from Switzerland, and Legiones from Italy have been selected to represent their respective countries...

The entire world focused on the general assembly these days. Lancaster chose to send his warning because of this. He knew better than anyone else that England didn't have a future if they failed to join the general assembly.

However, Rachel remained steadfast and didn't fear his threat. She would sacrifice herself if it meant resolving the animosity between Lancaster and England.

"Vice Leader, we will be starting soon."

Rachel turned off her smartwatch and looked up. They had renovated the training ground as a stage for the selection process.

"We'll keep the spectators back."

"Yes, go ahead."

The commoners began to enter. These people had purchased tickets to watch the English Royal Court's selection process. They sat in the spectator row away from the dirt ground protected by an invisible barrier.

The VIPs consisting of conglomerate chairmen, celebrities, and even the prime minister sat on a higher level as if watching an opera. Their fancy attires indeed made it seem like an opera.

The English Royal Court had an old tradition of opening the selection process to the public, so those applying could show their worth and garner support.

The host's voice rang out from the speakers on the roof.

— The English Royal Court's long-awaited selection test will begin in 15 minutes.

The first test allowed participants to freely demonstrate their abilities. Each of the 12 participants had 5 minutes to showcase their abilities.

— Please be aware that a variety of summoned creatures will appear

during the test.

Rachel closed her eyes to communicate with her spirits. They confirmed that no threats lurked in the area.

Even Lancaster wouldn't be stupid enough to attack this place at the center of their territory.

Tak... Tak... Tak...

The lights suddenly turned off and darkness descended in the hall.

The crowd noisily murmured, but died down when a spotlight shone on center stage.

A man wearing a formal suit stood there and signaled the start of the selection test.

— LADIES AND GENTLEMEN...

He shouted at the top of his lungs.

— You may find the list of knights participating on the pamphlet distributed earlier.

Rachel took a look at the pamphlet as well.

“Finley will be up first. Maybe we should've changed the order a bit.”

Dake whispered since Finley seemed better suited as the finale. Rachel didn't seem to care.

“Vice Leader, please don't worry. After all, we're in our territory right now. Our guild members are working hard alongside security to prevent anything from happening. We have fully vetted everyone here. Not to mention, I also prepared... *Ehem... Ehem... Ah*, look. Finley is coming out.”

Dake faked a cough when he almost exposed everything. Thankfully,

Rachel didn't seem interested in what he said.

— Now, the first participant you've all been waiting for! The knight who calls himself the royal family's shield, the brave lionheart, James Finley!

The doors opened and James Finley from Lumière walked out. His handsome looks sent the crowd into a frenzy.

Finley saluted the judges before taking a few steps back and infusing mana into his hands. The large concentration of mana turned into a gigantic shield.

“Ohhhh!”

The crowd seemed very impressed.

Clack!

A large steel cage opened from the other end and 12 giant wolves appeared from the summoning device. Finley stood firm and waited for them to make the first move.

— *Grrr! Grr!*

The wolves kicked off the ground and attacked. Finley faced them head-on. A pack of wolves against one human, but the flow of battle showed who had the upper hand.

The giant wolves couldn't break through Finley's shield. The ones he bashed with his shield whimpered in pain and retreated. Finley didn't give them any time to regroup and slammed his shield on their heads. The crowd roared at his wild and brave display.

Boom... Boom...

The ground shook after he subdued all the giant wolves.

Boom... Boom...

The crowd held their breaths.

Boom... Boom!

Finley looked up in an exaggerated manner like the protagonist of a movie.

A rank 3 giant tiger had been summoned this time and caused the ground to shake. It prowled around while observing Finley.

“Seup...”

Finley gritted his teeth and lowered his stance.

The crowd noisily murmured and thought he had given up. However, Finley proved them wrong by releasing all his mana.

“Keuh!”

He groaned as the amount of mana continued to increase. It enveloped his entire body and turned into an aura. Even Rachel, who busily looked around for potential threats, noticed his powerful aura and acknowledged his potential.

“Oh, so he can do something like that.”

“I was a bit worried when he asked for a giant tiger. Who knew he had such a skill under his sleeves?”

Finley shot forward like a bullet while everyone admired him. Then a ray of light suddenly flashed and disappeared. Everyone saw it, but no one could identify it.

However, the mystery would soon be resolved.

“Huh?”

An old man in the crowd broke the silence first. His vision had deteriorated because of old age and he didn't notice the ray of light.

Only he had kept his eyes on Finley the entire time and fully witnessed Finley's lifeless body twisting in the air like a ragdoll.

Shhheu...

A faint black smoke rose from Finley's forehead. His body remained motionless on the ground and his eyes lost focus.

Everyone finally realized what happened. *An assassination.* The rowdy crowd just a minute ago turned dead silent.

The eerie silence continued before people began screaming when they saw blood flowing from James Finley's forehead.

— *Kyaaaah!*

— What? What's going on? What is that?

— Dead! He died! He died!

— A djinn! It's a djinn!

Chaos ensued as those running for the exit shoved others blankly standing around. People trying to escape pushed the staff trying to restore order. A stampede broke out and some got trampled over. Screams and crying filled the area.

Rachel froze in her seat as the surroundings descended into utter chaos. She couldn't hear anything in her daze.

Reality seemed to slip through her fingers and grew further away. Only the lifeless body on the stage entered her vision. That enthusiastic and talented young man had been so eager to become a hero.

"Princess! Hurry up and evacuate the Princess!" Dake shouted.

However, Rachel shoved him back and ferociously ran forward with Windy flying behind her.

Kwawooooosh!

The spirit released a fierce wind that seemed to reflect Rachel's anger.

1. Seocho is one of the posh areas within Gangnam. 📍

Side Stories 5

Dream in a Dream (5)

Three hours ago...

[Mission Acceptance – Xtra has accepted Rocalist's request.]

I went to the basement before setting off on my mission. Only I could access the basement's lowest level filled with rows of ammunition boxes larger than refrigerators.

The warm, blue luster of mana escaped as I opened one of the boxes.

I called this bullet the 308-X. I modeled it after the 308 Winchester to be more destructive and easier to carry. I acquired a factory just to manufacture these. They contained a much higher concentration of mana than the ones on the market.

I closed the ammunition box and pressed a button. The gigantic box creaked like a machine before compressing into the size of a briefcase.

This function, which defied the laws of physics, could only be possible thanks to *[Settings Intervention]*.

I carried the ammunition briefcase to the basement's middle floor with rows of SUVs and motorbikes lined up in a wide hall.

“Hmm...”

I briefly pondered which vehicle to choose.

A motorbike, SUV, helicopter, or horse?

I ended up choosing an SUV sturdier than an armored vehicle. Its wheels had been enchanted with numerous magic like silent magic

and it could be considered a mobile weapon more than a vehicle. I infused mana into the SUV and it creaked before compressing just like the ammunition box.

I finished preparing with the two briefcases in hand and suddenly received a message.

— Hajin-chan.

It came from Kim Hoseop.

“What?”

— You asked me to check for any potential threats against the English Royal Court, right?

“Yeah, especially the ones targeting Rachel.”

— *Ah*, then I’m all done.

He always finished his work quite quickly. I designed his character without much thought, but he turned out to be a key figure in information gathering and helped me a ton.

“Okay, thanks. Send me the file and get some rest.”

— Okay, *nyang*.

Kim Hoseop sent the files to my server. I couldn’t help but exclaim in awe when I glanced over them. Its accuracy was one thing, but he organized it perfectly and made it easy for readers to find what they needed.

“Lancaster?”

As expected, that name caught my eye first. Rumors had it that Lancaster sent a warning to the English Royal Court. He seemed to be the only visible threat. So many others lurked under the surface and couldn’t be counted. Other factors that threatened the English Royal

Court included their dire financial situation, dwindling coffers, mountains of debts, hostile relations with Korean guilds, pressure from Germany and France, etc.

“*Hmm... Tsk...*”

I couldn't help but click my tongue after going through the files.

Rachel should've awakened after receiving help from Kim Suho. Then she should've revived the English Royal Court to its former glory and progressed it even further. However, everything became a mess now.

Did I cause this or did this damn world change things by itself? Regardless, I had to set things right.

I focused on everything related to Lancaster and quickly finished thanks to Kim Hoseop's wonderful highlights.

“The English Royal Court's selection exam?”

— Yes! I feel like something will happen there, *nyang*.

I closely examined every piece of information related to the selection exam: its location, attendees, judges, and even the number of spectators. Only one name stuck out in the end.

[*James Finley*]

This person seemed like the biggest threat at the moment.

James Finley made contact with a person presumed to be Lancaster. He also purchased a mana bomb last week from the black market. These bastards weaved a complicated web that would've been impossible to spot if not for Kim Hoseop's gift.

“When will the second selection take place?”

— It's today, *nyang*. It'll start in 2 hours.

“What? Why are you only telling me this now?”

I immediately got up and prepared to leave.

— I only found out after finally hacking their system! It was quite difficult to hack, *nyang*!

“Really? Alright then, I’ll get moving now.”

I accepted the request from Rocalist last night, but didn’t expect to work so soon.

— What’s the plan?

“Kill.”

I would’ve came up with various plans if I had the time. However, the best method now would simply be an assassination.

“Can you put me at the front of the portal queue?”

— Alright, leave it to me. Have a safe trip, *nyang*.

* * *

James Finley had been killed.

They immediately halted the selection exam and searched for the perpetrator. However, the English Royal Court and the other investigators couldn’t find the assassin. It seemed as if the assassin disappeared into thin air. Not even a trace could be found.

Rachel returned to where the selection took place and analyzed the situation from the beginning. A flash of light appeared before silently piercing Finley’s forehead. That single attack had been extremely accurate and fatal.

“It couldn’t have come from far. There’s a high chance it came from inside since the alarms would’ve gone off if someone’s mana entered

from outside. I think there's a high chance the assassin disguised themselves as security."

Rachel seriously muttered as she analyzed the situation.

"They could've easily hidden among the panicked crowd and escaped. Also... *Haaa...*"

She had a hard time breathing and her body felt hot. It burned from the rage boiling inside her.

Someone had been assassinated right in front of her under her watch. She felt certain Lancaster had done this to send another warning. To think he would sacrifice an innocent young man just to threaten her.

Rachel found it difficult to calm her beating heart. She tried, but couldn't suppress her rage.

Dake berated the heroes as Rachel deeply contemplated.

"Hey, you bastards! What happened? Did you even do your jobs?"

"I checked everything to the point that I thought I was being paranoid. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary."

"I swear on my life to the Queen that I sustained the barrier. I'm certain I would've felt something if anybody used their mana within a 1 km radius, but I didn't feel an ounce of mana anywhere."

"Ye... Yes... that's correct. There's no way we slacked off when all of us are aware of Lancaster's warning."

"*Ugh...* You useless morons!"

Dake scratched his head in frustration.

He felt like his head would split open right now. Did it make sense that one of the participant's brains splattered all over the ground in the presence of 30 high rank guild members and Vice Leader Rachel?

— Can you hear me?

A voice spoke directly into his ears.

Dake flinched and immediately checked his smartwatch. The voice belonged to the mercenary he recently hired, Xtra.

“What the? *Ah...*”

Dake briefly muttered before thinking of a brilliant idea.

The protection request immediately activated when they both signed the request. This mercenary could’ve seen the entire thing. No, even if he didn’t, Dake thought this could be an excuse to haggle the price.

“Are you around here somewhere?”

— Yes, I can see you right now.

“*Ah*, that’s a relief. Then you must’ve seen what just happened...”

— I killed him.

“What?”

Dake couldn’t even doubt his ears as his mind went blank. He could only tilt his head like a confused child.

Was it because they spoke in Korean? He found it difficult to understand the mercenary’s words just now.

Dake tried to remain calm and translated, *I killed him*, into English word for word.

— James Finley. I killed him.

“...”

A chill went down Dake's spine before his entire body shivered. He gulped and glanced sideways at Rachel, who busily investigated with the other officials.

Dake whispered to Xtra.

"You... What did you just say? What do you mean you killed him?"

— James Finley had been brainwashed by Lancaster. I discovered that Lancaster planted him into your selection exam. I'll send you the files, so please have a look.

"What? Hey!"

Dake shouted a bit too loud and Rachel turned towards him.

"Now that I think about it, Vice Leader's theory is quite convincing."

One of the investigators spoke, "Ah, is that so? Then..."

Rachel shifted her attention back to the investigator.

— I sent you the file.

"What?"

A bunch of files had been sent to Dake's smartwatch while he still felt dumbfounded about everything.

Dake glanced at Rachel before opening the files.

[Secret discussion between James Finley and Lancaster – Hacked Version (Confidential)]

[James Finley's Whereabouts.]

[James Finley's Activities.]

[Mysterious man and James Finley caught on surveillance camera...]

These files contained all of James Finley's activities for the past 6 months.

Dake stared at the files before clicking on the surveillance camera footage. James Finley appeared at a secluded place in London. The video seemed to have been taken 3 weeks ago. He spoke with someone and the other person passed him something before leaving. The next clip showed a hooded figure walking past the surveillance camera.

— James Finley is suspected to have received a mana bomb.

“...”

Dake tapped on the file titled, *[Secret discussion between James Finley and Lancaster – Hacked Version (Confidential)]*.

It could only be viewed and not downloaded.

[I'm ready to follow that person's will...]

[I'll offer up my life and turn that entire place into a sea of fire.]

[Yes, it's a great honor to be selected for this mission.]

[Thank you, my lord. I shall punish the corrupt royal family.]

The other party's messages seemed to have been erased or omitted, but Finley's messages alone served as enough proof.

“What the...”

Dake couldn't help but wonder how this mercenary collected so much information in less than a day. Also, how did he hack into Lancaster's secret communication channel? Was that even possible?

“Hey, listen... Couldn't all this just be fabricated?”

Obviously, Dake would ask this.

— You're free to believe what you want.

“What did you just say?”

— I don't care whether you believe me or not. I'll continue my duties with my own methods.

Dake couldn't utter a word, but felt strangely convinced.

Xtra overpowered every hero and mercenary here and assassinated James Finley in the most unimaginable way. He could've assassinated Rachel if he worked for Lancaster.

— It's up to you how you make use of this information.

Dake looked around before relocating to the corner of the hall and whispering.

“This is all too sudden. You should've given us a heads up before firing...”

— The portal to England had a slight problem. I was in a rush since I arrived late.

“No, I mean a heads up. You know, like a hint? Like what you're doing right now. You could've called while waiting for the portal...”

— Then would you have allowed me to assassinate Finley? This entire place would've been blown up if I was 3 seconds late.

Dake looked at the ceiling before nodding. He knew Xtra would be correct if James Finley indeed possessed a mana bomb.

— Anyways, take a look at the file I labeled as confidential.

[Secret discussion between James Finley and Lancaster – Hacked Version (Confidential)]

“Yes, I’m looking at it.”

— Don’t show that to anyone else for the time being.

“*Huh?* This file is the only way we can prove Finley worked for Lancaster...”

— The communication channel we’re using right now can’t be hacked, but everything will be leaked to Lancaster once you send that file to anyone else. They’ll find out that someone hacked their communication lines. Then they’ll abandon this one and set up a new channel, which will make my effort of hacking them meaningless.

“*Ah*, yes... I understand.”

It seemed like Xtra didn’t want to show his cards until he could end everything once and for all.

— Please keep my identity a secret as well. I don’t like drawing attention.

“Of course, I’ll do my best to keep your identity hidden.”

Dake glanced sideways at James Finley’s corpse. The investigator and Rachel spoke far away to avoid tampering with the crime scene.

— First, go and check Finley’s body. There should be a mana bomb somewhere on him.

“*Ehem... ehem...* Where is it?”

Dake loitered around as if trying to find something on the ground while gradually approaching the corpse.

— Be careful. The other minions that helped him will certainly be around.

Dake’s heart began to beat faster.

“...!”

As Xtra said, an unidentified object had been attached to James Finley's plate armor.

Dake tried to take off the plate armor.

“Excuse me! We're here to collect the corpse!”

Dake looked at the MI6 agents that suddenly appeared.

“Give me a minute. There's something I want to check...?”

The object attached to Finley's plate armor suddenly disappeared when Dake looked back.

“What the hell?”

“Please move.”

One of the MI6 agents said as he pushed Dake.

Rachel, still speaking to the investigator, looked towards Dake.

“Is there something wrong over there?”

“*Huh? Ah*, Vice Leader... No... that's...”

“*Huh?*”

“...”

Dake looked at the heroes around him, the MI6 agents collecting the corpse, and Rachel slowly approaching them.

Side Stories 6

Dream in a Dream (6)

James Finley's assassination spread like wildfire and made the headlines at every news agency across the globe within 3 minutes. Dake wanted nothing more than to prove that Lancaster masterminded this incident.

However, things took a strange turn the following morning. The mainstream media began spouting conspiracy theories because of all the unanswered questions surrounding James Finley's death. To make matters worse, a bombshell report dropped before the English Royal Court could release an official statement.

[A strange twist of events and a bodyguard gone rogue. Did the English Royal Court hire the mercenary who killed James Finley?]

[The newbie mercenary hired by the English Royal Court has only completed 20 missions in 5 years.]

The fact that Dake hired a mercenary from Violet Banquet already leaked. It didn't end there as the press even discovered the mercenary's identity as Xtra. Dake suspected Fermin had leaked it, but Fermin adamantly pleaded innocent.

A scary thought surfaced in Dake's head. What if Lancaster kept an eye on all the English Royal Court's offices and recorded their conversations? That might explain how the information got leaked to the press.

* * *

[English Royal Court – Vice Leader's Office]

“Why didn't you report this to me!” Rachel angrily screamed.

They hardly witnessed the vice leader's wrath once a year.

"I'm sorry. I was just worried before the general assembly," Dake replied while lowering his gaze. He had no choice but to confess everything since everyone already knew about Xtra assassinating James Finley.

"I don't need your excuses. Hand it over now."

Rachel demanded while extending her hand.

"That's..." Dake hesitated.

"Now!"

She commanded again while flapping her hand. Rachel motioned for him to hurry and Dake had no choice but to give her his smartwatch.

"Is Xtra in here?" she asked.

"Yes... in the personal contacts..." Dake muttered.

She pressed a few buttons and made the call. The line rang a few times before it connected. Then she placed the smartwatch next to her ear and asked.

"Are you Xtra?"

However, no response came back and Rachel grimaced.

"Answer me. I am the vice leader of the English Royal Court guild."

Still, no response came from the other end.

She squinted and glared at the smartwatch as if lasers would shoot out of her eyes.

"It's no use even if you stay silent."

She looked at Dake and briefly hesitated before continuing.

“Don’t test my patience.”

Her tone grew stern, but the person on the other end didn’t react. That person even dared to scoff.

A hint of anger flashed on her face.

“Tell me.”

“...”

“Who are you?”

“*Uhm...*” Dake tried to interject, but Rachel ignored him.

“Speak.”

“Vice Leader...” Dake interrupted her again.

“Will you continue to...”

Rachel turned to Dake in the middle of her words. “What is it?”

She acted quite cold, so Dake carefully replied to avoid worsening her mood.

“I suggest you put on the watch first or switch to speaker mode so you can hear the other person...”

“...”

Only then did Rachel realize her mistake.

She cleared her throat and muttered in slight embarrassment.

“I’m not used to these kinds of things. Can you hear me now?”

— I heard you since a while ago. You were the one who couldn't hear me.

She finally received a response. The voice sounded deep and husky as she expected.

“Tell me the truth. Did you...”

Rachel spoke when the person on the other end interrupted her.

— I don't talk to anyone other than the person who hired me.

“Really... What?”

The sudden interjection surprised her.

— I'm hanging up.

“*Huh?*”

Beep!

The call ended just like that.

Rachel stood there flabbergasted and blinked a few times at Dake. The entire conversation had been so ridiculous she couldn't even get mad.

“That's... Vice Leader, I suggest you look at the files first. That mercenary sent me some files that proved James Finley worked for Lancaster,” Dake informed her.

“File...” Rachel muttered and finally snapped out of it.

Dake showed her the files he received from Xtra. However, he didn't include the key evidence labeled, *[Secret discussion between James Finley and Lancaster – Hacked Version (Confidential)]*.

That specific file remained under Xtra's authority and couldn't be viewed without his permission since Lancaster would abandon the

communication channel at any signs of hacking.

Dake trusted Rachel, but he didn't trust their location right now. Lancaster's eyes and ears could be anywhere.

"Is this all the evidence?" Rachel asked after going through the files. It seemed she regained her usual composure.

"Yes."

"Does the mercenary consider this as evidence?"

No, she hadn't regained her composure and sounded cold as ever.

Dake understood since James Finley's suspicious behavior couldn't prove or disprove his crimes.

"Back alley, black market, brothel, unregistered dungeon, and... club?"

Rachel spoke in an emotionless voice and sighed.

"James Finley could've hired a prostitute or done drugs in back alleys. He could've smuggled things and illegally hunted at unregistered dungeons. He could've danced and drank at a club..."

A hero didn't have to live an honorable life. They could live however they wanted.

"These acts might not suit a hero, but they don't disqualify him from becoming one. Nobody has the right to take his life over this..."

James Finley should've been criticized for his actions if this turned out to be true. He should've been punished if he committed a crime. However, he shouldn't have been killed no matter the circumstances.

"You are 100% correct. No, 1000%... but Vice Leader... This evidence might only be circumstantial and nowhere near enough, but James Finley had something suspicious on him. I saw it with my own two

eyes.”

Dake told her, but Rachel’s expression remained cold as ever. She shook her head and sadly looked at him.

“Let’s cancel our agreement with that mercenary.”

* * *

[James Finley was a terrorist?]

[James Finley’s suspicious activities have come to light...]

[The Speaker of the House, Ranger Blair: “Evidence that James Finley was a terrorist is only circumstantial and does not hold weight. The English Royal Court should stop stirring trouble and just come clean and apologize for what their mercenary did. They should admit the mercenary used excessive force and took an innocent hero’s life.”]

[Who is the mercenary Xtra that killed James Finley?]

[Xtra, the mercenary that only operates on Violet Banquet.]

[England’s government has given the order to find Xtra.]

I lay on the couch in my penthouse while comparing the headlines. Opinions on the news shifted every hour and a heated discussion followed every time.

It started with, *[Lancaster Assassinated James Finley]*. Next was, *[The English Royal Court’s Hired Mercenary Has Killed An Innocent Hero]*. Then it became, *[James Finley Was A Terrorist Recruited By Lancaster]*. The third story circled a few times before changing into, *[Insufficient Evidence That James Finley Was A Terrorist. The Mercenary Xtra And His Employer, The English Royal Court, Should Issue...]*.

“I guess it’s all the same no matter which world. As long as people exist...” I muttered with a sigh.

The English media's opinion heavily leaned towards the theory that the English Royal Court mistakenly caused James Finley's death. Xtra took most of the heat because of that. Additional reports found nothing on James Finley's body after his death. Obviously, Lancaster manipulated this from behind the scenes.

It seemed Lancaster set his roots quite deeply in England when I stopped paying attention.

[Mercenary agreement has been terminated.]

I received a message 30 minutes later informing me that Rachel terminated our contract. Then I received another one 10 minutes later from Dake. He wrote as politely and respectfully as possible.

[I tried to convince her, but failed. I apologize. Our Vice Leader is quite stubborn, so I couldn't do anything. Still, I would like you to continue our request. As you said last time, I'm your employer and not our Vice Leader. Please continue with the request. I'm willing to double what we agreed on.]

Things seemed quite hectic in England right now.

"Should I just tell Rachel that I killed him?"

— I don't advise that, *nyang*!

Kim Hoseop immediately replied.

"Why?"

— Ton of spies and spyware are planted all over Rachel! You'll instantly be found out if you appear in front of her! Hajin-chan, will you be able to stop Lancaster alone? I heard some rumors that he's as strong as the Nine Evils now.

"It's difficult but... What? Nine Evils?"

I couldn't understand what I just heard. I sat and stood a few times before asking again.

“How is Lancaster on par with the Nine Evils?”

I never designed him to be on par with them. I designed him as a parasite that leeches off the Nine Evils and couldn't do anything without their help.

— I looked into it and he's been amassing his forces in Pandemonium for the past 3 years. That's how he planted a ridiculous number of spies in different countries, *nyang*. I also heard he's brainwashed a shocking amount of people. I think James Finley was one of them, *nyang*!

“What nonsense is that...”

Honestly, Lancaster didn't even deserve to be on the same level. The only remaining threats would be the Nine Evils since Baal's existence had been completely erased from this world. I also didn't know monster king Orden's current whereabouts.

I couldn't believe Lancaster became a threat.

“What the hell is going on?”

[The Tower of Miracle's fragment has begun to resonate!]

[You have attained a realization!]

[Tower of Wish's Bonus – You have received a special inheritance!]

[You have inherited one item stored in the player's storage!]

Inherited Item ► [Black Lotus Bow]

[You have inherited one trait stored in the player's storage!]

Inherited Trait ► [Young Dwarf's Dexterity]

[You have inherited one skill stored in the player's storage!]

I received several system alerts for the first time in 4 years, but I didn't have the chance to look them over.

"Euuuk!"

Something the size of my torso fell from above and crushed me. It turned out to be a large, black bow with a lotus symbol engraved on it.

"What the hell is this?" I muttered while touching the bow in a daze.

A question soon popped up in my head. I didn't question what I just inherited, but rather...

"Why now of all times?"

Why did this damn system that went silent for 4 years suddenly decide to work again?

I couldn't make sense of it, but I must've done something to trigger the storyline again. I thought about what I could've done to cause this and only one word popped up after I racked my brains.

"Lancaster..."

It seemed obvious now that I thought about it. The only major thing I recently did was assassinate James Finley. I must've accidentally intruded on Lancaster and Rachel's storyline.

Wiiing!

The living room doors slid open.

"Eugh!"

I immediately rolled up and hid behind the sofa. Then I peeked out to assess the situation.

“Yawn...”

Evandel came in while rubbing her eyes. Her bodyguard, Hayang, haughtily walked behind her.

Evandel glanced at me hiding behind the sofa. She didn't react in any particular way and went to the refrigerator for a glass of water before returning to her room.

“Cough... Cough...”

I stared at Evandel's back for quite a while.

Damn it...

This felt so embarrassing.

Side Stories 7

Dream in a Dream (7)

I went to the basement workshop to check the inheritance that suddenly fell into my lap.

▶ *[Young Dwarf's Dexterity]*

▶ *[Random Dice]*

▶ *[Black Lotus Bow]*

My *[Dexterity]* had been upgraded and I also acquired a strange weapon and skill. I didn't recognize the weapon, but I had designed the skill for the Tower of Wish.

"What the heck is this Black Lotus...?"

I pushed aside the unknown and focused on the skill, *[Random Dice]*.

I took out the dice that reacted to its user's wishes and rolled it while simply thinking, *Please be something good*. It rolled a few times on the ground before transforming into a rock with a blue glow. This compressed form of mana and carbon turned out to be a blue diamond.

"Oh..."

This blue diamond would fetch around 500 million won judging from its size. Not a bad haul at all. I placed it in my pocket.

▷ *[Young Dwarf's Dexterity] [High Rank] [Illusion Attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 3 – Proficiency EXP: 63%]*

Next, I checked *[Young Dwarf's Dexterity]*. I had no idea why a young

dwarf of all things, but inheriting an adult dwarf's dexterity might've been too much.

I inspected my open hands. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary.

“I should try and make something.”

I pondered what to make. *Should I make a new bed for Evandel?*

Kim Hoseop suddenly called as I waved my hands around and muttered to myself.

— Hajin-chan! Have you seen the news, *nyang?*

“What news?”

— I'll send it to you. Take a look!

A few headlines had been broadcasted 30 seconds ago from English media outlets.

[Crucial Evidence Found Against the Assassin, Xtra!]

[Xtra's whereabouts are still unknown. England's government is considering asking the Heroes Association for help...]

I had sniped James Finley from 4 km away. I also infused that bullet with my gift to increase its destructive power and kill him in one hit. The bullet disintegrated afterward and didn't leave a trace.

However, they claimed to have found evidence at the crime scene. Of course, Lancaster must've planned this.

— Those bastards are trying to drag us out. Look at this.

Kim Hoseop sent me a discussion from Lancaster's hacked communication channel.

[I don't think we can get any other details regarding Xtra. That person's

whereabouts are unknown and not a single thing is known about him.]

[I'll try to move the parliament heads to get the Hero Association involved. It's just a lone mercenary. I'm certain there will be some reaction if the association acts.]

[Go and check where the details regarding James Finley could've leaked.]

Kim Hoseop already hacked deep into Lancaster's communication lines.

"Hmm... They're coming out stronger than I anticipated. Maybe I shouldn't have killed Finley?"

— Not at all, *nyang*! That was the best course of action since we were pressed for time, *nyang*. The English Royal Court would've suffered a bigger blow if you didn't kill him. They purchased quite a powerful mana bomb, *nyang*!

I couldn't help but worry despite Kim Hoseop's reassurance. The English Royal Court guild certainly took a turn for the worse. No, the situation would surely nosedive even further.

[The fall of England, the first guild in history to assassinate their own applicant!]

[English Stock Exchange hit by Finley Incident... stocks down 13% as trading opened!]

[The English Royal Court's stock fell by 43% in a single day on January 8th. England's 2nd top guild, Arthur Knight has overtaken the English Royal Court for the first time!]

"I think they'll get pummeled even more if we reveal the secret communication channel considering how things are going. They'll probably accuse the English Royal Court of fabricating evidence, right?"

— Correct, *nyang*! They have quite a skilled hacker on their side as well! Staying still and not doing anything is the best course of action,

nyang!

Kim Hoseop offered his opinion, but I couldn't afford to remain still if Lancaster really grew on par with the Nine Evils.

"Hoseop."

— Yes?

"Shall we make some more money?"

— Money? Haven't you already made enough to last a few lifetimes?

I earned enough to be one of the top 30 richest in the world thanks to the items I crafted with *[Dexterity]*, which sold for astronomical prices. I also earned quite a sum from operating the *[Truth Agency]*. Not to mention, I bought as many Essence of the Strait shares as I could and struck the jackpot when their stocks reached an all-time high. I could probably be considered the richest in terms of cash on hand since the Truth Agency only dealt in cash.

"There's no harm in earning more, right? The English Royal Court's stock price is taking a massive beating, so I want you to purchase all their shares when they hit rock bottom. I want you to buy everything if possible."

This world ran on capitalism. The biggest threat a guild faced wasn't external, but their own stock price. Their burden would significantly reduce as long as their stock prices held out.

— The English Royal Court's share structure is 51:49. The royal family owns 51% and private entities own the remaining 49%. We can only buy 49% of their stock, *nyang*.

"Buy all of it."

— All 49%?

"Yes, as much as you can."

— It's going to cost a significant sum, *nyang*?

I couldn't help but laugh.

"I told you before, right? I wanted to run a guild on a whim. I guess I'll have some fun as the English Royal Court's new chairman. My bank account won't dry up no matter how much we use."

It didn't matter if Lancaster could match the Nine Evils. He couldn't be richer than me.

* * *

[January 10, 2031]

The peak of winter arrived and a chilling fog descended.

The English Royal Court faced the worst crisis in its history, but things suddenly took a drastic turn. Their falling stock price made an upward rally.

"Please brief me on the current situation."

Rachel sat in her office while glaring at the monitor with bloodshot eyes. She hadn't slept a wink for the past 120 hours since the incident.

— There's nothing much to report other than the fact that an unknown entity suddenly bought all our guild shares. We're trying to find out more, but we can't seem to make sense of what's going on.

[English Royal Court Guild (ERG) +17.5%]

Their stock price took a -20% hit yesterday and a -43% the day before. The infamous title of assassinating their own applicant proved fatal. The public protested not only for Rachel, but the entire board of directors to resign.

— The buying trend is so strong that retail investors have begun to jump on the bandwagon.

The chart continued upward as they spoke.

Even expert analysts at Yeouido^[1] agreed the English Royal Court had no hopes of bouncing back. However, the current upward trend proved them completely wrong.

“Then that means... *Ah!* It’s going up!”

Rachel exclaimed and clasped her hands together. She continued to observe their skyrocketing stock price.

“*Eugh... Eung!*”

She let out a cry like a baby whenever the stock price moved. Her body bounced up and down on her chair as if she rode on a rollercoaster.

“*Haaa...*”

Then their stock price took a dive after maintaining an upward rally for 30 minutes.

Kim Hoseop strategically planned this dive as a trap to shake off retail investors, but Rachel didn’t know that.

The hope and excitement on her face instantly disappeared and she sank into her chair again after witnessing the drop.

Rachel suddenly felt sick and pitied herself. She didn’t have time to get so worked up over their stock prices. The general assembly would soon begin and they hadn’t resolved James Finley’s death yet.

She had to regain the public’s trust whether through a public apology or investigating the link between James Finley and Lancaster.

Knock... Knock!

Someone knocked on her door. Rachel immediately fixed her shirt and straightened her posture.

“Come in.”

The door opened and Dake entered.

He slowly approached her desk with a sullen look and placed down an envelope.

“This is my letter of resignation.”

“...”

Rachel silently stared at him.

Dake couldn't look her in the face and bit his lips. He once vowed to stay beside the Princess and become her strength until the day he died, but it seemed he became nothing more than a burden. He decided that leaving would be best for her sake.

“However, I don't wish to resign from my position. Please fire me instead.”

Dake always placed his country and the guild above his life. He hoped the Vice Leader would agree. Forcing the young Vice Leader to make such a difficult decision pained him, but he knew Rachel would be their future hope. She would regain England's former glory for them.

He hoped she could ride through this storm at least.

“I'll resign and things will quiet down if you announce that you fired me instead. I'll hold a press conference and say the same. This will hold back the media until the general assembly concludes.”

Rachel's lips trembled.

Dake had always been beside her ever since she graduated from Cube. She could confidently say she fully trusted him among the guild members. He served as a hero in their guild ever since she could remember.

Someone she trusted would leave their guild again. Rachel mustered the courage and shook her head.

“Still, firing you is too—”

“I apologize for this. I’ll be waiting for good news from the upcoming general assembly and I’ll be rooting for you from a distance, Vice Leader.”

Dake interrupted her. It seemed he already made up his mind, which caused Rachel excruciating pain as if her heart had been wrenched out.

However, she did her best to not show any pain.

“Alright, please be on your way...”

Rachel managed to dismiss him without wavering. Dake turned around and left.

The door silently closed and only she remained in this suffocating space. She quietly sat and didn’t know what to think anymore. How should she be feeling?

Rachel broke down on her desk and silently cried. She gritted her teeth and only the sound of her breathing escaped.

She refused to admit that she cried. This fleeting sorrow would soon pass after she calmed herself. Yes, she only had to endure until it disappeared as if nothing happened. She sighed to let bygones be bygones.

Like that, Rachel convinced herself to endure the pain.

* * *

Some of the most prime real estates in the world could be found on the outskirts of Seoul at the foot of Bukhansan Mountain^[2].

The mountain energy and flowing river met here and rows of luxurious hanoks^[3] lined the area. Not even the most seasoned real estate agents would dare put a price tag on these properties.

These rows of hanoks had been designed with interiors that breathed in the fresh mountain air. The mountain stood behind and the river stood in front.

This luxurious property that blended into nature belonged to Chae Joochul's family.

"Ah, geez... I can't understand this at all!"

One of the owners of this place, Essence of the Strait's Chae Nayun, rolled on the floor while looking at a crystal that glowed golden.

[Miracle Stone] [The reward for successfully completing the Tower of Wish. When used, this crystal will allow the user to experience the pinnacle grade miracle known as regression.]

"Anyways... this means it's my fault, right?"

Chae Nayun slightly messed up at the last second. She got too worked up after obtaining the miracle stone and reading its description, which caused her to act rashly.

Anyways... something happened and...

Chae Nayun had to delay her real regression because of this mistake.

"Sigh..."

Sukeok... Sukeok...

She grabbed a pen and wrote in the diary she purchased yesterday.

[Chae Nayun's Diary]

[Today is January 13, 2031]

[I experienced a fake regression on January 10, 2031. Around 3 days have passed since then.]

[I found out that the Tower of Wish and the Tower of Miracle don't exist in this world. Neither does Baal nor my brother.]

Nor my brother.

She underlined those words twice.

[That's why I'm still having a hard time understanding what I must accomplish in this dream.]

[I roughly deduced that I have to find the miracle stone's fragment somewhere in this dream and help the people trapped in this fake world, especially Rachel.]

[Ah... but why the hell is the reward for clearing the tower so fragile? It broke just because I dropped it once? This is getting ridiculous the more I think about it... Fuck...]

[Anyways... The end.]

“That should do it.”

She muttered and nodded in satisfaction after finishing her diary entry for the day.

“I used my head today so...”

She closed her diary and stood. Now, she had to cool her head after racking her brains for a jaw-dropping 15 minutes.

Chae Nayun scurried toward the edge of her room and hopped into the VR capsule.

“Connect!”

The VR capsule closed and a completely different world appeared.

[Welcome, Nayunjajangman.]

[Please select your game.]

“Online game, Middle Age^[4].”

She chose Middle Age, which became the most popular game in capsule rooms^[5]. This game didn’t exist in Chae Nayun’s original world, so she enjoyed it a lot.

[Welcome, Nayunjajangman.]

[Nayunjajangman]

[199 cm, 115 kg]

[Level 93]

[Class – Warrior of Ethoric Tribe (Hidden)]

[Title – Legendary Barbarian]

An entirely different scene appeared after she logged in. She stood in the city marketplace where she logged out last night.

“Customers, look at this! Come and buy one before you go!”

“Aigoo! You look quite fit! Hyung, why don’t you buy a potion? Come, buy a potion!”

A swarm of merchant players rushed Chae Nayun and tried to sell their goods.

“Forget it. I’m not buying. Go away.”

She shooed them and walked off.

A character suddenly blocked her path when she prepared to warm up

and go hunting.

“Hey, Chae Nayun. What are you doing here?” the player asked.

“...?”

Chae Nayun stared at the strange character with a low level, but extravagant clothes.

Why the hell is this player wearing such a flashy dress in broad daylight at the marketplace?

“Who are you?”

“Who else? It’s me, Yoo Yeonha.”

“*Huh? Ah...* sure... why?”

Upon closer inspection, the character moved exactly like Yoo Yeonha. The posture and gestures only nobles from medieval times would make like putting their left arm around their waist and resting their right arm above it.

Yoo Yeonhwa furrowed her brows. “You... The general assembly is coming up soon. What are you doing?”

“What’s the problem? You’re also playing this game right now, right?”

“Playing the game? I’m only here because you blocked me! I had to make a character just to chase you!”

“*Huh?* But why are you wearing something so extravagant?”

“I can’t go around poorly dressed even if it’s a game. I spent some cash on clothes and accessories. Oh right, I also established a merchant company with my name. I did all that in less than 15 minutes after logging in.”

Yoo Yeonha covered her mouth and laughed. She seemed like the

epitome of rich before snapping out of it.

“Enough of that. Just hurry and come out. I already told you we have a joint training session today, didn’t I?”

“Sure. You’re blocked.”

“What? N-No! Don’t do that!”

Chae Nayun blocked Yoo Yeonha and the extravagant character suddenly turned into a pitch-black silhouette.

“!@\$#!@#%#@!@#!@#”

Chae Nayun ignored the lump of coal that chased her and used a *[Teleportation Scroll]*. She headed to a place called the *[Black Rose Baron’s Castle]*, where only high-leveled players gathered.

Her body disappeared with a *whoosh!*

[Black Rose Baron’s Castle]

— Entry Requirement: Level 80 and above

A lot of named players waited for quests in the Black Rose Baron’s Castle, which also served as a checkpoint.

Chae Nayun glanced over the nicknames before smirking at one that caught her eye.

[Extra7]

She knew who that ID belonged to, but the other person probably didn’t know her identity.

“Why is he always online?” she grumbled.

Honestly, she only downloaded this game to watch him since he only played this game. She didn’t have the courage to approach him yet

and felt satisfied watching from afar.

Extra7 suddenly turned around. He spent a ton of money and wore only the best equipment. Even his character's face looked more handsome than his real face.

Chae Nayun suddenly recalled the man playing that character.

“...?”

Extra7 scanned his surroundings as if he felt someone's gaze.

However, Chae Nayun hid in the corner of a dark alley and stole glances at him while grinning.

I'm not ready to meet him just yet.

1. Yeouido is South Korea's financial district, much like Wall Street in New York. 📖

2. For more information: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bukhansan> 📖

3. Hanok is a traditional Korean house. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hanok> 📖

4. The correct translation is Medieval Ages or Medieval Times, but the author provided the English version itself so it's written as provided. 📖

5. Capsule room is basically a play on PC room, which is what internet cafés are called in Korea. 📖

Side Stories 8

Dream in a Dream (8)

The world's top guilds began preparing for the general assembly march. The English Royal Court prepared to join as well and squeezed every cent from their impoverished pockets.

The total cost of food while traversing the Central Asian wilderness, the magitech tents and cooking utensils for camping, various communication crystals, artifacts, bribes to pay the local officials, costs to use the portal gateways, etc. amounted to more than tens of billions of won.

Yes, tens of billions of won evaporated from their pockets just like that.

They decided on horses for transportation and took 11 from the royal stables. Each hero departing for the general assembly received one. England was a country of knights, so the royal stables undoubtedly featured high-quality horses.

Rachel also announced Dake's termination, which quelled the public's sentiment towards the English Royal Court to a certain extent.

We haven't forgiven you, but James Finley wasn't exactly a model citizen. There's nobody else to represent us at the general assembly. Let's continue after that... or something along those lines.

"Xining, China is willing to open a portal for us," Fermin said as she entered Rachel's office.

Fermin looked strong for a woman with a toned body, sun-kissed skin, and long hair tied in a ponytail. She succeeded Dake after his termination.

"Most of the Korean guilds will probably depart from New Delhi,

right?” Rachel asked.

New Delhi was the closest city to the general assembly, but the English Royal Court gave up on using their portal since the local government there suddenly increased their fees to an absurd amount. Did it make sense that each person had to cough up a whopping 1 billion won per use?

“Yes, but going there will do us no good right now since that place is crawling with helicopters and drones. It’s basically media hell. *Ah...* More importantly, please take a look at this. This is the magitech tent we recently purchased.”

Fermin took out a rubber ball.

Rachel curiously looked at it before asking. “What is it?”

“Now, look at this. It’s smaller than a football, but when you roll it like this!”

Fermin exclaimed before she rolled the ball. It traveled across the office before hitting the wall.

Then... nothing happened.

They blinked a few times at the rubber ball.

“What? What’s wrong with this thing? Is it because we bought it pre-owned? Please wait a moment.”

Fermin tilted her head and approached when it suddenly went, *Shwaaak!* The rubber ball transformed into a tent.

“*Ack!*”

“...!”

She jumped in surprise. Rachel also flinched, but tried her best to hide it.

“It doesn’t look bad, but it got stuck on the wall,” Rachel told her.

“You’re right. I apologize,” Fermin mumbled in response.

Did the tent open when it struck the wall? A part of it penetrated the room. A single tent cost nearly 10 million won, but ended up unusable.

The office doors swung open and a man rushed in.

“Vice Leader, please take a look at this!”

Marcus, one of their high rank members tasked with accompanying Rachel, rudely entered without knocking. Something seemed off about his behavior.

“Hurry! Hurry!”

He exclaimed and dragged them out to the guild building’s front yard where a crowd gathered. Everyone immediately saluted Rachel and made way for her.

Rachel and Fermin wore the same shocked expression when they saw what caused the commotion.

“This... What’s all this?” Rachel asked in a daze.

A mountain of equipment and resources lay in front of her. The English Royal Court wanted to procure these exact items, but couldn’t due to their financial situation.

Marcus couldn’t hide the excitement in his voice.

“Someone donated all of this! Look! This is a top-of-the-line magitech tent! It’s designed to withstand the mana storms in Central Asia for a week! There are 24 right here!”

The natural disaster known as a mana storm occurred quite frequently in Central Asia. It would be difficult for the English Royal Court to

withstand if they didn't use these special tents.

"Who donated all of this?" Rachel asked with a hint of skepticism.

They desperately needed the magitech tents, but she couldn't welcome this with open arms. Her instincts told her to suspect everything.

"We don't know who sent them, but they included a card."

Marcus took out a card that looked quite small compared to the mountain of donations. It had a Christmas-themed background with a few words scribbled on it.

[To Rachel,

From, Fellow Cube Alumni]

Kim Hajin didn't plan on writing a card, but thought Rachel might refuse the donations. However, this didn't dispel an ounce of her suspicion since so many Cube alumni existed.

"*Huh?* Vice Leader, there's something else written on the back," Fermin said as she glanced at the card.

Rachel immediately flipped it over and read it.

[I'm still using the coat you gave me last time. Please think of this as my token of gratitude for the debt I still owe.]

"*Ah!*" Rachel gasped after reading those words.

Fermin glanced at the card again and asked, "Still owe? Is it someone you know, Vice Leader?"

Rachel smiled at the pleasant surprise and thought to herself, *I guess you succeeded in life. Well, how can someone so smart not succeed?*

She nodded at Fermin's question and replied with a smile.

“Yes, I think I know who it is. However, I’m the one indebted to him.”

“Oh, is that so? It’s someone Vice Leader knew after all. What a surprise. Did you date a daddy longlegs at Cube?” Fermin playfully teased her.

“No, that person isn’t that tall,” Rachel innocently replied.

“Ah... Sure...” Fermin muttered in disappointment.

Rachel now felt certain about where the gifts came from since Lancaster wouldn’t know those memories. She held the card dearly before turning towards Marcus, who busily took inventory of the donated items.

“Was there an address of where it came from?” she asked him.

“No, there wasn’t any. More importantly, is it alright to receive these now?”

Marcus asked and she briefly pondered before nodding.

Rachel couldn’t refuse a gift from an old friend. She wanted to thank him right away, but sadly didn’t know how to contact him. Regardless, she believed he left out his address for a reason and decided to leave it at that.

“Yes, it’s from someone we can trust.”

She spoke full of confidence.

* * *

— The guilds participating in the general assembly have arrived.

I observed the march from China’s gloomy, winter sky. I could see everything on the ground as if it happened in front of me thanks to my thousand-mile eyes.

— The English Royal Court guild from England, the Reislauffer guild from Switzerland, and the Twilight guild from Japan have chosen our city.

The Chinese reporter covering the guilds spoke in front of the camera.

A total of 35 heroes gathered in the city: 12 from Japan, 12 from Switzerland, and 11 from England. Each guild could bring 12 members, but England suddenly lost Duke.

— Let's move.

Rachel proudly mounted her horse and the other guild members trailed behind her. The coverage team from the English broadcasting station, *BBC*, closely followed them.

— The weather is quite cold today.

Fermin spoke up.

The winds blowing across China felt like sharp icicles compared to England.

— Please be careful of the climate here.

Rachel warned her fellow guild members.

I observed them shaking in the cold and shifted my gaze towards the desolate plains.

“When will they reach that place?” I wondered.

Civilization would disappear from view in 300 km and 13 different paths would appear in front of them. The 13 paths would further split into 8, which would further split into 6... Every single path featured rugged terrain and it would take them more than 10 days to reach the general assembly's location, which formerly belonged to Afghanistan.

— For the crown's glory and our nation's restoration!

The English Royal Court members enthusiastically cried out as they marched.

I slowly drove my helicopter and followed them. The helicopter silently flew and would be impossible to spot from the ground.

[EH-64 Elioch] [High Rank] [Mount]

[A helicopter manufactured by Essential Dynamics. A masterpiece with greater efficiency and abilities. It has been enchanted with numerous spells.]

Enchantments: 1. [High Rank Silence] 2. [High Rank Camouflage] 3. [High Rank Durability] 4. [High-Intermediate Rank Magic Resistance]

I enchanted this helicopter myself. Then I discovered I could create an even stronger synergy with *[Young Dwarf's Dexterity]*. I didn't need to explain how well *[High Rank Silence]* and *[High Rank Camouflage]* worked together. I could've never attempted *[High-Intermediate Magic Resistance]* with only *[Dexterity]*. This allowed me to pass through the mana storm without any problems. *[Random Consolidation]* also made it impossible for most flying monsters to spot this helicopter.

I leisurely flew and watched over the English Royal Court guild.

* * *

Two hours passed since the march started.

The guild traveled far beyond the city into abandoned territory. Rows of concrete and traces of civilization appeared like milestones. These landmarks degraded over the years and blended in with nature now.

"This is where the real march starts," Fermin said as she stopped on her mount.

Rachel tightened her grip around the reins and stopped as well. The guild members trailing behind did the same.

"How many... paths are there?" Marcus muttered in disbelief at the

sight before them.

The desolate land split into 13 paths across the horizon. The mana storms carved out these steep and narrow paths like ravines. Some paths would suddenly descend or slope upwards.

This unreal sight would overwhelm anyone who only ever lived in a modern city.

“Earthy, which path do you think is correct?” Rachel asked her spirit.

The young spirit looked around, but couldn’t give Rachel an answer. Instead, it alerted her of another approaching group.

“Another guild is approaching.” Rachel told her guild members, who looked into the distance as the sound of hooves reverberated.

The Reislauer guild from Switzerland soon arrived.

The English Royal Court members looked at them with envy because the Reislauer guild brought a group known as the Golden Generation of Switzerland. This party consisted of Sehit, Varga, Vars, Tilma, and Maritz. The entire world knew their names.

Sehit led the group and approached the English Royal Court with a leisurely smile.

“Greetings, friends from Europe.”

Rachel nodded at him.

She had heard of Sehit and his exploits. He enrolled at Cube two years before her and graduated with honors, placing 10th in his batch.

“It’s a pleasure to meet the English Royal Court, which we grew up admiring. Vice Leader Rachel, this must be fate. What do you think about traveling together?”

Sehit asked as if doing them a favor. The English Royal Court

members didn't like his tone.

On the other hand, the Reislauer members grimaced when they heard Sehit's offer since it obviously only benefitted the other side.

Surprisingly, Rachel refused the offer.

"Thank you for the kind offer, but we politely refuse. We'll just be a burden."

She knew Lancaster might ambush her and didn't want to drag any innocent people into her problems.

Sehit slightly raised his brows. "You don't have to refuse. We have a mercenary and pathfinder familiar with the terrain here. It'll be much easier if you come with us."

"Ah, w-we also hired a pathfinder!" Fermin exclaimed as her hand shot up.

The Reislauer members looked at her and she slowly lowered her hand.

"Ah, is that so? I heard you didn't hire one. You know... because of that incident..." Sehit spoke in a roundabout manner.

"It's a local. We... we hired a local and he knows this place quite well too!" Fermin quickly replied.

"Ah, I see. You had your own plans all along." Sehit and the rest of Reislauer smiled.

However, their smiles didn't look friendly at all. It looked more like sneers as they laughed.

Fermin awkwardly scratched her head and lowered her gaze to the ground.

"Fine then. We'll be on our way. May honor and luck be with you."

Sehit didn't offer a second time and their party headed towards the diverging paths.

The Reislaufer guild chose the 6th pathway as the other English Royal Court members glared at Fermin.

Marcus openly displayed his contempt and approached her.

"Why did you do that?"

"What?"

"I said, why did you do that?"

"I really hired a local."

"From where?"

"I already said a local, right? I made some arrangements before we came here."

"Is that person really a local?" Marcus continued to interrogate her.

Fermin stuttered back. "Y-Yeah... A local... a half-Korean local..."

"A half-Korean that lives in China?"

"Yeah... something like that? Hey, it's not impossible, right? Anyways, just wait a bit."

Then Fermin took out a crystal. They absolutely required these communication crystals in Central Asia since the mana storms disrupted all electronic equipment.

"Yes, it's me, Fermin. Yes... yes... yes..."

She spoke with the crystal to her ear and nodded a few times.

Marcus and the rest watched her with skepticism. Fermin seemed oblivious to their gazes and brightly smiled. Then she pointed to the 3rd path.

“The 3rd one! Vice Leader, we should take the 3rd path!” she enthusiastically exclaimed.

The guild members continued to glare at her with obvious discontent, but Fermin seemed quite confident and dead set. They had no choice but to listen. Besides, it wouldn’t make much of a difference. They would’ve tossed a coin to decide if they didn’t have a pathfinder.

“Alright, time to march!” Fermin gleefully shouted.

The third path turned out to be a narrow ravine with a grueling slope. Even the horses struggled to climb it. They continued for about an hour before more paths appeared. The road further split into 8 paths this time.

Fermin led the way and stopped. She pressed the crystal to her ear again.

“Yes, there are 8 paths. Yes, yes, yes... *ah*... yes... Everyone, follow me. We’re going through this path.”

She confidently informed everyone again.

“Damn it. Hey, where is this local person watching us from? Did they mention their current location or something?”

“Just shut up and follow me. You can lead the way if you’re dissatisfied.”

“No, it’s not that I’m dissatisfied... *Sigh*...”

Marcus and the others didn’t seem satisfied. However, they had to follow Rachel, who silently followed Fermin.

Fermin continued to guide them with unconvincing words like: *Over here, this is the path we have to go through, we’re almost there, just a bit*

further!

The sun went down and the horses became exhausted when they arrived at a flat plain.

Marcus dismounted from his horse.

“Hey Fermin, these guys will die if we go any further. Let’s set up camp and rest. I wonder where we should camp?”

“Wait a minute. I told you, right? This local person really knows the way around here.”

“Not even 12 hours have passed, you know? I’ll acknowledge his skills after he properly guides us for a week.”

Marcus grumbled, but he and others slowly trusted the pathfinder Fermin hired. They couldn’t help but acknowledge the pathfinder’s skills since they hadn’t run into a single monster or enemy.

Fermin discussed something with the pathfinder before suddenly nodding again.

“He says quite a deep cave will appear in a bit. We’ll be a target out here, so let’s camp over there.”

“A cave?”

“Yeah, he says there’s a cave. Let’s go, go, go! Let’s get moving, Vice Leader.”

Could someone find such a cave here? The guild members didn’t know whether to trust Fermin, but the mysterious pathfinder proved them wrong again after a cave appeared.

“Wow, what the hell... That pathfinder actually told the truth?”

“Holy...”

The guild members slowly stopped doubting the pathfinder. Rachel also seemed to fully trust the pathfinder now.

“I told you, right? This person is amazing! Anyways, let’s hurry inside!” Fermin triumphantly smiled and ushered them into the cave.

The guild members led their horses by the reins and entered one by one.

“Ah, Vice Leader is coming too, right?” Fermin asked her.

However, Rachel didn’t budge and simply stared at Fermin.

Fermin seemed confused when Rachel suddenly reached out.

“Give that to me.” Rachel ordered her.

“*Huh?* Give you what?” Fermin seemed to be at a loss.

“The communication crystal.”

“...”

Fermin’s expression stiffened and she nervously gulped. She anticipated this, but still felt nervous when it finally happened. Honestly, she felt a bit scared. It happened sooner than expected. Fermin thought it would take at least 4 more days before Rachel demanded to speak to the pathfinder.

“Ah, come on. This is my responsibility. I’ll hold onto it for now.”

“Hand it over.”

“Ah... that’s... I can’t... This is one of the terms on the contract so... only I can speak to that person.”

“Hand it over, right now.”

“No... that’s... because... the contract is like this you see... this half-

Korean pathfinder is in love with me. You know, something like love at first sight? That's why he refuses to speak to anyone other than me, so Vice Leader can't..."

"Dake must've told you, I know."

"..."

Fermin flinched at Dake's name and could no longer do anything. A part of her felt relieved she wouldn't get punished since Rachel knew Dake ordered her.

Fermin bit her lips and sighed. "T-That's... *Haaa...*"

She hesitated one last time and handed over the communication crystal for contacting Xtra.

Side Stories 9

Dream in a Dream (9)

Rachel grabbed the active communication crystal that glowed blue and Fermin whimpered like an injured dog.

Rachel glanced at her before speaking into the communication crystal.

“It’s you, right?”

She felt certain the person on the other end was Xtra.

— Yeah.

However, she didn’t expect him to admit it so easily. He must’ve anticipated this.

“You’re quite brazen, aren’t you? I’m pretty sure I told you last time —”

— Yeah, I know. Can you stop being so hardheaded?

She didn’t expect him to come out so strong and briefly stood in a daze before a vein popped out on her forehead. Rachel pretended to not be affected.

“Hardheaded? That’s the first I’ve heard of that.”

She wasn’t joking. No one had ever called her that before, which made her angry the more she thought about it.

I’m hardheaded? Me? How can he say that? Does he even know me?

— *Heh...* Sure, sure.

The mercenary sneered and struck a nerve again. Rachel bit her dry lips.

— Anyways, this is something Dake requested. He was willing to pay double out of his own pocket.

“...”

The English Royal Court had already fired Dake. This meant he no longer received any support for hiring this mercenary. However, that didn't deter him from hiring Xtra despite carrying all the burden.

Rachel didn't understand why Dake trusted this mercenary so much. What made this mercenary so special?

— He made the right choice in hindsight since all of you would be going around in circles without me.

Of course, she knew that as well. The mercenary only worked with them for 12 hours, but he already proved his worth when it came to pathfinding.

Despite her reluctance, Rachel acknowledged that she needed Xtra's help right now.

— Oh right, why did you refuse an offer that benefited you? You ran into Reislaufer, right? It would've been more comfortable if you went with them. Why did you refuse? Was it a matter of pride?

The march toward the general assembly didn't concern only her. It concerned the entire English Royal Court and England's future. Her guild members risked their lives on this march. She would never put herself first and risk them harm.

“I understand. Then, I hope you can continue to guide us. However, I'll be in charge of communicating with you from now on.”

They desperately needed a pathfinder and she wanted to prove she wasn't hardheaded. Rachel decided to compromise.

— Suit yourself if you want to hear my voice that badly.

“No... that’s not... *Haa...*”

Rachel tried to retort, but ended up shutting her mouth since a curse word would come out.

She hated every word that came out of this mercenary’s mouth. She hated his tone even more.

“I’ll hang up now.”

Rachel ended their call and placed the communication crystal in her leather armor’s pocket. She turned around and looked Fermin in the eye.

Fermin flinched and expected to be reprimanded, but Rachel merely spoke like usual.

“Let’s go in.”

“*Huh?* G-Go in where?”

“To rest.”

“*Ah...* Yes... Let’s go, Vice Leader.”

The two entered the cave with a slightly awkward atmosphere between them.

The cave turned into a cozy camp with 11 tents and ample space remaining. They even set up a makeshift stable at the end of the cave.

The guild members sat around the campfire and prepared their food.

Fermin stole a glance at Rachel before enthusiastically speaking.

“Hey, hey, hey. What are you all doing? What’s with the sudden campfire?”

She hurried towards the campfire to get away from Rachel.

“Didn’t we bring a stove and heater with us?” she asked them.

“We did, but we’re using it to warm up the cave. *Ah*, Vice Leader, please take a seat. It’s warmer here.”

Marcus gestured to Rachel, who approached them and took a seat.

She sat on the only chair they had while the rest sat on the floor. Everyone couldn’t help but smile at their Vice Leader who stood out.

They chatted about a variety of topics in the cozy atmosphere. Their great benefactor’s identity intrigued all of them. It made the news a few times already.

“I asked the other guilds. It turns out none of them are better equipped than us.”

“I heard the same too! This tent is quite expensive. The price tag shocked me when I saw it!”

“I heard we aren’t renting, right? They say we can use it next time when we’re hunting in dungeons!”

Tents, stoves, compasses, heaters, saddles, etc. All the donations would greatly help even after the general assembly because of their dire financial situation.

“Speaking of that...”

Marcus grumbled and seemed discontent as he looked at Rachel. He obviously had something to say.

“Vice Leader...”

Rachel tilted her head and didn’t do well with these conversations.

Marcus smirked and pointed at the tents. “Those tents, have you been

inside them?”

“Yes, I have. Why? Is it not to your liking?”

Rachel already checked the tent’s interior. It only had enough room to fit one bed comfortably. The fact that a magitech tent came with a bed already seemed luxurious enough.

“No, I like it. I would be insane to have a problem with this. It’s just... who donated all of this?”

Marcus furrowed his brows. It seemed he secretly had a drink judging from the redness in his eyes.

“That’s...” Rachel muttered when Fermin suddenly cut her off.

“It’s one of her classmates from Cube.”

“Oh, a classmate from Cube? Then I must’ve run into them as well?”

“That’s...”

“You think so? We were probably working our asses off to graduate. *Ah*, we barely managed to graduate from Cube now that I think about it.”

“...”

Most of the guild members here were all older than Rachel. Only Fermin and Marcus also graduated from Cube. The rest graduated from Britton Academy.

“I guess you’re right, but I ran into Vice Leader a few times on campus. I also heard a lot of rumors about her. Oh right, there was that one gunner. A hot rumor went around that a strange freshman had a huge crush on our vice leader. Do you remember that, Vice Leader?”

Rachel flinched when Marcus mentioned that person.

“*Huh? Ah, that person is...*”

“Come on. I also heard about that gunner. There’s no way he’s rich. Plus, he dropped out of Cube,” Fermin chimed in.

“...”

Rachel couldn’t utter a word because of Fermin and glared at her with fiery eyes, but Fermin didn’t seem to notice.

“Dropped out? How do you know about that?” Marcus asked.

“I paid special attention to him since I heard some guy was infatuated with our vice leader. He turned out to be below average,” Fermin nonchalantly replied.

Rachel simply brushed off whatever they said about Kim Hajin. She recalled his strange way of thinking and plenty of other memories like when he defeated Lancaster’s minion during their test. He also shared his rations with her during their exam. Then they met by pure coincidence at Clancy Islet and stayed together, etc.

She smiled while reminiscing about the past.

“*Ah! It’s a man!*” Fermin exclaimed after seeing Rachel’s smile.

“*W-What are you talking about!*” Rachel flinched and slightly overreacted.

“Oh, it seems like I’m right. *Hehe.*”

“Well, I would’ve donated too if I was rich. Our Vice Leader is really... *Um... beautiful.*”

“*Qui... Quiet down. It’s nothing like that!*” Rachel waved her arms in a panic.

“Do you even know how much one of these tents cost? Who in their right mind would spend tens of billions of won for someone’s

affection?” Fermin pondered out loud.

“Come on, our vice leader is definitely worth more than that. Rather, what kind of person is he? He must be a hero if he was your classmate, right?”

Marcus grew even more curious.

“No, I told you it’s not... It’s nothing like that.”

Rachel muttered, but her words fell on deaf ears and the guild members continued speculating.

“None of her classmates should have this much money. *Heok!* Don’t tell me... Shin Jonghak from Desolate Moon?”

“No way!”

“Wow! I think that’s correct! Amazing! Well, 30 billion won is chump change to Shin Jonghak.”

“That’s right! Sounds like it’s Shin Jonghak!”

“Silence! Silence! I said it’s not!” Rachel screamed. She tried to sound as stern as possible, but her flushed cheeks looked like ketchup would come out if someone squeezed them.

“Then? Who is it?”

“That’s... That’s not the case...”

Rachel muttered with tears welling in her eyes.

“Now, now, calm down everyone. Come eat. Stop fooling around or you’ll regret it later.”

Their meal finished just in time and Rachel was spared.

The heroes required huge amounts of calories and consumed a lot of

meat. The hungry guild members ate as much as they could as if in a trance.

“I’ll eat inside...”

Rachel ran away to her tent with her food, but not because she felt awkward about what just happened. She learned from the internet that nothing good came out of higher ranked people eating with their subordinates.

Ziiip!

She closed her tent and ate her food alone.

* * *

...inside... memories... trauma...

Forming... at that place... still...

...then... we will... watch over...

An eerie static voice whispered in her ears. She initially thought it came from her guild members loudly chatting outside, but the voice sounded quite soothing and she slowly fell asleep from it.

...Then... how... should...

Within... the tower... situation is—

The voice distorted before suddenly stopping and a migraine struck her. It felt like a beast gnawing on her head with its fangs.

“Euk!”

Rachel quickly got up and grabbed her head. She calmed her breathing until the pain receded and checked the clock. It read 2:30 A.M. They had 2 hours left before marching again.

Rachel left the cave for some fresh air and a stroll. She sat by the entrance and gazed at the sky.

The world perfectly divided into two. The sky made up half and the land made up the other. Nothing else remained on the horizon. This perfectly balanced nature untouched by mankind felt foreign and mysterious.

“Hoo... Haa...”

Rachel inhaled and exhaled the air from this desolate land. She could see her white breath and looked at the sky again. A meteor shower left numerous trails. This beautiful sight truly mesmerized her until she heard some strange noises.

Clack... Clack... Clack...

She could hear a foreign sound mixed with screams.

“...!”

Rachel finally understood the situation and took out the communication crystal.

“Is this sound coming from you?”

— *Hmm? Ah*, yes. I was cleaning up some monsters. It seems you have quite a lot of enemies.

Rachel stood up.

“I’ll keep watch from now on. Please get some sleep.”

— You really are hardheaded.

“Huh? Hardheaded? What? Why?”

Anger suddenly rose in her when she heard the mercenary calling her hardheaded again. She barely managed to suppress it when Xtra dealt

another blow.

— You should know that passion without the ability to perform will only be a burden to others. Just go and get some sleep.

“W-What did you say?”

Rachel lost her cool and clenched her fists. Then she pointed at the invisible mercenary.

“I said I would help, but you...”

— You don’t have to. I’m far more experienced when it comes to this place and I can see across the entire horizon. I can even see what you’re doing right now. Oh, you’re pouting like a duck.

“...”

Rachel slowly sucked her lips.

— Just leave it to me and don’t be a burden. The situation is all under control.

The mercenary didn’t say anything wrong. It would defeat the purpose of hiring a mercenary if she stood watch instead of him, but she hoped he could speak more politely.

Rachel managed to compose herself.

“I looked you up on the internet. No, I investigated you.”

— Is that so?

“I don’t think you’re an ordinary mercenary.”

— Yeah, I think so too.

Xtra sounded quite nonchalant.

“This isn’t a matter you can treat so lightly. The association will come after you once the general assembly ends.”

— Wish them good luck chasing after me. Finley would’ve committed a suicide bombing if I didn’t kill him.

“Even an evil person is a person. You can’t kill someone just because they’re evil.”

—...

Silence ensued and the mercenary didn’t respond for a while.

— Doesn’t matter. I’m not a hero, so I can do things my way. I’ll do whatever it takes to accomplish my objective.

Rachel grimaced at his words. Her wariness and hostility towards Xtra surged once again. They couldn’t cooperate because of their differences in ideologies.

Rachel wanted to keep her beliefs and honor as a hero. This didn’t stem from her royal bloodline, but to avoid sacrificing others for her own goals. People like Lancaster became her country’s archnemesis because of such sacrifices and choices. She didn’t want to repeat those past mistakes.

“Why did you accept this request?”

They had a common goal for now despite their different ideologies. Xtra came to help, so she should reduce as much friction between them as possible. She already accepted the fact that she needed his help.

“I don’t think 700 hundred million won is a big deal for you.”

No one in the world would accept her ideology and convictions. As Xtra said a while ago, passion without the ability to perform would only be a burden like a barking dog pretending to be a roaring lion.

— Who knows...

A chilly breeze blew. She thought she had grown accustomed to this coldness, but caressed her arm again.

— Maybe I'm a fan?

Xtra gave her a hint, but Rachel didn't catch on. She couldn't possibly connect the kind Kim Hajin she owed to the annoying Xtra she wanted to smack in the head.

“What?”

— I applied to your fan café. You have quite a lot of fans.

“Hmph!”

Rachel scoffed in response.

However, she slowly realized his words might be credible. At least, he didn't seem to be joking. Such a skilled mercenary agreed to help for a meager 700 hundred million won. Yes, it made more sense to look at this from an emotional angle rather than a logical one.

Shwiiiiik!

A stick flew out of nowhere and tapped her shoulder.

“Hmm?” Rachel looked up.

Where did that come from?

She looked around when another stick flew towards her.

“What the?”

She stood and walked around until another stick struck her shoulder.

“Ouch...”

She squinted into the distance and saw someone observing her.

“Is that you?”

— Who else is there?

“Why did you throw those at me?” Rachel retorted in a stern voice.

— I felt bored. I wanted to see you dodge them.

“I don’t have time to play with you.”

— You’re playing with me right now?

The mercenary threw another stick, but her instincts kicked in and she caught it.

— Wow!

“Please stop.”

— Pweash sthawp...

“...”

Her eyes trembled in anger before she crushed the stick. “You sure are childish.”

— Forget about that. I’m throwing it faster this time.

“Do you think I won’t be able to... *Guek!*”

Rachel gasped in pain when a stick struck her abdomen. She felt surprised a stick could fly so fast and hurt so much. More than that, she had no idea where it came from.

Shwiiiik! Tak!

Another stick flew and smacked her thigh.

“*Euk!*”

It hurt quite a lot and she grew annoyed. The anger she tried to suppress in her chest surged again.

Rachel gritted her teeth and fixed her stance.

— Oh, do you want to keep going?

“Don’t test my patience.”

Rachel growled in a threatening manner and pulled out Galatine.

He picked a fight with me first, so it’s alright if I go this far. I’m just paying him back for what he did.

— Then I’ll turn it up a notch too, okay?

“Sure, keep them coming.”

— *Hmm...* No, it’s boring if we do it like this. Why don’t we make a bet?

“A bet?” Rachel replied while focusing on the incoming sticks. She had no idea when and where they would appear.

— Yes, you win if you manage to block even once. Starting from now until we reach the general assembly hall. I’ll grant you one wish if you win. I can even refund the full amount paid to me if you want. Don’t you think it’s like killing two birds with one stone since you’ll also get to train your spirits?

Honestly, Rachel couldn’t believe it.

How can someone be so arrogant? This mercenary seems to have forgotten who I am. I might be like this, but I’m still Rachel of England. A hero renowned across the world.

“There’s no need for all of that since I’ll personally find you.”

— So your wish is to see my face?

“Just hurry up and throw those sticks.”

Rachel planned on reading the sticks’ trajectories to locate the mercenary’s hiding spot. Then she would charge at him. She wanted nothing more than to surprise him and take a look at his arrogant face. She also wanted to smack him real good.

“Hoo...”

Rachel exhaled and fixed her stance. The royal family’s swordsmanship didn’t leave a single opening for the enemy.

“You brought this on your—”

Tak!

A stick suddenly struck her between the eyes before she could even finish.

“...?”

Rachel reacted a bit late and briefly stood in a daze. She slowly raised her hand to touch her forehead where a bump slowly grew.

She couldn’t even ask herself what happened when another stick flew towards her. Not just one, but around ten flew towards her this time.

“Ah... Wait... Wait!”

Rachel instinctively cried out for a break without realizing it.

Side Stories 10

Dream in a Dream (10)

I nocked a stick onto the bowstring and pulled as far as I could until the bow creaked. Rachel's scream soon followed after the stick pierced through the air.

"This is amazing..."

I couldn't help but mutter in awe.

Indeed, the *[Black Lotus Bow]* seemed like the perfect weapon.

[Black Lotus Bow] *[Legendary]* *[Spirit Attribute]* — A masterfully crafted bow engraved with a black lotus. — Lotus: Arrows shot from this bow will strike their targets. (Limited to visible targets.) — Black Sun and Moon: The user's vision will be enhanced and the user may move without a sound. — Spirit Eradication: Possesses the power to eradicate the dead.

This bow's creator only left behind five letters, *dwarf*. However, it featured unbelievable abilities like a guaranteed bull's eye as long as the target remained in my vision. This simple ability seemed almost otherworldly. I took full advantage of it to make fun of Rachel right now.

"One more time."

I shot another stick and she failed to dodge again as it struck her pinky toe. I couldn't take any pride in this one-sided beating.

I recalled her words from before.

Even an evil person is a person. You can't kill someone just because they're evil.

She was right by a hundred, no, a thousand times. I still treated this world as a novel and felt like an outsider without a way to leave.

“One... more... time...” Rachel muttered.

I set aside my troubling thoughts and shot at Rachel again. I only did this for her sake.

I somewhat understood why the kings of olden days hated to be admonished. Just kidding. I closely watched Rachel and felt something was off.

A heavy burden seemed to be hindering her. A burden from her convictions and past mistakes on top of limitations she placed on herself.

However, the Rachel I designed in my novel had been completely different. I wanted her to become that Rachel again by standing on her own two feet.

I wanted to repay her for Evandel at the very least.

“I’ll keep going then.”

I chose to use her anger.

Anger and sadness always turned out to be the most cliché methods for someone to awaken.

“Eu... Ugh!”

Rachel lost her cool after another barrage of sticks struck her and she wildly swung her sword in every direction. However, she didn’t swing purely out of desperation. Her sword grew sharper the more she swung and formed a sword screen.

I shot another stick that ignored Rachel’s sword screen thanks to my bow’s ability.

“Argh!”

She retreated by a step after getting hit on the forehead. Her body trembled before she sat on the ground.

“It... It hurts...”

“You don’t plan on using your spirits?” I sighed and lowered my bow.

I could tell she held back. Rachel’s abilities shined most when she used her sword and spirits together. She knew that, but consciously limited herself.

“Did your teacher tell you not to use them together?”

“...” Rachel bit her lips and didn’t respond.

I couldn’t tell if she was being kind or stupid. Anyways, her silence frustrated me.

“Why do you even bother listening to a teacher like that?”

“Don’t badmouth my master!” Rachel fiercely retorted.

However, she looked quite awkward because she never made a scary face before. She resembled a cat meowing while thinking she was a lion roaring.

Her awkward expression only looked cute.

“Sure, then continue your futile attempts as long as you want. Let’s see if you can catch me.”

“I plan to do that without you telling me!”

I raised my bow again.

Rachel seemed quite offended when I badmouthed her teacher. She got worked up and continued getting hit by my sticks until five in the

morning.

* * *

The march continued early in the morning. The guild members seemed in good spirits. Perhaps last night refreshed them, but they even had the luxury to yawn and chat while walking.

“Oh! It’s quite vast!”

A plain appeared and seemed so wide that they could run to their hearts' content. The guild members' eyes sparkled while looking towards the horizon.

“Will this place be alright?”

Rachel asked Xtra and he reassured them. She nodded at the others and they tightly grabbed their reins.

Rachel summoned Windy and created a stream of wind for the horses to run with.

“*Ahhhh*, I can feel my stress flying away.”

“I think we just passed 200 km/hr.”

“That’s the end of it. Look, it’s uphill from here.”

Around an hour passed since they rode their horses to their heart’s content. The ground slowly inclined and grew narrower. Unfortunately, another series of steep hills interrupted their joy.

“*Hmm?* Vice Leader, you have a scar there.”

Clop... Clop... Clop... Clop...

Fermin spotted a small bruise on Rachel’s forehead and her words attracted everyone’s attention.

“I think a mosquito bit me. It’s nothing serious.”

Rachel nonchalantly passed it off and covered it with her hair.

“*Huh?* No way, that doesn’t look like a mosquito bite.”

“I’m fine.”

“Still, we should—“

“I said I’m fine!”

“Yes ma’am.”

Fermin shut her mouth after Rachel’s somewhat scary response.

Rachel had just experienced humiliation like never before. That mercenary one-sidedly beat her and continuously taunted her. She burned with the desire for redemption after what happened last night. Of course, she knew Xtra was miles ahead of her. However, it wouldn’t be impossible to surpass him.

“Oh, the road forks up ahead. What should we do, Vice Leader?”
Fermin asked while pointing ahead.

— To the right.

Xtra suddenly told them.

“To the right.”

Rachel relayed his words to the guild members, who moved without a question.

Xtra couldn’t help but smirk after watching her.

— You sound like a parrot. *Heh.*

“...”

Rachel bit her lips and tried her best to feign ignorance while looking at the scenery around them.

Three paths appeared after they walked for a while.

— Take the path on the left.

“The first path from the left.”

They took the leftmost path and marched for around 20 minutes. Then the path split into four this time.

— Continue straight.

“The middle. We’re going straight.”

Rachel began to slightly alter his words. The mercenary couldn’t help but laugh at her extreme pride.

“*Hmph!* What’s so funny?”

Rachel scoffed in response.

— Nothing, I just found your attitude cute.

“*Ahh!* You!”

She almost blurted a curse word when her temper flared. Rachel tightly gripped the communication crystal while shaking.

“What’s wrong with her?”

“I have no idea.”

The guild members tilted their heads while watching Rachel’s bizarre actions. Fermin took things a bit more seriously than the rest.

Actually, something had been bothering Fermin since last night. She couldn't understand why a skilled mercenary like Xtra would give them a discount and work for them. She continued watching from the sidelines and planned to immediately bring up anything suspicious.

"I guess you can't have it all."

Fermin grumbled and sighed as she looked at the Vice Leader.

* * *

The march reached its fourth day.

The English Royal Court progressed quite far into Central Asia without any skirmishes or casualties. Of course, the real journey had only just begun. However, the guild members didn't worry at all because of their dependable pathfinder.

"Haa... Haa..."

The English Royal Court followed a simple routine. They marched from sunrise to sunset. Then they set up camp at a suitable location to rest at night.

Meanwhile, Rachel picked up another task in her daily schedule.

"Not yet..." she muttered.

Her bet to catch a stick continued. It sounded like a kid's game, but she was currently lying on the ground drenched in sweat.

— What do you mean by not yet?

Rachel used every method she could think of for the past four days, but none of them worked.

— You won't be able to without your spirits.

She lay defeated on the ground when Xtra threw a stick that perfectly

struck her forehead. He also threw sand, mud, pebbles, dried leaves, and all sorts of other stuff that piled on her head.

Rachel clawed at the ground and her nails dug into the mud.

Could she really not win without her spirits? She thought about how to use her spirits out of desperation, but Shin Yeohwa's face popped up whenever she did. Her duties as a disciple held her back.

— You're quite pitiful.

"Haa..."

Rachel sighed because the mercenary's pity angered her. She felt something snap in her head.

Rachel slowly stood with her eyes closed. Her flaring anger burnt away and she instinctively called out a spirit that enveloped Galatine.

— So it's the wind spirit.

Rachel raised her spirit sword and focused all her senses on it. She swung it down and a blast of wind shot out.

Then she closed her eyes and silently waited for Xtra's attack. She judged that her eyes would only hinder her since she couldn't see the sticks anyways.

Tak—

Something struck her forehead again as she waited.

"What was that?"

Did something pass by just now?

Rachel blankly stared at her sword with the wind spirit still enveloping it.

I still couldn't achieve anything after disobeying my master's command? No way, there must be more. I must be mistaken.

She thought to herself in denial.

Rachel refused to accept it and almost burst into tears. She wanted to forget about everything and just throw a tantrum like a child. She wanted to ask that damn mercenary to go easy just once, to reduce the stick's speed by just a little.

— Don't get discouraged.

Hiccup!

Rachel hiccupped without realizing it, but Xtra didn't laugh like he usually did. He spoke in a serious tone this time.

— There's no way you can do it on the first try. It'll take some time since you haven't used it in a while. That's how spirits work.

“...?”

Rachel tilted her head at Xtra's words.

It sounded as if he knew everything about spirits. He could be bluffing, but she thought otherwise.

“What do you know about— *Bleugh!*”

A pile of sand shot into Rachel's mouth as she spoke.

— We're starting again. Don't lose the wind surrounding your sword.

Another stick flew and their training continued as Rachel spat out sand from her mouth.

She swung her sword infused with the wind spirit, but Shin Yeohwa's face kept popping up. However, she decided not to think about that for now.

Rachel felt an odd sense of relief after making her decision.

* * *

“That looks quite vicious.”

The guild members finally came face to face with the stark reality in Central Asia the following day. The blue sky turned red as they marched and the ground also turned black. Their lungs felt hot as if breathing in fire.

They wore their masks and mantles, which were all top-of-the-line products from the anonymous donor.

“Vice Leader, don’t you feel nervous about this?” Marcus carefully asked.

Rachel’s expression hardened and anxiety crept up on her.

— You’ll have to pick up the pace from now on. Continue forward.

An encouraging message came from the communication crystal.

“Alright.”

Whiiiiiiish!

They saw an infamous mana storm in front of them and the wind blew right into their faces.

Rachel stood at the front and passed a magitech rope to the back.

“Everyone! Stop for a second and wrap the rope around your waist!”

“Yes, ma’am!”

“Do a roll call while you’re tying yourself to the rope!”

The roll call started with Rachel, Fermin, Marcus, Caron, Dale... They confirmed that no one went missing and formed a line all tied to the rope. The storm completely blinded them with dust everywhere.

However, Rachel navigated through thanks to Xtra's guidance. Then they came to a dead-end for the first time.

“The path is...”

— Stand back. I'll open a path for you.

Something flew out before Rachel could think. A small projectile dug itself into the rock wall and exploded. Surprisingly, the projectile triggered a chain of huge explosions.

It drilled a round path through the rock wall. This sight truly surprised everyone, but they didn't have the luxury to stand around and admire it.

— Hurry up. You have hostiles from behind and vipers in the sky.

Kieeeeeee!

They could hear monsters shrieking in the distance. It would be best if they could avoid the high-intermediate rank poisonous flying monsters known as vipers.

— I'll cover you, so run in a line. Now!

“Everyone! Run!” Rachel quickly shouted and the guild members ushered their mounts forward.

They could feel an unstable mana behind them followed by consecutive explosions.

Side Stories 11

Dream in a Dream (11)

The guild members' horses ran as fast as possible. Only the sound of hooves filled the artificial tunnel dug by the pathfinder. The horses gradually reached their limits as the cavalry continued forward.

Boooooom!

An explosion shook the ground.

Rachel looked back and saw a reddish-black lump of mana extending like a tongue towards them. It tried to slurp up the guild members.

“Vice Leader!”

The lump of mana licked up and down while melting the ground and ceiling. The ground melted away like a stream and the guild members could feel the powerful surge of mana heating their skin.

“Our rear is in danger!” Marcus desperately shouted.

“Get down!”

Rachel pulled out Galatine and swung with all her might.

The wind spirit, combined with her sword, shot towards the lump of mana and pushed it back with a gust of wind. Then the spirit returned to Rachel and created a stream of wind that further propelled the horses.

They managed to exit the narrow path thanks to the wind spirit's support, but the lump of mana continued chasing them and covered the sky. It turned into a huge tidal wave and refused to give up.

“Follow me!”

Rachel thought for a split second before pulling her reins. She decided it would be impossible to avoid the mana chasing them, so she gave up the vast plains for refuge between the cliffs.

“We’re going down!”

Her body suddenly leaned forward when the horse she rode spun and threw her into the air. Rachel looked down and saw complete darkness. The bottomless cliff descended into depths that nobody had probably ever seen.

“Windy!”

Rachel summoned her wind spirit, who shot a jet stream that slowed the guild members’ fall. This supernatural phenomenon defied the laws of physics.

However, their predicament didn’t end there.

Kwaaaaa!

The wave of mana stubbornly chased them like a hungry predator and poured down the cliff from all sides. It looked like a tsunami falling from the heavens.

“—!”

The reddish-black storm could only be described as overwhelming, but Rachel didn’t give up. She squeezed every ounce of her strength to form a barrier made from wind and earth. She had never successfully combined two elements like this before.

Shin Yeohwa warned her once that forcing different elements together could cause them to clash and the elementalists could suffer from qi deviation. However, Rachel didn’t shy away from the risks. She had too many things to protect and too much to lose right now.

She gritted her teeth and fused her wind and earth spirits into

Galatine.

Shwaaaa!

A powerful gust cut through the air as the two spirits successfully merged.

“Ah...”

Rachel muttered in surprise when the spirits reacted according to her desire. The wind and earth spirits formed a barrier as gentle as a breeze, yet sturdy as earth to block the incoming mana wave.

The mana wave came crashing down on the barrier, but the barrier remained steadfast without any signs of cracking.

An extremely bright light flashed after the mana wave clashed with the elemental barrier. The blinding light engulfed their entire surroundings. Everything briefly turned white and they couldn't see. The elemental barrier continued protecting them as the tidal wave and the bright light subsided.

Rachel felt like her entire body would crumble into dust. Her consciousness slowly drifted away as she sunk into nothingness.

A hand suddenly appeared and gently grasped her in this nothingness. She could feel this hand pulling her into a warm embrace.

Rachel found herself simply accepting this embrace.

“Good job.”

The gentle voice said before she slowly lost consciousness.

* * *

Nothing had foreshadowed the ambush. More than twenty enemies had suddenly appeared out of nowhere.

However, the situation remained favorable since only I could see the entire area covered by the mana storm.

— Sweep everything up. We just have to melt everything and they'll be caught up in it.

The enemies gathered their mana and channeled it into the tunnel I created for Rachel and the guild members. They didn't even bother to form a magic circle and simply shot their mana into the tunnel like a bulldozer. This primitive method worked quite well.

“Where did these crazy bastards come from?”

I immediately turned on my helicopter's firearms. This helicopter was originally a combat model used by the military, so it featured all sorts of weapons like machine guns and missile systems with mana bullets and shells.

Wiing! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

A barrage of mana bullets and shells rained down. The huge explosions formed craters on the ground and kicked up a dust storm.

The enemies only spotted me after I had reduced their numbers by half.

— Is that the mercenary they hired?

They properly cast black fireballs at me, unlike the mana wave they recklessly shot towards the English Royal Court members.

The fireballs came at me like footballs.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

I immediately maneuvered the helicopter and hid inside the mana storm, which swept away the fireballs. I continued using the mana storm for cover and took out my Desert Eagle. The barrel grew longer and transformed into a sniper rifle.

I aimed at the enemies on the ground and pulled the trigger.

Clack—

A bullet infused with stigma pierced their barrier and went through an enemy's heart.

Only nine remained.

Clack—

Then eight, seven, and six remained. The rest retreated after their comrades died one by one every time I pulled the trigger.

— Retreat for now!

They left almost immediately and disappeared as fast as they appeared.

I grew curious about what kind of trick they used. It seemed like they either turned into dust and scattered away or turned into the wind itself and disappeared. I didn't have the luxury to ponder such things right now.

Kieeeeeek!

The viper lurking in the sky spotted me and flew through the mana storm towards my helicopter.

I immediately grabbed the helicopter's control stick and made a steep dive. However, the monster continued chasing me even as I almost crashed into the ground.

Rumble!

The ground trembled when we came within a hair's distance of each other.

Kyaruruk!

“Ah, this fucking snakehead...”

The viper kicked up some dust as it flapped its wings and smacked the helicopter.

I activated bullet time as the helicopter spun.

Dudududu! Dudu! Du... Du... Du—

The helicopter’s propeller slowed along with everything else.

I grabbed my Desert Eagle and transformed the sniper rifle into a shotgun. Then I opened the cockpit door and the viper’s wide-opened mouth appeared right in front of me. The bastard seemed to be spewing venom, but I attacked first by shoving a grenade down its throat followed by a blast from my shotgun.

Booom!

The viper flew back when the grenade exploded inside it. I infused stigma into my bullet and aimed as it grew further away.

This would be my last streak of stigma.

Clack— Tang!

The monster screeched in agony as its body exploded.

“Hooo...”

I deactivated bullet time and brought the helicopter to a higher altitude. Then I dusted my clothes off and flew towards the cliff where Rachel and her guild members fell.

The cliff appeared steeper than I thought. I began to worry, but soon spotted them. None of them had been severely wounded.

“Hmm... This is quite a surprise.”

Eleven individuals and their horses floated in the air. All of them seemed fast asleep as if stuck in a spider web.

I pressed a switch and the helicopter entered its hovering mode before I jumped out to their location.

“The wind is quite strong.”

It felt as if I landed on solid ground when I stepped on the wind that suspended the entire group. An impossible sight unfolded before me, but I already knew mystical beings like spirits could perform such miracles.

I slowly approached Rachel before flinching and quickly putting on the gas mask I usually wore around her in case she suddenly woke up.

“Looks like she overexerted herself this time.”

Rachel’s blood vessels protruded throughout her entire body. She suffered from mana exhaustion after pushing herself to the limits.

I carefully placed her in the helicopter.

“Good job,” I muttered.

She suddenly opened her eyes when those words escaped my lips.

“...”

Her slightly out-of-focus eyes glanced at me.

I went stiff and my heart wildly beat from her gaze, but that only briefly lasted.

It began raining all of a sudden.

I calmed my heart and took a few deep breaths. Then I checked my SP and system log to distract myself.

[You have shown remarkable piloting skills with Young Dwarf's Dexterity!]

[Young Dwarf's Dexterity has been affected by Master Sharpshooter!]

[A new synergy has occurred...]

[SP: 3305]

I gained quite a lot of SP and wondered if I should learn how to handle spirits like Rachel while staring at the other ten guild members sound asleep.

My beating heart calmed and turned cold again.

Someone among these ten had betrayed Rachel.

* * *

A child brightly smiled in my hazy memories. The child with chubby cheeks and long golden hair didn't know the responsibility she carried.

All sorts of famous instructors visited London and news of a prodigy in England spread throughout Europe. Every person in England watched with anticipation at how the child prodigy would grow.

However, they all became naggers for the child. These mean adults forced her to do homework she didn't want to do. They never let her play with friends or go out to ride a swing or seesaw.

Only one adult served as her refuge and sanctuary. Not the old butler assigned to her nor the nanny that raised her, but one of the knights tasked with protecting Buckingham Palace.

"I see that you're hiding again," the man said with a gentle smile.

The child in the bushes flinched and trembled before slowly coming out. She crossed her arms to make herself look as haughty and confident as possible.

“Yeah, I ran away because I didn’t want to study.”

The man shook his head at her brazen words, but smiled nonetheless.

“Is that true?” he asked her.

“Yes, I don’t lie. I ran away,” the little girl confidently replied.

“You’re quite honest, Your Highness. Alright, why don’t you continue on your way? Shall we see where you want to go?”

The child beamed with a smile before shuffling her small feet. The man quietly followed.

Pat... Pat... Pat... Pat...

The little girl bravely ventured into the woods and used what she learned from her training and magic lessons.

A small hill appeared once they exited the forest.

She plopped down on the hill while the man stood behind her.

“Isn’t it pretty? I really like this place.”

She looked over the horizon with a huge smile.

The man looked at the same horizon filled with flowers. Small flowers peeked out from the shrubs with bees and butterflies busily hovering about.

The man felt somewhat peaceful while looking at this scenery.

“Indeed, it is.”

“Right? I want to live in a place like this when I grow up! A place with lots of flowers and trees! I want to grow them myself and... *Ah!* I also want to raise a kitten!” she excitedly exclaimed.

“That doesn’t sound bad at all,” he briefly replied with a smile.

“Ah! Look! Look at that!”

The little girl pointed somewhere else.

How much pride would this lovely little princess bring to our nation in the future? How much responsibility and burden would she have to bear alone?

“Look over there! There’s a squirrel! Look, look! A squirrel!”

She squealed with joy while pointing at a squirrel running around.

The knight, Alex Edmund Lancaster, warmly looked at the adorable princess.

May God save the princess.

* * *

Rachel opened her eyes. She could see the half-covered sky above and a crescent moon peeking from behind the clouds. It seemed she hadn’t died yet.

She slowly raised her body and checked her surroundings. The ten guild members accompanying her all seemed sound asleep.

She looked at them for a while before sighing.

“Was this your doing?”

No response came, but Rachel already knew the answer. She recalled the mercenary’s faint silhouette before passing out.

“You don’t have to tell me if you do not want to.”

Rachel grumbled before looking down at her sword and saw the spirits still residing within Galatine.

She couldn't recall what she did when they fell down the cliff.

Did I save my comrades with this? But how? What did I do?

— An ordinary wind and a spirit's wind are completely different. A spirit can control the elements much stronger than nature itself. Their wind can become hard as the ground when fused with an earth spirit. A wind formed from such harmony can block anything.

A voice came from the communication crystal and gave her a hint.

Rachel didn't respond with, *What do you know about spirits?* She felt certain that Xtra knew about spirits quite well and might even possess such skills. He could be another elementalist that the public didn't know about.

— You'll reach the general assembly in roughly two days. How do you feel right now?

Rachel checked herself and couldn't feel her mana as if it froze at the source. Her body didn't have an ounce of strength left. She didn't suffer from anything critical, but had been completely exhausted.

"I'll recover in time."

— I'll get you some medicinal herbs.

Rachel blinked a few times. She wasn't used to receiving help, but didn't refuse.

She sat on the ground as if she just committed a serious offense. A thought suddenly flashed across her mind.

"Ah, what happened to the attackers? Who were they?"

— Half of them died and the rest ran away. I think you already know who they are without me telling you.

"Yes..." she muttered with a nod.

“Thank you.”

— No need to thank me. I just did it since... never mind.

He deeply contemplated who the traitor might be and planned on getting rid of them immediately regardless of Rachel's feelings.

— Get some rest.

The way Xtra spoke had changed and he sounded like an old master or something.

Rachel found it awkward, but it somewhat put her at ease.

“You too.”

She replied before lying down again.

Her body became a mess, but her heart felt light. She felt more proud of herself than ever. The fact that she protected her guild members with her own strength brought her great joy.

“Hehe...”

Rachel looked at each of her guild members as the moonlight shone on them. Everyone looked so peaceful while sleeping.

“What a relief.”

She smiled after saving every single one of them.

Side Stories 12

Dream in a Dream (12)

“We apologize for lacking so much.” Fermin said in a dejected tone with her head down.

The other guild members also felt ashamed they couldn’t help their vice leader and only burdened her.

“No, it’s fine.” Rachel shook her head. She appeared calm and peaceful as always. They couldn’t have controlled that mana wave in the first place. Their best option had been to run and hopefully survive.

“Vice Leader...”

Fermin sounded like she would burst into tears as she held Rachel’s hand. She closed her eyes and scanned Rachel’s body with her mana.

Rachel felt the aches all over her body slowly disappear thanks to Fermin’s simple, yet rare gift called Healing and Rejuvenation.

“Thank you.” Rachel smiled at her.

“Don’t mention it! It’s our duty to assist you.”

“Vice Leader!”

Marcus, Karen, and Dale returned from scouting the area. Xtra left a while ago to collect medicinal herbs for Rachel, so they went on the lookout for any potential threats.

“There seem to be no threats nearby. Also, we caught this on the way.”

They returned carrying a boar known as ricorit. This low rank monster had excellent taste and nutritional value.

“Let’s roast it for tonight. You have to eat properly to replenish your strength.”

“Yes, that sounds good. Let’s eat together.”

Rachel seemed friendlier today after gaining an important enlightenment as an elementalist. It felt as if a heavy burden had been lifted off her shoulders. She planned to rigorously train in combining her elements as soon as she recovered.

“Yes, we’ll prepare it immediately.”

The guild members went to cook their meals. They lit up the campfire and roasted the ricorit on top.

This slowly cooked meat would cost at least tens of millions of won, but all the guild members seemed downcast. The ambush last night instilled a crushing sense of defeat in them.

“It must’ve been Lancaster, right?” Marcus asked, and the others shifted their gaze towards Rachel.

She nodded. “Most likely.”

They all fell silent and only the crackling campfire and roasting meat could be heard.

“Please, come and eat.”

Rachel portioned the meat for them, but no one had an appetite.

Everyone felt depressed when Marcus tapped Fermin on the shoulder.

“Hey, what happened to that local person?”

“W-What?” Fermin suddenly flinched.

“That local pathfinder you hired. I tried not to pay too much attention, but does it make sense that he guided us through a mana storm?”

The other members wondered the same. They got around safely thanks to the pathfinder, but grew suspicious after Lancaster’s ambush.

“Ah... that’s...” Fermin muttered and stole a glance at Rachel.

Rachel wore a calm expression that seemed to say everyone could know the truth now.

“Xtra... you’ve heard of him, right?” Fermin asked them.

“So it was him.”

The guild members didn’t overreact and already seemed to know, which surprised Fermin.

They weren’t surprised at all after hearing his name?

Fermin waved and blurted something even more shocking.

“No, no, no, there’s something else too. I thought about it and...”

“What is it?”

“I mean... I think this mercenary has a crush on Vice Leader...”

“A crush? You mean he likes her?”

“Yeah, it’s just my speculation though.”

The guild members glared at Fermin, but Rachel briefly flinched and pretended to be nonchalant about it.

“Hey, listen to me. Ah, you should listen too, Vice Leader. It’s...”

Fermin tried to spell out the things she noticed until now.

Why did a skilled mercenary like Xtra accept this request for a meager 700 million won? Definitely not for the fame since the English Royal Court lacked prestige. It only made sense if Xtra liked Rachel, so he decided to help.

“Isn’t it convincing?”

The guild members all turned to Rachel again when Fermin finished explaining.

Rachel flinched and placed down the meat she prepared to eat.

“No, rather than that...”

Ring! Ring! Ring!

An alarm from their smartwatches interrupted Rachel.

“What’s this?”

“Isn’t this our watch alarm?”

“Why would our watches ring?”

Electronic devices didn’t work in Central Asia, so they only used their smartwatches to tell time. However, they suddenly received a message just now.

[This is a message from the General Assembly.]

[Congratulations, the English Royal Court guild has passed the first trial.]

[Please click the link below to check your general assembly license.]

“Trial... then is this something the association prepared?”

One of the guild members asked, but none of them knew.

* * *

Meanwhile, I worked on turning the viper's hide into leather armor in my helicopter. The viper's hide possessed great durability and high magic resistance, so it would make for useful equipment.

"This should do the trick."

I completed the [*Viper Leather Armor*] that covered my shoulder down to my waist.

Stigma took care of the tedious tasks like tanning, stitching, and soldering. The results undoubtedly turned out spectacular. Its Roman mythology design also pleased the eye thanks to Young Dwarf's Dexterity.

"How do I give this to...?"

I wanted to gift it to Rachel, but had no justifications to do so. Also, she probably wouldn't accept it for free judging from her personality. I couldn't use it anymore since I made it to fit a smaller woman.

"Ah, why the hell did I have such a dream?"

I had a strange dream last night. I saw a younger Rachel that looked exactly like Evandel. She was with Lancaster, who hadn't been corrupted yet. She seemed much more cheerful than now and Lancaster also held great affection towards her and his country. The dream felt so vivid, which made it all the more unfortunate. It made me pity Rachel.

Diring! Diring!

"Ah, that surprised me!"

My smartwatch suddenly rang.

Huh? What's this? Did communications work in Central Asia?

I composed myself and checked the message.

[This is a message from the General Assembly.]

[Congratulations, the English Royal Court guild has passed the first trial.]

[Please click the link below to check your general assembly license.]

“General assembly license?”

I clicked the link.

[You are affiliated with the English Royal Court.]

[Your name has been set as Xtra.]

[Please click here to check your license.]

“What the hell is this?”

— Can you hear me?

Rachel suddenly contacted me.

“Yeah, I can hear you.”

— Yes, what I wanted to say is...

“The general assembly license?”

— Yes, it's about that. We just received the message, but I have no idea what it means. You're also included.

Rachel said while sounding troubled.

I clicked on the *[General Assembly License]*.

[General Assembly License]

*[Name: Xtra] [Contribution Rank: A +] [Affiliation: English Royal Court]
[Type: Assassin, Observer] [Relationship: N/A]*

**This license is required to enter the general assembly. *The holder of this license may use the facilities under their affiliation. *You are affiliated with the English Royal Court.*

“Haha...”

I could only laugh in disbelief.

Aside from the general assembly, I had discarded this license from my story a long time ago.

* * *

“See, I told you.”

Aileen stared at the holographic screen in a mysterious hall with a large dome above. The extravagant walls featured blue crystals that made the entire place sparkle.

“Essence of the Strait will take the top spot.”

[1. Essence of the Strait]

As expected, Essence of the Strait led by Chae Nayun received the *[General Assembly License]* first and Creator’s Sacred Grace led by Yun Seung-ah and Kim Suho came in second.

Everything went according to Aileen’s prediction.

“They say the English Royal Court came in 17th. Have you looked into it?” Jin Seyeon asked Aileen.

As one of the association’s top heroes, Jin Seyeon had also been requested to be one of the general assembly’s overseer.

Aileen shook her head. “No, why even bother? They only have Rachel, right?”

“Still, I suggest looking into it. The mercenary they hired seems quite peculiar.”

“Why? Is there something about that mercenary?”

“*Hmm...* Take a look for yourself.”

Jin Seyeon pulled up a screen in mid-air.

The holographic screen displayed [1. *Chae Nayun*] followed by [2. *Kim Suho*]. This chart listed the ranking each participant individually obtained during the march.

This ranking had been made by the general assembly and not the association, so everything would be fair.

[8. *Xtra*]

► *Killed High-Intermediate Rank Monster, Viper.*

► *Unknown Ambush, Killed: 13*

► *Contribution Rank: A +*

“*Huh?* A mercenary killed a viper alone? What’s with the unknown ambush? He fought against djinns?”

A fully-grown adult viper could be considered a high-intermediate, rank 1 monster. A mercenary couldn’t possibly handle it alone. However, this mercenary did and also killed numerous other enemies.

“That’s not an ordinary mercenary.”

“You’re right. He’s the only mercenary who got a license. Seems like he got it through his affiliation with the English Royal Court.”

“Oh, really? Then did the general assembly make a mistake?”

“I have no idea. However, the English Royal Court only had 11 members participating since one of them dropped out. I think they added that mercenary to fill the vacancy.”

“*Hmm...*”

Aileen crossed her arms and pondered. She chose to let it be since the General Assembly decided everything that happened here.

“Let’s just observe for now. After all, no one has any idea what this General Assembly really is.”

The general assembly that established a huge field in Central Asia turned out to be a being, which no one could have predicted.

Correct, the General Assembly could think and communicate like a human. It reached out and contacted the association first.

[Hello, I am a large field created in Central Asia. My name is the General Assembly...]

The email began like that. The contents felt like such a ridiculous joke that they marked it as spam and deleted it repeatedly.

Could it be some sort of living computer or an advanced artificial intelligence? If not, then could a field suddenly possess intellect?

Aileen had no idea. All the mysteries surrounding the General Assembly would only be resolved once the event officially began.

“They’ll be here any time now.”

Aileen spoke when...

Creaaaak—

The two heroes turned towards the opening doors as twelve more

heroes entered: Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, Yi Jinah, Yi Jiyeon, etc. These renowned heroes all belonged to Korea's top guild, Essence of the Strait.

"Hello! It's been a while, hasn't it?"

Aileen smiled at them.

* * *

"Is this... the second trial?"

The English Royal Court faced an overwhelming obstacle during their march.

This gigantic maze seemed like it had been built by giants or ogres due to its sheer size. It had 5 meter thick walls that rose 20 meters in height.

"This is... who knows?"

— Don't enter and wait for me.

The communication crystal flashed as Xtra spoke. All eyes immediately darted to Rachel. She suddenly felt nervous for no reason because of all the attention.

— It'll be best if you rest for today.

"Rest? Rest here?"

— Yeah, you haven't fully recovered from your mana exhaustion, right? Take a break. I also have something to give you.

"Something to give? To me?"

— Yeah.

Rachel tried to say something, but couldn't find the words as her guild

members curiously stared at her with sleazy eyes. They seemed excited about something.

“W-Why?”

Rachel asked and couldn't think of anything else to say.

— I collected some herbs to help you recover. There's a lake nearby. You should go there and...

Xtra continued speaking, but Rachel cut off their communication. She felt somewhat uncomfortable with the current situation.

“*Hehehe*. Yeah, I guess we should listen to him and rest for now.”

Marcus said with a sleazy grin. He acted quite sly today for some odd reason.

“Please don't smile like that.”

Rachel muttered before turning around and leading the group towards the lake according to Xtra's instructions.

Side Stories 13

Dream in a Dream (13)

A rugged mountain range surrounded the lake that Xtra mentioned. The scenery perfectly suited Central Asia where the environment constantly changed.

The English Royal Court set up camp near the lake. They used the towering trees above as a canopy and the soft grass underneath as a cushion. Their camp turned out quite comfortable.

“Isn’t this something like being in bed with your enemy? We have to catch Xtra after the general assembly, right?”

“It’s still murder no matter how bad the person is. A mercenary doesn’t have the right to enforce the law.”

Marcus and the other guild members whispered. Their conversation caught Rachel’s attention, but she pretended not to hear.

She didn’t have the luxury to think about anything else when every second counted. Currently, she practiced communicating with her spirits while sitting in a lotus position behind the trees. However, she decided to abandon her attempts after their conversation from a distance away broke her concentration.

“Haaa...”

It would be difficult unless she recovered from her mana exhaustion. She felt frustrated since she couldn’t even perform the most basic step of circulating her mana. The flow had been blocked for some reason.

Rachel sulked while sitting on the ground. She opened and closed her fist a few times.

“Vice Leader?”

Fermin called out while looking at the license details on her smartwatch.

“What do you think this license is for?”

She asked Rachel.

[General Assembly License] [▶ Name: Fermin Kirby] [▶ Contribution Rank: D +] [▶ Affiliation: English Royal Court] [▶ Type: Healer] [▶ Relationship: N/A]

*[*This license is required to enter the general assembly. The holder of this license may use the facilities under their affiliation. *You are affiliated with the English Royal Court.]*

She knew they required it to enter the general assembly, but couldn’t make heads or tails of the other details.

Seems like it has some other uses since it allows us to access some sort of facilities.

“Who knows... For now—”

“Ack!”

“Kyak!”

Fermin screamed and Rachel jumped in surprise.

“Look... Look at this, Vice Leader!” Fermin exclaimed while holding a card.

Rachel tilted her head at the card that suddenly appeared.

“It came out of my smartwatch!” Fermin exclaimed while getting all worked up.

“What? How did you do that?”

“Here, it says [*Convert to real object*]. Try pressing it.”

“Oh...”

A stick flew out of nowhere and struck Rachel’s waist.

“What! Is it an ambush?”

Fermin instantly jumped and prepared her mana.

However, Rachel stopped her since she knew who shot this stick.

Xtra’s voice came through the communication crystal.

— I made it from various herbs. It’s stronger than a potion since I haven’t filtered it, but there’s nothing better than that to help you recover.

A vial had been tied to the end of the stick.

The guild members gathered around after hearing the commotion. They all looked at the vial with a green liquid.

“Thank you.”

Rachel replied before cutting off their communication.

The guild members stared at her with faces that seemed to say: *Is this what they call pouring out one’s heart? Where the hell did he find these medicinal herbs? Our Vice Leader sure has the moves.*

Rachel had no idea what they would say, so she decided to remain silent.

“I’ll head back first. I hope all of you rest well.”

She ran away to her tent with the vial.

Rachel immediately zipped up her tent after entering and inspected the vial. It only contained a few drops that gave off a sinister glow.

“Hoo...”

She couldn't be picky about whether it tasted bitter or sweet. Rachel took a few deep breaths before drinking the entire bottle all at once.

“...!”

It tasted unimaginably horrible and felt like a rotten insect slithered down her throat.

“Ah... *Bleu... Bleurgh!*”

Rachel squirmed at the horrid taste. She suppressed the desire to throw up and withstood it for five whole minutes until her mind began working again.

— I already told you it would taste bad.

Xtra transmitted another message while Rachel coughed in disgust and downed a glass of water.

— Do you feel better now?

She coughed a few more times before checking her body's condition. The liquid had cleared up her clogged vessels and her mana began circulating like normal again.

Rachel nodded in satisfaction.

“Yes, I feel better now thanks to you.”

— Then take out your license.

“My license?”

— Yeah, I'll tell you how to use it.

Rachel took out her license and pressed [*Convert to real life object*] on her smartwatch like Fermin.

“You mean the [*Convert to real life object*] part?”

— I see you figured it out already.

“Yes, I just found out.”

— Aside from that, the rank and form of your license will change depending on how much contribution you rack up. You can get whatever you want with that card. It doesn't matter as long as you've made enough contributions. On top of that, you'll be able to use the guild's vault to...

Rachel paid special attention and made a mental note of every word Xtra said.

* * *

[A miraculous field that will grant you any wish and desire!]

[Welcome to the General Assembly!]

[The general assembly meeting will soon begin! Please look forward to entering the field!]

The General Assembly sent a message that sounded like spam mail to their smartwatches. Their smartwatches became the General Assembly's plaything where no electronic devices were supposed to work.

“It must be referring to...” Chae Nayun muttered while looking at her smartwatch.

The words, *miraculous field*, seemed a bit strange. She felt certain the Miracle Stone's fragment had to be around here.

“Nayun, snap out of it and come over here? Take a look at this.”

Yoo Yeonha called her.

Essence of the Strait entered the general assembly and unpacked their luggage in their assigned rooms. The two of them became roommates again after a long time.

“What is it?”

“Look at this.”

Yoo Yeonha said while touching the *[General Assembly License]*. Then a pack of ramen suddenly fell out from the card.

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened in surprise. “What was that? How did you do that?”

“It said a reward I wanted would be given based on my contribution. I thought of this and it appeared out of nowhere.”

“Okay, but why did you suddenly think of ramen?”

“*Huh?*”

Yoo Yeonha flinched and began stuttering with a fake laugh.

“I know right? I wonder why. *Haha... Ha...* I don’t know. Anyways, I’m looking forward to what will happen during this general assembly.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, and this ramen is... It’s really nothing, you know? Maybe I should just throw it away.”

“No, just give it to me. I feel like having one after a long time.”

“*Huh? Ah...* Come on. Why would you eat ramen? Do you want to get

indigestion? It's alright. I'll throw it away."

"No, I already told you. Don't throw it away. Besides, I'm not as sensitive as I used to be when it comes to food."

"I said it's fine."

Yoo Yeonha hid the ramen in her backpack and wiped her drool before smiling again.

"I should go and prepare for the meeting."

Yoo Yeonha sounded quite awkward.

Chae Nayun couldn't help but respect her.

Yoo Yeonha became a successful businesswoman and also reached greater heights as a hero. She seemed to be around high-intermediate rank now.

"Do you want to come with me, Nayun?"

"*Huh?* No, you know I'm not good with those things."

"I guess..."

Yoo Yeonha took out a communication crystal and relayed her orders to Seoul in the middle of the night while everyone slept. She racked her brains and made all sorts of calculations to guide them during the day, but never once showed any exhaustion. Of course, this wasn't the real Yoo Yeonha. However, she could be considered the same person since it formed from her consciousness.

"Hey, aren't you tired? You haven't slept the entire week," Nayun asked out of concern.

"I'm fine since I brought my bed with me," Yoo Yeonha replied with a satisfied smile.

“Bed? Ah, that bed you went crazy for and spent a fortune on?”

“Hey, what do you mean I went crazy and spent a fortune?”

Rumors had it that Yoo Yeonha spent billions of won on a bed, but she always furrowed her brows and dismissed that rumor.

“Don’t you know what Jinzel is? It’s the most premium furniture on Earth. They released a new bed and I barely managed to buy it through an auction. I didn’t want my lack of sleep to get in the way, so I decided to bring it with me. It’ll be a disaster if something happens to it.”

Yoo Yeonha proudly displayed the bed she kept in her spatial backpack.

Kim Hajin crafted this small bed with *[Young Dwarf’s Dexterity]* and sold it after using it for four days.

“Ah, I shouldn’t have taken it out. Now I feel like lying down on it.”

Yoo Yeonha grumbled and proceeded to sniff the bed sheets. Then she lay on it with a blissful look.

Chae Nayun tilted her head.

“Why did you sniff it just now?”

“What do you mean?”

“You sniffed it just now.”

“What are you talking about?”

It seemed Yoo Yeonha subconsciously did it out of habit without realizing it.

Chae Nayun bitterly smiled, but Yoo Yeonha ignored her and went under a blanket.

“I’m going to take a nap since I’m already here.”

“Sure, goodnight.”

“Yeah, then...”

Snore...

Yoo Yeonha fell fast asleep after lying down and displayed a truly enviable sleeping ability.

Chae Nayun observed her for a moment and took out the Miracle Stone.

“Phew~”

She recalled bits of the past when she looked at this small crystal glowing golden. These memories made up who she was right now. However, she would have to say goodbye to this world after completing the crystal. She would leave for another world that she didn’t know yet.

Will I be able to do good then? Will I not end up regretting things and finally become happy?

Chae Nayun sat by the window and looked at the sky. Stars littered the night sky here where civilization ceased to exist.

“I wonder how many of them there are?”

She began counting the stars and remembered a precious person whenever she counted one. Someone she wanted to see again, someone she would never see again, someone she loved, someone she hated, someone she felt grateful to, someone she despised...

Surprisingly, she could only think of one person while counting the stars.

The English Royal Court stood in front of the maze two days later. It looked as if numerous skyscrapers towered above and they felt overwhelmed just looking up. However, they didn't feel anxious or scared because they simply had to find the right path.

“Let's enter.”

Rachel led her guild members inside. She almost fully recovered from her mana exhaustion after resting for two days. Her body felt fine again thanks to the ricorit they ate.

“Yes, ma'am!”

“Let's go.”

The English Royal Court marched through the maze.

“Well, it looks big, but I guess there's nothing special.”

Fermin inspected the walls up and down.

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary after they entered. Just walls on both sides and dirt beneath their feet.

— Turn right from there.

“We're turning right at the fork ahead.”

Rachel led them according to Xtra's instructions.

— Turn left for now.

“We're turning left. No, we're taking the right path.”

She said before pausing.

“It's the left and not the right?”

— Relax, I won't tease you anymore.

“...”

They proceeded through the maze without much difficulty.

Some guild members who seemed slightly nervous at first already loosened up and chatted among themselves. They mostly talked about the delicious ricorit they ate and the attribute combination their vice leader awakened.

Rachel feigned disinterest while eavesdropping. She picked out her achievements from their conversation.

Then the environment suddenly changed. The dirt ground with debris became red bricks. It didn't concern them at first, but they also came across familiar objects like a fallen statue, a rotten pond, marble tiles, etc.

“What is all of this?” Marcus asked.

“Ah, it must be that. A civilization used to be here, right? Maybe these are its remnants?” Fermin replied.

The two of them agreed, but Rachel could feel the hostility in the air. She took out the communication crystal and sent Xtra a message.

“Where are we supposed...?”

The crystal had turned black, which indicated they had lost contact. Xtra had gone silent for a while now, but she thought that meant they simply had to head straight.

“Vice Leader, is something wrong?”

Fermin asked when she saw Rachel's face turning pale.

Rachel knew everyone would only grow nervous if they found out.

“Nothing.”

She replied and hid the communication crystal. Then she summoned her spirit and sent Windy to scout ahead for any dangers. They would march on if it was safe.

“This place is giving me the creeps.”

“We should stay alert. Right, Karen and Dale?”

“Okay, I’m ready to buff anytime.”

Rachel heightened her senses with every step.

The surroundings felt familiar the more she walked, which should be impossible in Central Asia. This strange sense of familiarity made her even more on edge.

“...”

She suddenly stopped in front of a crushed signpost and made out some English words on it.

[Henry VIII...]

Henry the Eighth.

Rachel froze and felt as if the ground underneath her would collapse. Her eyes lost focus and her heart turned cold.

This place remained a trauma in her heart. A nightmare where thousands of innocent civilians died, but she alone survived. *Hampton Palace.*

“This place feels somewhat familiar?”

The guild members caught on as well. Any England citizen would remember that incident.

The situation suddenly turned for the worst. A lump of red mana gathered in the distance and everyone immediately pulled out their weapons without a word.

Rachel absent-mindedly stared at the ground and slowly raised her head.

Dozens of assailants in black robes appeared on top of the ruined old palace. All of them emitted a strong killing intent and looked like the ones who ambushed them before.

One of the assailants glanced over before making a sleazy smile.

“That annoying bastard seems to be gone. Good job.”

They must be referring to Xtra.

Rachel thought as she forced herself to keep standing.

“Vice Leader, are you alright?” Fermin worriedly asked.

Rachel reassured her, but grew nauseous at this traumatic scenery from hell.

“Vice Leader?”

“I’m fine.”

Rachel steeled her resolve. Nothing would change if she ran away. She had to protect her guild members as their vice leader.

“Princess, do you remember me?” a voice suddenly asked.

Rachel didn’t respond. No, she couldn’t.

The voice didn’t belong to Lancaster, but someone else Rachel knew. She had memorized the names of all the mothers, fathers, and children massacred in that incident. She had resolved to carry that burden for the rest of her life.

Correct, the assailants in front of her were none other than them.

Side Stories 14

Dream in a Dream (14)

The nightmare that Rachel painstakingly tried to bury resurfaced. She felt the prickly sensation of being stabbed all over her skin. This pain from her imagination spread like wildfire throughout her body.

She could only tighten her grip around Galatine.

“It seems you’ve forgotten about us as you enjoy your life,” the robed man said.

That couldn’t be further from the truth. Rachel never forgot what happened for even a second. She lived while suppressing those memories all this time. She had no intention of forgetting, but her body always became a mess whenever she recalled that event. The trauma from that day became etched on her heart and mind like any other mental illness.

“You are disgusting... really... disgusting...”

The man said while emitting obvious killing intent towards her.

The guild members readied their weapons, but Rachel couldn’t bring herself to cut down those people.

“We... because of you...”

The man couldn’t say any more than that.

These people didn’t have the luxury to chat and reminisce. They simply gathered their mana with their mouths shut. Then hundreds of flames and blades gathered in the air.

Some assailants cast their spells while others didn’t require such

casting. They completed various magic circles and chants before flinging their spells at the targets.

Rachel swung Galatine and erected a sword barrier. She called her spirits to protect her guild members.

Boom!

The spells and sword collided with a blast. Remnants of mana scattered through the air and a ferocious shockwave shook the ground. Beautiful red and blue sparks danced in mid-air and captivated some of the guild members.

No one would win this neck-and-neck fight. Rachel wanted to ask if their anger would be alleviated if she offered her head. Would they let her guild members go and forgive England's innocent citizens? She would gladly offer her life if it could appease their anger.

No, she just wanted to give up at this point. She wanted to finally be free from the overwhelming sadness and fatigue every day. Such weak thoughts penetrated her heart.

Guoooh...

A lump of mana gathered. The same lump without any intricate chants or magic circles that ambushed them a while back. It had no form or order and simply destroyed everything in its path.

"Everyone, stand back."

Rachel calmly ordered her guild members. She knew that lump of mana would only chase after her.

"We can't do that... *Eugh!*"

"Ack!"

The guild members refused to obey, but she already summoned Windy and pushed them far away.

Gwuoooooh!

The mana coming after her turned everything in its path to dust.

Rachel looked straight at the incoming mana and didn't run from those who sought vengeance. She gathered her mana and spirits into Galatine.

However, someone suddenly intruded.

Dududududu!

A large object fell from the sky and slanted down in front of Rachel as if to protect her from the incoming attack.

“...?”

Rachel stared at the object that seemed made out of steel and initially thought the mana wave would instantly disintegrate it.

Shwaaaaa!

However, the object endured the attack. Not only that, it even deflected the mana away.

“What in the world is that?” Rachel muttered in disbelief.

The lump of mana shrank after the steel object blocked it. Soon, a person came down from the sky and landed on top of the steel object.

Rachel looked at the person's face, but couldn't make anything out because he wore a gas mask that covered his entire face. However, everyone else knew.

“Go, I'll take care of this.”

The mercenary they hired, Xtra, finally appeared.

Rachel didn't want to run away though and Xtra grumbled in

frustration after seeing her hesitate.

“You know very well you can’t fight against them. Those guys will keep targeting England even if you offer your head today. What do you expect from those harboring grudges against you who never questioned their own methods? Do you really think they’ll stop just because you’re dead? You’ll only make it easier for them to destroy England without its protector.”

Rachel thought Xtra’s voice sounded familiar. He sounded different from when he spoke through the communication crystal. However, she didn’t have the luxury to recall where she heard this voice before as her guild members rushed over.

Xtra looked at Rachel.

“Steel your resolve. It’s not your fault that you survived, so...”

A blade suddenly flew towards him. Xtra twisted his body and avoided it, but the blade partly caught his gas mask.

Rachel could see his eyes through the small broken portion of his mask.

“Don’t get in my way and get lost.”

Xtra took out a small object that resembled a dog and extended it to them.

“Take it with you. It’ll lead the way.”

Fermin took the dog-like machine from him. The mercenary also took out a smoke grenade from his pocket.

Boom!

The smoke grenade exploded and formed a smokescreen. This thick smokescreen made out of black smoke instead of gray made it difficult to see anything.

The guild members grabbed Rachel while the smokescreen covered them.

“Vice Leader, you better be ready to deal with the mutiny if you do something like that again.”

“Wait, let me go—”

Rachel resisted.

“I am suppressing my urge to smack you right now.”

“What did you just say? *Ack!*”

One of the guild members flicked her forehead.

“You’re just a kid eight years younger than me, so don’t make me angry ma’am. Vice Leader was probably only eleven years old when I graduated from the academy, right?”

“Darren finally said something correct after a long time.”

The guild members Rachel betrayed just a while ago sternly warned her before dragging her away and chasing after Xtra’s mechanical dog.

* * *

I quickly realized the English Royal Court fell into a trap. This barrier separated space and the enemies created an entrance and an exit to trap Rachel. I couldn’t enter from above on my helicopter.

I immediately lowered my flying altitude and rushed towards the barrier’s entrance.

The situation already reached a boiling point when I infiltrated the barrier. The mana wave charged at Rachel and she planned on taking it head-on.

I didn’t have time to think and immediately threw my helicopter

towards her. It came crashing down in front of her and blocked the mana wave.

“Who are you to meddle in our business?”

I managed to help them escape, but the enemies surrounded me now.

“Do you think you can handle us by yourself?” one of the assailants who looked like their leader asked.

I snickered in response. “Why? Are you upset an extra suddenly barged in and ruined your plans?”

I went ahead without thinking, but I wondered how I would fight against all of them too. Of course, I didn’t come here without any plans. I had at least one trick up my sleeve.

The system gave me a gift when Rachel finally awakened her attribute combination.

[Tower of Wish’s Bonus – You have received a trait inheritance!]

[You have inherited one item stored in the player’s storage!]

Inherited Item ► [Dark Ore Arrow]

[Dark Ore Arrow]

— *A mysterious arrow crafted by a dwarf from the highest grade dark ore.*

— *List of effects:*

1. *[High Destructiveness]*

2. *[High Penetration]*

3. *[High Shadow Trajectory]*

4. *[High-Intermediate Magic Destruction]*

5. *[Intermediate Controlled Homing]*

This arrow possessed an effect I never heard of called controlled homing.

I still struggled with the amazing *[Black Lotus Bow]* because I didn't have a decent arrow for it, but now things had changed.

"You dare intrude upon us when you aren't even related to this!" the man angrily shouted.

I found this quite amusing. The foreigner spoke in Korean and the fact that he said I wasn't related to this amused me even more since I created this world. This world only existed thanks to me, so what did he mean that I wasn't related?

"Is it affection? Did you fall for that princess in distress? Are you protecting her because of shallow emotions such as love?"

I didn't bother replying since an extra didn't have any lines in the first place.

"Your affection won't be reciprocated. That woman can't love anybody. She has to endure the guilt of a thousand vengeful spirits. Her heart is tainted with their wails and grudges. The only thing that awaits her is betrayal and ruin."

I silently nocked the arrow.

His words held some truth. It only slightly surprised me. After all, I created the setting for Rachel's cruel destiny.

"The princess will betray you in the end. That's her destiny."

"What kind of bullshit have you been spouting, retarded bastard?" I grumbled under my breath and immediately shot the arrow.

The arrow disappeared into the black fog without a sound. It pierced someone's forehead before another person's heart. Then it continued traveling until it snapped someone else's spine and returned to me.

Three seemed to be my limit for now since I hadn't grown accustomed to this arrow yet.

"Kill him!" the man shouted.

They managed to gather their mana and finished casting their spells while the man spoke.

Hundreds of spells flew towards me.

"Argh!"

A blade managed to pierce my shoulder and I felt an excruciating pain.

"Kuhahahahaha!"

The bastard laughed after hearing me groan. His laughter sounded quite unpleasant.

"Ah, you pushed me too far..."

Finally, I would use all the SP I saved up until now.

* * *

The English Royal Court silently followed the mechanical dog until they left the maze.

They could somewhat make out the huge palace in the distance. It had four huge spires guarding the north, east, south, and west. It also had a huge dome for a ceiling. The general assembly would take place there.

Rachel didn't utter a word and looked back at the maze.

“Vice Leader, we have to go...” Fermin told her.

Rachel nodded and began walking again.

The English Royal Court finally reached the gates after walking for two hours. They didn’t have to travel too far, but monsters like rekols, tigers, and wolves hampered them along the way.

“I’ll open it now,” Rachel said.

“Yes, Vice Leader.”

Rachel placed her hand on the huge door.

Creak...

It automatically opened when she touched it.

“What...”

“Wow...”

The guild members became speechless with wide-opened mouths. They looked around the place filled with jewels. Enchanting crystals covered the floor tiles to the ceiling.

Two people stood at the hall’s center waiting for them and their presence filled the vast hall. Anyone in the world would recognize Aileen and Jin Seyeon.

“Oh? Nice to meet you,” Aileen nonchalantly said.

The eleven guild members stared at Aileen. They had never seen her before in person. She looked so small and cute. They doubted if this was really the infamous Little Devil Aileen from the Temple of Justice.

“I guess all of you somehow managed to succeed despite your skills. Well, you can go over there.”

Aileen pointed at the northern corridor.

Rachel nodded and prepared to lead her guild members away when Aileen raised a brow and asked.

“Come to think of it, where’s that mercenary you hired?”

All the guild members couldn’t hide their surprise as they looked at Aileen.

How did Aileen know about Xtra? Was everything a test from the association? Was Lancaster a part of their test too?

Aileen shook her head.

“No, it’s nothing like that. There’s no test or anything. Look at your smartwatches. I think the general assembly should’ve sent you a message by now.”

The guild members all looked at their smartwatches.

[A miraculous field that will grant you any wish and desire!]

[Welcome to the General Assembly!]

[The general assembly will begin tomorrow now that twenty teams have gathered! Please look forward to entering the field!]

“What does this mean?” Rachel asked.

“What else? It’s the general assembly. The one that called you and the one that recruited me was none other than the General Assembly. This place is ruled by the General Assembly, which possesses intelligence equal to or surpassing that of a human.”

Aileen nonchalantly explained to them.

However, Rachel couldn’t understand.

“Then that means...” Rachel continued to mutter.

“Ah, shut up. Look for your own answers and don’t annoy me,” Aileen retorted quite rudely.

Actually, Aileen hated any woman ten centimeters taller than her. Also, Aileen self-reported her own height to be 157.1 cm.

“Ah... *haha*... Welcome, everyone from the English Royal Court.”

Jin Seyeon welcomed them in a completely different manner than Aileen.

“Thank you...”

However, the English Royal Court’s atmosphere seemed gloomy.

Aileen and Jin Seyeon might be famous celebrities, but the guild members didn’t have the energy to be starstruck or excited about meeting them.

“*Ehem*... I guess you had a tough time. *Haha*... Why don’t you follow me?”

Jin Seyeon awkwardly scratched her neck and politely guided them to their accommodations.

Their living place looked clean and favorable. It featured a spacious living room with six bedrooms. Most importantly, it had three bathrooms as well. The guild members snapped out of their sorrows after seeing the toilet and shower, which they didn’t have for an entire week.

“You may rest until you receive another message. We don’t know when it’ll arrive, so please keep your smartwatch alarms on. I’ll excuse myself for now and come back later once you’ve rested.”

Jin Seyeon left them at their lodging.

First, the guild members unpacked. Of course, silence ensued the entire time.

“...”

Rachel went to her room alone. She sat on the bed with the communication crystal in her hand, but it remained disconnected.

“Hoo...”

She let out a depressed sigh.

Rachel had caught a glimpse of Xtra through the crack on his gas mask. His eyes looked familiar. Not only that, his voice sounded familiar too.

Rachel believed in her ability to remember people she once met. She rarely made a mistake when it came to recognizing people. However, she couldn't place her finger on where she met this person before. Not to mention, he didn't seem related to her at all.

— I'm one of your fans.

She suddenly recalled him saying that and faintly remembered where she heard this before. However, she must be mistaken. That person wouldn't continue watching over her from so far away. Also, a lot of people looked like that person since he had a fairly average face. Yes, she must've made a mistake. Besides, that person used a gun instead of a bow.

Rachel gripped the communication crystal with both hands while gritting her teeth and blaming herself. No matter what the situation might've been, she dragged someone innocent to their demise once again.

Creak...

Someone carefully opened the door and entered as Rachel blamed herself. Fermin slowly walked over and sat next to Rachel.

Rachel glanced at her, but didn't say anything. Neither said a word for some time as they sat in silence.

"You're aware of it, right?"

Fermin broke the silence first and spoke in a gentle tone. She fiddled with her thumbs before continuing.

"My mother passed away at that place too..."

"..."

Rachel raised her head and looked at Fermin. Of course, she had known.

Fermin bitterly smiled.

"I resented Vice Leader at the time. No, I despised the entire country and cried a lot because of it."

Her smile disappeared as she shook her head. She honestly spoke like always.

"However, that's no longer the case. It wasn't your fault, Vice Leader. The nation was responsible, but... isn't all that in the past?"

Fermin looked at Rachel, who quietly sat like a criminal atoning for her sin.

'I'm surrounded by people who are too nice to me... '

Rachel thought to herself.

"This is what I think. I understand resenting someone, but it's wrong to seek vengeance against that person. Vengeance begets vengeance. It'll never end well. It's impossible for one person to end such a cycle. Both parties must put an end to it."

Fermin placed her hand on Rachel's and Rachel could feel her

warmth.

“Vice Leader remembered me and my mother. You didn’t forget my mother and I don’t resent you anymore.”

Rachel looked at Fermin with tearful eyes and Fermin continued in a trembling voice.

“So it’s time for Vice Leader to stop resenting yourself. Nothing will change just because you resent and blame yourself.”

“...”

“Do you understand?”

They stared at each other when Fermin suddenly squealed.

“Ughkyak!”

“Kyak! W-What is it?”

“The crystal! Look at the communication crystal!”

Fermin exclaimed while pointing at the crystal in Rachel’s hand.

It glowed bright blue again.

Side Stories 15

Dream in a Dream (15)

I didn't even have the chance to catch my breath during the intense battle. The number of blades coming at me felt infinite. I shot them down with my Desert Eagle, but they kept coming with no end. It felt like playing a shooting game.

“Argh...”

I didn't have the luxury to think about what gift to create because of the barrage of blades. Of course, I thought of a few like Kim Suho's Sword Saint, Aileen's Spirit Speech, Yoo Jinwoong's Berserker, Kwang Won's Splitting Earth, etc.

However, those powerful gifts required an insane amount of SP. I had nowhere near enough.

[SP: 3,975]

I needed a gift that could help with my current predicament. Something that cost slightly less than four thousand SP. I could think of only one.

[Spirit Stone Master]

The power of a spirit wasn't a bad gift. Only a handful could use this unique power in the world. It also synchronized well with a gun and bow.

I calmed my breathing and activated bullet time. Then I immediately activated [Settings Intervention] while defending myself as time slowed.

[Spirit Stone Master] [Unique]

► Spirit Stone

— *A stone filled with a spirit's power. The user may summon a spirit as long as they possess this stone.*

► Master of the Stone

— *The user will gain proficiency in handling the Spirit Stone as its master.*

I added the restriction, *as long as they possess this stone*, to maximize its power. I also added the effect, *gain proficiency in handling*, so I could use it right away.

[All of your SP has been consumed to create the gift, Spirit Stone Master.]

[Your luck has accumulated for five years and has finally activated!]

[The gift has been greatly improved!]

[The Spirit Stone has grown bigger and its effect has been amplified!]

Thud!

A large rock the size of a meteorite fell from the sky.

“Ah, what the fuck is this?”

I cursed without even realizing it. That huge rock would be impossible to carry, so how the hell could this be considered lucky?

However, I didn't have the luxury to feel wronged as I placed one hand on the Spirit Stone and held the Desert Eagle in the other. I naturally realized how to use the Spirit Stone thanks to the second phrase, *The user will gain proficiency in handling the Spirit Stone as its master.*

I loaded my magazine with the wind spirit and immediately pulled the trigger.

Kaboom!

The bullet infused with the wind spirit penetrated the enemy spells. A blast of air followed the bullet from above and below. This threw off their spells and scattered them throughout the area.

I used this opening to pull my bowstring.

“Keuk!”

“Argh!”

The *[Dark Ore Arrow]* took down two of them and the bullet’s wind pressure blocked their counterattacks.

The shooting game’s difficulty drastically decreased thanks to the Spirit Stone and this ranged battle slowly tilted in my favor.

“That damned bastard!”

The assailants raged as they gathered their mana to cast another mana wave.

However, I had already prepared a countermeasure for that. I stuck close to the Spirit Stone and transformed my Desert Eagle into a machine gun. Then I pulled the trigger.

Dududududu!

The bullets fanned out and suddenly stopped in mid-air. The ones I shot first paused as more bullets lined up from behind. Then they all zoomed through the air like an inescapable net.

I called it, Land of the Wind. It functioned like the skill Rachel used last time, but I used a gun instead of a sword.

Shwaaaaa...

The wind encircled the mana wave. The Spirit Stone released a hot

burst of light as its energy dwindled, but managed to sustain itself through sheer size.

“Keu... Keuk!”

“Ack!”

I shot the arrow again as the mana wave grew weaker. The assailants couldn't even cast a barrier before I shot them down.

One, two, three, and four... Their numbers rapidly dwindled. Soon, only one of them remained. I used the wind spirit to pull back his hood.

The old man had white hair and wrinkles that roughly told his age and how much he suffered throughout those years.

“...”

I aimed my gun at him before taking out the communication crystal to speak with Rachel, but the old man began spouting nonsense.

“You won't get anything out of me. Just kill me.”

“Is that so?”

I placed the communication crystal back into my pocket and stared at him.

Did Lancaster brainwash this old man or did he willingly become subservient? Regardless, I had to extract information from him.

“Why do you wish to kill Rachel?”

“Is that even a question? Are you in love with the princess without knowing what happened?”

“No, Rachel is already suffering so much because of it. Can't you see? She probably remembers your face, who you are, and who you lost in

that tragedy.”

The old man seemed to expect such words and lashed back.

“*Ha!* Suffering? What did you say? Remember? I don’t give a damn what she does! I don’t care if she’s going through hell! Can she be in more pain than those that didn’t even have the chance to suffer?”

This man depended on Lancaster’s promise. He probably would’ve swallowed his anger and given up or taken his own life in my original world. However, this world had incredible power. One could always appease their anger or resentment if they offered their souls to a devil. Resentment and revenge abounded in this world for such a reason. Lancaster took advantage of their hatred and became a formidable enemy.

“Still, Rachel has been atoning and suffering for the past twenty years. She’s already pitiful enough. Don’t you think it’s time to at least forgive her?”

“No, only death can be her forgiveness. The princess has to die just like my daughter. No, she has to suffer even more than my daughter when I imagine how... how scared she must’ve been at that place!”

The old man couldn’t finish and began to uncontrollably weep. He looked completely different from a while ago when he continually shot mana at me.

“Is that so?”

I walked towards the weeping old man.

“That’s too bad,” I said.

Everyone in this world lived as if this wasn’t a novel. They thought as if this wasn’t a novel and died as if this wasn’t a novel. Only I looked at this world as just another novel.

“You see, I wish for the princess to be happy for a long time.”

Despite everything, I wished for my story to have a happy ending like those old fairytales.

“So I can’t let any of you go.”

I pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The gunshot echoed out and signaled the battle’s end.

Fog descended on the area.

“...”

I sighed before taking out the communication crystal, but it broke after being exposed to the huge amount of mana. I threw it away and its fragments scattered all over.

Then I looked at the sky. Countless stars stared down as if they had something to tell me, but I couldn’t hear what they wanted to say.

My hometown was probably further than those stars.

* * *

Bang!

“...!”

A loud gunshot echoed in the dead of night. Rachel woke up and jumped in fright.

“What the... *ha...*”

Her body trembled, but she still felt groggy. It seemed she managed to fall asleep after tossing and turning last night.

She sat on her bed and recalled the conversation she overheard through the communication crystal yesterday.

— Is that even a question? Are you in love with the princess without knowing what happened?

— No, Rachel is already suffering so much because of it. Can't you see? She probably remembers your face, who you are, and who you lost in that tragedy.

— You see, I wish for the princess to be happy for a long time. So I can't let any of you go.

Perhaps the communication crystal malfunctioned, but it relayed their voices for around three minutes before it broke.

Fermin had explained it to her.

“Well-made communication crystals tend to continue relaying messages for a few minutes before they're destroyed so the user can send an emergency message.”

Xtra's words seemed quite strange. It sounded as if he wanted to protect her.

“...”

Rachel's cheeks blushed after she recalled the event from last night. She immediately got up from bed and almost tripped on something. Fermin had been sleeping on the floor.

Rachel moved her to a bed and covered her with a blanket before leaving the room. The crystals brightly lit up the corridors even in the early morning.

She turned on the general assembly's map that they received on their smartwatches last night.

“Shop?”

Rachel spotted a shop not too far away. She had no idea what kind of shop, but wanted to take a look and distract herself.

[General Assembly Shop]

It had a signboard out front.

Creak...

An amazing sight greeted her when she opened the door. Countless shelves lined the walls and a hologram cashier managed the counter at the vast room's center.

— You may purchase magic items and books on swordsmanship.

The male merchant hologram said to the customer in front of him.

Rachel tiptoed and tried to steal a glance at the customer, but couldn't see their face because the counter obstructed her view.

"Then what's the most expensive thing here?" the customer asked.

Rachel's eyes widened when she heard the customer speak. It sounded too familiar and she heard this voice countless times at Cube.

— Beats me. I don't know what the most expensive item is because the General Assembly sells more than just my wares.

"Then what's the most expensive thing that you sell?"

— It's the Swordsmanship of Mythology.

"What? I don't need that. Don't you have anything else? You know, something like a stone fragment or something?"

— I apologize, but I don't have anything like a stone fragment. I suggest you try outside and pick it up from the streets.

"What did you just say, you bastard! Are you picking a fight with me?"

What do you mean you don't have it? I'll beat the living daylights out of you if I find it!"

The woman picking a fight with the hologram was none other than Chae Nayun.

Chae Nayun pushed her hand through the hologram a few times before clicking her tongue in frustration. Then she turned around while grumbling and came face to face with Rachel.

"*Huh?*"

The two awkwardly reunited like that. Both of them became speechless after seeing each other. It had been a long time since they were rivals at Cube.

No, more like they didn't have anything to say to each other. However, Chae Nayun broke the silence first.

"It's been a long time."

"Yes, indeed it has."

"What? Hey, are you still speaking with honorifics? Why can't you just speak normally? You're getting on my nerves again."

Chae Nayun grumbled before looking behind Rachel.

Of course, Rachel came by herself.

Chae Nayun furrowed her brows and asked, "Hey, where's your mercenary?"

"Our mercenary is... How do you know about that?" Rachel asked with a hint of suspicion.

Chae Nayun briefly flinched with an expression that seemed to say, *Darn it!* She tried her best to explain in a sketchy manner.

“Isn’t it obvious? It’s Xtra, right? Rumors have already spread far and wide, you know?”

Rachel squinted at her. “Is that so? Well, he hasn’t caught up with us yet.”

“Oh, really?”

“Truth be told, he already accomplished his mission since we only hired him as a pathfinder.”

Rachel moved away from Chae Nayun and looked at the items on the shelves.

— Are you looking for anything specific? What do you think about these flowers since you look so beautiful?

“No thanks,” Rachel replied.

The store had many items that enticed her, but Rachel didn’t stay long because Chae Nayun kept pestering her.

Chae Nayun left as well while nonchalantly whistling from behind.

[Restaurant]

Rachel entered the restaurant next door after suddenly feeling hungry. The restaurant looked quite empty early in the morning, but...

Tadak!

Something busily moved. Rachel glanced at where the sound came from and saw someone covering their face while sitting in front of a ramyeon with rice in it.

“There’s only one person. Why did you come here? Are you hungry?” Chae Nayun asked from behind.

Rachel glanced at the person eating alone before replying when the

restaurant door opened again.

“Huh?”

Rachel recognized them too. Their eyes widened when they saw her as well.

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan from Creator’s Sacred Grace, Reisläufer from Switzerland, Shen Wuiyan from China, etc.

Quite a lot of heroes entered the restaurant. Rachel greeted them before turning towards the lone diner eating a while ago.

“Huh?”

The man eating a ramyeon had disappeared without a trace.

What was that? A ghost? But why would a ghost eat ramyeon?

“Hey, what are you doing? Why are you here so early?”

Chae Nayun asked Kim Suho, who snickered in response.

“I received a message that the general assembly would begin soon. Rather than that, long time no see, Rachel.”

She hadn’t heard that voice in a long time. Kim Suho looked at her and she smiled before checking her smartwatch. As he said, they had all received a message.

[The general assembly will begin in two hours. I hope all of you will fill your bellies before coming to the meeting room at the center of the general assembly hall.]

* * *

Rachel and her guild members went to the *[Meeting Room]* when the sun rose. They discussed various strategies while heading there and agreed to request at least one beneficial thing for placing in the top

twenty.

“Wow... What is this?”

“Is this place really...?”

They steeled their resolve and entered the meeting room only to be flabbergasted. They couldn't even close their mouths from the surprise.

The meeting room looked so unbelievable no one would dare to replicate it. The elegant and luxurious general assembly hall couldn't compare.

“Where should we sit?”

A large round table sat at the center of the meeting room that resembled a crystal cave. It had numerous seats for others to sit. Also, white crystals floated above the chairs for lighting.

Ding!

A message arrived on their smartwatches while they dumbfoundedly stared.

[Two representatives from each guild will sit at the round table while the others sit on the stands behind.]

[The first representative will be the guild's spokesperson while the other will be the one with the highest contribution rank.]

[The English Royal Court's representatives will be Rachel and Xtra.]

Rachel looked troubled when she read the message because she lost contact with Xtra last night.

“Vice Leader, we can go sit at the stands, right?”

“Yes, go ahead.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

The other guilds entered one by one.

Korea, China, America, Japan, Europe, etc.

The prestigious guilds from each country captivated the English Royal Court members.

“Ah, Yeonha! Long time no see. It’s an honor to meet you here. Is your father doing well?”

“Of course, he’s doing too good for his own sake.”

“*Haha!* I heard Essence of the Strait achieved a remarkable feat this time. I truly admire you. It was a surprise when I heard the news!”

“Ah, is that so? Was there really a need to be surprised though? We already expected such an outcome.”

Yoo Yeonha discussed business with those surrounding her. Every guild master or vice leader fought to meet her.

“My! Isn’t this Chae Nayun?”

“Ah, yes.”

“I saw the remarkable achievements you made during your last dungeon raid! You’re truly amazing!”

“Ah, yes. Indeed, I am a bit strong. No, I’m very strong.”

“They say a tiger begets a tiger.”

People also surrounded Chae Nayun, but she acted the total opposite of Yoo Yeonha.

Meanwhile, Rachel couldn’t help but feel jealous of them. She sat alone at the table and clawed at it with her nails. Nobody approached

her in the end. Kim Suho spared her a glance, but couldn't approach as Yun Seung-Ah dragged him around.

A text appeared in mid-air when Rachel finally mustered the courage to stand up and socialize with everyone.

[Please be seated.]

[The general assembly will soon begin.]

The bustling room instantly settled and everyone returned to their seats.

Thirty-nine people sat at the round table while two hundred sat at the stands for a total of 239 attendees.

[All of you will go through a test at this general assembly hall and the field within it.]

[The field placement and treatment towards your guild will change according to each guild's test scores.]

[The grand winner will gain the privilege of owning me, the General Assembly.]

[However, I see we have one absentee. I guess that person got hurt or you fought amongst yourselves.]

All eyes instantly darted towards Rachel. The only empty seat was next to her.

“Hahaha!”

“Well, England is quite the troublemaker these days. It's commendable they made it here in the first place.”

Some of the guilds, especially from China, spat out arrogant remarks.

Rachel tried her best to remain calm and nonchalantly ignore them,

but couldn't stop her face from turning red.

[However, it's fine for a seat to remain empty.]

[Then, I will show you the contents of the first test.]

A small text appeared at the center of the round table.

[First General Assembly – Theory Class]

Nobody in this room expected such words.

Side Stories 16

Dream in a Dream (16)

“What should I do with this?”

The Spirit Stone’s huge size caused quite a dilemma. I didn’t lie when I said it looked like a meteorite and it weighed like one too. I couldn’t just simply leave it here.

“What’s wrong with my luck?”

It was supposed to only give me an absolute advantage with no strings attached. Yes, my luck greatly amplified the Spirit Stone’s power, but I couldn’t bring it anywhere like this.

My [*Accumulation of Luck*] should’ve triggered as well.

Squirm... Squirm...

I heard a strange noise from somewhere.

Squirm... Squirm... Squirm...

“Ah, that sounds quite annoying.”

I grumbled and turned around.

Several individuals squirmed on the ground like caterpillars with their hands and feet tied and their eyes and mouth covered. Around eight of these fortunate ones had survived their encounter with me.

“Ufff! Ummhp! Hmmp!”

I didn’t feel like shooting these defenseless folks. Honestly, I slightly

pitied them when I saw the old man shed tears. I planned on just tying them up and letting the association or heroes take care of them with a trial or something.

“Stay still if you don’t want to die.”

I threatened them.

They obediently shut their mouths and stopped squirming. Even the old man who shouted, *I won’t tell you anything about our lord even if you kill me*, held his breath in fear that I would really kill him. As expected, every human feared death.

I turned my attention towards the Spirit Stone again.

[Spirit Stone] [Legendary] [Unique] — A stone infused with the power of spirits. The energy used will recover over 24 hours.

[Energy Capacity: 10,000/10,000]

“Hmm...”

An idea suddenly popped up in my head after staring at the item’s description for a while. I looked down at my hands that possessed the *[Young Dwarf’s Dexterity]*. Maybe I could carve this Spirit Stone with *[Young Dwarf’s Dexterity]*. Perhaps my luck made the Spirit Stone so massive for a reason.

“Will it work?”

However, reducing its mass for more portability would surely affect its efficiency. That would essentially make it meaningless.

“Shall we test it a little?”

I formed a sculpting knife with stigma and carved off a tiny portion of the Spirit Stone. Then I checked its description again.

[Detached Spirit Stone] [Artifact] [Unique] — A stone infused with the

power of spirits. The energy used will recover over 36 hours.

[Energy Capacity: 50/50]

Fifty didn't seem like a bad figure, so I began sculpting the Spirit Stone.

Sukeok... Sukeok... Sukeok...

I started at the edges and slowly worked my way in. Pieces that fell off littered the ground and a beautiful peak stood in the middle of the mess.

I sculpted the huge Spirit Stone into a rose with a bluish hue.

[Spirit Stone Flower] [Legendary] [Unique] — A stone infused with the power of spirits. It has been meticulously sculpted by a dwarf and a much more powerful strength now resides within it. The energy used will recover over 18 hours.

[Energy Capacity: 100/100] [Low Rank Harmonization]

My hard work resulted in a jackpot.

* * *

[First General Assembly – Theory Class]

My insides turned when that text appeared. The first test would be difficult.

All of us came here with our own abilities and powers, but what the hell did a theory class have to do with anything?

“What? What the hell is this? A class? What bullshit is this?!”

Yoo Yeonha ignored Chae Nayun's tirade and calmly analyzed the situation.

“Ah... fuck. Just wait a minute. Are you asking us to study after we came all the way here?”

The General Assembly didn't give any additional details, but the words *test* and *class* made it obvious enough.

“Is this some kind of a joke? What the hell is this? Have you gone insane? *Ha!*”

Yoo Yeonha didn't worry since Essence of the Straits had two of the most intelligent people who always fought for first and second place at Cube when it came to theory. Of course, she hadn't expected this and only brought them to assist with planning strategies. However, her decision turned out for the best.

“*Sigh...* I guess we can't do anything about it.”

Chae Nayun grumbled before calming down and thinking.

Her sudden composure and pondering slightly surprised Yoo Yeonha. Chae Nayun should've grumbled a few hundred times and even screamed in frustration, but she suddenly began taking notes with her smartwatch?

“First... General... Assembly... Theory... Class...”

Chae Nayun recited each word as she typed them down with her hologram keyboard.

Yoo Yeonha stared at her in astonishment. This might be the most shocking thing she witnessed in the last three years.

“It's worth a shot if it's theory.”

On the other hand, Rachel felt confident after seeing what the first test would be. She had been top of her class at Cube when it came to theory and Fermin might look a bit dumb, but actually placed in the top percentile of her class for theory too.

The General Assembly finally gave them additional details.

[I will now give out questions for you to conduct your own research about the general assembly.]

[You must solve these questions as the pursuit of truth is also a hero's calling.]

[Each guild will be provided its own research facility. The size and the equipment inside will depend on your guild's contribution points. You may use your contribution points to further upgrade your research facility.]

[You are also free to cooperate with others. However, you will have to form a party through your smartwatches.]

Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!

Their smartwatches rang throughout the meeting room.

[Welcome, Rachel.]

[English Royal Court Guild]

[Contribution Ranking – 19th]

[Party – X]

[Accommodation Rating – 9]

[Research Facility Rating – 9]

What's this? Rachel wanted to check the new message, but the General Assembly suddenly gave them their first question.

[First Question]

[Q.1]

— There is the British Dungeon in London, the Hongok Dungeon in Seoul, and Parrishmare in the United States. A dungeon closely related to those three resides within the general assembly area. Find out its interior

composition, mana density, and the monsters inside.

[You will find out if the dungeon randomly appears or if it can be anticipated by solving this problem.]

Rachel's expression suddenly stiffened. It would be impossible to solve such a complex problem with four dungeons mixed together.

[I hope you will enjoy solving this problem. The next meeting will begin in 96 hours.]

The General Assembly's text disappeared and the attendants stood up to discuss among themselves.

Essence of the Strait and Creator's Sacred Grace attracted quite a crowd. France's La Guild Lumiere and China's Chinese Empire seemed to get along. This bothered Rachel since England and France didn't have a good relationship to begin with.

“...”

Rachel remained all alone like a castaway. Nobody bothered to strike up a conversation with her. No one even spared her a glance even though she graduated top of her class in theory at Cube. Her first-place title seemed meaningless here.

She mustered the courage to approach the other guilds first, but everyone only greeted her out of courtesy and avoided her or flat-out ignored her.

The English Royal Court members swallowed their anger and tears as they watched Rachel go from guild to guild.

“Vice Leader Rachel?”

Someone suddenly approached and greeted her as if they had been waiting. It turned out to be Reinslauder's Sehat.

“Hello, it's good to see you again.”

“*Haha*, same to you. By the way, Vice Leader... do you have any clues regarding the problem? Nothing comes to my mind no matter how much I rack my brains.”

“I have a feeling it’s the same as the similar dungeon theory that’s been making the rounds these days in academia. A dungeon pops up every year that’s somehow similar to another existing dungeon. There have been many attempts to find any common links between them.”

“Oh, you’re truly amazing as expected.”

“Not at all, I don’t have a clue regarding the problem either. I never thought the Hongok Dungeon and the British Dungeon were related...”

A man suddenly interrupted them as Rachel and Sehat busily discussed the problem. He belonged to the Golden Afterglow guild and anyone could tell they came from China because of their uniforms.

“Hi, Vice Leader Rachel.”

The man who looked like a rat greeted Rachel and scanned her from head to toe with a sleazy smile.

“Hello, how may I help you?” Rachel courteously asked despite his scummy look.

“*Hehe*, that’s... our Golden Afterglow is also...”

“Vice Leader, let’s go.”

Fermin and the other guild members came over and dragged Rachel away. Then Fermin spoke to Sehat.

“Let’s head to the research facility provided by the General Assembly and continue our discussion there.”

The English Royal Court entered their research facility along with Sehat and the Reinslauder guild members.

“*Umm...* Shall we take... our seats first?” Rachel awkwardly welcomed their guests.

She felt embarrassed because of their pitiful research facility. The wooden floor tiles creaked, the chairs looked worn out, dust covered the desks, and cobwebs scattered all over the place.

They couldn’t have received a better research facility because they ranked the lowest for contribution points. Xtra’s points had been excluded from the tally.

“I apologize for our shabby facility. We didn’t expect our research facility to be in this state...”

“No, we’re fine. Please don’t mind us.”

Sehat nonchalantly replied as he took a seat. However, the other Reinslauder guild members seemed quite disappointed by the shabby facility.

Fermin quickly interjected and changed the topic.

“Here’s the information regarding the British Dungeon, the Hongok Dungeon, and Parrishmare.”

Thud! Thud! Thud!

She set down a few stacks of documents that totaled nine hundred pages. Rachel flinched whenever a stack fell on the table. The Reinslauder and English Royal Court members also flinched and murmured among themselves. The mountains of documents overwhelmed them.

“How are we supposed to present this?”

“What? We have to do a presentation too?”

“But... isn’t this too much? We didn’t even do this much at Cube...”

“No, why do we even have to do this?”

However, the prerequisites for being a hero also included this. Of course, scholars carried out most dungeon analyzes these days, but sometimes their analysis didn’t match the dungeon’s interior. Heroes had to conduct their own analysis in such situations.

“Then, does Sir Sehat have any plans to cooperate and form a party with us?” Rachel carefully asked.

“Of course, Vice Leader was a well-known genius at Cube. We should be the ones asking to cooperate with you.”

Sehat seemed to be the only one who thought this. His other guild members looked displeased, but Rachel still extended her hand to shake his. Sehat smiled and shook her hand.

[The English Royal Court and the Reinslaufer guild have formed a party.]

Rachel and Sehat successfully formed their alliance. The English Royal Court members rejoiced while the Reinslaufer members glared at their leader.

“Then, I’ll go and check if there’s any other information available.” Fermin bowed before leaving the research facility.

“Still, it’s a relief we managed to team up with a guild like Reinslaufer. I thought we would be left all alone.”

Fermin muttered while skipping through the corridor. She would reach the shop soon and thought about purchasing more information there. Then she suddenly recalled what happened last night.

— No, Rachel is already suffering so much because of it. Can’t you see? She probably remembers your face, who you are, and who you lost in that tragedy.

— Still, Rachel has been atoning and suffering for the past twenty

years. She's already pitiful enough. Don't you think it's time to at least forgive her?

— You see, I wish for the princess to be happy for a long time. So I can't let any of you go.

Was Xtra someone deeply related to the princess? Or was he just a hardcore fan who managed to find information about her online?

Rachel had been trying to forget what she heard that day, but couldn't at all.

“He must be a stalker or a die-hard fan, right?”

Fermin muttered before her expression stiffened and her feet stopped. The faint trace of mana in the air made her freeze. This sinister and eerie mana oozed with a longing for vengeance.

Gulp.

Fermin nervously gulped before turning around and looking down the corridor. She didn't see anyone behind her, but once felt that mana in the air before with her own body.

Lancaster had been here.

* * *

[Spirit Stone Necklace] — A necklace infused with the power of a spirit. Its power has been amplified by a dwarf's exquisite craftsmanship and stigma's mana flows within it. Its color will change depending on the element.

The energy used will recover over 12 hours.

[Energy Capacity: 1,000/1,000] [High-Intermediate Amplification] [High-Intermediate Protection]

[Spirit Stone Armband] — An armband infused with the power of a spirit.

Its power has been amplified by a dwarf's exquisite craftsmanship and stigma's mana flows within it. Its color will change depending on the element.

The energy used will recover over 12 hours.

[Energy Capacity: 1,200/1,200] [High-Intermediate Attribute Combination] [Intermediate Spirit Projection]

"Hooo..."

I used up stigma to create an accessory and equipment, but 80% of the Spirit Stone remained.

"Ah... this is killing me..."

I wouldn't be able to use up all of the Spirit Stone even if I created an entire set of equipment to clad myself. I might be able to make full use of it if I spent an entire week crafting.

"Ughh..."

I massaged my forehead since the thought of spending an entire week gave me a migraine.

Ring... Ring... Ring! Ring Ring Ring! Ring...

My smartwatch rang as if relaying something through Morse code.

[Marcus: What is this theory? Ah... I feel like my head is going to split open. I can't even get through the third page...]

[Kayle: How can you call yourself a Cube alumnus when you can't even understand this?]

[Marcus: Hey, don't you know I specialize in combat? I'll just go out and gather some contribution points, Vice Leader.]

[Rachel: Yes, that also sounds like a great idea.]

[Marcus: Yes, ma'am! Did you guys hear that? All of you who can't use your heads to save your lives, follow me!]

It seemed like someone invited me to the guild chat.

“What’s this?”

The General Assembly sent me a bunch of messages as well. I didn’t notice my smartwatch ringing while crafting the Spirit Stone.

[First Question]

[Q.1]

— There is the British Dungeon in London, the Hongok Dungeon in Seoul, and Parrishmare in the United States. A dungeon closely related to those three resides within the general assembly area. Find out its interior composition, mana density, and the monsters inside.

“Theory class?”

I didn’t go to the general assembly, so I had no idea what happened. However, I felt confident if the topic had to do with theory.

“Hmm...”

I searched for information related to the British Dungeon, Hongok Dungeon, and Parrishmare using the Book of Truth and *[Observation and Reading]*.

“Is this even a difficult question?”

They had to calculate the interior composition, mana density, and list the monsters inside this unknown dungeon using the common factors among the three provided dungeons.

I used my cheat abilities to start calculating and find out...

I hadn’t used my creator’s authority in a while, so it felt like having

my mind blown.

It took me three minutes to solve the problem. I hadn't taken this long to solve a single problem in five years!

Side Stories 17

Dream in a Dream (17)

I entered the final stages of crafting the Spirit Stone after two days.

I also engraved the spirits onto my *[Desert Eagle]* and the *[Black Lotus Bow]*. Then I infused the elasticity provided by the Spirit Stone into my clothing. I now possessed an armband, outer clothing, shoes, necklace, ring, etc. all crafted from the Spirit Stone. These accessories completely covered me and I worried that I might develop an allergy to the Spirit Stone. Anyways, I didn't even use up all of the Spirit Stone. However, its size had reduced to a football.

“The rest will be...”

As expected, it would be best to give the rest to Rachel. I placed the Spirit Stone in my backpack and stood up. I should test everything out after spending so much time and effort making them.

I equipped all the items and warmed up. I did the usual stretches kids would do in the morning before school started. Then I stored the Desert Eagle inside stigma and stretched out my hand.

Fwaaaaah...

A powerful current appeared where I aimed. The current twisted and turned before compressing into a cube.

I infused the fire attribute into the wind cube and flames appeared in mid-air without any catalyst. This flame purely burned by itself.

I spread the flame out of the cube in every direction and it devoured everything in its path. The wind cube turned into a huge ring surrounding the area.

Next, I infused the earth attribute and the ring turned into a sturdy wall that encircled the area.

“Not bad.”

Any passerby who saw this strange phenomenon might’ve thought the initial flame looked like a will-o-wisp^[1] having some fun.

The Spirit Stone had endless combinations and possibilities. Unfortunately, I couldn’t materialize the spirits like Rachel because she operated on completely different fundamentals that I couldn’t replicate. I could only borrow the spirits’ powers while she communicated and built a relationship with them. In short, Rachel was a true elementalist while I became something more like a sorcerer.

Actually, it would be more efficient for Rachel to use the Spirit Stone instead of me.

“*Sigh...*”

However, I could only sigh in resignation when I realized the time I wasted here.

I missed Evandel, but didn’t worry since she already grew up a bit. She must be having the time of her life with no one to nag her. I still missed her nonetheless.

I knew very well where my mood swing came from because I knew why this general assembly took place, what awaited at the end, and what I expected.

“Well... there’s no way, right?” I muttered and laughed in disbelief.

The system already made its decision and I could no longer return to my world. That wouldn’t and couldn’t change.

I clicked on my smartwatch gallery to look at Evandel’s pictures, but various pictures of Rachel caught my eye instead.

“There are 173 photos...”

I took a picture of her whenever I thought her pose looked nice and I also saved some from her fan sites. I had no idea why I collected these pictures. Perhaps out of pity if I had to describe it?

Rachel always made me feel remorse and sympathy. The Rachel in my story and the Rachel in this world seemed too pitiful. Her mannerisms, her convictions, and her past were all too much for her to bear.

However, pity wasn't a positive emotion. It was nothing more than a parasite that leeches off one's emotions. Emotions like pity or sympathy couldn't be considered true remorse. One would only mistake this sympathy for remorse.

I always felt nervous when I saw Rachel because only she could make me feel an emotion I would never feel for anyone else in this world.

“Damn it...”

I cursed under my breath before plopping down on the ground. However, I found myself smiling when I recalled the stick game I played with Rachel.

Had six days already passed? My luck triggered during my bet with her and she screamed, *kyah*, as she missed her footing. Then she fell and bumped her head on the ground.

“Pfft! Heh... Ah... Puwahahaha!”

That funny sight made me burst into laughter in the middle of nowhere like a moron.

* * *

The General Assembly made the heroes nostalgic as they recalled their academy days. Currently, they sat in front of computers with pens in their hands and fervently studied. However, they couldn't find any answers despite their best efforts. Most guilds already gave up and the rest headed to the store to access the computers with the General

Assembly Net. They read through the numerous papers stored there.

[Hongok Dungeon] — A large dungeon that appeared in Hongcheon-Gun, Gangwon-Do, South Korea. The interior is covered in bright red brimstone and magma flows through the ground. The dungeon is inhabited by monsters below intermediate rank, grade 5 such as sulfur fish, fire manta ray, firenha, etc.

— The mana density at the entrance is around 2% and the mana depth has peaked at 4.6%. Being exposed to a high concentration of mana for a long period may cause not only breathing complications, but also mana rampage. Therefore, the dungeon has been closed off until...

Rachel purchased the above information with her contribution points, but still couldn't find any leads despite scrutinizing every detail.

Hongok Dungeon, British Dungeon, and Parrishmare...

She couldn't find anything in common between these three dungeons. Not only Rachel, but even the other guilds struggled. Almost half the guilds already gave up after forty hours.

"Haaa..."

Rachel sighed and looked at the clock.

[3:45 A.M.]

Only she remained at the research facility and she couldn't leave empty-handed. She had nothing else to contribute to the alliance with Reislauder except her brains. Her only value had been placing top of her class at Cube when it came to theory, so she had to show some results as soon as possible.

She spent an hour alone racking her brains before turning on her smartwatch out of frustration. She accessed the General Assembly Community Board to distract herself when the name *[Xtra]* under the *[English Royal Court Guild]* caught her attention.

She received a call from him at that exact moment.

[Xtra: Are you guys doing a theory class or something?]

Rachel flinched in surprise. She wondered if their thoughts aligned or something.

[Me: Pardon?]

[Me: Ah, yes. We're currently doing a theory class.]

[Me: That aside, I'm glad you're safe as expected. 🐼🐼]

[Xtra: Use this for your theory.]

[Me: ◯ ∧ ◯ ?]

It took her more than thirty seconds to type the emoticon, but Xtra completely ignored it and went straight to the point by sending a file. The file size looked huge.

What's this? She wanted to take a look, but Xtra sent another message.

[Xtra: Also, I captured nine of the assailants that ambushed you. All of them are alive.]

“Ah...”

Rachel subconsciously sighed in relief. Then she thought she was being too soft. To think she would feel relief that the ones who ambushed them still lived. She hardened her expression and replied.

[Me: Thank you for your hard work.]

[Xtra: I'm just wondering... Do you know the names of these nine people?]

Xtra sent a picture of the nine assailants all tied up.

Rachel flinched again, but composed herself and wrote down their names for Xtra.

[Xtra: Alright, get some rest.]

Their conversation ended just like that, but Rachel still had one more thing to say.

[Me: But... You're aware our bet isn't over yet, right? (ಠ_ಠ)]

It was her only opportunity to meet Xtra face-to-face, but he didn't reply. She stared at her smartwatch for a response before faking a cough in embarrassment.

"Ehem..."

She should probably check the file first since she could live without the bet. Getting one-sidedly beat up hadn't been fun anyways.

She opened the file without any expectations. It didn't contain anything surprising and the first few pages explained theories that everyone else knew. However, she slowly grew amazed as she read more and processed the words.

The research facility doors suddenly burst open and Marcus barged in. Rachel jumped in surprise and turned off her smartwatch.

"Vice Leader! They asked us to gather in the meeting room!"

"Pardon?"

"Hurry up and come out! They say it's an interim inspection!"

"Why all of a sudden—"

Rachel couldn't finish as Marcus dragged her out. The sun already brightly shone outside as Marcus led her to the General Assembly Meeting Room.

A few guilds had already gathered such as The General and Lake Ford from the United States, the Chinese Empire and Golden Afterglow from China, etc.

Rachel entered the meeting room and sat at the round table.

“Hey, how long will the English Royal Court keep attending alone? That seat is getting cold.”

Someone sneered at her. Rachel glanced at Chiffon, vice leader of La Guild Lumiere from France. However, she didn’t react at all and didn’t let those words upset her.

“Those that are poor or lack brains are all the same. How can a mere mercenary have more contribution points than them?”

The Chinese Empire guild allied with La Guild Lumiere chimed in.

Rachel continued to completely ignore them.

“*Hahaha!* That sounds about right!”

“*Hohoho!*”

She didn’t even bother responding and quietly turned on her smartwatch.

[The Interim Inspection will now begin.]

[Please come up to the podium if any guilds have completely solved the problem or have made some progress.]

[Please keep in mind that this interim inspection will be broadcasted throughout the entire world via the internet.]

A crystal podium appeared in front of the round table. Rachel briefly pondered while staring at the dazzling podium, but couldn’t muster the courage to go up there.

She hesitated because she didn’t even understand the first few bits of that shocking theory from Xtra.

[It seems the English Royal Court guild is still alone.]

The General Assembly suddenly said.

“Pfft! Pwahaha! Keheum!”

The sound of sneering rang out across the room and Rachel blushed in embarrassment.

[I advise that you two make up already.]

The General Assembly seemed to be teasing her. *What a prankster...*

[Hmm... Anyways.]

[It seems that no one is prepared. You may send me whatever files you have prepared if you wish to have your theory checked. I will see if it is correct or not.]

The General Assembly made quite an offer. They could have their files checked without risking embarrassment.

Rachel looked at her smartwatch and General Assembly’s text.

[Is there nobody?]

The General Assembly asked again.

Rachel tightly shut her eyes and hesitated.

[I am disappointed. Then we shall conclude the interim inspection today—]

She raised her hand just as the interim inspection came to an end.

* * *

Meanwhile, Rayton didn’t doubt his lord. He believed his lord would appear at the right moment and punish this bastard. Putting all that aside, the bastard tied him up so tightly he couldn’t even move a muscle.

Rayton wanted to at least see, so he squirmed as hard as he could and rubbed his blindfold on the ground. The ground kept grinding against his face, but that didn't matter.

Rub... Rub... Rub...

Rayton finally undid his blindfold after rubbing his face on the ground more than a thousand times. The pitch-black view suddenly brightened and blinded him. He squinted and looked around.

He could see Xtra standing still, but that stubborn bastard always wore a gas mask. Rayton activated his prosthetic eye to film that bastard and send it to his lord, which would be a huge achievement.

However, why did that bastard keep standing still?

Rayton wondered when that bastard suddenly extended his hand and a fierce wind blew out.

It didn't end there. The real surprise had just begun.

Fwaaaaa!

Flames raged upward like a reverse waterfall along with the wind. It gathered in the sky like a cloud before crashing down to the ground like a torrent.

The grand sight of flames melting the ground sent chills down Rayton's spine.

What's going on right now? What power is this? How can a mere mercenary...?

Rayton watched the entire spectacle and made sure to record every second.

“...!”

The bastard suddenly turned around and Rayton shut his eyes.

Step... Step...

He could hear footsteps approaching him and his heart raced.

Drrr!

Something shot up from the ground and covered the entire place. Only then did Xtra stop walking.

Rayton opened his eyes. The entire place had been surrounded by an unknown wall of earth.

“Lancaster won’t be coming.”

A deep chilling voice spoke out.

Rayton flinched when he saw Xtra staring down at him with that gas mask.

“How do I know? These are the messages between the executives of your lord.”

Xtra showed him the communication channel log that Kim Hoseop hacked from Lancaster. It took some time for the file to reach him through his private satellite, but he still received it even in Central Asia.

[What should we do about Rayton and the rest?]

[Leave them be. They’re just disposable rats anyways.]

[They might’ve spilled the beans about us.]

[Then kill them with your own hands if they come back alive.]

“Ha! You expect me to believe your fabricated lies?!”

Rayton screamed out when Xtra removed the rag stuffing his mouth. He vehemently accused Xtra with his saliva splattering all over the

smartwatch.

However, Xtra simply shook his head.

“You don’t have to believe me since the only reason you’re still alive is thanks to Rachel.”

“What?”

“Your boss not only abandoned you, but also tasked someone with killing you. All of you desperately tried to kill Rachel, but she’s ironically the one who wants you alive.”

“This crazy bastard! How dare you spout such lies!”

Rayton wouldn’t even listen to Xtra’s words. Too much time had passed since he believed only what he wanted.

Xtra smirked and nodded.

“Sure, keep waiting here. Perhaps a week? Yeah, around a week. You’ll be safe for that amount of time within these walls. Those monsters won’t be able to get you.”

Rayton finally noticed that Xtra didn’t speak to just him. The old man looked left and right and saw his comrades intently listening to Xtra.

“These ropes binding you will loosen by themselves and Lancaster will probably think you’re all dead.”

Xtra briefly paused and recited all their names.

Jenny’s father, Rayton. Barbie’s mother, Daisy. Elise’s parents, Rian and Stan. Lucy’s husband, Zeron. Lily’s husband, Rio. Toby’s wife, Sonya. Ellie and Ryan’s son, Caleb. Dexter’s brother, Oscar...

“Rachel knows every one of you by name. She engraved your names to her heart and carried it with her every second she lived.”

“D-Don’t be fooled! Don’t be fooled, you bastards! Don’t listen to him! Shut your ears!”

Rayton urgently shouted. He could feel a sense of doubt rising within him despite shouting at the top of his lungs for his comrades to not believe those words.

Xtra didn’t bother to hush the old man and continued.

“You can pretend to die and cut all ties with Lancaster or return to him and repay this grace with your death. Or... you can go to Rachel and let bygones be bygones.”

Xtra turned around with his back facing them and formed a door through the earth wall.

“The choice is yours and yours alone.”

He left with those last words.

Silence filled the dark interior of the earth walls. Only a single person left, but it felt like the entire place had emptied.

The assailants couldn’t say anything to each other. They needed time to think about who deceived them. How had they been deceived? Had they even been deceived in the first place? Or are they still being deceived?

No one knew.

1. The exact word used by the author is Dokkaebi Fire (Goblin Fire). The Dokkaebi, or Goblin, is a different creature from the green-skinned goblins portrayed in mainstream culture. The Korean Dokkaebi is more of a magical creature that can use magic and likes to pull pranks. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dokkaebi>



Side Stories 18

Dream in a Dream (18)

All eyes focused on Rachel when she raised her hand. Even the English Royal Court members looked at her with surprise. No one had expected this.

[Representative of the English Royal Court guild, Rachel.]

[Do you have something worth submitting?]

The General Assembly asked.

Rachel lowered her hand and took a deep breath before replying.

“Yes.”

All sorts of murmuring filled the meeting room when she confidently nodded.

The hostile guilds sneered at her, but also became visibly shaken at the tiniest possibility that she actually had something as someone who ranked first at Cube. After all, only the best gathered there.

“I have it saved as a file.”

[Please send it to me.]

The General Assembly replied.

Rachel forwarded the file that Xtra sent.

“It’s the answer prepared by the mercenary, Xtra.”

She didn't want to steal his achievement. She couldn't fool anyone in the first place when she didn't even understand it herself.

“Mercenary?”

Everyone in the room became doubtful. Even Fermin seemed slightly surprised by Rachel's words. Fermin acknowledged Xtra as a skilled mercenary, but did it make sense that he could also help them in theory?

“Hey, aren't you relying too much on that mercenary?”

Chiffon grumbled in disgust, but Rachel didn't react to his accusation. Rather, she knew he stated the blatant truth.

Rachel felt embarrassed for always being on the receiving end, but swallowed her pride and accepted the help because of England's dire situation.

[Understood.]

[I will now check the theory proposed by Xtra.]

The General Assembly became silent and everyone held their breath. The silence felt nerve-wracking as everyone waited for the result, which would obviously be the wrong answer. However, the sliver of doubt that a mere mercenary could be correct made the entire situation even tenser.

Essence of the Straits had spent two days and nights working on the problem, but failed to make any progress. They felt like they would make some progress with a little more, so they couldn't afford to lose here.

The General Assembly finally responded with something that betrayed everyone's expectations.

[It is perfect.]

[I did not expect to see such a perfect answer during the interim

investigation.]

“What?!”

“What the hell?”

“Hey! What? No way, hey General Assembly!”

Some guilds screamed while others remained silent. A few seemed relieved rather than surprised. Truth be told, only ten guilds had attempted to solve the problem. The English Royal Court had been expected to finish last, but actually solved the unsolvable question.

[Was this solved alone by Xtra without anyone's help?]

Rachel nodded.

[Then, all the contribution points shall be attributed to Xtra. In addition, the English Royal Court shall have the first right to choose and work on the second problem.]

[Also, the same right may be given to Switzerland's Reislaufer guild if the English Royal Court wishes.]

The General Assembly basically gave them the right to call first dibs on the next problem.

Some of the others, especially Chiffon, protested after realizing how big of an advantage the English Royal Court just received. However, they zipped their mouths when Rachel asked a question.

“Then, is it also possible to switch the turns for other guilds?”

[Of course.]

[In return, you may not provide any benefits to your allied guild, Reislaufer.]

“...”

The French and Chinese guilds immediately avoided Rachel's gaze. She motioned with her mouth at them, *Do you have anything you want to say?* They finally looked at her with a smile this time.

The Chinese Empire's representative, Ryu Wei, spoke first.

"Well, I just want to say... Vice Leader Chiffon incited us first. We, the Chinese Empire guild, have always respected the English Royal Court."

"W-What did you say?! You said that they were a sight for sore eyes first!"

"When did I say that?! Do you have proof? *Ha?*! You spread all sorts of rumors about Vice Leader Rachel when I told you that I was a fan of hers!"

"What? You're a disgrace of a hero..."

The General Assembly interrupted the two bickering guilds.

[This concludes today's meeting.]

[The English Royal Court's accommodation has been upgraded for completing the first problem.]

[Also, Xtra's answer will be published as a thesis all over the world through the internet. Of course, all rights shall belong to Xtra.]

[Now, all of the guilds besides the English Royal Court will receive the second problem after 144 hours.]

[I hope you enjoy your free time until then.]

* * *

Rachel obtained the first right to access the second problem, but didn't earn a single contribution point because Xtra received all the credit. Unfortunately, the English Royal Court would remain at 19th place

unless Xtra joined the general assembly.

“What kind of monster is he to solve this problem so easily?” Fermin muttered in surprise.

Xtra’s answer had been a perfect thesis with no errors.

Rachel nodded in agreement while reading the thesis. “I’m curious too.”

She wore round spectacles called the [*Glasses of Calculation and Reasoning*], which she obtained, no, extorted from Chiffon and Ryu Wei.

The spectacles automatically calculated anything she came across while reading and even provided supporting texts to make certain parts easier to understand.

“Do you think he had outside help? Xtra rode on a helicopter of some sort, right? Oh, I think that helicopter thing is part of Xtra’s gift.”

“...”

Rachel quickly looked around.

To be frank, she also suspected that Xtra received help in solving the problem. He didn’t have to go all the way to Korea for experts in theory because plenty existed in Pandemonium right next to Central Asia. These mad scientists obsessed over certain theories and ended up as djinns.

“Hmm...”

Rachel almost said something when she recalled Kim Hajin, who always crushed her when it came to theory. Her memory of Kim Hajin suddenly aligned with Xtra’s eyes when she saw him through the cracked gas mask. A very slim possibility existed. Things kept coincidentally falling into place one by one or perhaps by fate. The possibility would flare up like a spark before immediately dying.

“Wow, this thesis becomes even more convincing as you read it.”

Fermin exclaimed as she flicked through the pages. *Tak!*

Xtra proposed three core reasonings that sounded rock solid. First, he found the common factor between the three dungeons. Next, he found the condition that needed to be fulfilled for those common factors to align. Then, he even provided the direction required to apply it in real life.

“This... will be published through the internet, right? I think it might’ve caused a huge commotion by now.”

Rachel nodded before taking off her glasses.

Xtra’s answer had been remarkable, but they had to focus on the second problem now.

“Rather than that, I think it’s time for us to get moving.”

“Yes...”

Fermin nervously nodded. She had been hiding the fact that she sensed Lancaster earlier, but the problem wouldn’t be solved even if she told Rachel. She stole a glance at Rachel before carefully speaking.

“Vice Leader, so... about the alliance... what do you plan to do with it?”

“What do you mean?”

“Pardon? *Ah*, yes, well, I just think they probably want something from us.”

“They agreed to enter four days later than us.”

Rachel decided to maintain the alliance with Reislauer for the second problem. However, she placed a condition for them to enter four days after the English Royal Court since they didn’t contribute anything to

solving the first problem.

Fermin sighed in relief since everything would be fine if Reinslaufer entered after them.

“I wanted to get Xtra’s opinion, but... he’s not here so...”

“Yes, you’re right.”

The clock informed them that the countdown would soon end. Now, they had to enter the second test. Rachel and Fermin nervously looked at the clock before leaving their room.

“Welcome!”

“We’ve been waiting for you.”

The other guild members stood on standby. Some scouts from other guilds also watched them.

“Shall we?”

“Yes, but it seems we have some rats on our tail. Whatever, just let them have a look.”

The English Royal Court became the center of attention as they confidently walked through the corridor after passing the first test.

They walked quite far for nearly twenty minutes under the General Assembly’s guidance to reach the second test.

[Test Hall]

The test hall looked shabby with only a small door and a door plate on it. The guild members felt surprised by the hall’s shabbiness when the General Assembly spoke through their smartwatches.

— Congratulations. The English Royal Court has obtained the first rights to the second test. Please enter the test hall and choose the

stage you wish.

The General Assembly's mechanical voice sounded a bit eerie.

“Ah, that surprised me.”

“I thought it was a ghost, damn it.”

Rachel and the guild members entered the door.

A peculiar space appeared beyond. It looked pure white with no walls or boundaries in sight. The space extended left and right towards the horizon with only a row of large doors lined up without any walls.

— The second test is called the Chain of Memories. This place has a total of forty doors. You may choose which door to enter and must satisfy all the conditions in that stage to clear it.

— 75% of the stages have been removed as a reward for completing the first test.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Thirty of the forty doors suddenly disappeared. It seemed the remaining ten doors fell into the top 25%.

“Everyone, which door should we choose?” Rachel asked her fellow members.

“Of course, we'll follow whichever one Vice Leader chooses,” her guild members replied.

Rachel pondered while reading the door plates on the ten doors.

[Forgotten Memory], [Fragment of Life], [Hidden Desires]... One door plate stood out among the rest.

[Hometown of Dreams]

Rachel felt this specific door calling out to her. She approached as if in a trance.

“Hometown of Dreams?” Fermin asked, and Rachel nodded.

— You have chosen the [*Hometown of Dreams*].

— Please enter through the door one by one.

The door to the Hometown of Dreams opened.

Rachel glanced back at her guild members and proceeded. A strange sense of hostility crawled over her skin with every step towards the door. She felt a chill down her spine as she neared it. Her pupils dilated when a bright light from the door enveloped her. It felt as if the light gently caressed her and squeezed her to death at the same time.

Rachel tightly closed her eyes and opened them a few seconds later.

“...”

A completely different world appeared and she stood on a street bustling with people.

She couldn’t tell where exactly. Shops lined up to her left and right with street peddlers selling food to passersby.

“Where am I?” Rachel muttered as she looked at the clothing store, restaurants, and cosmetic shops. She looked behind her, but the door had disappeared and she couldn’t find her guild members anywhere.

A chill ran across her body.

“Hoo... Let’s get a grip.”

Rachel regained her composure and thought the test purposely made things problematic. Thankfully, everyone here spoke Korean.

A strange pillar caught her eye as she explored the foreign environment.

[Line 4 424]

[Myeongdong]

[Exit 8]

“Myeongdong?”

This was Myeongdong? No way. She knew Myeongdong quite well and this couldn't be it.

Myeongdong served as the center where people sold all sorts of magical ingredients and artifacts. A billion won could be instantly spent on this street.

“What in the world is going on...” Rachel muttered while aimlessly walking and couldn't grasp her surroundings. The people around kept stealing glances at her and some even asked why she dressed so strangely. Rachel ignored them and continued wandering.

Growl...

Her stomach growled and she grew hungry after walking for around thirty minutes. The smell from the nearby hotdog and squid stands enticed her.

Sizzle... Sizzle...

Rachel stared at the vendor grilling hotteok^[1].

She rummaged through her pockets despite not having any money.

“I'm hungry...”

She had no idea what to do in this place. The General Assembly cruelly dropped her here without any guidelines. Well, the General

Assembly did mention clear conditions they had to complete. This must be part of the test as well.

Rachel stood still and observed the passersby.

“What could it be?”

All of them walked with a rectangular device in their hands. She intently observed the device, but didn’t recognize it at first. They kept tapping the screen on it. Judging from what she saw, she deduced that...

It’s a smartphone!

Why did all these adults use smartphones? Only little kids who struggled with smartwatches used them.

Growl...

Her stomach growled again and she felt the pain from hunger this time.

“Ugh...”

Rachel groaned and sat on the ground. She noticed something strange too. She just ate two hours ago and shouldn’t have felt this hungry yet. Not only that, she couldn’t feel a trace of mana in the air.

She clearly sensed no mana when she closed her eyes and focused on breathing. She tried short breaths, long breaths, complicated breathing, and even normal breathing. However, she still couldn’t sense an ounce in the air. No, it might be more accurate to say no mana flowed inside her as well.

Only then did she realize the gravity of the situation. Having zero mana in the air could only mean...

Rachel, who came from the present, found herself in a disastrous situation.

Meanwhile, I hid in the bushes and observed the entrance to the general assembly hall. I already steeled my resolve to enter, but still felt nervous.

Many more resided behind those doors other than Rachel. I ran away from the novel's main characters like Kim Suho, Yoo Yeonha, Chae Nayun, Yi Yeonghan, and Shin Jonghak.

Ring!

A message appeared on my smartwatch.

[The English Royal Court has started the second test.]

[You may also join the second test at any time as a member of the English Royal Court.]

[The members' statuses will be displayed. The percentage beside their names will decrease the more severe their situation.]

[Rachel: 47%]

[Fermin: 49%]

[Marcus: 67%]

[Dale: 53%]

The message notified me of the second test.

“Ah... Damn it...”

I had no idea what kind of test, but Kim Hoseop said Lancaster had arrived here somewhere. That meant I couldn't afford to leave Rachel alone.

I carefully approached the general assembly's entrance. I looked

around to make sure the coast was clear before carefully opening the door.

Creaaaaak...

“Ah!”

However, a bright voice immediately greeted me when I stepped inside. I tried to run away, but a tiny finger pointed at me. I had been caught already.

“Hey, there he is!”

“Wait, just give me a minute... I’m not done tying your hair Aileen—”

A small woman skipped or flew towards me. She was in her mid-thirties and hadn’t finished tying her hair. It was none other than Aileen. Jin Seyeon stood behind her with a hairband.

I sighed since it would’ve been impossible to sneak in with these two as the gatekeepers.

Aileen merrily skipped until she stood in front of me.

“It’s you, right? Extra!”

“...”

I looked at Aileen and Jin Seyeon before nodding. Jin Seyeon’s eyes glimmered as if she found me interesting.

“Yes, I’m the extra.”

I willingly admitted, so they wouldn’t do anything to me.

Aileen brightly smiled.

“Then, why don’t you take off that gas mask first?”

She used her Spirit Speech and my hands automatically moved towards my gas mask.

Honestly, this surprised me. I didn't expect her to use Spirit Speech as soon as we met. No, I should've expected it since...

I had designed Aileen.

1. Hotteok is a type of Korean pancake usually filled with sweet fillings. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hotteok> 📖

Side Stories 19

Dream in a Dream (19)

“Then, why don’t you take off that gas mask first?” Aileen ordered me with her Spirit Speech.

My hands moved towards my gas mask and grabbed it. However, I simply stood there without taking it off.

“What the? Why aren’t you taking it off?”

Aileen grimaced and seemed taken aback by the sudden turn of events.

I felt surprised too. Her Spirit Speech couldn’t force me, but merely suggested that I take off my gas mask.

“You...”

Aileen muttered while still in shock. She placed both hands on her waist and gathered her mana into an aura for a more powerful Spirit Speech.

“Aileen, please cut it out.”

Thankfully, Jin Seyeon stepped in and stopped her. Aileen glared at me with shame, but angrily stomped away.

A system message suddenly popped up.

[Realization – You have become susceptible to Spirit Speech, but some of the power to resist it has remained with you.]

[Tower of Wish’s Bonus – You have received a special inheritance!]

[You have inherited two items stored in the player's storage!]

Inherited Item ► [Dark Ore Arrow]

Inherited Item ► [Orb of Regeneration]

An arrow and a green orb fell from the ceiling. I immediately snatched them before they struck the floor and shoved them into my pocket. Thankfully, Aileen didn't see and Jin Seyeon busily consoled her.

“Hey!”

Aileen suddenly called when I tried to make a run for it.

I nonchalantly turned around to find her glaring at me.

“Who are you? Also, take off that ugly gas mask while I'm being nice.”

“Pfft!”

I snickered without realizing it. Aileen seemed as stubborn as I designed her to be.

“What are you laughing at?” Aileen raised a brow and asked.

I contemplated whether I should make a run for it, but realized I had no reason to hide my face from her.

“You won't know me even if you saw my face.”

“That's something we'll decide. Also, we won't tell anyone who you are. I don't have that many friends, you see.”

Aileen reassured me.

I could trust them as heroes. Actually, I should be the one begging for some sort of relationship with them if I had the chance. I had nothing to lose by introducing myself.

“If you say so.”

I promptly took off my gas mask.

Aileen and Jin Seyeon nervously gulped as they watched me.

“Oh... *uhmm...*”

“*Hmm...*”

As expected, both of them seemed clueless even after seeing my face.

“I think I saw him on the street once?” Aileen muttered with a serious look.

I put on my gas mask again and laughed. “I told you. I’m just an ordinary mercenary.”

Aileen stared at me for a while before nodding.

“You’re right. I have no idea who you are...”

“Did you descend from Baekdu Mountain by any chance? I heard there are a lot of hidden experts there...”

Jin Seyeon pressed her right fist and left palm together like some sort of greeting from a Shaolin movie.

Oh?! Aileen’s eyes widened as if what Jin Seyeon said made perfect sense.

“No...” I muttered with a bitter smile while looking at them.

* * *

Four days passed.

Rachel aimlessly wandered around South Korea without any results.

She felt certain she had arrived in a parallel universe, but couldn't figure anything else out. Most importantly, she had no clue how to clear this test.

“That will be nine thousand won.”

A staffer at Kimcheon Food Country^[1] informed Rachel.

She extended a card to the staffer. The General Assembly had provided this license in a card form to them.

“Do you need a receipt?”

“Yes.”

“Please have a seat over here.”

Rachel sat at a table with the receipt in her hand.

[Grilled Cheese Cutlet – 9,000 won]

“...”

All eyes in the restaurant naturally stared at her dining alone. Her flowing golden hair, deep blue eyes that resembled the ocean, beautiful facial features, and tired yet elegant demeanor made it difficult for ordinary people to approach.

“Phew...”

Rachel sighed while pouring water into her cup. This world didn't have any mana or monsters. She felt confused at first, but slowly adapted since humans still lived here.

— Breaking News. An unidentified body was found at a back alley in Myeongdong at two in the morning today.

The news on the TV attracted Rachel's attention.

— The body looked like it had been ravaged by a wild animal...

Tak.

The staffer set the plate of sizzling cheese cutlet on the table.

Sss... Sss...

Rachel salivated at the delicious smell.

“Are you a model from overseas?”

The staffer asked, and Rachel shook her head no.

“Wow, I thought you were a Greek goddess when I first saw you.”

“Thank you...”

“*Omo!* Your Korean is really good! How is your pronunciation so good?”

“*Ah... haha...*”

Rachel could only awkwardly laugh. Everyone in the restaurant kept staring and she tried her best to ignore them while eating her food in discomfort.

She finished her grilled cheese cutlet in less than three minutes, but one plate didn't satisfy her. This world had no mana, so her main source of sustenance had disappeared. Her required caloric intake became four to five times that of a male adult.

“No...”

Nevertheless, Rachel suppressed her hunger. Using her contribution points to order food had been painful enough. She couldn't afford to spend hundreds of thousands of won on just food.

“Thank you for the meal.”

“Omo, you finished already?”

Rachel left Kimcheon Food Country and came out to the streets. She headed towards the crime scene just on the news.

— An unidentified body was found at a back alley in Myeongdong at two in the morning today.

She went searching for the back alley, but the street vendors with food kept attracting her. She tried to ignore them, but found herself staring at one of the stalls that sold fishcakes and hotdogs. The potato hotdog^[2], which had a hotdog on a stick riddled with potatoes, looked especially appetizing. Rachel found herself walking towards the stall as if bewitched.

* * *

“Hehe...”

She giggled while sitting on a bench at a nearby park.

Rachel finally felt full, which lifted her mood. It felt like being on cloud nine and all her worries disappeared. She truly felt at peace now.

“Ah!”

However, she soon snapped out of it and came back to her senses when she received an alert on her smartwatch.

[You are running low on contribution points.]

She acknowledged the fact that she overspent on food, but did she really spend that much?

[Contribution Points: D-]

[Converted to Won: 300,000 Won]

Rachel seriously pondered over her contribution points when a cat suddenly jumped from a tree and sat beside her. She gasped in surprise at the white furry creature with cute watery eyes.

“Nyang.”

The cat lay on the bench as if asking Rachel to rub its back. She mustered the courage and slowly extended her hand.

Growl...

A faint growl came from somewhere. Rachel almost lost consciousness, but managed to hold on. She focused all her senses on stroking the cat's back to stay conscious. However, she didn't have the luxury to compose herself.

A sinister mana that reeked of stench flowed from somewhere nearby like cigarette smoke. This mana openly taunted her.

Rachel grabbed Galatine and glared at her surroundings, but didn't spot anything.

Did it finally start?

“Whitey, get going.”

She placed the cat on the ground. It looked at her before scurrying away.

Rachel stood from the bench and began looking for a suitable place to fight because the park would only involve innocent people. The ones tailing her noticed her intentions and quietly followed.

Rachel entered a secluded alley when the sun almost set. She walked deep inside before stopping in the middle.

“You can come out...”

Whiiiiiss—

A sinister red and black wind blew and gathered into a person. This swordsman wore a robe that seemed to be made from the sinister wind.

The swordsman looked at Rachel.

“Princess... Do you know... who I am?”

Rachel felt shocked, but did her best not to show it. She clearly remembered this swordsman.

“Lifeat...”

She muttered his name.

“Ah... Kuhahahaha!”

Lifeat burst into laughter along with a hideous smile. He laughed hysterically like a clown for a while before glaring at her.

“What are...” Rachel muttered as she took a few steps back.

Ughh... Kekekeke!

Lifeat let out a gruesome scream as his body uncontrollably contorted. It went on for some time before he calmed down.

“Hmm...”

He calmly muttered. However, Lifeat no longer controlled his own body. Another person’s soul had entered like a possession.

The man stared at Rachel with only the white of his eyes showing and he spoke in a sullen voice.

“Hello, princess. It’s been a while.”

Rachel would never forget this voice. Her heart sank and she couldn’t utter a sound. She coughed and cleared her throat before continuing

in a shaky voice.

“You’re... hiding behind others as usual.”

They had an ill-fated relationship. She respected him at one point, but he became her country’s enemy.

Rachel pulled out Galatine and pointed it at Lancaster, who simply grinned.

“This place isn’t suitable for our reunion. I will appear at the most appropriate place in front of you when the time comes, princess.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I’m talking about Hampton, princess. Have you already forgotten?”

Rachel’s shoulders trembled before she retorted, “Forget about forgetting. That place no longer exists.”

Lancaster tilted his head and responded in a downcast voice, “Princess, do you not wish to return there?”

“Get a grip! We... we can no longer go back to that place!”

Rachel screamed with every ounce of her voice. Nothing could change the past and no one could revisit it. She resolved to do her best so the past would never repeat itself.

The corners of Lancaster’s mouth curled up.

“As expected, it seems like you haven’t realized the truth behind this world.”

“...”

“Princess, you remember the ones who died in your place that day, right? However, remembering them won’t bring them back. I already told you, didn’t I?”

“I’m not trying to remember them. It’s that I can’t forget them.”

Rachel snapped back as she focused and tightly gripped her sword.

Lancaster stared at her with deep eyes devoid of any emotions.

“Princess, you know nothing. Everything can be traced back to that place.”

He kept trying to convince her of something.

“That’s why I’m trying to rewrite the events of that tragic day.”

However, Rachel couldn’t understand him.

“I hope you will reach me soon, princess. I will wait for you at that place with this hope. That place... with less darkness and more sunlight. Less cold and more warmth than this world we live in...”

Lancaster finished his last words and left Lifeat’s body.

The atmosphere changed the moment Lancaster disappeared. The swordsman’s body shook like a puppet let loose from its strings and charged at Rachel with his sword.

“Die!”

His scream was filled with hatred.

Rachel swung Galatine and parried the attack.

Clang!

The two swords clashed and sparks flew across the air.

Her enemy’s sword carried the heavy weight of his conviction. It felt as if he would do whatever it took to stab her heart, but Rachel tried her best not to take his life. She only parried his attacks in this life-and-death battle. She hoped he would eventually tire out as she

displayed a graceful and merciful swordsmanship.

“...?”

The moonlight suddenly flickered and she spotted another assailant aiming at her when she looked up. No, countless shadows scattered on top of the alley.

They formed pairs and charged at her, but Rachel resisted and pushed them back.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

Half of them crashed into the wall, but Rachel sustained eleven wounds in the process. One on her shoulder, another on her calf, another on her waist...

Numerous enemies remained.

Rachel closed her eyes and summoned her spirit, but only a tiny one appeared. This world didn't have enough mana and spirits.

She could only depend on her sword and tightly gripped it with all her focus.

“Euff!”

However, her strength left her body. Her arms and legs gave out and her hand around Galatine uncontrollably trembled. It felt as if something had sucked the strength out of her body like roots sucking water out of the ground.

“Eugh...”

She lost her balance and fell to one knee. Her vision grew blurry.

Rachel felt a burning sensation on her wounds and realized the assailants had coated their swords with poison. She could've easily neutralized this poison with her mana, but mana didn't exist in this

world.

Rachel used Galatine like a cane to stand up. She looked up and saw the group of assailants charging at her with their swords. They unmistakably aimed for her heart.

Bang!

A gunshot echoed out and a bullet pierced one of the assailant's shoulders. The impact flung the assailant back and he crashed into a wall.

Step... Step...

The sound of someone's footsteps followed.

The assailants held their breath as they looked towards the footsteps. Rachel looked as well.

A man's silhouette appeared. He held a pistol in one hand and a book (the Book of Truth) in the other as he approached them.

"What are you looking at?"

He asked before suddenly pulling the trigger.

One, two, three, four—

Four gunshots echoed in the air.

The assailants jumped and widened their distance from him. None of them attacked and they only continued to observe.

Meanwhile, he approached Rachel and knelt on one knee before extending his hand. Then he looked at her.

"Get up. It'll be hard for me to fight them all alone."

1. There is a restaurant chain in Korea called Kimbap Heaven, “Kim Bap Cheon Guk”. The author played on this by naming it “Kim Cheon Bap Guk,” which translates to Kimcheon Food Country 📍

2. Potato hotdog is a famous street food in South Korea. You can google potato hotdog for more information. 📍

Side Stories 20

Dream in a Dream (20)

“Get up. It’ll be hard for me to fight them all alone.”

I extended my hand towards Rachel after finding her thanks to the *[Book of Truth]*.

However, she had been poisoned to the point where she found breathing difficult. Her blood vessels turned green underneath her milky white skin.

I placed the Orb of Regeneration in her hand.

“Hold onto this tightly.”

Shwiiiish!

The assailants threw numerous daggers at us like bullets, but I shot them all down with real bullets. As expected, it would be hard to find a weapon more powerful than a gun in this world without mana.

“You... are...”

Rachel weakly muttered as she propped herself up with Galatine and leaned against my shoulder.

I aimed at the assailants, but...

“What the hell?”

They stared at us from on top of the alley like a bunch of statues. I hesitated to pull the trigger because I had no idea what they were planning.

“Haa... Haa...”

Rachel slightly recovered, but her body was burning up.

Then a cold breeze blew and the assailants instantly made their move. They rode the wind and displayed a completely different speed from before.

I activated bullet time as I shot my handgun with one hand and swung a dagger in the other.

“Huh?”

I had anticipated their trajectories, but the wind surrounding them veered my bullets off course. Not only that, the wind allowed them to defy the laws of physics. They could instantly soar in the air or suddenly appear behind me as they charged.

I couldn't understand as I fought these bastards that freely moved everywhere. Why did they simply watch before when they possessed such speed? They could've already killed Rachel when I hadn't arrived yet. Did they just want to toy with her?

Clang!

A dagger flew towards my head, but I threw one of my own to deflect it. However, I couldn't block the assailant that flew towards me faster than the dagger. I simply couldn't handle all of them moving so fast.

“Keuk!”

I took a few steps back after being punched in the guts. A few cracks appeared on my Spirit Stone armor.

The assailants suddenly stopped and jumped on top of the alley again. They stared at us like a group of owls.

What were they doing? Were they just laughing and toying with us? Or did they have a reason for doing that?

I composed myself and reloaded my gun while thinking. A single word popped up in my head.

“Wind...”

These bastards only made a move when the wind blew. Come to think of it, a mana storm had occurred when they first ambushed Rachel. Did that mean their powers somehow came from the wind itself? I would’ve written Lancaster’s settings in detail if I knew this would happen.

Whoosh!

A powerful gust blew this time. As expected, they threw their daggers along with the wind and proved my theory. Countering them became much easier now. I just had to get rid of the wind, right?

“...!”

I allowed two of their daggers to hit my waist. My Spirit Stone armor and aether immediately prevented any serious damage, but I pretended to crouch with my arms around my waist.

“Ah!”

Even Rachel fell for my acting as she exclaimed in surprise.

The assailants took the bait thanks to her. All nine of them rode the wind and charged at me.

I immediately activated the Spirit Stone’s power.

Krrrwaah!

The ground shot up and sealed the entire area to cut off the wind. The entire place grew dark as well.

“This can’t be...”

The assailants found themselves in trouble now that the wind disappeared. On the other hand, I couldn't be more comfortable. A sharpshooter like me who could see everything considered the darkness my most dependable ally.

Click... Clack!

Aether fused with my handgun and transformed it into a shotgun. My defense would significantly drop, but my destructive power increased by several times. Every bullet would blow up their bodies with excruciating pain.

Shwiiiiish!

The assailants threw hundreds of daggers in every direction, but Rachel stepped up and blocked all of them.

“A-Are you alright?!”

She desperately asked after being fooled by my acting.

“I'm fine, so you can continue resting.”

Rachel didn't seem to be in a good state. She probably felt dizzy and tired as the poison and Orb of Regeneration clashed within her body.

“No...”

She stubbornly refused.

Bang!

Rachel immediately covered her eyes and hunkered down when I fired a shot. I slowly walked forward and pulled the trigger again.

The assailants completely lost their mobility after I sealed the area and everything became dark. I shot my shotgun at their chests.

Thud! Thud! Thud!

The sound of something crashing into walls could be heard. My shotgun shells sent them flying. After all, a mere human could never stand up against technology.

Kwachik!

A dagger flew out from nowhere and struck my shoulder, but I didn't care as I shot another shell into the bastard's mouth.

Bang!

Splatter...

I blew his head off and splattered his brain all over the place.

"Ugh..."

I groaned in disgust and suppressed the urge to vomit. A metallic taste lingered on my tongue and the scent of blood filled the area.

However, I didn't stop and continued pulling the trigger. I destroyed everything in my path. The assailants didn't give up and charged at me with their lives on the line.

A dozen gunshots rang out within the sealed area.

"Hoo..."

The once human bodies became a pile of unrecognizable mush. I swallowed back my puke while standing in the middle of this. This was why I hated fighting in close combat and chose to be a sharpshooter.

I released the earth walls sealing the area and moonlight shone down on our surroundings. The scene of massacre looked like hell on Earth.

Rachel stared at me, but I couldn't tell how she felt.

"Are you alright?" I asked as I approached her.

She didn't respond. Instead, she slowly raised her hands and held my gas mask. Then, she drew her face inches away from mine and stared at me with trembling eyes.

I hardly ever saw her so shaken up. No, it felt like déjà vu from the past.

"Blood..."

She muttered while wiping the blood off my gas mask.

I smiled and shook my head. "It's not my blood."

Rachel stared at me intently.

The gas mask probably wouldn't be any use this close. We looked into each other's eyes without a word.

Why did I wear this tacky gas mask anyways? What a shame... I should've worn something much cooler. Tons of cool masks existed, right?

"...!"

Rachel suddenly wrapped her arms around my neck. The dagger flying towards my neck stabbed her arm instead.

I quickly turned around and saw an arm from one of the bodies I blew up. It seemed to have thrown the dagger by itself even after being separated from its body.

I immediately shot it with my handgun.

Whiiiiing...

A siren blared when I thought everything had ended. The gunshots must've attracted the police.

I looked at the sky and turned back to Rachel. She gazed at me in

exhaustion as her eyes slowly closed. She looked quite peaceful as she fell asleep.

* * *

Rachel slowly opened her eyes to a flickering light bulb on the ceiling.

Zzzt... Zzzt... Zzzt...

The light bulb dazed her and made her feel as if she might still be dreaming. Her entire body felt like peacefully floating.

“Are you awake?”

A voice dragged her consciousness back.

Rachel turned and saw a man sitting on a chair. They met a long time ago, but he seemed so familiar as if they just met yesterday. It was Kim Hajin.

As expected, this wasn't a dream. Rachel touched her face and clothes before getting up, but suddenly felt dizzy and staggered when she stood.

“Are you alright?” he asked in his usual kind voice.

She felt awkward and couldn't get used to it after such a long time.

“Yes...” she awkwardly replied.

“Then, look at this.”

“...”

She had a lot of things to ask, but decided to do as he said for now. Kim Hajin typed on a keyboard and clicked the mouse a few times. She looked at the file he opened.

[A ravaged body has been found...]

[A massacre took place...]

[Is it a zombie drug?]

She had seen some of this news while eating at Kimcheon Food Country. It seemed Kim Hajin already knew where the first incident took place.

“Don’t you think the clear condition is related to this place?”

“...”

Rachel thoroughly went over the file before nodding.

She kept stealing glances at him while pouting as if to show she had a lot of questions to ask. For her, the clear condition became secondary to what really happened. Had he really been Xtra? Why did he help her as Xtra? Also, what was the truth behind James Finley?

“If you’re curious how Lancaster’s minions came here... I can only guess his organization already infiltrated the general assembly. *Hmm...* Or they might’ve gathered enough contribution points to intervene with the general assembly...”

Kim Hajin didn’t give Rachel a chance to ask and continued talking about important matters even though she expressed her discontent by pouting. He continued with formal talk as if indirectly telling her he didn’t plan on explaining or she didn’t have the right to know.

“We should probably round up your guild members before getting involved any further, right?”

Kim Hajin asked, but seemed to have already decided as if he was the guild leader.

Rachel tried to retort as the English Royal Court’s vice leader, but couldn’t utter a word. She tried to say something, but her vocal cords wouldn’t work. Instead, an excruciating pain spread all over her body.

She tried to suppress the pain and strange sensation, but...

Growl...

A growling sound rang out across the room.

“Ack!”

Rachel flinched in surprise and covered her stomach with a pillow. Not that it would do anything to stop the sound.

Groooooowl...

Her stomach growled even stronger this time.

She felt shame and embarrassment that she had never felt before in her life.

“This... No... This is... What I mean is...”

She stuttered incomprehensibly.

“...”

Kim Hajin silently stared at her and Rachel didn't want to decipher the meaning behind that look. She bit her lips and closed her eyes to concentrate on controlling her stomach.

“Are you hungry?”

“...”

Rachel slightly opened her eyes at his words and replied in a shaky voice.

“I keep trying... but I can't help it...”

To be frank, it was a natural phenomenon. Her mana-enhanced body drew most of its energy from the mana she breathed in around her. However, this world had no mana and she had to supplement all her energy with food alone. She couldn't escape from her destiny of

becoming a glutton.

She would probably struggle with this new lifestyle. Her appetite had increased by several times. If compared to an animal... it wouldn't be an exaggeration to say her appetite now matched an elephant's.

“No, I completely understand.”

Kim Hajin thought about feeding Rachel before anything else.

“Ah... this is really... *ah*... why am I like this... why...”

She felt like she would cry without anything to eat. Twelve hours had passed since the fierce battle last night.

“Just wait a bit.”

Kim Hajin got up and headed to the kitchen. He thought about cooking the same food that Evandel liked, except he would make four or five times the portion.

First, he opened the refrigerator and pretended to take out ingredients while rolling the random dice. The random dice filled the refrigerator with top-class ingredients.

Growl... Groooooowl...

Rachel's stomach continued growling.

She panicked as her royal image diminished from her noisy stomach. Kim Hajin played some music to cover up the sound.

Her stomach could no longer be heard thanks to his thoughtful gesture. He had to crank up the volume a bit though to drown it out.

Side Stories 21

Dream in a Dream (21)

I placed a bundle of pasta into the pot and some beef into the frying pan. I cooked up a steak and carbonara sauce after roughly looking up the recipe online. Then I drizzled the steak with sauce and garnished it with vegetables. I also plated the carbonara with garnishes.

It would be lackluster to only have western cuisine, so I cooked a pot of rice and kimchi stew with pork neck.

All in all, the entire meal could feed more than ten people. I set all the food in front of Rachel.

“Thank you.”

She didn’t decline the feast.

Rachel initially tried to mind her table manners, but slowly became a pig. Her eyes widened like Evandel whenever she took a bite. I couldn’t help but find it adorable.

I looked out the window and thought about a few things as Rachel stuffed herself. This stage took place in South Korea during the year 2018. I used to rent this two bedroom unit with a twenty million won deposit and six hundred thousand won a month in rent as a novel writer. Of course, I knew the door’s passcode since I used to live here. The code had been my birthday.

I always missed this world where neither mana nor monsters existed. However, I wondered how the General Assembly recreated this world. How did it know about my existence? And why did Rachel choose this stage out of the numerous options available?

“Fwah...”

Rachel's satisfied sigh woke me from my thoughts. Only empty plates remained on the table. I looked at the clock and seven minutes had passed since she began eating.

"Are you alright now?"

Rachel came back to her senses at my question and put on a serious, yet relaxed expression.

"Yes..."

"How was it? Good?"

"It was..."

Her eyes sparkled and she subconsciously licked her lips. *Sseup!* Then she continued in a trembling voice.

"This is my first time... How can something... so delicious exist?"

I ended up laughing.

Her reaction might be normal since Young Dwarf's Dexterity played a role, but the saying also went that the most delicious ingredient was one's hunger.

"That's a relief."

"Did you learn how to cook? It seems like you've been cooking for decades!"

"Not at all. Anyways, I'll keep cooking for you at least until this stage ends."

"...!"

Rachel looked at me full of emotions. Then she glanced back and forth between me and the empty dishes on the table. It seemed she felt quite overwhelmed. However, she soon composed herself.

“Hajin...”

She sounded serious, so I silently waited for the conversation that would finally happen. Rachel stared at me for a while and pondered what to ask first.

“I have a lot of things I want to know.”

She said before sighing.

Why did you kill James Finley? Why did you suddenly appear out of nowhere and help me? Why did you treat me so harshly?

She decided not to ask these questions and would wait until I mentioned them first. Rachel decided to ask about something else.

“Where do you think this world is?”

However, I hoped that she wouldn’t ask this one question and bitterly smiled.

* * *

We walked through the streets early in the afternoon towards the recent zombie murder scene to find out more about this stage and its clear condition.

“Seems like we won’t be able to enter,” I grumbled.

The crime scene hadn’t been far from my house, but the police had sealed it off with yellow tape like in the movies. Numerous forensic experts and police patrolled the premises.

“Ah, wait a minute. There are some traces over there.”

Rachel closed her eyes and extended a finger. A small spirit that looked like a water droplet appeared from her index finger.

“Hooo...”

She blew on the spirit and it set off. The spirit flew towards the crime scene like a dandelion seed. It stayed on the ground for a while before returning to Rachel.

“What did you do?”

“I communicated with the earth spirit there.”

“Ah...”

The ability seemed similar to psychometry.

“...”

Rachel placed the spirit on her finger and closed her eyes.

I quietly stood until she finished receiving the spirit’s memories, but someone seemed to be observing us. I initially thought it might be an enemy, but the gaze didn’t feel hostile. It seemed quite favorable.

“Ah...”

It didn’t take long for me to figure it out. The beauty standing beside me stood out more than anyone else on this entire street. Rachel attracted everyone’s attention by simply breathing. Even the police guarding the perimeters stole glances at her as if mesmerized by her beauty.

“I found out what happened.” Rachel opened her eyes with a determined look.

“There’s a spell related to the undead that... *Huh?*”

“Wait a minute.” I interrupted her and took off my cap to put it on her.

Rachel tilted her head at me.

“I think it’ll be better if you wear this instead of me. After all, there

are only Asians...”

The cap immediately slid down without a push. It looked cute on her small head.

“*Hmm...* Let’s make it look more hip-hop.”

I slightly turned the cap to make it look more hip.

“It looks good on you even though it’s a bit big...”

I complimented her without much thought and Rachel smiled underneath the oversized cap. Her beautiful eyes formed an elegant arc that also looked cute. My heart skipped a beat, but I pretended to act normal.

“*Ehem...* Let’s go somewhere else to discuss.”

I faked a cough.

* * *

Rachel’s spirit told her what happened in detail.

A sorcerer who worshiped the undead had been behind the zombie murder incident.

“So to summarize... stopping that guy is the clear condition for this stage?”

“I think so too, but...” Rachel paused and nervously looked at me.

“Can you speak to me comfortably... like you used to?”

I thought about what she meant. She was probably referring to how I spoke to her as Xtra.

“*Huh?* No, at that time... well... I forced myself to act like that so my identity wouldn’t be discovered. I actually had a hard time talking

down to you.”

“You sounded quite comfortable and you seemed to be having fun.”

Rachel retorted while pouting.

I awkwardly scratched my neck. However, looking at her pouting made me want to talk comfortably again. Honestly, her pouting face reminded me of Evandel.

“Sure, then I’ll be talking comfortably with you.”

“Pardon?”

“I said I’ll speak comfortably.”

Did she perhaps not expect this? Rachel seemed surprised and spaced out before finally nodding.

“O-Okay, but you can keep talking formally if you find it uncomfortable—”

“It’s fine. Anyways, we should probably look for those guys, right?”

“Y-Yes, that’s correct.”

“Any ideas?”

“I do have one, but...” Rachel summoned her spirit that looked like a water droplet again.

“This spirit can guide us.”

“Alright.”

I took out a mask that I prepared. The gas mask made me look cheap, so I crafted a different one while Rachel ate.

She looked at me.

“That’s...?”

“It’s a mask.”

“I know.”

Rachel squinted as if to say, *Do you think I’m that stupid?* Then she reached out to touch the mask.

I suddenly froze. She had been doing quite a lot of things that weren’t good for my heart.

“What symbol is this?”

“A lotus.”

The Tower of Wish kept giving me items related to a lotus, so I purposely drew one on my new mask as well.

“Ah, lotus... a lotus?” Rachel muttered with a strange look as if trying to recall something.

“Why?”

“Nothing, it just feels like I’ve seen it somewhere. Maybe I’m mistaken...”

Rachel sighed and gave up on trying to remember. She put on the cap and gas mask that I used before.

“Oh, take this.”

I took out a smartphone and explained, “Our smartwatches don’t work here, so we’ll have to keep in touch with these.”

“Ah, yes...”

Rachel fiddled with the Apple iPhone.

“Will you use a smartphone too?”

“Ah, I’ll be using my smartwatch since I already synchronized it.”

“Synchronize?”

“Yeah, you can do it through your license. I have a lot of contribution points, you see.”

“...”

Rachel didn’t say anything and extended out her hand. She seemed to be asking for my smartphone.

I smiled and gave it to her.

“It’s different from mine.”

“Yeah, this model is called a Galaxy.”

“Ah...”

Tap Tap—

Rachel pressed on the screen with two fingers. She fiddled without knowing how to use it and pressed on every pretty icon.

I became distracted for a second when Rachel suddenly flinched.

“Huh?”

She stared at my smartphone in serious shock.

What happened all of a sudden? I slowly grew nervous and took my phone from her when I saw that she had opened my gallery. The phone had been synced to the gallery on my smartwatch. My heart

sank when I thought she saw Evandel's pictures.

"W-Why... why is my picture..."

"*Hmm?*"

Fortunately, she didn't know how to scroll through and only saw one of hers. I inwardly sighed in relief. Then I realized there was nothing to be relieved about.

"Wait a second. Please give that back."

She reached for the phone again, but I turned away and shielded it from her.

"Hajin."

She extended her hand out with a serious look. Her cheeks became a bit flushed, but I didn't know if she felt ashamed or embarrassed.

"*Huh?*"

"G-Give that to me."

"Give what?"

"I saw my picture just now."

"Ah, that one? I can explain. No, I'll explain."

I found myself speaking formally to her.

Rachel tried all sorts of things to take my phone. I raised it above my head, but she tried to jump for it. Our height difference wasn't huge, so she almost succeeded.

"Wait! Wait! I can explain!"

“I don’t need your explanation. I’ll see for myself because I think I saw it wrong.”

“No, you can’t! This is my phone!”

“But I’m certain I saw my picture just now?”

“I said I’ll explain what happened—”

“Give that to me!”

“Waiiiit!”

* * *

Two hours later...

The spirit guided us to Bukhan Mountain. The air between us contained a hint of awkwardness because of the ruckus over my phone.

“...”

“...”

The night turned cold and dark. Rachel continued guiding without a word and I quietly followed.

“It should be around here somewhere. *Hmm...*”

She seemed conscious of me and I also felt awkward as hell. However, I tried my best not to show it.

“Is it...” I awkwardly replied.

Rachel’s spirit roughly found the location where they secretly gathered, but couldn’t pinpoint their exact hiding spot on this vast mountain.

We aimlessly wandered as owls hooted and the full moon barely shone through the trees.

“*Uhhh...*” Rachel awkwardly kicked the dead leaves on the ground as she walked.

“Yes?” I replied while scratching my neck.

She glanced at me and sighed before looking at the night sky.

“I’m just saying this in case...”

I listened to her without a word. She would probably mention the picture again. I wondered if I should sincerely apologize or deny being a stalker. Of course, I chose to sincerely apologize since that seemed like the best course of action.

“I... I’m not able to receive someone’s love or love someone... I’m not in the position to do that...”

“What?”

“I’ll be like that for a long time. No, probably for the rest of my life. I won’t be able to receive or love anyone.”

She began spouting strange nonsense. I looked at her in disbelief and made sure my expression clearly expressed how I felt about all of this. However, she kept avoiding my gaze.

“So just in case you’re—”

Fortunately (or unfortunately), Rachel couldn’t continue.

“Who are you?!”

Someone suddenly shouted and...

Grrwuoooook!

A huge amount of dirt covered the sky like a landslide crashing down on us.

Side Stories 22

Dream in a Dream (22)

I immediately activated the Spirit Stone's power before the dirt crashed on us. A wind barrier appeared just in time when the assailants charged at us like flies.

“Euk!”

Their faces looked hideous after crashing into the barrier, but Rachel and I had grown accustomed to such sights.

Rachel looked at the barrier before looking back at me.

“Hajin... this is... by any chance...?”

It seemed she felt the Spirit Stone's power when I activated it. I did use it once before, but it had been so hectic she probably didn't notice back then. I didn't particularly try to hide it either and honestly replied.

“I can use the spirits to an extent.”

Rachel's eyes widened like an owl's and I sheepishly smiled. The two people clinging to the wind barrier looked at us and shouted.

“Huh?!”

“Vice Leader!”

I recognized them too as Fermin and Kayle, but I had no idea why they showed up here. I promptly canceled the wind barrier.

“Kyah!”

Both of them fell to the ground and jumped like springs towards Rachel.

“I missed you!”

They exclaimed and gave Rachel a big hug. She patted their backs.

“It’s fine now. You don’t have to cry. What about the others?”

“We haven’t met them yet...”

“Then, what brings the both of you here?”

“Ah!”

Fermin separated herself from Rachel.

“We found some clues regarding the clear condition. These voodoo dolls, nails, and some other stuff are required to cast a curse...”

Fermin rummaged through her backpack and took out a few items that served as catalysts for curses or rituals to summon the dead. She briefly paused to glance at me and I immediately checked if my mask properly covered my face. Thankfully, it still did its job.

“That person is...?”

“Our mercenary, Xtra.”

Rachel informed them.

“What?!” Fermin’s eyes shot open and she scanned me from head to toe.

“He’s shorter than I imagined!”

“...”

“I thought he would be at least 190 cm.”

I wanted to retort that my height could be considered average in South Korea, but I suppressed the urge to fight for my dignity. I despised the fact that I couldn't alter my height with settings intervention.

“Fermin?”

Rachel rebuked her gently, yet sternly. Fermin immediately apologized with a bow.

“Ah, yes... I apologize...”

I simply shrugged it off.

Rachel sighed and looked at Fermin and Kayle's dirty faces.

“That aside, where have the two of you been staying? Did you manage to find a place?”

“Ah, us? Well... we...”

* * *

Fermin led them to a cavern.

The entrance seemed quite shabby, but the interior had the basic necessities for humans to live. They had cooking utensils, gas stoves, gas lamps, and furniture like beds and dining tables. It seemed cozy like a mountain lodge.

“We stayed here and hunted wild animals on the mountain for food. Whatever we lacked, we went down to the nearby town and borrowed,” Fermin explained to them.

“Borrow?” Rachel asked with skepticism.

“Yes, there were a lot of butcheries nearby.”

“Ah... Are these furniture from there?”

“Yes, we borrowed them for now. I’ll have to pay them back once I make some money.”

Rachel felt slightly surprised as she sat on the bed named RikuRiku.

Fermin briefly hesitated before asking, “But Vice Leader, were you... together with Xtra the entire time?”

Rachel nodded and her heart sank as if heavy lead dragged it down. She found out about something she shouldn’t have. A part of her regretted finding out. She should’ve stayed still, so she wouldn’t experience such a dilemma right now.

“Umm... Did something happen?”

“Nothing happened. I safely got by thanks to him.”

Rachel replied with a smile. She felt certain he collected pictures of her... because he liked her. He probably held on to these feelings for a long time now. It probably dated back to their days at Cube.

Rachel found his precious feelings burdensome, so she told him that she couldn’t give or receive any love.

“Anyways, you mentioned something around here?” Rachel changed the subject.

Fermin noticed her bitter smile, but feigned ignorance and went along with the flow.

“Yes, there’s a secret gathering place about a twenty minute climb from here.”

It certainly had something to do with the stage’s clear condition.

“Thank you. Then, we shouldn’t waste any time.”

Rachel steeled her resolve to investigate this secret gathering place, but ended up sighing.

She couldn't help but feel bothered by what she saw. The picture on Hajin's smartphone popped up in her mind as if to tease her. Did people usually collect pictures of the person they loved? Is that why he had pictures of her?

However, she had never fallen for anyone and had no idea how to deal with the situation. Should she coldly push him away because she couldn't reciprocate his feelings? Or should she apologize and ask him to back off?

Rachel clenched her fists as various thoughts crossed her mind and weighed her heart.

"Vice Leader?"

"You don't look so good, Vice Leader."

Fermin and Kayle expressed their worries.

Rachel shook her head and stood up. "I'm fine. Let's get moving."

"Yes, ma'am!"

The three of them left the cavern.

Kim Hajin volunteered to stand watch outside and looked at the night sky.

Fermin nudged Rachel's arm and teased her.

"Look at him sitting all alone up there. Something happened, right?"

"N-No, nothing happened. What could possibly have happened?" Rachel retorted while breaking into a cold sweat.

Kim Hajin looked down at them from the tree.

“We’re heading out now!” Fermin shouted to him.

He came down from the tree without a word.

Fermin looked at Rachel and Kim Hajin a few times before grinning and turning around to lead the way.

Rustle... Rustle...

They walked through the mountain path covered with dead leaves. Rachel couldn’t help but be conscious of Kim Hajin walking in front of her. She tried her best not to be bothered. Fortunately, the walk wasn’t far.

“It’s over here.”

Fermin stopped in front of a suspicious bush.

The bush and tree branches covering the cave entrance emitted a sinister aura.

“I wanted to go in the moment I found it, but there seems to be an alarm.”

“...”

Kim Hajin suddenly stepped forward and used the Spirit Stone’s power to surround them with a mysterious wind. This made their bodies light enough to not trigger the alarm and they could even phase through objects.

“Wow?”

“What is this? What kind of buff is this? Did Vice Leader cast it?”

Fermin and Kayle’s eyes widened in surprise, but Rachel seemed even more shocked.

To think that he could use this much power from the spirits in a world

without mana... No, now that she thought about it, it was Kim Hajin who helped awaken her ability to control spirits. Maybe, just maybe, he awakened this potential even earlier than her and helped her because he felt frustrated watching her.

Rachel followed Kim Hajin while lost in her own imagination.

The cave separated into multiple paths like an ant nest, but Kim Hajin continued without an ounce of hesitation.

“...”

Around ten minutes passed before he suddenly raised his hand and signaled them to stop. Then he sent a message through his smartwatch.

[There's a group of people over there.]

Kim Hajin spotted a few hundred people ahead. All of them seemed possessed or bewitched while doing something.

“I think we'll have to stop them...”

“Yeah.”

Kim Hajin took out the *[Black Lotus Bow]* when their surroundings began to collapse.

Drrrrrr!

A message popped up on their smartwatches.

[Your right to enter first has expired. You may reconnect after twelve hours.]

“What?”

They didn't even have time to process the message as the space around them distorted and a ceiling covered in blue crystals appeared.

“What the hell?!” Kim Hajin exclaimed and immediately stood up. He looked around and found himself in the general assembly’s lounge.

However, Chae Nayun appeared in front of him.

“...”

They looked at each other without a word and neither of them expected such a meeting.

Chae Nayun’s mouth opened wide and her drink fell to the floor. She stood from her seat and ran out as fast as possible.

One other person sat beside her and had been left behind.

“Kim Hajin?”

Kim Hajin hurriedly put on his mask, but Yoo Yeonha snickered and crossed her arms over her chest. Then the door to the lounge opened and a group walked in.

“Ah, the first team returned.”

Kim Suho pointed at the English Royal Court members stacked on top of each other like a hamburger.

Yun Seung-Ah, Yi Yeonghan, and other guild representatives left sucking their thumbs this entire time entered the room.

“Why do all of you look like that?”

Aileen tilted her head at the English Royal Court members.

Rachel rubbed her aching head and checked her members first. All of them, including herself, managed to safely return. A few of them looked extremely haggard, but didn’t suffer from anything serious.

Aileen’s voice reverberated throughout the room.

“Now! Listen up and focus! The second and third tests will simultaneously take place in twelve hours!”

* * *

The English Royal Court members had forcibly returned to the general assembly hall after their right to first entry expired. They didn't mind since they could simply re-enter after twelve hours. They also obtained a solid lead towards the test's clear condition.

However, a lot of uncomfortable facts popped up during the test.

Rachel stood outside her balcony to calm her troubled heart. The view surrounded by nature looked calm and peaceful. Looking out the window slowly cleared her mind.

— I hope you will reach me soon, princess. I will wait for you at that place with this hope. That place... with less darkness and more sunlight. Less cold and more warmth than this world we live in...

She recalled meeting Lancaster in that stage. Lancaster had mentioned that place, but how could she possibly go there? What had Lancaster witnessed at this general assembly? Could they really change the course of what happened that day?

“No way, how is that even possible?” Rachel muttered to herself before sighing.

“I see that there's someone above me.”

Someone suddenly spoke from below her. Rachel immediately recognized the voice as Sehat.

“Is that you? Sir Sehat?”

“Oh, how did you know?”

“I'm good at remembering people. Whether it's their face or voice...”

“That’s quite amazing.”

Sehat spoke while clapping.

Rachel bitterly smiled and asked, “What did you do at your stage, Sir Sehat?”

“Well, there was nothing much other than struggling with hunger... I guess?”

“Ah...”

Rachel smiled and felt relieved she hadn’t been the only one.

“That’s alright. We managed to find some leads on the clear condition, so rest up and we’ll enter together next time.”

“I apologize. We’re always on the receiving end.”

“Please, don’t mention it. After all, we’re allies.”

“Umm... That person is Xtra, right?”

Sehat suddenly asked something strange.

“Pardon me?”

“There, that person wearing a mask.” Sehat pointed somewhere.

Rachel spotted Kim Hajin wearing his lotus-engraved mask and talking to Yoo Yeonha.

Yoo Yeonha said something first and Kim Hajin replied, but Rachel couldn’t hear anything from this distance. More importantly, how had they been acquainted here? Rachel couldn’t help but furrow her brows at them.

“It seems he knows Team Leader Yoo Yeonha as well. He’s quite the mysterious one. I hope to see the face under that mask one day.”

“Is that so? Anyways, I’ll excuse myself now,” Rachel curtly replied and went inside her room. She slammed her balcony door shut. *Bam!* Then she paced around her room for a while before making her way to their accommodation hall.

The English Royal Court had its own accommodation hall now. Their lodging underwent a drastic transformation after Xtra entered the general assembly with his massive amount of contribution points.

They now had an office, three floors with twenty-four rooms, and ten servants. They could invite others without feeling ashamed and could even rent out the remaining rooms for a fee.

“So, there was no mana over there?”

“How would we beat those undead without any mana?”

“Beats me. No, rather than that, how can they summon the undead when there’s no mana?”

The guild members gathered in the living room and exchanged information regarding the test. Rachel observed them for a while before making her way to the office.

“Amazing,” she uttered in astonishment.

This grand office looked like it belonged to a feudal lord from the medieval times. She looked around for anyone else before taking out a notebook with a lock in the middle.

[Diary]

She had been advised that keeping a diary would help her mental health, so she forced herself to write every day for the past six months.

Rachel picked up the quill on the desk and began writing what happened yesterday and today along with all her emotions. She continued writing until she regained her composure.

“Hoo...”

Rachel finally sighed in relief and looked at the clock. Thirty minutes had passed and her diary now contained nine pages of entries. She closed her diary and checked the thesis on her smartwatch. Kim Hajin submitted this thesis for the first test.

She focused on reading as hard as she could before sprawling on the desk.

Huff... Huff...

Her small and gentle breathing filled the room.

Did everything that happened tired her out that much?

Rachel dreamt a slightly strange dream.

Side Stories 23

Dream in a Dream (23)

“I think I’m going to die...”

“Phew...”

“Aigoo... My joints are killing me!”

Twenty-four guild members sat around an empty lot and sighed. All their smartwatches rang as they received the General Assembly’s message.

[Clear Condition Completed – Defeat the brotherhood singing the Song of Destruction.]

[The Reislaufer and English Royal Court alliance has completed the second test – Hometown of Dream.]

[The contribution points will be distributed according to each member’s contributions during the test.]

Contribution Ranking:

1. Rachel

2. Setien

3. Xtra...

Undead corpses filled the dark forest. Their rotten black blood tainted the ground and gave off a disgusting stench. Various mutilated body parts littered the ground.

The guild members didn't move a single step in this horrifying scene. They all felt so exhausted that they couldn't even grumble a complaint.

The second test had been that difficult. They expected the sorcerers to summon a legion of undead, but none of them expected a death knight. A near-infinite number of mobs like ghouls and zombies supported the boss, which further increased the raid's difficulty.

"As expected of Rachel who graduated second from Cube."

Tilma from Reislaufer praised the English Royal Court's vice leader.

Tilma was a world-renowned hero also famous for her beautiful smile and charming looks.

Rachel laughed and shook her head.

"No, not at all."

She wanted to be humble, but no one could deny that Rachel played a key role in today's victory. She noticed first that the undead could move without mana because they relied on human blood for fuel. She also found the blood well and evaporated it using her spirits.

No one could deny her top spot in the rankings for this test. They probably would've lost the battle of attrition against the unending waves if not for Rachel.

"Also..."

Tilma turned around to look for someone.

However, she couldn't find that man anywhere. Xtra displayed an impressive prowess far greater than most heroes.

"Where did he go?"

She wondered under her breath as she recalled his arrows that

disappeared and suddenly reappeared.

Xtra had saved her whenever an enemy she failed to notice almost ripped her neck off. His arrows only struck the enemies even though her neck had been inches away. She felt even more surprised when he did this numerous times and never missed.

“Where did that mercenary go?”

She didn’t dislike the feeling of being protected and finally understood why guilds favored a skilled sharpshooter over warriors that stood in the front.

“Mercenary? Do you mean our mercenary?”

Fermin treated the wounded and stood.

“Yeah, I was curious what kind of person he is. Rumors say he descended from Baekdu Mountain. Is that true?” Tilma asked with a smirk.

They spoke to each other for the first time since the alliance, but both of them actually had a junior and senior relationship at Cube.

“*Hehe*, we have no idea about that either,” Fermin replied with a sheepish smile.

“Oh really?”

Tilma turned to Rachel and wanted to ask. However, the rumors regarding Rachel and Xtra had been so scandalous that Tilma decided not to. She faked a cough without saying anything.

“Here, please take this.”

Setien handed something to Rachel.

“What is it?”

“It was on the death knight’s corpse. It says it’s some kind of entry ticket.”

“Entry ticket?”

“Yes, it says whoever uses it will be able to re-enter this stage.”

Who would want to come back here? Rachel wondered to herself.

Shwiiiiik!

A wire flew from somewhere and snatched the entry ticket away. Rachel jumped in surprise and immediately looked at the tree where the wire came from. She spotted Xtra on top.

“I’ll be taking this.”

He inspected the entry ticket.

Everyone stared at him, but he disappeared almost immediately into the dark before anyone could say anything.

“What the hell? Is he Batman or something?” Tilma grumbled in disbelief.

“He’s always like that. I think the chuuni syndrome hit him hard or something.”

Fermin snickered as she tapped Tilma’s shoulder.

Marcus appeared just in time after sweeping up the loot from their surroundings.

“Listen up, everyone! This is what you’ve all been waiting for! Time for loot distribution!”

Their loot included the sorcerers’ robes, wands, the death knight’s skull, bone, armor, sword, and the dullahan’s armor, sword, bone, etc.

They felt a slight aversion towards the undead body parts, but these could be crafted into excellent equipment as long as they properly purified it.

Meanwhile, Rachel scanned the pile of loot for anything that might catch her eye.

* * *

Rachel woke up the next morning.

“...?”

She looked up and saw a chandelier. Her back felt comfortable. She found herself in her room and on her bed.

I'm sure I fell asleep on the office desk last night, but why am I here? Did Fermin move me? Or maybe... don't tell me... Was it him?

She discarded such thoughts and quickly got up. Rachel smacked her face that blushed from her delusions and stepped out of the room.

The English Royal Court servants were busy at work.

“Oh, Vice Leader! Do you want to play a game with us?”

Marcus waved from a table through the wide-opened door that led to the lounge.

Rachel tilted her head and looked inside. The English Royal Court members, including Fermin and Marcus, were playing poker with Reislauer members like Tilma and Maurice.

“I'll pass.”

Rachel told them.

“Come on. Join us.”

Marcus tried to convince her, but she refused and walked to the entrance. Rachel opened the door to leave.

Creak...

She didn't think about anything in particular as she left with a yawn.

"Haaa..."

Rachel immediately noticed that something felt off beyond the luxurious door.

Strange stones had been embedded in the ground like stepping stones. She observed them for a while before looking up.

"...?"

The scenery outside looked like a completely different world from the general assembly she recalled. Yes, a completely different world perfectly described the drastic change.

Small huts and brick houses lined up below the hill. People and carriages went about their business. This couldn't be considered modern in any way.

Rachel stood dumbfounded and wondered if she was still dreaming when a voice suddenly spoke from above.

"This is the third test."

Rachel flinched and looked up. There, she saw Kim Hajin sitting on top of a Zelkova tree^[1] in the middle of the garden.

"You didn't check your watch again?"

He smirked while tapping his smartwatch and Rachel quickly checked hers.

[The third test will now begin for those who have cleared the second stage.]

[Third Test – Mixed Up Stories]

[First Objective – Accumulate your fame and renown to earn an invitation to the king's castle!]

[Tip – The king loves the arts and martial arts.]

[Current Renown – 1%]

“Interesting, right? This is basically the medieval period. Or is it the renaissance period? Anyways, it looks like something out of the *Lord of the Rings*.”

The city beneath the hill had artists, magicians, sorcerers, swordsmen, and merchants. Not everything about the city looked like fantasy.

“It also has a modern twist.”

Kim Hajin pointed something out to Rachel.

“Modern twist?”

She asked and he lightly nodded.

“Yeah, there's a bridge over there that connects to another continent. That continent is similar to the modern world. No, it looks like a complete replica.”

Rachel continued listening when a thought suddenly struck her and she desperately asked.

“Are there buildings resembling England there too?!”

She looked quite serious, so Kim Hajin furrowed his brows and stared into the distance before nodding.

“It's a bit far, but I think I see something. Big Ben... Yeah, it looks like the Big Ben.”

Rachel felt her heart drop. She finally understood Lancaster's words and what he wanted from this place. It all began to make sense now.

"I can see the Hampton Palace too. It's definitely England," Kim Hajin added.

Rachel bit her lips. Kim Hajin observed her for a while before speaking in a low voice.

"I don't think you should mind the Hampton that much..."

"No."

Rachel fiercely cut him off.

"Huh?"

"Please stop... Don't bring that up. I don't want to hear it."

Everyone knew the events that transpired that day, but Rachel didn't want to hear about it from someone else. She hoped that no one would ever talk to her or ask about it. No, she loathed the idea of those who didn't have the right babbling and gossiping about that day.

However, Kim Hajin only grimaced.

"I don't want to."

"Pardon?"

"Why should I?"

"W-What did you just say?"

She never expected such a reaction and became dumbfounded rather than angry.

"How frustrating..."

Kim Hajin found her frustrating. The trauma from that day continued to tie her down. Of course, he had written that as her setting, which made him all the more frustrated. He made that setting so she could overcome her trauma, but she never thought about overcoming it at all.

“Why do you keep thinking everything was your fault and that only you have to carry that burden?”

“...”

“Is it because you want to be the main character of a tragic movie? Do you want to be the only one holding that title? What? Are you an actress? Is the entire world just a movie to you?”

Rachel couldn't retort a single word. She remained silent and didn't want to argue.

Kim Hajin could read her thoughts and descended from the tree. He stared at Rachel, who didn't even look at him, and spoke in a low voice.

“The Rachel I've been observing until now is too... pathetic. No, you're worse than pathetic. You're hopeless. You're so hopeless that I'm considering quitting your fan club.”

Grit—

Rachel gritted her teeth and clenched her fists.

Kim Hajin left her standing there and leisurely walked away.

“...”

Her entire body trembled as she kept looking at the ground. A drop of blood dripped to the ground. She bit her lips so hard that they bled.

I walked the streets alone. The shops on this medieval street sold all sorts of magic items, monster parts, butchered meat, etc. Also, one could earn fame and renown at various places like the underground arena or academy.

I walked for a while and spotted Aileen. She seemed busy running around sightseeing. On the other hand, Rachel walked a distance away with a sullen look.

“Haaa...”

I couldn't help but sigh. I felt pissed off today and ended up striking a nerve in Rachel too. I probably snapped at her to vent, but her actions had frustrated me this entire time. Still, I shouldn't have blatantly attacked her like that.

[Entry Ticket – Hometown of Dreams]

This entry ticket had caused it. It would allow me to stay at the second stage. I didn't think much of it, but it began bothering me since last night.

What if... my mother and father lived somewhere in that stage? What if my friends lived there? What if my identity still remained there? That place might be a fake world recreated for the test, but what if I treated it like the real world?

“Alright! Alright! Come and sign up! Hey, you there! You look strong!”

A shout from somewhere cut off my train of thoughts and my gaze naturally went to the source.

A large wooden placard stood on top of a stage at the bustling marketplace.

[Commencement of the 13th National Competition]

[Anyone interested may sign up!]

Competition List:

1. *Martial Arts Competition*

2. *Archery Competition*

3. *Hunting Competition...*

“I wish to sign up.”

I heard a familiar voice, which turned out to be Rachel. She purposely ignored me even though I stood a few feet away. Mentioning Hampton had been a bad move on my end.

I might’ve been the one who created her setting, but I had no relation to Hampton. I’m sure Rachel found it ridiculous that I mentioned it in the first place.

I decided to step back for now.

“Sigh...”

Which competition should I join? Do I even have to join one? I pondered for a while when I saw a nameless artist drawing on the riverbanks. The colors he drew on the canvas looked beautiful.

“Hmm...”

I looked at my hands that possessed the valuable gift known as Young Dwarf’s Dexterity. *Wait a minute.* The message said the king had an interest in the arts.

[Art Supply Store]

It didn’t take long to find the art supply store. I wanted to go inside when someone suddenly called out.

“Excuse me.”

“*Huh?* What the...?”

Yoo Yeonha appeared out of nowhere.

What? Did they already clear the second test?

“Can you come here for a second?”

Yoo Yeonha pointed to an alley with her chin.

I followed her without hesitation. I noticed a sharp gaze on my back, but it soon disappeared.

I decided to ignore it and stood in front of Yoo Yeonha.

“What?”

“Please show me your watch.”

I extended my wrist and Yoo Yeonha bumped our smartwatches together to transmit information between them.

“What’s this?”

“Information I obtained from outside. It’s a picture taken by satellite.”

I looked through the eighteen pictures taken of the general assembly from outside, but wondered why she showed me. *Huh?*

“There are traces of humans and mana.”

“Yes, it looks like someone entered this place before we did. Don’t you find it strange? Where do you think they disappeared to?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha pointed to the ground as I remained silent.

“I think there’s a high chance they’re here. I investigated this stage and found four continents. They might be called continents, but they’re only the size of Gyeonggi-do at most. Anyways, every continent has its own king. I suspect these kings are those people.”

It sounded like a plausible theory. I crossed my arms and looked at her.

“If what you’re saying is true... I think I know one of the kings.”

“*Huh?* Who is it?”

“Lancaster.”

Yoo Yeonha rubbed her chin in thought.

“It sounds possible if it’s Lancaster, but what’s your basis?”

“England has been recreated, including the Hampton Palace.”

“That sounds quite concrete. Alright, you can head over before us. Have you found a way to increase your fame?”

“Somewhat.”

“What is it?” Yoo Yeonha stared at me full of curiosity and I awkwardly scratched my neck.

“Painting?”

I had no idea why I felt so embarrassed.

“Painting? You mean... like drawings and portraits?”

I made an okay sign with my fingers and Yoo Yeonha grimaced.

“Hehehe... It’s that bastard.”

Someone in a dark alley compared a man’s face to a bounty poster and sheepishly laughed.

He had no doubt about it. The man’s mask, silhouette, and description... Everything matched the bounty poster.

[Bounty – 500,000,000 won]

The reward would be a whopping five hundred million won, dead or alive.

The bounty hunter excitedly trembled and swallowed his saliva. The edge of his dagger shone as he followed his prey from a distance.

He patiently waited for the right moment to cut off his prey’s head. His prey wouldn’t even notice its death.

Sseeup...

The bounty hunter licked his lips as he slithered in the shadows like a snake waiting to strike.

1. For those wondering, this is an ornamental tree native to Eastern Asia. More info here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zelkova_serrata



Side Stories 24

Dream in a Dream (24)

I entered the art supply store with Yoo Yeonha. Various easels and canvases that exuded luxury lined the neatly organized store.

“Do you really plan on painting?”

Yoo Yeonha asked as I busily looked over the products. I didn’t bother responding as I picked a brush, palette, easel, canvas, oil paint, etc.

“How much will these be?”

I asked at the counter. The store owner wearing a beret and sleeve protectors looked at me skeptically.

“Do you know how to paint?”

I smirked at his question. Honestly, I had no idea. I figured I would naturally pick it up once I started.

“Of course, I’m buying these because I know how to paint.”

“Why are you wearing a mask? Do you have leprosy?”

“It’s none of your business, so please just tell me how much.”

The store owner grimaced and shook his head.

“We can’t sell our goods to any chap on the street. That’s the law.”

“I said I know how to paint. I might not be just another chap, you know?”

“...”

The store owner crossed his thick arms in disbelief and glared. It seemed like he would call the police if I stubbornly persisted.

I smirked again and nodded.

“Then, let’s do it like this. Sell me those first and I’ll go paint. You can gauge my skills and call the police if you’re not satisfied with my painting.”

“*Hmm...* You sound confident, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“Okay, deal.”

I extended my card to the store owner and he snatched it out of my hand.

“How much—”

I asked, but the store owner interrupted me.

“Three million won. It’s actually three hundred thousand won, but I’m charging more just in case you run off. I’ll refund the full amount if you bring back your painting and I acknowledge your skills.”

I almost punched the store owner when he said three million won, but I composed myself after hearing him out.

I looked at Yoo Yeonha after paying for the items. She tilted her head and shrugged as if to ask why I looked at her.

“I need a model.”

“What?”

“I need a face to put on this canvas, right?”

I tapped on the easel and canvas.

Yoo Yeonha furrowed her brows and looked at me in disbelief. No, it might be more accurate to say she looked at me in disgust.

Five minutes later...

We came to a nearby park with excellent scenery. I asked her to sit on the grass while I prepared the easel. I placed the canvas on top and took out the palette and brush.

Yoo Yeonha began grumbling as I mixed the colors on my palette.

"I dare you to screw up. Be prepared to never see me again if you mess up a single stroke. *Ah*, don't even think about giving excuses like you were drawing an abstract painting of me. It has to be the real me or else—"

"*Ah*, quit whining will you? Why are you talking so much?"

I began painting after cutting her off.

Whik! Whik!

My brush strokes came out perfectly without a hint of hesitation.

"How did you all clear the second test?" I asked her while painting.

"Nayun did everything, what else?"

"Chae Nayun?"

"Yes, I think Nayun has reached an entirely different level now. It's safe to assume she's reached the pinnacle."

Yoo Yeonha proudly smiled as she recalled Chae Nayun's martial prowess.

"Is that so?"

I had no idea how strong Chae Nayun became, but she did switch to the sword a long time ago.

Yoo Yeonha sullenly looked at me.

“Can you be a bit more interested? You were the one who discovered her talent for the sword.”

“I did?”

“Yes, you turned Nayun into a swordsman.”

“Ah...”

I smiled after recalling the distant past, but didn’t say anything and focused on painting.

Yoo Yeonha sighed as if she gave up talking and focused on posing as well.

The brush moved according to my will as I transferred the beautiful woman surrounded by lush greenery onto the canvas.

* * *

Chae Nayun roamed around the third test’s stage.

She checked every main structure in the area including the king’s castle, the magic tower, the academy where they trained the next generation, and even the artist hall where they trained talented artists.

“Registration will close soon! Hurry and register!”

She saw a shirtless man causing a scene on her way to their lodgings. He kept telling people to sign up for the martial tournament, which Yoo Yeonha asked her to participate in.

“Ah, I should join that.”

Chae Nayun had completely forgotten. She went over to register when someone sulking on a nearby bench caught her attention.

This dumb blonde perfectly fitted the description of beauty.

“Why the hell is she over there looking all depressed?”

Chae Nayun thought about just ignoring her, but that dumb blonde was the protagonist of this world. She should at least go over and ask why it looked like Rachel stepped on shit.

Chae Nayun approached and sat beside her, but Rachel kept her head down and didn’t even notice.

“*Ehem!*”

Chae Nayun faked a cough, and only then did Rachel finally look up.

“What are you doing here?” Chae Nayun curtly asked her.

“...”

Rachel looked away and didn’t even have the strength to talk. Chae Nayun hated that face the most.

“What is it?”

“...”

“Chicken got your tongue? Why aren’t you talking all of a sudden?”

Rachel looked at her and weakly replied, “It’s not a chicken, it’s a cat...”

“Oh...”

Chae Nayun’s face became slightly flushed.

“T-That’s the same thing. Hey, I did that on purpose to make you laugh. You dare make fun of me? *Haa*, did you really think I didn’t know it was a cat?”

Her excuses sounded too obvious. Rachel didn’t even bother to entertain her. Chae Nayun acted dumb a few more times, but Rachel didn’t react at all.

“*Sigh...*”

Chae Nayun racked her brains. The only thing that could put Rachel in this state... She had no idea because they weren’t close, but if she had to guess...

“Hey, did you fight with Kim Hajin by any chance?”

Rachel flinched at her words. How did Chae Nayun know that Kim Hajin was Xtra? That question popped up in Rachel’s head first.

“I guess I’m right. What did you two fight over?” Chae Nayun asked, but Rachel didn’t want to talk about it.

However, Chae Nayun already did her research and had an idea. She faked two coughs before carefully speaking.

“Hampton?”

Rachel shook and turned towards Chae Nayun.

“Looks like it, but why did you two fight over something from so long ago?”

Rachel remained silent, but a part of her wanted to ask someone about it. She wanted to know who was in the wrong between them.

“I...”

Rachel hesitated, but Chae Nayun encouraged her.

“Yes, go on. Feel free to speak.”

Rachel sat properly on the bench and faced Chae Nayun with a sigh.

“I believe that I’m responsible for the massacre that occurred at the Hampton Palace. I should carry the burden—”

“*Huh?* Why do you have to carry that burden? That wasn’t even your fault.”

Chae Nayun bluntly responded and Rachel flinched. Chae Nayun said the same thing as Kim Hajin, but she even scoffed as if she found Rachel’s words to be funny.

“You’re a funny one, aren’t you? Hey, you... *uhm...* Do you know how my mom died? Answer me honestly. Everyone knows about that incident.”

Rachel felt surprised and didn’t expect Chae Nayun to openly talk about that event. Did she already recover from it?

Chae Nayun grimaced and continued, “If we went by your logic, then my mom’s death would be my fault, right? Are you trying to drag my family into this? *Ha?* Is the English Royal Court’s vice leader really going to stoop so low? *Ha?!?*”

“No, that’s not what I meant...”

“Then what is it? What did you mean?”

Rachel broke out into a cold sweat at Chae Nayun’s pressure. She chewed her lips and nervously gulped.

“*Pfft—*”

Chae Nayun held back her laughter and tapped Rachel’s shoulder.

“So what I’m trying to say is, it’s not your fault. Don’t force yourself to carry the burden of everything, alright? *Ah*, it seems like Kim Hajin

said the same thing.”

“...”

“Well, I understand how you feel. People tend to think their misfortune is the worst. I used to be no different.”

Chae Nayun spoke while looking at the sky. The sun began to set and the sunset’s orange hue dyed the ground. She suddenly thought about Kim Hajin. *I still don’t know what kind of person he is, what burden he’s carrying, or how lonely his life is...*

However, only Kim Hajin could save Rachel in this world.

Chae Nayun slowly lowered her gaze from the sky and looked at Rachel.

“He’s going through tough times just like you, so he probably felt frustrated seeing you blame yourself for everything.”

Chae Nayun wanted to change the topic before Rachel could ask anything else.

“Ah, you signed up for the martial tournament too, right?”

Rachel nodded.

“I plan to sign up too. I suggest you surrender if you meet me. I’m not someone the likes of you can handle.”

Chae Nayun confidently laughed and patted Rachel on the back.

Tak Tak Tak

Rachel grimaced at the sharp pain that spread all over her body.

“Ah, stop that.”

“Do you understand, little baby?”

“Stop that. Let go.”

Rachel shrugged Chae Nayun’s hand away before standing from the bench. Chae Nayun also stood and they walked side by side for a while before someone caught their eye.

“*Huh?* What the hell are they doing?”

Chae Nayun frowned while looking somewhere. A situation they couldn’t understand currently took place in front of them.

Kim Hajin, who wore a mask, seemed to be at the park with Yoo Yeonha. Yoo Yeonha sat on the ground like a model as Kim Hajin painted a portrait of her along with the scenery.

“Hey, what the hell are those two... Fuck, have they gone crazy?”

Chae Nayun grumbled and looked at the person next to her. Then she jumped in surprise.

Rachel’s expression had turned cold and emotionless. No, it looked emotionless, but also contained anger.

“Hey, hey.”

Chae Nayun nudged her. Only then did Rachel’s strange and scary expression disappear. She was still brooding though.

“I’m going.”

Rachel left with those words.

Chae Nayun sighed as Rachel walked away with a scary aura.

“At least she managed to be comfortable around me. I guess I only have to get a bit closer to her.”

Chae Nayun accomplished one of her objectives to grow closer to Rachel.

“But what the hell are those two doing? Damn it...”

Anger surged from within her as she glared at Yoo Yeonha and Kim Hajin.

That posing girl and the bastard painting her... What the hell are those two doing right now?

A voice suddenly shouted from somewhere nearby.

“The tournament registration will now close!”

“*Huh? Eh? Ah!* Fuck! Wait a minute! I have to join!”

Chae Nayun screamed as she ran towards the shirtless muscular guy.

* * *

“All done.”

I finished the portrait after about an hour. It took longer than expected even with Young Dwarf’s Dexterity because I never painted before. It would’ve taken even longer for the oil to dry, but I skipped that part thanks to stigma’s mana.

“Hey, get up.”

“*Huh? Ah, yes...*”

Yoo Yeonha woke up and nonchalantly replied as if she never dozed off in the first place.

She stood with a sigh and walked over with half-opened eyes that still seemed drowsy.

“*Yawn...* Then, I’ll get going now. I wasted too much time because of you.”

Yoo Yeonha tried to leave without even checking the painting. I

grabbed her shoulder.

“Hey, aren’t you going to take a look?”

“Why should I? I’m busy.”

Yoo Yeonha retorted while tapping on her smartwatch with an annoyed expression.

Still, I had to let her see it and give my work a score. I took the canvas from the easel and handed it to her.

“I said I’m not interested. Why do you keep insisting...”

Yoo Yeonha suddenly stopped and blankly stared at the canvas. Her face grew bright red at the portrait of a black-haired woman surrounded by lush greenery.

I had no idea what to call this portrait, but I could tell that I did a great job.

“*Umm...*” Yoo Yeonha dryly gulped.

“What?”

She slowly hugged the painting and asked.

“Are you looking to work with a curator by any chance?”

* * *

A week passed. Most guilds had finished the second test and entered the third. All of them focused on increasing their fame and renown.

Some guilds chose to do social work while others opened businesses or subjugated dungeon monsters.

Meanwhile, all sorts of tournaments began. A few guilds focused on these tournaments. Creator’s Sacred Grace, Essence of the Strait,

Rakeford, Chinese Empire, Golden Afterglow, Panzerburg, La Guild Lumiere, etc. The intense competition between the top guilds finally began.

“First, I’m looking for a sponsor.”

Yoo Yeonha said after I finished the archery tournament. She held onto two oil paintings as if her life depended on them.

“Sponsor?”

“Yes, having a sponsor will increase your renown. I heard the king loves art and nobles actively sponsor artists because of that.”

“Well, that’s good for me. Aren’t you busy though? You’re the most important person in your guild, right?”

Essence of the Straits had quite a lot to do right now. The preliminary rounds of all the tournaments finally began. They also had to build relations with the local nobles and an information network in this world.

“I am busy, but I also have a reason to invest in this.”

“*Huh?* What’s the reason?”

Yoo Yeonha furrowed her brows and bit her lips as if she felt annoyed.

“Chae Nayun... She failed to register for the tournament. *Ah...* I can’t believe she forgot...”

She made Chae Nayun seem like the dumbest buffoon in the world, which starkly contrasted with the praise from a while back. *Nayun has reached an entirely different level now. It’s safe to assume she’s reached the pinnacle.*

“Damn, I’m so annoyed I can kill her. Anyways, follow me.”

“*Huh?* Why me?”

“The nobles here love it when an artist personally meets them, so you’ll have to attend the meeting.”

I nodded and got up.

“Ah, before that.”

Yoo Yeonha tapped on her smartwatch.

[Essence of the Straits Yoo Yeonha has proposed a personal alliance with Xtra from the English Royal Court.]

[Will you accept?]

I received a message on my smartwatch and looked at her. She stared at me with big sparkling eyes that seemed to say, *Accept it.*

I almost tapped yes, but suddenly stopped.

“Hmm... I’ll see how you do first before accepting this.”

“Huh? What did you just say?”

“What? Isn’t that logical? You’re the one who needs me, right? Go on. Lead the way.”

“No... that’s...”

“You don’t want to?”

“Wow...”

Yoo Yeonha looked flabbergasted and suddenly exclaimed, “First it was Chae Nayun and now it’s you! Damn it!!! Come, follow me!”

She had no choice but to grit her teeth and stomp away. No, she led the way.

Side Stories 25

Dream in a Dream (25)

I stood in front of the castle gates of a noble whose name I didn't know. The castle looked huge even by my standards, but Yoo Yeonha didn't seem fazed.

She approached the guards standing watch.

"My name is Yoo Yeonha. I have an appointment today."

"..."

The two guards grimaced at her.

"Yoo Yeonha?" one of the guards asked.

"Yes."

"*Hmm...*"

They whispered between themselves before the other guard took out a communication crystal. He spoke through the crystal before nodding and opening the door.

"A guest has arrived!"

The guard shouted for the servants, who suddenly appeared as if they expected us. They immediately walked up to Yoo Yeonha and took the two portraits from her.

"Welcome."

The head butler greeted us at the gates and looked at me.

“You must be the artist our lord mentioned.”

“Yes, I am the artist and this child here is my manager.”

I immediately drew the line between Yoo Yeonha and I since no artist should be treated the same as their manager.

“Ha...” Yoo Yeonha scoffed in disbelief.

The butler nodded without a change in expression.

“I see, but may you please remove that mask?”

“...”

“Hmph...”

Yoo Yeonha scoffed again, but for a different reason this time. The first scoff carried a sense of disbelief and annoyance while this one carried a sense of triumph.

“May I remove it when I meet the head of this household? I will be troubled if my identity is exposed, you see...”

I roamed around without my mask a few times during the second test, but only because I already disposed of Lancaster’s minions. However, Lancaster and numerous guilds had their eyes and ears everywhere in this third test.

“I understand,” the butler replied before opening the castle’s front doors.

One couldn’t possibly see everything at a glance in this vast castle foyer. The chandelier illuminated the entire interior and its light reflected off the marble walls. Yoo Yeonha managed to reel in a capable and wealthy noble.

“Our lord is waiting in the meeting room. I will guide you there.”

The butler respectfully led us to the meeting room. We climbed a flight of stairs and stood outside the room as he knocked twice on the door.

Knock... Knock...

“The guests have arrived.”

— Let them in.

A response came from the other side.

The butler opened the door and we saw the noble sitting at the head of the table.

He exuded a strong sense of masculinity with sideburns that came all the way down to his chin. He glanced up from his book and looked at us.

“Are you... the artist that Rohan mentioned?” he asked.

His voice sounded rough and deep, which made him seem even more suited for martial arts than arts and crafts.

“Yes.”

Yoo Yeonha gratefully replied for me.

“*Hmm...* Alright, my name is Ritten de Kayden. You may call me Count Kayden. I don’t need to hear your names, so why don’t you just show me your works?”

“I understand.”

Yoo Yeonha replied with a bow before unwrapping the paintings and passing it to the noble.

“*Hooo...*”

He exclaimed under his breath.

One painting depicted the general assembly hall and the other showed a beautiful woman bathing in the sunset's orange hue while surrounded by lush greenery. Yoo Yeonha decided to keep her own portrait, so this portrait featured a different woman.

"It looks flawless."

Count Kayden rubbed his beard in satisfaction at my works.

"But you still have to pass the most important test," he added.

The count clapped twice and a man appeared from another room. He wore clean white gloves and a headband. Obviously, he worked as an appraiser.

"I will start the appraisal," the man said.

I found it all a bit strange. An appraiser usually analyzed works to distinguish counterfeits from originals, but there wouldn't be any fakes of my paintings since I was a nameless artist.

"Are you gauging the mana within it?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

The count burst into laughter.

"*Hahaha!* Exactly. Who would buy a painting for just its looks? A good painting should also have mana. That mana will spread in the air and fill the room. Isn't that what's really important?"

Only then did I understand the situation.

A master or expert naturally infused mana into their art. Only those with a great deal of experience could achieve this.

"H-How can this be?"

Meanwhile, the appraiser became shocked at my paintings. Yoo

Yeonha raised an eyebrow and Count Kayden looked as if curiosity would kill him too.

“You... are you really a nameless artist?” the appraiser asked me in awe.

I smirked and nodded. Then he bit his lips as if he wanted to say something, but remained silent.

“What’s wrong? Is there a problem?” Count Kayden asked.

The appraiser nervously gulped before forcing his trembling lips to speak.

“This piece is one of the three best works I’ve seen in the past twenty years...”

Count Kayden ended up buying each painting for one billion won. That was an astronomical amount for this stage. I gained a lot of renown thanks to that and I entered an alliance with Yoo Yeonha as promised.

“Here, two hundred million as your fees and one hundred million for your efforts.”

“Thank you.”

I handed Yoo Yeonha a check for three hundred million won and she pocketed it with a smile. I stared at her for a while before asking.

“Did you notice the mana from the start?”

“*Huh?* No, not at all. You can only do something like that if you receive special education from an early age.”

“So you just liked the painting?”

Yoo Yeonha placed a finger on her lips and briefly pondered before shaking her head.

“Who knows? I guess I just trusted you? Or should I say I had a good feeling about it? Even I had no idea how special your painting was.”

“Really?”

“Yes, what in the world happened? How did you move that appraiser so much?”

“That’s... it’s a trade secret.”

“Pfft!”

Yoo Yeonha snickered and turned around to look at me.

“Anyways, thank you for your hard work today. When do you plan to paint another one?”

“Who knows?”

“Please take your sweet time. You should let your name spread first before limiting the number of customers to one hundred. Then, you can start releasing one or two paintings at a time to attract the king’s attention.”

Indeed, that sounded like a strategy she would think of.

I laughed and simply nodded.

“I’ll excuse myself now.”

Yoo Yeonha said her farewells and cheerfully walked away with the check in her hand. She even patted it a few times like a pet.

I watched her leave before turning around and heading off.

* * *

I dreamt of a palace built with red bricks that seemed to belong to the 14th century style. A very sad memory took place here. The palace

had a lot of people. A child, an elder, and a young couple stood out among the crowd and cheerfully chatted in the garden.

I noticed the child with a hat shying away from this cozy atmosphere. The child looked around with tearful eyes and had always wanted to visit this place. The child's mother had given birth and passed away here. However, everyone at the palace dissuaded the child from coming here and the child couldn't understand why.

Why can't I come when my mother passed away here? Is it because I might feel something where she passed away? But I've never even seen my mother's face.

The child impulsively ran away from home...

The child's emotions came crashing down on me. I felt dizzy and I had no idea why I felt such emotions.

"Ahjussi, are you alright? Are you not feeling well?"

The child grabbed onto my clothes as I staggered and a question suddenly crossed my mind.

This shouldn't be possible. This child only existed in my dream, so how could this child touch me right now?

"I'm alright."

"I don't think you are. You should go to the hospital if you're not feeling well."

"Sure..."

"Hehe."

The child smiled and turned around.

A thought that felt closer to an instinct flashed in my mind. I approached the child as if bewitched by something.

Whoosh!

I lifted and placed the child on my shoulders.

“Kyak!”

The child screamed and protested.

“Let me go!”

The child kept resisting, but I ran as fast as I could out of the palace. The child screamed and caught everyone’s attention. The guards swarmed towards me.

“You shouldn’t be here,” I said in my dreams.

“Everyone is in danger, including you. Come, follow me. You shouldn’t be here...”

The space surrounding us began to fall apart. The palace crumbled and the child that kept resisting now blankly stared at the surroundings too.

Both of us watched as the world around us collapsed...

“Ugh!”

Rachel groaned and immediately woke up.

Her eyes shook and sweat drenched her entire body. She calmed her breathing to lessen the sharp pain hammering her head.

“Haa... Haa... Haa...”

She had dreamt the same nightmare about that day at the Hampton Palace. Rachel suppressed the urge to vomit as she looked for her medicine, but suddenly felt that something had changed. She didn’t feel as bad as usual.

“It wasn’t... that nightmare...”

The nightmare today didn’t play out until the end as everything crumbled. A man suddenly appeared and ran away with her younger self. A different twist had taken place in her recurring nightmare, but she couldn’t recall the man’s appearance.

“I wonder what that was...”

What else could it be, but a horrible dream?

Rachel kicked away her blanket and got up from bed. She went to her bathroom in her pajamas and washed her face. The tournament would take place today, so she had to prepare and do her best. She couldn’t drop her guard even at the 128th round.

Fuuh... Fuuh...

Rachel washed her face with the cold tap water when a message briefly popped up on her smartwatch, which she had set on the bedside table.

[The General Assembly is closely watching you.]

* * *

Fermin greeted Rachel when they met at the hall in the early morning.

“Vice Leader! I expected you to be up by now.”

“Yes, how are you today, Fermin? I’m sure you’re busy tending to the sick.”

Fermin increased her renown by tending to people with incurable illnesses. The guild members regarded her as their ace for that.

“Yes, I’m fine! Rather than that, have you seen this? This Xtra guy is insane!”

Renown Ranking:

1. *Xtra: 2,000*
2. *Kim Suho: 1,250*
3. *Yun Seung-Ah: 95*
4. *Chae Nayun: 800*
5. *Yoo Yeonha: 800*

“He gathered two thousand points all alone to take the top spot!”

Fermin exclaimed and Rachel’s eyes widened in surprise.

“Is this... is this even possible?”

She had no idea how Xtra raised his renown by so much.

Knock... Knock... Knock... Knock... Knock...

Someone suddenly knocked on the door that led to the general assembly hall, which meant visitors from another guild had come. Rachel made her way across the room and opened the door.

“Yes, this is the English Royal Court.”

Quite a crowd stood outside. She counted at least thirty of them. Yun Seung-Ah, Kim Suho, and Raygun from the General guild stood out among them. The English Royal Court would never even dream of speaking to these big shots. However, things had changed.

“Ah... Hello, Vice Leader Rachel. It’s nothing important, but is the mercenary Xtra there by any chance?”

“Hello, Vice Leader Rachel! Sorry for intruding so early. *Haha!* Actually... we’re looking for Xtra...”

“I have something to say to Xtra.”

“Can you arrange a meeting with Xtra?”

Yun Seung-Ah, Raygun, Kim Suho, and the rest all wanted to see Xtra. Rachel blankly stared at them for a while before bitterly smiling.

“I see... but Xtra is currently not here. He went to the archery tournament—”

“Ah, is that so?”

“I see.”

“Well, I guess I have no business here then.”

“Sigh... I wasted my time. Oh, but your accommodation looks quite nice. Anyways, have a nice day.”

“Ciao!”

The crowd disappeared almost immediately and the bustling corridor became empty again with only Rachel at the door.

“Haaa...” she subconsciously sighed.

They technically came to the English Royal Court, but only wanted to meet Xtra. Hey, I'm the vice leader of this guild. Aren't they crossing the line?

Rachel grumbled inwardly while also feeling confused. Still, she managed to compose herself and closed the door.

The swordsmanship tournament's 128th round would take place today, so she didn't have the luxury to be distracted by such small matters.

* * *

Rachel ran to the archery tournament stadium as soon as her 128th

round finished.

The entire stadium had been filled. She looked around and saw big shots like Yun Seung-Ah, Raygun, Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, Yoo Yeonha, Refren, Ryu Wei, etc. As expected, they all came to watch Xtra.

“I think contribution points and renown is all that matters on this stage. Some guilds are actually having internal conflicts about this.”

Sehat suddenly appeared beside Rachel and continued.

“Also, I heard it’s possible to recruit normal people into your guild. I mean the people who originally live in this world. Chae Nayun from Essence of the Straits already recruited a high-ranking knight from the Black Tiger Knight Order.”

Rachel only found out about this shocking news thanks to Sehat. She never expected Chae Nayun to make a smart move like that.

“Ah... I see. Thank you for the information.”

Rachel nodded while focusing on the tournament.

Sehat briefly observed her before asking.

“But Ms. Rachel... Did you come here to try and keep Xtra? I heard it’s possible to leave one’s guild as long as they pay the right amount of contribution points.”

“Leave the guild? No, not at all... not at all... I... I’m just here to scout the other guilds’ capabilities.”

Rachel lied without batting an eye.

“Also, there’s no way Xtra would leave our guild.”

She said that, but couldn’t help feeling nervous since the English Royal Court technically did nothing for Xtra. Rachel tried her best to

hide her anxiety as she bit her lips and waited for the tournament to begin.

— Ladies and gentlemen! The archery tournament will now commence!

Xtra went first in the round of 128. The man wearing a lotus mask came up to the stage along with fifteen other contestants.

“Oh right, here. Drink this coffee.”

Sehat offered her a cup of coffee. Rachel quickly drank it as she felt a bit peckish.

— Targets spread!

“Oh?”

The archery tournament couldn't be compared to the boring swordsmanship tournament. First, a total of sixteen contestants competed in each round and something suddenly shot up from the ground.

Pat! Pat! Pat!

Everyone in the stadium looked up at the sky and the things that shot up from the ground exploded. *Bang!* A bunch of paper birds appeared and spread all over the place.

The paper birds flew in a relaxed manner before speeding up faster than a wasp as they zoomed through the air.

— The one who shoots down the most paper birds will win!

“Wow...” Rachel muttered in amazement without even realizing it.

The archery tournament looked fun compared to the swordsmanship tournament she attended.

“It looks fun.”

She said as her gaze landed on Xtra. However, she couldn't help but flinch when they made eye contact.

Side Stories 26

Dream in a Dream (26)

“Why didn’t you participate?”

Aileen asked Jin Seyeon while holding chicken skewers in both hands and licking the dripping sauce.

Jin Seyeon smiled at her.

“What good will it be if I joined? I’m just a supervisor here.”

“*Hmm...* Is that so?”

Aileen gobbled up the chicken skewers and threw the sticks on the floor. Then a nameless hero sitting from behind extended a plate of food to her.

“Excuse me, Madam Aileen. Would you like to eat this as well?”

“What is that?”

“It’s a special street food only sold here. It’s a rice cake called jisupan.”

“Is that so?”

It looked like an egg and a piece of bread at the same time. Aileen took a bite before taking the entire plate.

The nameless hero clenched his fist as if he had won something. After all, he wanted to score some points with Aileen.

Meanwhile, the archery tournament began and all sixteen contestants

came up to the stage.

“Huh? What’s that? Why is he wearing a mask? Is he an attention seeker?”

A man wearing a lotus mask stood out from the rest.

Pat! Pat! Pat! Pat! Pat!

Something shot up from the ground and paper birds suddenly filled the stadium.

— Targets spread! The one who shoots down the most paper birds will win!

Aileen and Jin Seyeon watched with interest.

The other contestants immediately drew their bows and began shooting the paper birds, but the man wearing the lotus mask simply stood there. He looked up as if trying to act cool.

“I guess he’s just an attention seeker,” Aileen grumbled.

Yun Seung-Ah suddenly sat next to her and chimed in.

“I know right.”

She stole one of Aileen’s rice cakes. Aileen immediately pulled back the plate to protect her remaining rice cakes.

“Hey, what the hell do you think you’re doing?”

“It’s quite good. What is this, unni?”

“Whatever, don’t eat it. It’s mine.”

“You’re such a glutton. Anyways, let me introduce someone to you. This is one of my guild members, Kim Suho.”

“Hello.”

Kim Suho bowed and greeted Aileen. Yi Yeonghan, Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, and others also stood next to Kim Suho. They all greeted Aileen with a bow.

“Yeah, yeah, alright.”

Aileen nonchalantly replied and shrugged them off.

The archery tournament just began, so Aileen waved them away. However, Yun Seung-Ah kept talking.

“All of them are my lovely juniors. Please take care of them.”

“Ah, shut up. You’re too noisy. Can’t you see I’m trying to watch the match? Shut your mouth, will you?”

“...”

Aileen closed Yun Seung-Ah’s mouth with Spirit Speech and continued watching the match.

Whiiiiish!

The contestants busily shot their arrows, but one man stood still without doing anything as if he had taken root there. Then he slowly raised his bow.

Creak...

The man finally nocked a black arrow onto his bow.

“Hmm...”

Aileen felt like she might know his identity. She could already sense that his bow belonged to an entirely different league compared to the rest.

Shwaaa!

The man shot his first arrow and it flew ferociously through the air before turning. It moved like a snake and devoured all the paper birds in its way. A single arrow decimated hundreds of paper birds like a living being.

Jin Seyeon observed the spectacle with a serious expression.

“Hey, is he stronger than you?” Aileen asked.

“Pardon me? Ah, why would you ask something like that?”

Jin Seyeon seemed flabbergasted before smiling.

“Pfft,” Aileen smirked in response.

The man’s arrow devoured most of the paper birds, which shocked the host before he declared that Xtra had won. The first match of round 128 concluded.

Xtra returned to the waiting area as the spectators shuffled around.

* * *

Rachel immediately ran over to the waiting area, but Xtra had already left. She hung her head and returned to their accommodation. Her shoulders felt heavy today for some reason.

“Vice Leader is back. Everyone, say hello to our vice leader.”

Their accommodation bustled with people that the guild members met in this world. Knights, mercenaries, artists, etc. all visited their hall.

Rachel greeted them and headed to her room when Marcus suddenly shouted.

“Oh, right! Vice Leader, we have a training area in the basement now!”

“Huh?”

“Our mercenary made it for us.”

The guild members began respectfully addressing Xtra as their mercenary a while ago.

“You should visit it sometime. The facilities are amazing and the mana density is quite high down there.”

“Ahh... Sure...”

Rachel made her way to the basement. A new training area appeared as Marcus had said. She nodded in delight and looked around the state-of-the-art artificial environment. Dirt and sand covered the ground, trees grew all over, and the basement now had lush green scenery. It seemed like the best place in this world to train her spirits.

“We’re already done here, so Vice Leader can use it comfortably. I hope you have a good time.”

“Salute!”

Dale and Kayle saluted her before leaving.

Rachel closed her eyes all alone in the training area and sat on the ground. She wanted to feel the nature and let go of her troubling thoughts.

“Hoo... Hoo...”

She calmed her breathing, but suddenly felt someone’s presence behind her. Rachel opened her eyes and turned around to see a black silhouette against the wall. Kim Hajin stood there wearing his lotus mask.

“How do you like the training area? I invested around three hundred million won to build it.”

Kim Hajin took the initiative and spoke first.

Rachel faked a cough to break the awkward tension and nodded.

“It’s good...”

She suddenly felt much better as if all her burdens had been lifted. It felt as if her world had brightened again after his few words. Rachel brushed her hair behind her ear without realizing it.

“I’m glad you like it.”

Kim Hajin slowly approached and sat beside her. A cool gentle breeze blew.

He broke the long silence again, but his voice didn’t carry the same confidence this time.

“Rachel... By any chance, did you have a dream recently?”

She looked at him and he shifted his gaze to a swaying tree branch.

What did they witness in their dreams? Did their dreams relate to each other? Rachel tried to recall whatever she could.

“Yes...” she replied.

“What kind of dream was it?”

“I...”

She had never dreamt of such a strange dream before where she stood still and time itself seemed to have paused.

“There was a computer and a monitor... and some words on the screen... also, a cup of coffee and cigarettes on the table. I dreamt of something like that...”

Kim Hajin’s expression suddenly hardened. He hesitated before

speaking in a heavy voice.

“It seems we’re sharing things...”

He had a good idea of what Rachel saw. She probably dreamt of his past like he dreamt of hers. However, how could that be possible?

He felt a migraine coming just thinking of the possibilities. Finally, he sighed and handed her something.

“Here, take this.”

“...?”

Rachel reached out for the paper.

“I sold a painting recently. As you know, this third test is no different from society. Money is the most important thing here.”

She looked at the paper. Ones, tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions, tens of millions... hundreds of millions?

Rachel’s mouth opened wide in shock.

“This... this is...”

“It’s the money I earned, but you should be handling it since you’re in charge of the guild.”

“...”

“It’ll be easier to raise contribution points and renown if you have the money. I’ll be entrusting everything to you, Vice Leader.”

Kim Hajin smiled at her.

Rachel became flabbergasted and looked at him full of emotions. Kim Hajin simply laughed at her honesty. As expected, money could solve

everything.

* * *

Four weeks had passed since the third test began.

None of the guilds failed yet, but some guilds would definitely be left behind. Such guilds didn't possess enough renown or contribution points, had internal conflicts, or suffered irreversible damage.

Compared to them, the English Royal Court guild stood strong and the guild members remained close as ever. Honestly, all the credit belonged to me. Any organization doing well would surely have stronger bonds and more loyalty.

I released six paintings in this world and the nobles entered a fierce bidding war for them. Then I invested all my earnings into the English Royal Court. This greatly improved their accommodation and the guild members' welfare. Rachel even had the luxury to formally inaugurate the *[English Royal Court Guild – General Assembly Branch]*.

“Oh, it's the two of you today?”

Rachel joined my meeting with Yoo Yeonha at a café that nobles frequented.

“Please think of me as Hajin's manager,” Rachel said.

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled at those words.

“Well, let's get straight to business. Xtra's value is skyrocketing as we speak.”

Xtra's name already became a brand and influential nobles all wanted my works, which meant the royal family would soon notice me.

“We just have to push a bit more. Soon, we'll meet the king and get permission to cross the bridge.”

Rachel's expression suddenly turned serious. She would be one step closer to Lancaster after crossing that bridge.

Yoo Yeonha sipped her coffee and asked.

"Come to think of it, how many have you painted recently?"

"Ah, that? Painting is more difficult than I thought since I can't just mass produce it."

"Yes, I understand what you mean."

Art remained difficult even with Young Dwarf's Dexterity. I needed a model, inspiration, the will to paint, and the courage to not be embarrassed about the painting.

"Around two?"

"Hmm... Sounds good. I'm thinking of opening a personal exhibit."

Yoo Yeonha presented a pamphlet to me.

[Xtra's Personal Exhibit]

— The personal exhibit of the genius artist Xtra, who appeared like a savior to the stagnant art world...

It seemed she had already finished planning and printing the pamphlets. Yoo Yeonha's work efficiency awed Rachel.

"We can provide lodging for the staff once the exhibit begins."

Rachel proposed as she read the pamphlet.

"I'll be grateful for that. After all, the English Royal Court's accommodation is quite famous these days."

Rachel squirmed as if she found Yoo Yeonha's compliment slightly embarrassing. She wouldn't even dare to look at someone like Yoo

Yeonha outside the general assembly.

“Your two Roof Hasrin coffees are here.”

The waiter brought them two cups of coffee.

I reached out for mine, but Rachel suddenly stopped me.

“Please be careful with your hands. You shouldn’t carelessly touch hot objects.”

She seemed to be muttering something under her breath. *Those are precious hands... Do you know how much you earned with those hands? Do you know how much more you’ll earn with those hands?*

“Please let it cool first before drinking,” Rachel adamantly insisted.

“Ha... Give me a break...”

Yoo Yeonha scoffed in disbelief while staring at Rachel. Then she shook her head and continued.

“Anyways, we need to decide. Where will you go once we get the permit to cross? I hope our paths don’t overlap.”

She sounded serious again. We had already decided on the answer to that question.

“We’re going to where Lancaster is.”

“Hmm...”

Yoo Yeonha nodded as if she expected that.

“Then, we’re going in the opposite direction.”

“Okay, go ahead,” I told her.

“I believe we have an agreement?”

“Yes.”

I smiled and extended my hand. Yoo Yeonha also smiled and we shook hands.

Rachel blankly stared with wide eyes before composing herself and also shaking hands with Yoo Yeonha.

Yoo Yeonha sent a message as we enjoyed this productive atmosphere.

[Essence of the Straits' representative, Yoo Yeonha, has proposed an alliance with the English Royal Court's representative, Rachel.]

[Do you wish to accept?]

Rachel almost tapped yes, but suddenly stopped.

Yoo Yeonha's face crumpled after seeing that and she grumbled.

“Hey... you two... why do you keep acting like amateurs? We already agreed, right?”

Side Stories 27

Dream in a Dream (27)

Her hazy consciousness drifted away as a thick white fog clouded her mind. Rachel slowly opened her eyes and found herself in an unfamiliar room. The smell of coffee and cigarettes overwhelmed her. She dreamt the same dream again.

“Ah...”

She tried to stay still like always, but a desire to move compelled her. She stood, swept the floor, cleaned the cigarette ash and coffee on the table, threw everything in the trash, and went to the front door.

Rachel turned around and looked at the dirty house that became clean again.

“Where is this place?”

She finally made out the house’s layout after cleaning all the mess. This small house only had a living room, kitchen, and bedroom.

Bedroom...

Rachel looked around before grabbing the bedroom doorknob.

“Hoo...”

She had no idea why she felt so nervous just opening a door. She tightly gripped the doorknob before letting go and grabbing it again. She let go in the end and couldn’t muster the courage to open it.

Rachel turned around and spotted a picture frame on the desk. She slowly approached and looked at the three people in the picture. Kim Hajin stood between a middle-aged couple. Anyone would recognize

this as a family picture.

“...?”

She couldn't help but question something strange.

Did Kim Hajin even have a family to begin with?

“!”

Rachel's eyes shot open and a dark ceiling lay in front of her. She had returned to reality in her room.

“Hoo...”

Rachel wiped her face and sat up in bed. She didn't know why, but the dream felt more vivid this time. She went to the bathroom and washed her face. Then she left her room. The corridors looked empty as usual at this hour.

Rachel went down to the training area in the basement to clear her mind.

“Huh?”

However, she found someone else there already. It seemed he fell asleep while training. Kim Hajin slept on the ground without moving in the slightest.

Did that person have the same dream by any chance?

Rachel sat beside him and looked at his sleeping face. She poked his eyes, nose, and lips simply because she felt like being mischievous.

“Umf... Ebebe...”

Kim Hajin moaned as his eyes peeked open. He grumbled when he saw Rachel.

“What the heck? Did you come to train?”

“Yes.”

She replied with a smile.

“*Sigh...* I’ll help you then. *Ughh...*”

He groaned like a grandfather when he stood, which made Rachel giggle. His half-asleep eyes looked cute to her for some reason.

“Now, try sending your spirits to me. *Ah*, wait a second. I’m so thirsty. Let me drink some water first...”

* * *

Xtra’s exhibit attracted massive interest from the nobles. It only displayed seven paintings, but various counts and viscounts came to praise Kim Hajin.

“It’s a relief everything went smoothly.”

The exhibit went on for around seven hours and ended in huge success.

“I think this will be more than enough. Please leave the auction tomorrow to our guild members and get some well-deserved rest.”

Yoo Yeonha looked satisfied and went over the auction schedule with Rachel in the lounge.

I stretched my arms and asked, “Will we even be able to meet the king by doing this?”

“It’s strange that there hasn’t been any reaction so far, but I’m certain something will happen as long as we keep—”

Bam!

The lounge's backdoor swung open and knights poured in.

Rachel instantly stood on guard.

"Halt! Stop moving at once!" one of the knights shouted.

I simply sat there and blinked a few times.

The dozens of knights that barged in surrounded the room. Then a person with their face covered by a silk veil waltzed into the room. They wore simple clothing that exuded luxury.

"How dare you? Try and see what happens if you pull that out!"

The knight shouted in a threatening manner when Rachel moved her hand towards Galatine.

Rachel looked angry and wanted to retort, but the veiled person spoke first.

"Enough, you may leave."

The woman had a strong and commanding voice.

I slightly tilted my head because I had heard that voice before.

"B-But Your Majesty!"

"Leave, Ruten. I have something very personal to discuss with these people."

"Yes, Your Majesty... We will be guarding the perimeter outside."

The knight wore a sullen expression and led his subordinates out.

"..."

I couldn't comprehend this situation and the other two next to me

couldn't as well. We simply sat and stared at the person referred to as Your Majesty.

Her Majesty turned towards me. I couldn't see her face, but I could tell she was smiling for some reason.

Yoo Yeonha carefully knelt on one knee and offered a greeting.

"It is an honor to meet Your Majesty—"

"Nice to meet you too."

Her Majesty cut off Yoo Yeonha and completely disregarded her. Instead, she directly approached me.

Yoo Yeonha bit her lips in disappointment.

"It's been a while..."

Her Majesty's tone sounded as if she spoke to a servant.

Only then did I finally smirk. I knew this voice from a distant past and figured out her identity without even seeing her face. Rachel seemed more certain than me judging from her expression.

I carefully said her name.

"Tomer?"

"Ah, it's been a while since I heard that name."

Tomer took off her veil and looked the same as I recalled with her Latina features, sun-kissed skin, and proud look. She stared at me with nostalgia.

"Good to see you again, Kim Hajin."

"I guess you can say that. It's so good to see you that I'm speechless."

Rachel stepped forward with a face that said, *Please notice me too.*

“Ah, and Rachel too.”

“Geez...”

Yoo Yeonha got up with an upset look after being left out. She raised a brow at Tomer, who somehow became the king here.

“What is this situation? Can you kindly explain what’s going on?”

* * *

“You didn’t have to do something so bothersome like an exhibit.”

Tomer guided us to the palace’s banquet hall, which lived up to its name with an extremely long table filled with all sorts of scrumptious food.

Rachel’s eyes sparkled at the sight.

“Your paintings weren’t bad,” Tomer nonchalantly said.

“Is that so?” I replied.

Tomer somehow went against my story settings and appeared here, which made me relieved and confused.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” she asked with a smirk.

Rachel, who engrossed herself in eating, suddenly turned towards me.

“Anyways, we want to cross the bridge. Please?”

I tried to sound respectful at the end just in case.

Tomer smacked her knee and laughed. “*Kekeke!* Hey, no need for the formalities. Just be comfortable. It’s only us here.”

“Ah, alright... sure... then... there are four continents in this third test, right?”

“Yeah, there are four.”

“Is there a kingdom where Lancaster is king?”

Rachel dropped her lobster and focused on our conversation.

“Yes, that’s correct. Lancaster is also here and he recreated England on the largest continent.”

As expected, I guessed right on the money. I continued asking with a hint of anxiety.

“Do you know what that bastard is planning?”

“*Hmm...* No idea...”

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t stand the current atmosphere. No, did she not like the food? She kept poking at a lobster with her fork and mumbled to herself. *I wonder if this will taste good with ramyeon?*

“Do you know what the people here are?” Tomer asked me with a smile.

“Beats me. Aren’t they created by the General Assembly?”

“It’s similar, but different. They’re the souls of people who used to live in Central Asia. The dead were granted new life within the General Assembly. Those people can’t survive outside this place.”

Tak! Tomer stabbed her lobster.

“Also, Lancaster is trying to recreate the former England here.”

“...”

Rachel seemed mortified at those words and Tomer bitterly smiled.

“That bastard is... he’s trying to resurrect the people who died that day at the Hampton Palace. However, it’s impossible to resurrect the dead even if this is the general assembly.”

Tomer transferred her lobster to another plate and continued.

“The spirits of the dead can be briefly resurrected, but their memories and habits can’t be perfectly recreated. That bastard refuses to accept that fact and is stubbornly trying to recreate England.”

“What is he doing over there right now?” Rachel calmly asked.

“I can say with certainty that he’s recreating the past. He’s trying to make his England overlap with the real England and he claims that everyone can return or regress to the past once he succeeds.”

It couldn’t be understood with common logic. Yoo Yeonha quietly listened the entire time and asked.

“Is that even possible?”

“It might be with a miracle or sacrifice.”

Tomer looked at Rachel again and continued.

“I mean, it’s possible with the General Assembly’s miracle and if millions of English people are sacrificed.”

“...”

Rachel clenched her fists and I gently held her trembling hands.

“Also, you won’t be able to cross the bridge since Lancaster destroyed it.”

“Then—”

“However, there’s still a way with an underground path.”

“Underground path?”

“This place was a vast area when I first came. I think it was around three years ago? The four continents were actually one and the underground path is a remnant from those days.”

Tomer opened her hand and an image of the underground path appeared in the air.

“Only a maximum of three people can use it at the same time. Lancaster will immediately notice if more than that uses it. You’ll be able to reach his fake England if you walk for two to four days, but there could be monsters lurking underground. It’s been neglected for quite a while.”

“That’s fine,” Rachel shook her head.

“What about the other continents?” Yoo Yeonha carefully asked.

“The other continents? *Ah*, the other continents should be fine. They aren’t as greedy and ambitious as Lancaster. Anyways, one is a Lego world and the other’s setting is the Joseon^[1] Dynasty.”

Diririring!

An emergency siren suddenly cried out from our smartwatches.

Tomer stopped talking and Rachel looked at me.

[Kayle: Hey, where did all of our money in the safe go? I mean, our cash and all the other stuff.]

[Fermin: ??? What are you talking about? It’s all in the safe.]

[Kayle: No, it was in the safe until I checked just now and everything is gone. Did Vice Leader take it? The contribution points we converted into checks all disappeared as well.]

[Fermin: No way. Hey, wait a minute. I’m on my way. Who was standing

watch over our safe today?]

[The English Royal Court's guild member, Marcus, has left the guild.]

[Fermin: Huh? Ah, fuck... wait a minute... That bastard Marcus...]

“Ah...” Rachel gasped in horror.

I bit my lips and sighed.

“What happened? Is it something big? Let me look,” Tomer asked.

Rachel showed her the messages on her smartwatch.

“Oh... This guy must've been one of Lancaster's minions.”

Tomer nonchalantly stated and shrugged.

“But where else would he run to? Wouldn't it obviously be England? You want to use the underground path right now?”

I looked at Rachel and she stepped forward with a cold look.

“Yes, I would like to.”

“Alright then. Follow me.”

Tomer stood from her seat and guided us out of the banquet hall. Two of her servants each carried over a huge sack.

“I packed some rations and other stuff you'll need in there. Feel free to use it.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

We took the sacks and followed Tomer. I spoke formally since several others watched us outside the banquet hall. The royal palace had something similar to an elevator and we took it to the basement.

“Wait a minute,” Tomer said.

She stepped forward into the pitch-black basement and lit a torch. Our faces turned orange from the flame’s glow.

“Continue climbing down. Be careful,” Tomer warned.

We descended the stairs spiraling into darkness and continued for fifteen minutes.

Tomer finally stopped walking.

“This is it.”

She illuminated the wooden door with her torch as we stood in front of it. Tomer took out a smartwatch from her pocket and smiled.

“Here, send me a message if things get too dangerous. I’ll immediately summon you.”

[The Great Emperor, Yutor, has proposed an alliance with Xtra of the English Royal Court.]

“How is it? Does it work? My smartwatch is a bit old.”

“Yeah, it’s working great.”

I immediately entered an alliance with Tomer.

“Have a safe trip, I guess? You don’t have anything else to prepare, right? After all, your entire safe just got robbed.”

She was absolutely correct. Most of our cash and equipment had been stored there.

“Thank you,” I said.

“Thank me for what? I should be thanking you.”

Tomer returned my gratitude and opened the door.

A cold, damp breeze blew from the passage. I held Rachel's hand as we stepped inside together. We walked for a while when I suddenly noticed someone else. A black silhouette seemed to be glaring at me, so I instantly turned around. Chills went down my spine.

Yoo Yeonha had followed us.

"Ack! Hey! You surprised me! Why the hell are you here?" I shouted after jumping in fright.

"What do you mean? I was here the whole time?" Yoo Yeonha retorted with a scowl.

"What I mean is, why would you follow us?"

"We're allies, right? Then I have the right to follow, no? Also, I was with you from the start. Why are you so surprised?"

I felt flabbergasted and glanced at Rachel. She nodded as if to say Yoo Yeonha could tag along. Rachel always cared about connections and networking, so of course she would use this opportunity to build some rapport with Yoo Yeonha.

"Alright, I give you permission to tag along..."

"Hey, what are you talking about? I said I was here from the start. What do you mean by permission?"

1. Joseon is the ancient kingdom of Korea. Most Korean historical movies are set in the Joseon Dynasty. 🖐

Side Stories 28

Dream in a Dream (28)

[Rachel: It's fine. Someone will soon arrive to assist us.]

[Rachel: I'll go catch Marcus, so please cooperate with them for now.]

Their vice leader tried her best to console Fermin, who couldn't help but despair.

"That son of a bitch. He really took everything."

"I always found him suspicious."

Darren sighed while massaging his forehead.

Fermin's eyes shot open and asked, "Really? How? What part of him was suspicious?"

"*Huh? Ah...* He always stayed out late these days and... he's been doing things alone for a while now."

They could see it in hindsight, but Marcus never did anything that would've raised suspicions. Fermin couldn't understand why he chose to run now of all times. He could've stolen much more if he waited until the auction ended.

"*Ah...* This is driving me nuts," she grumbled.

Whatever his reasons, looking at the empty safe felt heart-wrenching. It contained everything they possessed. Not only their cash, jewelry, and gold, but also the checks they used for transactions with other guilds to trade contribution points.

Marcus stole all of it. They only had the seven paintings left that Xtra

auctioned at his exhibit.

“Haaa...”

Fermin couldn't help but sigh.

Sehat shook his head and approached the safe with one of his guild members who possessed the detect ability.

“Marcus left a lot of signs, but we can't tell where he went.”

The Reislauder guild came to help as an ally.

Fermin thanked them before collapsing into a chair.

“Does Vice Leader even know where Marcus went? How is she going to chase him?” Kayle asked out loud.

“Who knows? The swordsmanship tournament isn't even over yet,” Darren replied.

The English Royal Court's mansion suddenly grew rowdy outside. They heard dozens of footsteps rushing towards the basement where they kept the safe.

Fermin instantly stood and Sehat grabbed his sword. All of them held their breaths and heightened their senses before three knights in platinum armor entered the room.

The knights suddenly displayed a document and announced.

“I am the royal knight, Ruin. I have been issued a royal command to help all of you.”

A royal command meant it came from the king himself. They couldn't understand the situation, but Fermin nodded anyway since the knights came to help.

Then their smartwatches rang.

[The English Royal Court has become the first guild to come in contact with the king's command!]

[All guild members will receive contribution points!]

“This is a gift from Her Majesty.”

Ruin and the other knights placed a chest on the ground. It contained swords, wands, bows, and other equipment.

The guild members stood dumbfounded before reaching towards the chest. Fermin moved first and took two wands. These high-quality wands would serve her well as a healer.

“Her Majesty also plans to purchase all of Xtra’s paintings on auction and bestow them to the nobles. We will inform the nobles ourselves, so please hand over the paintings.”

Fermin’s forehead creased at Ruin’s words.

She knew this would happen. How dare they think of throwing a bone with some equipment and snatching these invaluable paintings from under their noses! These paintings would easily fetch at least a few billion won each!

Ruin extended a check to Fermin.

“This is the amount Her Majesty will pay.”

Fermin glared at the knight before taking the check. However, her vision suddenly spun and she felt dizzy when she laid eyes on the paper. It felt as if her eyeballs would pop out from their sockets.

“Oh my god... Wow... How many zeroes are there?” she muttered in shock.

Yes, the check had an endless number of zeroes.

I held a torch in one hand as we walked through the dark and winding underground passage. I focused my eyes deep inside in case any ghosts or monsters appeared. Fortunately, I didn't spot any enemies so far.

"Why did Marcus do that?"

Rachel finally spoke after a long silence. She still seemed to be arranging her thoughts.

Actually, I already had an idea why he would do something like that. I didn't know if I should tell Rachel though. Not to mention, I found something strange about Marcus' actions. He stabbed Rachel in the back, but sincerely worried about her every time something happened.

"Let's think about that later."

I looked at Yoo Yeonha, who busily messaged her Essence of the Strait members.

"Why don't you just go back if you're so worried about them?"

I peeked at Yoo Yeonha's conversation.

"*Huh? Ah*, what are you talking about? I'm not worried at all."

She waved and turned off her smartwatch.

"I already came all the way here, so I might as well see what's available over there."

"But... what did you tell your guild?"

"I told them I'll be absent for a while."

I recalled her last message and recited it out loud.

"...The English Royal Court's safe was just robbed, so stay vigilant. We're the guild with the most cash right now..."

“Ah...” Yoo Yeonha flinched at my words.

Rachel stole a glance at me before speed-walking away.

“Let’s hurry. We have to stop Lancaster and whatever there might be in that fake England.”

We pressed on. An hour passed, two hours, and three hours... Time flowed strangely within this underground passage. Only the time on our smartwatches changed, but the scenery around us never did.

“I think I have an idea why people get claustrophobic now.”

Yoo Yeonha grumbled and sighed while tapping the walls.

I took out my Black Lotus Bow and they both flinched.

“Is there something in front?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“Yeah.”

I looked at the horde of monsters ahead that looked like moles.

“I’ll shoot them down.”

Shwiiiiik!

My arrow fiercely flew towards them and penetrated their heads. I shot down eight of them with a single arrow that defied the laws of physics.

I placed the bow on my back again when my smartwatch rang.

[You have killed a monster on the boundary of space.]

[Your smartwatch will be disconnected from the previous continent.]

“Huh?”

“Eh?”

Rachel and Yoo Yeonha received the same message.

“What is this? What does this mean?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“I have no idea, but we can only press on.”

The corpses of the mole monsters appeared after we walked for around three minutes. It seemed to be about five hundred meters away from where we stood a while ago. My vision could only go so far here.

“Ugh...”

Yoo Yeonha groaned and covered her nose. Rachel also grimaced as she stepped over the corpses.

I didn’t spot anything out of the ordinary, but Yoo Yeonhwa suddenly asked.

“Excuse me, the air suddenly changed. Did you not feel that?”

“It must be the stench from those corpses,” I replied.

Indeed, the air reeked of a stench that I couldn’t quite make out. It probably came from those corpses.

Rachel and Yoo Yeonha formed a gas mask with their mana. My mask already had those functions.

“It feels much better now. Let’s keep moving.”

“Is that so?”

I took another step when my body suddenly staggered. My legs gave out before I knew it and I dropped to the floor. *Thud!*

“Hajin, are you alright?” Rachel asked as she helped me up.

I dusted my knees and bitterly smiled.

“Ah, yes. I think I tripped over something.”

“Be careful.”

Rachel seemed worried about me.

“Ha!” Yoo Yeonha scoffed and glared at us.

“The two of you look real *good* together.”

She emphasized the word good for some reason. Did she pronounce it wrong or did I mishear?

I continued walking, but found it difficult to maintain my balance. It felt like a strong gust of wind kept pulling and pushing me from the front and back. It also grew more difficult to think the further I walked.

Where was I? Oh, right. I'm in an underground tunnel... but it's too dark... Is it alright for a tunnel to be so dark?

Still, I continued walking.

Thud!

My body collapsed again, but my entire body lay on the ground this time.

Kim... Ha... Jin...?

Someone's voice distorted in an eerie manner.

I couldn't move my limbs and could only think as I sprawled on the ground.

Something feels off... Was I poisoned or drugged? No, that shouldn't be possible... One of my traits is the Medicinal Memory Physique, so it

shouldn't be...

My consciousness began to drift and the world grew further away. My ears went dull and my vision slowly darkened as well.

A dark figure suddenly appeared and grabbed me by the shoulders. I couldn't see who, but it must've been a person.

“-----!”

A voice screamed like a broken record or a video being played in reverse.

My head felt as if it twisted and turned. No, it really did twist and turn.

“-----!”

The voice screamed again.

It felt as if the voice shook my brain and I couldn't help but grimace in pain.

“-----!”

The entire surroundings turned black after the third scream and my fleeting consciousness finally snapped.

I blacked out.

* * *

“... ”

“... ”

Kim Hajin groaned some gibberish before suddenly losing consciousness. Rachel and Yoo Yeonha became speechless at the turn of events. They blankly stood there and stared at him.

Only the wind blowing through the underground passage could be heard in this deafening silence. Neither of them moved.

Rachel stopped Yoo Yeonha from taking off Kim Hajin's mask.

"Why?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

"He's poisoned."

Rachel calmly diagnosed Kim Hajin's current state.

His blood vessels turned green, his lips turned purple, and his eyes lost focus. These signs clearly indicated he had been poisoned. However, Rachel couldn't tell what kind of poison.

"Ah... It'll be alright. We were told to ask for help whenever we needed it."

Yoo Yeonha quickly switched on her smartwatch.

[You have killed a monster on the boundary of space.]

[Your smartwatch will disconnect from the previous continent.]

Her smartwatch didn't work anymore.

"Oh, right... but everything will still be fine. We just have to go back the way we came—"

Kuuruu... ruuung...

A sinister sound echoed from behind them. It sounded like something coming up from the ground. Could it be more comrades of those mole monsters they just killed?

Yoo Yeonha nervously gulped and called out.

"Rachel?"

However, Rachel froze while looking down at Kim Hajin and didn't say a word.

"Kieeeeeee!"

Monsters cried out from behind them. Another cry could be heard from the front as if responding to those cries.

"Gueeeee!"

Yoo Yeonha sighed amid these monster cries going back and forth.

"Sigh... Maybe I shouldn't have come?"

She looked at Rachel again.

Rachel seemed to be panicking as her hands uncontrollably shook. Then she turned towards Yoo Yeonha.

"Let's run. We have to get out of here."

Cold sweat formed on Rachel's forehead.

"Alright, but I don't think those moles are that strong."

Kim Hajin wiped them out with a single arrow. Besides, Yoo Yeonha was also a high-intermediate rank hero. She pursed her lips and rolled up her sleeves. Then she took out the whip at her waist. It had been a long time since she used it, but the time to show off her skills had come.

"Leave the monsters to me. Just focus on protecting that guy. What about the poison though? Do you think you'll be able to cure it?"

"..."

Rachel remained silent and Yoo Yeonha clicked her tongue.

"Tsk... Figures, the spirit of poison is probably too difficult for you to

handle.”

She glanced at Kim Hajin to check his current state. It seemed quite serious as he began to have difficulty breathing. She had never seen him in such a weakened state before.

Yoo Yeonha found it too strange. How come nothing happened to them and only Kim Hajin?

Bzz... Bzzt... Bzzt!

An electric current formed around her whip, which she used more as a conductor than a weapon. Her electricity's power would be amplified several times in this damp and narrow space.

“Run as soon as I give you the signal,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“Gueeee!”

The moles cried out in a threatening manner and seemed to have caught their scents.

Yoo Yeonha shouted at that exact moment.

“Now!”

She smacked her whip on the ground.

Bzzzaaaaaat!

A wave of electric currents ferociously spread across the narrow and damp passage.

Side Stories 29

Dream in a Dream (29)

Yoo Yeonha's wave of electric currents spread all over and heated the air in the underground passage. The ferocious currents devoured the mole monsters and the grotesque crackling of their flesh being fried replaced their earlier cries.

"Heh."

Yoo Yeonha smirked and confidently crossed her arms over her chest. She turned around with her heels clacking.

"How dare you go against...?"

The mole monsters suddenly cried out again in the middle of her victory speech.

"Kieeeeeee!"

Yoo Yeonha's smug smile disappeared and she stood there stupefied.

"Grrr..."

A toad with bright red eyes glared at her from the dark. She couldn't understand what just happened.

Bzzt!

Sparks crackled around the monsters and it seemed they already adapted to it. Yoo Yeonha just turned ordinary monsters into electric monsters.

"..."

“What did you do?”

Rachel asked when Yoo Yeonha became silent.

Yoo Yeonha grabbed the hem of Rachel’s clothes.

“I think... *Hmm...* It’ll be better for me to hold onto him and we both fight these monsters...”

“*Huh?*”

“*Grrrrrrng!*”

The mole monsters growled and unleashed electric currents from their bodies.

“*Ouch!*”

Yoo Yeonha jumped in surprise and hid behind Rachel while rubbing the arm that had been zapped.

“So... I think these monsters have resistance against electricity. What I’m trying to say is... It’s not an exaggeration to call them my natural predators... Hurry up and help...”

Yoo Yeonha muttered from behind.

“*Ah...* Please be careful with him,” Rachel replied.

“Hurry up and pass him to me. Those monsters are scaring me!”

Rachel thought for a moment before passing Kim Hajin over. Yoo Yeonha carried him on her back and faked a cough when the embarrassment finally came through.

“I’ll get going then,” Rachel said.

“*Ehem!*”

Yoo Yeonha faked another cough and stuck closely behind.

“Hap!”

Rachel kicked off the ground and charged forward.

“Kieeeeeee!”

The mole monsters charged as well, but Rachel bravely swung Galatine and pierced through the crowd. The monsters shot poison darts from behind them, but Yoo Yeonha defended with an electric barrier. The poison darts immediately disintegrated on contact.

“Don’t let go of him!”

Rachel shouted as she cut through the monsters. Blood and flesh splattered whenever Galatine shone. It didn’t take long for Rachel to be covered in blood.

“Don’t even think about looking back. A huge army of moles is chasing us!” Yoo Yeonha exclaimed in terror.

They continued running as the monsters chased them. The dark underground passage went on forever with no end in sight. They couldn’t help but doubt if an exit really existed. However, they couldn’t afford to turn back now. No, they could no longer turn back.

Rachel turned around to check Kim Hajin’s condition.

“Look in front of you! Look in front!”

Yoo Yeonha kept screaming, so Rachel’s eyes immediately darted back to the front.

A huge mole monster blocked the entire passage with its body.

Rachel swung Galatine as hard as she could.

-----!

Galatine unleashed a diagonal wave that split the monster in half. The three of them jumped through the huge monster's torn body while being rained with blood, flesh, and all sorts of bodily fluids.

“Ahhh... Fuck this...”

Yoo Yeonha cursed and looked like she would vomit at any moment.

* * *

Meanwhile, Tomer typed something on her laptop in the king's study. Only the king could use this unique laptop that could communicate between this world and the outside world.

[Search: Xtra]

[Search: Rachel]

[Search: Kim Hajin]

Tomer searched all sorts of keywords on the internet and Violet Banquet. She found a ton of articles on Rachel, who was famous since birth. She also found articles about Xtra, who had been a hot topic lately. However, she couldn't find anything on Kim Hajin.

“What the hell were you up to all this time?” Tomer muttered with a smile.

She knew he dropped out of Cube, but had no idea why and wanted to know what he had been doing.

Her face stiffened as she took out a letter from her pocket. Her father had left it for her and she would've never found it without Kim Hajin. This letter became Tomer's treasure because it contained her deceased father's honest feelings and thoughts.

“Hooo...”

Tomer sighed and reclined in her chair. She felt indebted to Kim Hajin

and probably would've aimlessly wandered and become a djinn if not for him.

“...”

Tomer ran away after learning the truth from Kim Hajin that day.

However, she paid a heavy price to break free from her bonds. The djinns labeled her as a traitor and chased her to the ends of the earth. Ironically, she only became this strong thanks to that experience.

She stumbled upon a cave in Central Asia around three years ago while tending to her wounds. The djinns had been chasing her when she received an invitation from the General Assembly.

A strange message popped up on her smartwatch that day.

[Congratulations.]

[You have been selected as one of the Beta Testers for the general assembly.]

[Do you wish to participate in the general assembly?]

She would've ignored the message as spam any other day, but her enemies would soon close in on her hideout. Tomer tapped *[Yes]* and grasped onto anything she could find.

Then, she found herself in a dark space. A few hundred people also arrived there and the General Assembly tested them in various ways.

Tomer survived until the end.

“Ah... I'm getting worried...”

She couldn't personally help Kim Hajin despite owing him. She could indirectly help as the continent's ruler, but couldn't interfere any more than that.

Her best option would be to find someone who could support him, but it would have to be a living person from outside the general assembly. Tomer couldn't bring in too many people. She needed someone who could help Kim Hajin alone and support him to the fullest extent.

“Ah!”

Tomer exclaimed after thinking of the perfect person. She immediately opened her laptop again and messaged that person.

* * *

The underground passage contained various monsters.

Not only the mole monsters, but a huge anaconda also waited for them with its mouth wide open pretending to be a part of the passage. They almost fell for it and became snake food, but Rachel displayed superhuman strength and decimated all their enemies.

Her swordsmanship perfectly harmonized with her spirits. It seemed she finally broke through her limits.

“Over there!” Yoo Yeonha exclaimed and her face brightened up.

A faint light ahead signaled the end of their misery. They ran with all their remaining strength and jumped towards the light when they reached it.

The scenery changed almost immediately and the mole monsters and various other creatures chasing them disappeared.

“Haa... Haa... Haa...”

“Urgh!”

The two of them sat on the ground and caught their breaths. They remained like that for a while before checking their new surroundings.

It still seemed to be an underground tunnel, but a stream flowed in

front with walkways on both sides wide enough to walk on.

They ended up in the sewers.

“Ah... This is killing me...” Yoo Yeonha grumbled.

Rachel, drenched in blood and gasping for air, approached her.

“Now... Please, give... to me...”

“Give what?”

“Hajin... *Haa... Haa...*”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled in disbelief before putting Kim Hajin on Rachel’s back.

Rachel began walking while carrying him.

“Let’s go.”

“Are you not even exhausted?” Yoo Yeonha asked while standing in the same spot.

“We don’t have time to rest. We have to hurry.”

Rachel glared at her. She couldn’t understand why Yoo Yeonha took her sweet time despite Hajin’s dire condition.

“Hey, you know... that guy isn’t so weak that you have to worry so much.”

Yoo Yeonha grumbled as if she found Rachel frustrating.

Honestly, Kim Hajin could pass as a top hero without a hitch in her opinion. He wouldn’t die from something like poison.

“Then, feel free to stay as long as you want. Alone,” Rachel curtly replied.

Yoo Yeonha couldn't help but sigh.

“*Huuu...* Alright, I'm coming.”

Fortunately, the sewers didn't have any monsters and it didn't take long for them to find a ladder going up. The ladder connected to a manhole that led to the surface.

“Wait a minute. Before we go up...”

Yoo Yeonha stopped Rachel from climbing and rummaged through her bag. She took out a water canteen and robes.

“Wash up first. We'll stand out too much.”

“*Ah...*”

Rachel realized she had been drenched in blood.

Yoo Yeonha poured the water and Rachel used her spirits to completely clean their bodies. Then, they covered themselves with the robes.

“Let's go.”

“Sure, sure.”

They climbed the ladder and peeked out of the manhole. The scene outside looked exactly like England.

“*Ughhh...*”

Yoo Yeonha stretched after leaving the manhole.

Rachel stood stupefied while looking around. She recognized the clear, yet gloomy sky and the brick and mortar buildings with a few

wood ones sprinkled throughout. It looked like London before the reformation period.

Memories from the past made her nostalgic, but she shook her head and came back to her senses. She didn't have time to waste on nostalgia.

"Let's find a hospital first," Rachel quickly said.

"No." Yoo Yeonha stopped her with a warning.

"Lancaster will immediately find us if we go somewhere like that."

"But still—"

"I know we're in a rush, but let's try to think."

They had no idea how far Lancaster's influence reached here, so they couldn't afford to hastily act. Kim Hajin remained unconscious, but their enemies posed a far greater threat than the poison.

"What do you propose when we don't even have IDs? They'll call the police as soon as the hospital finds out."

"..."

Indeed, Rachel couldn't refute such a sound argument.

"Alright, we have to at least find a place for him to rest. We both learned how to cure poison, right? It's been a long time since we studied it, but..."

"Okay."

The two roamed the bustling London streets after agreeing.

Rachel couldn't help but wonder, *What kind of world is Lancaster trying to create? Does he truly believe that he can be happy by turning what's fake into reality?*

A signboard caught her eye. It belonged to a shop that sold newspapers and magazines. Rachel walked over and checked the date. It read January 1st of that year.

Meanwhile, Yoo Yeonha looked at the back of the newspaper after Rachel froze from seeing the date.

“Hmm... Follow me. I think we can get a place,” Yoo Yeonha told her.

[Share House – We Share Empty Places!]

* * *

“Shall we eat first?” Yoo Yeonha asked while rubbing her stomach. She felt like she would die from hunger after running and fighting an entire day without eating.

However, Rachel suffered the most and shook her head as if she didn’t have an appetite.

“Alright, well... I guess I have no choice then... *Haaa...* I should just cook up some ramyeon or something since I don’t have an appetite as well. This ramyeon... I normally don’t eat this, but... I guess I have no choice...”

Yoo Yeonha took out a gas stove and placed a pot on it while mumbling.

“It doesn’t taste that good and it’s classless food on the level of fodder. However, this is the best I can do right now since I need a quick bite. It cooks quite quickly, so I’ll have to eat this... Yeah, I have no choice but to eat this for my survival... Yes...”

Rachel paid her no mind and only focused on Kim Hajin. She tightly squeezed his hands, which had turned blue. She felt guilty that he ended up like this because of her, but strongly believed that he could overcome this.

“Don’t worry so much. He won’t die that easily. His body is probably naturally curing itself right now. See? He looks much better than a

while ago, right?”

Yoo Yeonha pointed out the fact that he looked better than before. His body seemed to be slowly detoxifying the poison thanks to his *[Medicinal Memory Physique]*, which they had no idea about.

“Hum Hum Hum...”

Rachel was worried sick despite his improving condition while Yoo Yeonha hummed a tune and cracked an egg over the ramyeon.

Rachel didn’t even spare her a glance.

Yoo Yeonhwa asked a bit reluctantly after cooking the ramyeon.

“Do you want a... Do you want a bite?”

Rachel looked at her and Yoo Yeonha nervously gulped. This moment felt extremely nerve-wracking for Yoo Yeonha. What would Rachel say?

“No.” Rachel shook her head.

Yoo Yeonha inwardly sighed in relief.

“Alright. It’s just ramyeon, so I’m sure you’re better off without it.”

Slurp! Slurp!

Yoo Yeonha made delicious sounds as she slurped the ramyeon. Rachel stared at her without saying anything.

Yoo Yeonha didn’t pay her any mind this time. She ignored her... ignored her... and ignored her... until she felt so bothered that she couldn’t ignore her anymore. She slammed her chopsticks down.

“What? What do you want?”

“...”

Rachel remained silent.

“Do you want a bite?”

“...”

“Say something, will you?”

“...”

“Then, I’ll finish this all by myself.”

Grrk... Grruuk...

Rachel’s stomach suddenly growled and she carefully muttered like a stray cat asking for food.

“Just... Just one bite...”

“*Haa...* this is driving me crazy...”

The trio spent their first day in this small, cozy, and cramped room.

Side Stories 30

Dream in a Dream (30)

Rachel stepped out onto the streets and went to buy a laptop at Yoo Yeonha's request. She paid for the laptop by bartering some of her items. The laptop didn't have high specs, but at least they could access the news and community sites.

They had undoubtedly ended up in the old England.

"Welcome back. What about the laptop? Did you manage to buy one?" Yoo Yeonha asked while observing Kim Hajin's blood sample.

"Yes," Rachel replied as she hung her robe on the coat stand.

"Please hand it over. I need to analyze the poison's properties."

Rachel widened her eyes and ran over with a look that seemed to say, *Are you serious?*

"I infused my electricity into the blood sample and it showed some reactions. I recognized the poison almost immediately since it's quite famous," Yoo Yeonha nonchalantly said.

Rachel stiffened at those words. A poison would only be famous for two reasons. One, people commonly encountered or used it. Two, it was one of the most lethal poisons out there.

"This poison is called Empty Dream," Yoo Yeonha informed her.

"Empty Dream..."

"It's a very rare and unique poison."

Empty Dream required extracts from all sorts of rare ingredients and

could be considered one of the most lethal poisons. However, it couldn't directly kill the victim. Rather, it forced its victim into an eternal sleep that they would never wake up from.

"This is dangerous... very dangerous..."

"It'll take some time for him to wake up."

Rachel looked serious, but Yoo Yeonha only flashed a bitter smile.

Yoo Yeonha had always considered Kim Hajin to be much stronger than Kim Suho. He might've lost his passion and dropped out of Cube, but she firmly believed his toughness remained over the years.

"He'll be fine. I'm certain he'll wake up."

"..."

Rachel weakly nodded in agreement, but still had a hard time composing herself.

"Anyways, don't be too worried. Dreams are meant to be woken up from."

Yoo Yeonha took the laptop and sat in front of the desk.

Rachel watched her type away before suddenly thinking of a brilliant idea. The Empty Dream made its victim dream, but she recently experienced sharing dreams with Kim Hajin for some unknown reason.

That means...

Rachel snuck under the sheets and lay next to Kim Hajin. She brought her face as close as possible to his.

"Hey Rachel, come take a look at this... W-What?!" Yoo Yeonha exclaimed in surprise when she turned around and saw the situation. She stuttered in shock, "W-What do you think you're doing?"

“Who knows... this might work—” Rachel replied, but Yoo Yeonha immediately ran over and pulled her away from him.

“It looks too indecent!” she exclaimed.

“What do you mean by indecent? Let go of me. I have to sleep here to —”

“Get out this instant! Right now!”

“But it’s not what you think... *Tsk...*”

Rachel glared at Yoo Yeonha after being dragged out of the bed.

Yoo Yeonha’s face flushed red. “W-What do you think you’re doing when the sun is still up? Why are you doing this? Have you gone crazy? Are you insane?!”

“No... it’s not what you think...”

Yoo Yeonha kept chirping like a bird all worked up. Only after she calmed down did Rachel finally explain her plan.

* * *

Rachel experienced her first dream in the same familiar, yet unfamiliar space. She felt certain that Kim Hajin lived in this house and finally mustered the courage to open the bedroom door, which she failed to open last time. A man slept on the small bed.

Rachel silently observed him and he slowly opened his eyes as if he noticed her. She woke up from the dream the moment he woke up.

She dreamt her second dream at the Hampton Palace.

Kim Hajin found her this time and he placed her younger self on his shoulder as he ran away from the palace. She could feel a strange sense of warmth from him.

Then she woke up from that dream when the surroundings cracked and turned into a white space of nothingness.

Rachel's third dream took place at Kim Hajin's house again, but they could look at each other now. He lay in bed as she stood there, but she suddenly woke up. Oddly enough, she couldn't recall their conversation.

After that, she dreamt her fourth, fifth, and sixth dreams...

The two of them shared their past. Their dreams grew longer and clearer the more she dreamt. They gradually reached the depths of their consciousness.

"You're putting in quite the effort."

Yoo Yeonha looked at Rachel, who just woke up and rubbed her eyes.

"Did you share dreams again?" Yoo Yeonha asked her.

"Yes, but I can't remember our conversations..."

The results kept turning out the same. The vivid dream grew vague after she woke up and her memories from the dream scattered away.

"Then, shall we go for a stroll?" Yoo Yeonha suggested.

"..."

Rachel silently looked at Kim Hajin still under the Empty Dream.

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled and tapped Rachel's shoulder.

"It'll be alright. I've already set up a powerful barrier here, so we'll be immediately notified if something ever happens. Rather than that, don't you think time travel is a rare opportunity?"

Yoo Yeonha seemed to be in a good mood.

Rachel looked out the window and saw the pleasant weather today. This type of weather would be rare even in the real England. The sun brightly shone and a cool breeze gently blew through the trees. The scenery outside looked picturesque.

“Just for thirty minutes,” Rachel muttered.

“Sounds good.”

The two of them went out to the bustling streets of England. Several families also came out for the weekend. Children’s laughter and smiling parents made for a beautiful sight under the sun and gentle breeze.

Had the atmosphere always been this pleasant and peaceful before the reformation? No, before the incident at the Hampton Palace?

“Wow, this looks exactly like what I saw in textbooks!” Yoo Yeonha exclaimed as she stood in front of a red telephone booth.

Rachel smiled as Yoo Yeonha excitedly posed in front of the booth. However, her expression suddenly stiffened when she saw Buckingham Palace in the distance. A chill went down her spine and a sense of anxiety stifled her.

Lancaster had recreated this old England. Did that mean people from the past also existed?

“Oh, Buckingham Palace is over there.”

Yoo Yeonha pointed it out and Rachel flinched at her words.

“Shall we go closer?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

Rachel profusely shook her head since Lancaster could discover them if they carelessly approached.

“Well, I’m glad you know where to go and where to not go,” Yoo Yeonha said with a smirk.

“...”

What the heck? Is she looking down on me? Rachel thought while pouting.

“Pfft! Just make sure nostalgia doesn’t get a hold of you. All of this is fake anyways.”

“Fake...” Rachel muttered.

As she said, this entire world was just a fake. Nothing but a copy of the original world... a world where souls gathered...

“Now, shall we roam around for a bit before heading back?” Yoo Yeonha asked while linking arms with Rachel.

* * *

“...”

Rachel woke up at the break of dawn.

Today had been no different. She couldn’t recall her dream again. Her head became a blank slate no matter how much she forced herself to remember.

She could only recall his voice ringing in her ears as he said something.

“Vice Leader.”

Rachel instantly turned to the familiar voice. Her body stiffened when she spotted the man hanging upside down outside the window like a bat with his head covered in a hood. He pulled back his hood and Rachel glared at him with visible anger.

Marcus had suddenly appeared.

“You!” Rachel exclaimed as she grabbed Galatine, but Marcus raised

both his hands in surrender.

Rachel pointed at him with her chin as if to say he better spill the beans. Marcus looked around before coming in through the window.

“Are you living with him here?” He asked while looking at Kim Hajin on the bed.

“You little—!” Rachel exclaimed in anger.

Marcus immediately placed a finger to his lips.

“*Shh!* I barely managed to sneak out. Don’t cause a fuss. I have something to tell you.”

“*Yawn?*”

Yoo Yeonha woke up with a yawn. She looked at Marcus before rubbing her eyes in case she was still dreaming. It didn’t seem to be a dream.

“Get to the point,” Rachel curtly told him. She didn’t show any respect towards the traitor who betrayed his guild, country, and comrades.

Marcus simply nodded.

“I have no idea how you managed to come here, but Lancaster is plotting to sacrifice every citizen in England.”

Rachel grimaced in anger, but Marcus continued.

“Did you run into those mole monsters by any chance, Vice Leader?”

Rachel nodded when he asked about the monsters they faced in the underground passage.

“Those monsters are currently digging underneath this city. They’re carving a huge magic circle. I have a hunch that the same magic circle has already been created underneath our England back home.”

Marcus anxiously looked around.

“They’re planning to swap the real England with this fake England using that.”

Yoo Yeonha approached and said, “Don’t tell me you believe this traitor?”

“Yes, Lancaster had brainwashed me too. I thought everything was Vice Leader and England’s fault.” Marcus honestly admitted before shaking his head, “But Vice Leader bears no responsibility for that incident. We’re the ones at fault. I only realized that after spending time with you, Vice Leader.”

He continued with his passionate plea.

“I’m helping Vice Leader and England with my own methods. I stole everything in our safe to obtain Lancaster’s trust. Also, I purposely let our guild members chase me to the secret passage so you would be able to come here.”

He didn’t give Rachel a chance to respond.

“I’m not asking you to fully trust me, but Lancaster will activate the general assembly’s miracle at the Hampton Palace on that day.”

Marcus looked at her with sorrowful eyes.

“I will open the door on that day. It’s impossible to stop them alone, so I hope Vice Leader will help stop them too.”

He lowered his head after finishing his monologue and weakly added, “I’m sorry...”

Rachel couldn’t tell if he told the truth or not. Should she trust a subordinate who already betrayed her once? She sat on the bed and observed Marcus. Suddenly, a breeze blew from the window and his body turned into fine particles that dispersed into the air.

The sun rose on the horizon and the first rays of sunlight shone on the

sleeping Kim Hajin.

Rachel gently patted his head while thinking.

Will he be able to wake up before that day?

* * *

Rachel immersed herself in training after Marcus' visit. She wanted to perfectly harmonize her spirits with her sword to stop what would happen that day. The clock was ticking and every second counted.

"So... you only remember what happened, but not the specifics?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

Rachel also trained her mind to remember her dreams as much as possible. However, that proved even more difficult than harmonizing her sword and spirits.

"Yes..."

"You can't remember even the tiniest detail from your conversations?"

"They're all vague..."

"How are they vague? Tell me whatever you can recall."

Rachel tightly closed her eyes and focused on Yoo Yeonha's words.

Ughh...

She racked her brain until she felt a splitting headache and finally recalled a single word.

"A... pocket? Pouch? Pocket mouse?"

"What? A pocket mouse? You mean a mouse with a pocket?" Yoo Yeonha frowned.

Rachel sighed, “I have no idea...”

“Tsk... Forget it. Anyways, shall we eat something?”

“Sure...”

They sat in front of the table and ate pork kimchi stew for breakfast.

“It turned out quite nice today.”

Yoo Yeonha complimented her own cooking and Rachel nodded in agreement. It didn’t taste as good as Kim Hajin’s, but she did a fairly good job.

“Eat slowly.”

“Okay.”

“I said eat slowly. You’re eating too fast.” Yoo Yeonha suddenly slammed her spoon on the table as they enjoyed their meal.

Rachel froze in shock at her reaction. Did Yoo Yeonha get mad because she ate too much?

“Ah... Don’t tell me... he meant my pocket?!”

“P-Pocket?”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t bother explaining and ran to Kim Hajin. He still wore the same clothes since the water spirit took care of cleaning him and washing his clothes.

Yoo Yeonha rummaged through his pockets. She started with his pants, his inner pockets, his coat pockets... but he simply had too many pockets.

“Ehem... Ehem...” Rachel faked a cough as if to say she didn’t feel comfortable with Yoo Yeonha touching his body so freely.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha ignored her and continued searching.

“*Ehem! Ehem!*” Rachel faked a cough again and Yoo Yeonha became annoyed.

“Alright, I’ll be done soon.”

Rachel went over and began searching his body as well to speed things up.

Then, Yoo Yeonha placed her hand in one of his pockets and felt something.

“*Huh?* What’s this?” she muttered and took it out.

The beautifully crafted necklace brightly shone the moment sunlight reflected on it. The necklace looked so beautiful that even Yoo Yeonha, more well-versed in jewelry than anyone else, had never seen such a beautiful piece before.

“I’m jealous...” she grumbled and tossed the necklace to Rachel.

Rachel somehow caught it. The necklace felt smooth to the touch and sparkled like a mirage.

“What is it? I thought he had an antidote or something... *Geez...* This is so frustrating...” Yoo Yeonhwa grumbled and pouted when she realized that Kim Hajin prepared a gift for Rachel and passed it along in his dream while on his deathbed.

Rachel’s cheeks flushed red as all sorts of thoughts went through her mind. She wondered why Kim Hajin would gift her such a beautiful necklace.

“*Huh?*”

One of her spirits appeared by itself as Rachel became lost in her

fantasy.

Yoo Yeonha looked at the spirit and Rachel with a serious expression.

The spirit and the necklace began resonating with each other.

Side Stories 31

Dream in a Dream (31)

A ray of light shone on the lifeless pair of eyes before slowly disappearing. How scary and cold it must've been? How much they must've despised me? My child's eyes looked at me. My wife's eyes slowly closed as she held onto our child. I can still see their eyes the moment the embers of their lives had been snuffed out.

The palace collapsed and the ground caved in. Many died a horrible death and their mangled corpses littered the floor. Their blood formed a stream that flowed into the abyss.

Amid this chaos no different from hell was the princess covered in blood and flesh. My lady that I swore to protect with my life...

I gave up everything to save her. I abandoned my wife and child, crushed by debris, to save the princess...

* * *

Lancaster stared at the single ray of light shining into his dark room. It made him reminisce about the painful past.

“Begone, light.”

The light disappeared with his command and the surroundings returned to darkness again.

His consciousness drifted and he could feel the long-awaited day growing closer. Everyone who died would come back to life and he would right the awful tragedy that happened. He would smash the cogwheels of fate that ran askew and replace them with new ones.

Lancaster was prepared to sacrifice his life for the greater good. The

knight untainted by despair and agony would reappear as long as he crushed his corrupted soul. He had to preserve his consciousness for this reason. He would embed his consciousness into those eyes that watched as he abandoned them.

Lancaster slowly sunk.

The young princess was still there in that cozy place like a dream. The lifeless bodies of his wife and child also resided there.

He only hoped that everything could restart in this dream. Everyone's pain would be buried within this neverending dream and they could all be happy again.

The flowers that bloomed that day looked particularly beautiful.

He wouldn't waste this last chance.

* * *

Galatine unleashed a bright light as the water spirit compressed to its fullest and the sword's amplified sharpness threatened to cut anything in its path.

Shwaaa...

Rachel swung Galatine and the powerful aura surrounding her sword froze the air.

This slashing and freezing became the most lethal combination she could create using both her swordsmanship and spirit.

Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap!

Yoo Yeonha watched from the sidelines and clapped. Rachel called back her spirit and the glow surrounding Galatine disappeared.

"Excellent," Yoo Yeonha's voice echoed as if in a tunnel.

Their current environment did resemble one. They failed to find a suitable place to train, so they decided to go underground. In other words, they returned to the sewers.

Rachel's spirit purified the water and air, which made the sewers much cleaner than the surface.

"I have no idea what's going on, but I'm certain the necklace amplified your spirit powers."

Yoo Yeonha made an observation and Rachel nodded.

Rachel had grown 1.5 to 2 times stronger after receiving the necklace.

"I wonder where he found something like that..." Yoo Yeonha muttered while looking at the necklace around Rachel's neck. Rachel wondered the same.

Who would've thought that someone could become so much more powerful after wearing just a necklace? Also, where in the world did he find something like that? Lastly, why did he give it to her of all people?

"*Hmm...* I'll have to go back up for now. Will you be training more?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

"Yes, I'll train just a bit longer," Rachel replied.

"Well, I bet you're having a ton of fun thanks to that necklace. Anyways, see you later."

Yoo Yeonha climbed up the ladder.

"*Hoo...*"

Rachel sat in a lotus position after being left alone. She relaxed her mind before slowly taking deep breaths. Her breathing method became more effective in the sewers than on the surface because she grew closer to the ground.

Shwiiii...

The sewage water slowly rose as if reacting to her breathing. It gathered around her before shooting up like a geyser and lifting her off the ground.

A small thought distracted her when she almost took full control of the spirit.

“Ah...”

Shwaaaak!

The water spirit dispersed once she lost her concentration and the pillar of water collapsed as well. She fell into the sewage water, which was too clean to be called sewage water.

Rachel remained still and floated in the water with her cheeks flushed red.

“...”

She fiddled with the necklace while thinking of someone.

Did he prepare this necklace just for her? Did he really really really prepare something like this for her? Like, really really really really for her?

She covered her face after feeling embarrassed over nothing. The cool water splashed on her, but her face still felt hot. Even her heart began to act up.

Did she catch a disease somewhere or get poisoned too?

Rachel placed her hands on her chest and tightly closed her eyes. She tried to calm her breathing and her heart, but to no avail.

“What’s going on...” She muttered before giving up and floating in the water with her arms and legs stretched out. She blankly stared at the

ceiling while floating.

The gently splashing water and the cool breeze over her face made her eyelids grow heavy.

“...”

A dream slowly came to her in this peaceful scenery and she closed her eyes.

* * *

[Pinnacle Rank External Injury Healing Potion]

[Royal Armband]

[Paper Crane]

[Great Magic Scroll]

[Magic Scroll...]

“These are what we have.”

Yoo Yeonha opened the sack they received from the royal palace.

It contained numerous useful artifacts enchanted with effects like magic power amplification and magic resistance. They also received a pinnacle rank healing potion and magic scrolls.

“That day is in February, right?” Yoo Yeonha asked while putting on the armband.

“Yes,” Rachel briefly replied.

“*Hmm...* As you know... we’re severely lacking in firepower with just the two of us. I’m certain their army will number in the thousands at least. We won’t be able to face them alone,” Yoo Yeonha said.

She made a fair point. Rachel couldn't possibly face an army of more than a thousand no matter how much her powers had been amplified.

"Even if we have excellent equipment... Wow, this is really good," Yoo Yeonha interrupted herself after coming across the capes from the royal palace.

Rachel picked one up and wore it too. "It even has a gliding function."

"I know. It seems they spared no efforts in supporting us. Also, the design is quite pretty. Don't you agree?"

"Yes, it looks luxurious."

"That's right. It looks like a branded item befitting the royal family. I won't look tacky wearing this in Seoul later, right?"

They merrily chatted over the capes and suddenly became silent. Then, they went back to the main topic.

"Can you trust Marcus?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

Rachel couldn't easily reply.

Marcus declared that he was a double agent, but he could be a triple agent or even a quadruple agent for all she knew.

"He hinted at something when he mentioned that he would open the door. It sounded as if he would open a backdoor so we could immediately fight Lancaster without facing his minions, right?"

They had a chance if Marcus sincerely helped them. Rachel's abilities had been greatly amplified, so she could face Lancaster one-on-one now.

"How are you related to Marcus?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

Rachel bit her lips before weakly replying, "Marcus lost his parents at the Hampton Palace incident."

Yoo Yeonha furrowed her brows, “You accepted him into your guild despite knowing that?”

“Because he did nothing wrong. That wasn’t his fault,” Rachel replied.

She even sponsored Marcus’ tuition fees at Cube.

Yoo Yeonha sighed before suddenly exclaiming, “*Ah!* I have a great idea!”

She proceeded to tear up the bedsheet and Rachel flinched at her sudden action.

Yoo Yeonha tied the pieces here and there to form something like an animal.

“What are you doing?”

“Can’t you tell? I’m making a vessel for your spirit.”

“*Huh? Ah!*”

Rachel finally realized it after some time.

Yoo Yeonha placed a bird on top of the bed after tying the final knot. It looked quite detailed despite being made from a bed sheet.

“Now, try infusing your spirit into this.”

“But I’ve never tried before—”

“It’s alright. Your teacher was an expert at this, right? I’m certain you can do it too.”

“...”

“Hurry up. What we need most right now is someone to scout for us.”

As Yoo Yeonha said, they desperately needed to scout the enemy since they didn't have any information.

Rachel sighed at the bird. She had only heard of this difficult technique and never attempted it before. She had never even seen it accomplished in person.

However, she felt confident thanks to the necklace's power.

Rachel closed her eyes and summoned her spirit. Then she infused it into the bird on the table. She chose the wind spirit and needed something to act as a link between her consciousness and the spirit.

She focused as hard as she could for a few minutes and the bird finally flapped its wings.

"Ah!" Yoo Yeonha exclaimed in surprise, but Rachel ignored her and only focused on the bird.

The bird flapping its wings soon linked with Rachel and the infused wind spirit cried out.

"Kiuuuuu!"

"Ugh..."

"Are you alright?"

Rachel staggered and Yoo Yeonha rushed over to catch her while intently observing the bird.

"Kiuuuuu! Kiuuuuu!"

The silvery bird looked beautiful. Fine dust spread out as it flapped its wings, which proved that the spirit had been successfully linked.

* * *

Rachel also sent a spirit rat along with the spirit bird to the Hampton

Palace.

A saying went that the bird eavesdropped during the day while the rat eavesdropped during the night. This proved to be true as the bird and rat completed their reconnaissance mission. They not only retrieved information regarding the palace's interior, but they also brought back information regarding Lancaster's minions guarding the place.

Rachel drew a blueprint of the palace based on the information her spirits retrieved.

"Right here. This is the only spot that's different from the Hampton Palace's original design."

She pointed at a passage beneath the palace floors with a pen.

It seemed to be the door that Marcus said he would open.

Yoo Yeonha rubbed her chin. "Then I guess this will be our destination and Lancaster is probably in there?"

"That should be the case if we go by Marcus' words... and trust him."

"Well, what can we do? We don't have any other options than to believe him, right? That's the best we can do now."

Yoo Yeonha tapped on the blueprint.

"*Hmm...* I guess we'll have to dig as well to get there..."

Rachel nodded in agreement.

Lancaster's minions guarded various paths to the Hampton Palace according to their new information, which meant any normal route would be no different from rushing head-first into a fire.

"Let's change our hideout first. It's simply too dangerous to stay in the same place. We should use the sewers as our hideout from now on."

“Yes, but I will carry Hajin—”

“I know. I never said anything about touching him. Go ahead.”

“No... That’s not what I meant...”

The duo brought Kim Hajin along and went down to the sewers, which they already grew quite familiar with.

Yoo Yeonha made a makeshift bed and Rachel placed him on top.

“*Hmm...* This place gives off a camping vibe. You know, setting up a tent beside a stream?”

The sewers became more of a natural garden thanks to the spirits that made the stream crystal clear and the fresh air had no hints of any pungent smell.

Yoo Yeonha smirked and set up a meeting table on top of the stream.

“Now, let us—”

A sinister vibration shook from somewhere when she prepared to start their meeting.

Badum...

Rachel immediately took out Galatine while Yoo Yeonha took a few steps back.

Badum... Badum... Badum...

The sound seemed to be coming from nearby.

“W-What is it?” Yoo Yeonha asked while nervously gulping.

Rachel took a few steps closer towards the sound with her guard up.

Badum...

The sound grew closer.

Badum... Badum...

A dense mana could be felt from where the vibration originated.

Cold sweat formed on Rachel's forehead and she summoned her spirit to scout ahead. The spirit butterfly fluttered its wings and flew towards the vibration.

Rachel closed her eyes and borrowed the spirit's eyes and ears.

Bam! Bam! Grrr... Grrr Waaaaah!

Something roared in a beast-like manner and didn't make any sense.

It slaughtered numerous things... but Rachel couldn't get a closer look because the berserk violence swept up her spirit.

She opened her eyes and spoke in a serious tone, "Yeonha, I'll leave Hajin to you."

"Okay," Yoo Yeonha immediately held onto Kim Hajin and prepared to run away if anything happened.

"Who are you?" Rachel asked as she raised Galatine. Her sword brightly shone to illuminate the dark sewers.

The light slowly spread throughout the sewers before a figure appeared.

"Strike first and take the initiative!"

The hideous figure screamed and charged at Rachel.

"Euk!"

Rachel instantly swung Galatine and blocked the first strike, but the next strike connected with her chin. The strike came so fast like an uppercut and completely neutralized her in one shot.

Ding!

That was the last sound she heard as her brain shook and struck her skull.

Side Stories 32

Dream in a Dream (32)

Everything settled down in the sewers.

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

“ ... ”

Three people stared at each other without a word.

The first person glanced at the second, but the second person instantly looked away and avoided locking eyes. The second person was forced to look at the third person, but the third person avoided eye contact as well.

They continued this game of avoiding each other's gaze before Yoo Yeonha stepped up and broke the awkward silence.

“I will apologize instead.”

Rachel grimaced while holding her chin, which swelled up after being struck by an uppercut or whatever that attack had been.

However, the ambusher didn't seem apologetic at all and muttered something under her breath while awkwardly scratching her neck. “Who told you to aim your sword at someone without even trying to talk?”

Rachel glared at her ambusher and gritted her teeth. “Ouch!”

A sharp pain struck her when she gritted her teeth too hard.

“Anyways!” Yoo Yeonha exclaimed with a clap, which got both of their attention. Then she asked Chae Nayun, who appeared out of nowhere, “How did you get here, Nayun?”

“How else...” Chae Nayun replied before stealing a glance at Kim Hajin by naturally rolling her eyes as if she simply checked the surroundings. She couldn’t help but wonder, *How in the world is this sewer so clean? I mean, look at this water and the plants growing around.*

“The king asked me to come,” she said.

“The king?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“Yeah, she wanted me to help Kim Hajin, who was in grave danger. So...” Chae Nayun’s words trailed off and she stole a glance at Rachel this time.

She initially thought only Kim Hajin would be here, but never imagined Rachel would appear as well.

Yoo Yeonha pointed at Kim Hajin. “So you’re here because of him? That’s what you’re saying?”

“Yeah, but what the hell’s going on? What kind of a situation is this?” Chae Nayun scratched her head with an annoyed expression.

She couldn’t understand the current situation. She came to save Kim Hajin, but he turned out to be with the princess and Yoo Yeonha. They claimed to be tagging along to clear a quest.

“Anyways, listen up Nayun. I will explain as simply as possible...” Yoo Yeonha proceeded to explain everything within fifteen minutes.

They ended up in the old England recreated in this world. Lancaster became the king and owner of this place. He plotted something so big that it would even affect the real world.

“Do you understand?” Yoo Yeonha asked after finishing her explanation.

“Erm... Yeah...” Chae Nayun replied with a serious look.

She knew very well that it would be impossible to swap this England and the real England unless someone used the fragment she was looking for. She became all the more certain that she would find it here.

“But... what happened to Kim Hajin?” Chae Nayun asked as she looked at him. She found it strange that he had been sleeping the entire time without moving an inch.

“He gotsh poishoned by a poishon called Emptwee Dweem,” Rachel replied. Her speech became slurred due to her swelling chin.

“Pfft!”

Chae Nayun tried to hold back her laughter, but marvelously failed.

“...”

Rachel glared at her and wanted to instantly cut her down.

Chae Nayun faked a cough, “*Ehem...* Empty Dream... What the heck is that?”

Yoo Yeonha answered this time, “It’s a poison that makes the victim keep dreaming. There’s no antidote and the victim can only recover by themself.”

“Oh... is that so?” Chae Nayun muttered while staring at Kim Hajin’s face.

This was the first time she saw him sleeping so peacefully.

“*Hmm...*”

Honestly, she felt relieved that he fell asleep. She rushed over after hearing he was in danger, but had been extremely nervous and didn’t dare to face him. Things turned out in her favor if she didn’t have to

talk to him.

“Look at him sleeping...” she muttered.

Chae Nayun found him adorable after watching him sleep for so long. She flashed a mischievous smile and walked towards him. However, Rachel immediately dashed over and blocked her path.

“Down’t go closh to ze patience,” Rachel warned her.

“Aren’t you the patient?”

“What ziz you shay?”

Rachel pouted in anger, but ended up looking like a carp bread^[1] instead.

Chae Nayun burst into laughter. “Anyways, I understand what’s going on and I’m glad to help.”

* * *

Rachel and Chae Nayun covered themselves in robes and went to the surface. Chae Nayun stubbornly wanted to sightsee around the old England.

“*Hmm...* So even a tiny fragment can create a world like this...” Chae Nayun muttered while looking around the perfectly recreated England.

Rachel tilted her head in confusion and asked, “What ziz you shay?”

“No... Nothing. *Pfft! Ah...* this is hilarious. Hey, shouldn’t you go to the hospital or something?”

Rachel’s recovery took longer than usual because Chae Nayun’s fist had been filled to the brim with mana.

“No, Lanster’s eyes are all over zi playsh...” Rachel stopped talking

midway after seeing Chae Nayun mock her with pouting lips.

Rachel lightly shoved her.

“*Pfft!* Ah, alright. I’ll stop it. Anyways, I’ll wreak havoc here while the two of you sneak in from underground, right?”

Rachel nodded.

Yoo Yeonha would plan the specifics, but the overall gist of their plan went like that.

“What if Kim Hajin doesn’t wake up by then?”

“We have to moove him to a swave pwaish.”

“Move him to a safe place?”

“Yesh.”

Rachel suddenly felt bothered by something. She noticed a hint of emotion in Chae Nayun’s voice when talking about Kim Hajin.

“You musht bwee cwosh? Seein you run here sho fasht,” Rachel nonchalantly asked.

Chae Nayun turned around and looked at her.

Diiing!

The Big Ben rang, signaling that the clock had struck twelve.

“You asked if we’re close?”

“Yesh.”

Chae Nayun placed both hands on the back of her neck and began thinking. Then she stretched her hands up, “Who knows?”

Kim Hajin and me. What are we to each other? Can we say that we're close?

She asked herself as the memories she shared with him flashed across her mind. She recalled the unforgivable things he did to her and she did to him.

Chae Nayun made a bitter smile that turned into a mischievous one. "Rather than being close... we're super close with each other."

"..."

"Very, Super, Close..."

Rachel's expression stiffened as she glared at Chae Nayun.

Chae Nayun tapped her chin, "What? Whatcha gonna do about it?"

"I know you're lying."

"Pfft! Really? Is that what you think?"

"Hmph!"

"Believe what you want to believe."

"Layer..."

"You sound cute like that. Hey, cutie pie!" Chae Nayun teased and pinched Rachel's swollen cheeks.

Rachel slapped her hands away and glared.

"Hoo..."

Then she sighed in resignation. They had to cooperate, so she decided to be the adult and hold it in since Chae Nayun came all the way here to help Kim Hajin.

“Here,” Rachel handed a mirror to Chae Nayun.

“What’s this?”

“Itsh a miwor connected to my shprits vishoon.”

Her pronunciation seemed to be getting better by the minute.

“*Hmm...* Is that so?” Chae Nayun inspected the mirror.

A different scene played in the mirror. It showed the spirit rat’s vision that Rachel controlled.

“That rat ish going around the Hampton Palash and the area around it evweeday, sho use that to familiarize yourshelf with the area.”

“Sure... if you say so...” Chae Nayun placed the mirror in her pocket and began walking somewhere.

“Where are you going?” Rachel asked, but Chae Nayun simply waved without looking back.

“I’ll be sightseeing for a bit. I’ll be careful not to get caught, so don’t worry.”

“Hey...”

“I’ll be back real quick.”

“*Haa...*” Rachel sighed and shook her head. She turned around and returned to the sewers.

* * *

Their preparations for that day proceeded smoothly.

Yoo Yeonha made magic bombs infused with her mana. She designed them to minimize casualties while incapacitating the English forces with her lightning attribute. They used the spirit bird and spirit rat to

install the bombs throughout England.

Rachel immersed herself in training and Chae Nayun volunteered to be her sparring partner. Rachel finally had a proper training session thanks to her.

“Ugh!”

“Too slow!”

“Kyah!”

“Just die!”

Anyone else who saw them sparring would probably mistake it for a one-sided beating.

Rachel couldn't keep up with Chae Nayun and Chae Nayun pummeled her into a corner using only bare fists.

“Heuk...” Rachel grabbed her stomach and collapsed after being punched in the guts.

Yoo Yeonha began worrying after watching them spar. “Hey, are you alright?”

However, her voice carried a hint of superiority more than worry. After all, Chae Nayun belonged to Essence of the Straits. Watching her one-sidedly pummel Rachel, the vice leader of another guild, felt quite pleasant.

“Not yet...” Rachel muttered while staggering.

Chae Nayun didn't give her any space and immediately attacked again. However, Rachel reacted this time and summoned her wind spirit to amplify her speed. She caught up to Chae Nayun and blocked the punch with Galatine. Then she kicked Chae Nayun in the abdomen.

Creeaaaak!

The tiles broke as Chae Nayun slammed her feet to the ground. She stood upright and clapped with a hint of sincerity.

“Oh, you grew stronger already?”

“Not yet...” Rachel muttered as she wiped the blood off her lips. A necklace became visible through her disheveled clothes.

Chae Nayun pointed at it and asked, “What’s that necklace? It looks pretty.”

Rachel didn’t plan on responding, but suddenly stood upright and flashed a mischievous smile.

“I got it as a gift...”

“From who?” Chae Nayun asked.

Rachel already anticipated her question and only flashed another smile.

Chae Nayun seemed to realize something and asked in a cold voice, “Don’t tell me... Kim Hajin?”

Rachel nodded in response.

“...”

Chae Nayun turned to look at Kim Hajin sound asleep on the bed. She stared at him for a while before taking off her watch.

The entire atmosphere suddenly changed.

Shwaaaaa!

A ferocious aura burned so strong that it seemed to snuff out the oxygen in the air. Rachel held her breath and staggered back.

“...”

Crack... Crack...

Chae Nayun cracked her neck and took a few steps forward. The sewer tiles caved in with every step.

“I’ll be getting serious now. Take care of yourself,” she said in a voice cold as ice.

Rachel nervously gulped and pleaded, “Hey... wait a minute... let’s take a break...”

“No.”

Puuuk!

Chae Nayun instantly appeared in front of her and punched her in the guts again. Rachel’s eyes trembled at the sudden impact and she couldn’t follow Chae Nayun’s movements at all. It seemed as if Chae Nayun disappeared and reappeared like the wind.

Rachel plopped face-first into the ground. She couldn’t even make a sound since everything happened in the blink of an eye.

“I’ll pummel you down if you don’t get up,” Chae Nayun warned in the same icy voice.

Rachel held her abdomen and slowly got up. The pain became fuel for her anger. She gritted her teeth and gripped her sword.

Chae Nayun suddenly struck her shin when Rachel prepared to move.

“*Kyak!*” Rachel shrieked like a dying bird and collapsed again.

“Hey, get up. We still have a long way to go...” Chae Nayun threatened.

Chae Nayun’s personal training could only be described as brutal.

Rachel had never experienced such brutality in her life. However, she could feel herself growing stronger at a more rapid pace than ever before.

* * *

January would soon end and every day that passed only made the atmosphere more nerve-wracking.

Rachel skipped training for today and stood on top of a building. She looked down at England's scenery.

The winter seemed quite peaceful. Everything felt too cozy and peaceful to call it fake. It would be a shame to lose this view because it looked so serene.

"What do you think about the results of your training?" someone asked from behind.

Rachel had no idea how, but Yoo Yeonha showed up from behind her.

"..."

Rachel pouted and removed the bandage on her nose. A shallow scratch remained from where she had been cut.

"I think I zid grow shtronger... after being beaten up..."

Her speech became slurred again after being struck on the chin.

"You're quite impressive. You made Nayun use her sword in just a week."

"I never knew zhat there wash that much of a gap between our abilities," Rachel said with a sigh.

She lost to Chae Nayun, who didn't even use a weapon, while she used Galatine all the time. No, Chae Nayun repeatedly pummeled her to the ground.

Rachel had no choice but to become stronger if she wanted to make it out alive from Chae Nayun's fists, which carried some deep personal feelings.

"We will meet him soon... Lanster..." Rachel said as she thought of Lancaster.

She wondered what she should say once they met. Could she possibly say anything to correct their ruined relationship? What should she say first?

She wanted to prepare exactly what to do and say, but it turned out to be much harder than she thought.

"Well, that's entirely your business..." Yoo Yeonha told her.

"Yesh..." Rachel muttered before a nervous thought crossed her mind.

"But... what about Hajing?"

If she and Yoo Yeonha had come here... then who guarded Kim Hajin?

"You don't have to worry. Nayun is taking care of him."

"Ah..." Rachel nodded. She felt relieved for a moment before realizing that she shouldn't be relieved.

"No!" She suddenly stood and exclaimed. Then she screamed in a trembling voice, "How can you leave the two of them alone!"

"Huh?"

"Damn it!" Rachel cursed and ran as fast as she could. She ran so fast that she began sweating profusely.

What would the two of them do alone? No, what kind of indecent things would Kim Hajin suffer at the hands of Chae Nayun?

Her blood shot up to her head just thinking about it. She became one

with the wind and sped towards the sewers.

Rachel immediately arrived at the sewers and caught Chae Nayun doing something very indecent to Kim Hajin, who remained fast asleep and defenseless.

1. This is a popular Korean street snack known as Bungeo-Ppang that looks like a carp. It's originally from Japan and is also called Taiyaki. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bungeo-ppang> 🙋

Side Stories 33

Dream in a Dream (33)

“Huh? When did you arrive?” Chae Nayun nonchalantly asked while sitting on top of Kim Hajin and doing something to him.

Rachel instinctively reacted before saying anything and pushed her off.

“Euk!”

Chae Nayun fell into the sewage water.

“What are you doing?!” Rachel screamed while glaring at her with visible rage.

“Ugh...” Chae Nayun groaned while rubbing her hips. Then she retorted, *“This little! Hey, you wanna die?!”*

“What? You have zhe odasitee to say zhat?!” Rachel screamed in response.

“What the hell are you saying? Did you lose a tooth or something?” Chae Nayun grumbled and took something out of her pocket. She showed Rachel a root covered in dirt. It was a wild ginseng.

“I was trying to feed him this. Got a problem?”

“...?”

Rachel’s expression relaxed and she tilted her head in confusion.

“It’s not as good as the ones in Korea, but is there anything more effective in helping someone recuperate other than wild ginseng?”

Yoo Yeonha said they couldn't cure Empty Dream, but Chae Nayun wouldn't just sit around and twiddle her thumbs. She climbed the highest mountain in Britain called the Ben Nevis.

"I looked around and found some wild ginseng there," Chae Nayun said with a shrug.

She found some thanks to her herbalist skills rather than luck. She had a poor sense of direction, but an excellent sense of smell. Chae Nayun simply followed its scent and didn't have much difficulty finding these rare roots.

"*Ah... Hmm... I see... Ehem... Ehem...*" Rachel awkwardly faked a cough. Cold sweat formed on her forehead. She felt flustered and embarrassed by her actions just now.

Rachel rubbed her swollen chin, "So you wanted to feed him that?"

"*Huh?* Well, yeah... As you know, it's best to chew wild ginseng thoroughly, right? I wanted to see if he could instinctively chew it or not. I was going to grind it into a paste and forcefully feed him if he couldn't."

The best way to absorb the full benefits of wild ginseng was to chew on it.

Honestly, Chae Nayun considered feeding it to him mouth-to-mouth if he couldn't do it himself. She had foraged the wild ginseng two days ago, but waited until Rachel left.

"He won't be able to eat it... probably."

"Then, I'll just grind it up," Chae Nayun sighed in regret.

Rachel awkwardly squirmed before summoning the spirit of fire.

"Here."

"Thanks."

Chae Nayun tossed the wild ginseng into the spirit's blue fire.

The spirit didn't burn the wild ginseng. Instead, it slowly melted the wild ginseng and turned it into an extract. Rachel slowly fed the extract to Kim Hajin and stepped back to check his condition.

“...”

“...”

An awkward silence followed.

Kim Hajin showed no signs of any changes and Chae Nayun scratched her head in frustration.

“Hey, I'm going out for a while. Let me know if he gets better.”

Rachel nodded and continued observing Kim Hajin.

Grumble... Grumble...

Chae Nayun walked away while grumbling something under her breath.

* * *

— Welcome.

Rachel opened her eyes and saw Kim Hajin in front of her. She flinched in surprise and looked around. Then she finally realized they were dreaming.

Kim Hajin laughed as if he found her looking around quite cute.

— How are things these days? Is everything alright?

Rachel stared into his eyes and could see her reflection in them.

“Yes... things will start soon. I feel a bit nervous, but I’ll be fine. This is something I had to personally take care of from the start...”

— *Slurp...*

Kim Hajin sipped his coffee.

Rachel fiddled her thumbs and mustered her courage.

“But... that necklace...”

— *Hmm? Ah, yes. What about it?*

“That is...”

— I made it for you as a gift. I paid a lot of attention to making it.

Rachel’s eyes widened in surprise and Kim Hajin laughed at her reaction.

— How many times have you asked me this? I guess you can’t remember anything after waking up.

“Ah... yes... that’s correct...”

— Then, I’ll say this again. You don’t particularly need that necklace. You’ll do great on your own. After all, your concept is to overcome and be resolute.

She couldn’t understand his words, but felt the genuine faith he had in her through his voice alone.

A thought suddenly popped up in her head.

This person had more faith in me than I did in myself...

— Trust me if you can’t trust yourself. There’s nobody else who knows you better than I do.

His gentle voice resonated in her ears and she finally opened her eyes.

“Now, I’m almost done with my preparations.”

Yoo Yeonha slammed a button on the table.

Tak!

Rachel flinched and looked at it.

Yoo Yeonha made this button to remotely control the bombs.

“I’ll detonate all the bombs before we enter the palace. The entirety of England will be shrouded in darkness for at least a day. Also, take one of these.”

Yoo Yeonha passed a bundle of bombs to Rachel and Chae Nayun. Then she added, “Use them when you can. These bombs will be effective against our enemies.”

Chae Nayun pouted and complained, “I don’t need these.”

“Still, take it with you. *Ah...* Rachel, did Marcus tell you anything?” Yoo Yeonha asked. She needed a guarantee of some sort to fully believe Marcus about opening a back door.

However, Rachel shook her head.

“No, not yet.”

“*Hmm...* This makes him more credible for now, I guess... After all, he has to avoid Lancaster’s eyes, right?”

She would’ve suspected him more if he managed to freely contact them. Yoo Yeonha crossed her arms and continued.

“Anyways, Plan A is quite simple. We’ll enter through the back door and assassinate Lancaster. Come to think of it...”

Her words trailed off and she seriously looked at Rachel. “Can you tell us?”

Rachel flinched and shuddered at her question. However, Yoo Yeonha didn’t relent and pressed on.

“That day, what really happened?”

“...”

“I believe we have the right to know.”

Rachel dropped her head and bit her lips, but it didn’t take long for her to sigh and speak up. It felt painful to recall, but she mustered the courage to talk about it for these two that willingly became her comrades.

“Yes, I understand.”

Rachel’s expression became resolute.

Yoo Yeonha reclined in her chair while Chae Nayun looked at Rachel with interest.

Rachel scratched the back of her hand and carefully told her tale.

“Honestly... I found out the truth too late. I was the most important catalyst that triggered all of it... but I was oblivious to it for the longest time...”

The birth of England’s princess could potentially change the entire country’s fortune. They coined her as the greatest genius born in Europe. She gained plenty of other monikers and many enemies too. Having her abilities celebrated became her greatest weakness.

Djinns aimed at her for ransom and to increase their infamy. Other countries in Europe and even China and the United States wanted to keep her in check. They deployed all sorts of cowardly tactics to stunt her growth.

However, the young Rachel remained oblivious to all of this. She had no idea how many agents and knights had been sacrificed to keep her safe. Her supposed foolishness and ignorance resulted in the disastrous Hampton Palace Incident.

Rachel ran away from home that day because she felt sick and tired of all the nagging. Her life trapped inside Buckingham Palace began to bore her. She ran away to the Hampton Palace where her mother passed away.

Perhaps it was a stroke of bad luck, wrong timing, or just a curse. A djinn who still hasn't been identified to this day saw her enter the Hampton Palace and ambushed the place.

England's government and the royal palace issued a very simple order to the heroes.

Rescue Rachel.

The deployed heroes only searched for Rachel. They closed an eye to the countless people buried under the rubble asking for help as they scoured the place for her.

The heroes panicked because of the sudden disaster and the extreme orders from above. Of course, Rachel would've probably died if the heroes stopped to help anyone else.

The victims had been sacrificed to safely rescue Rachel.

Despite all that, the country didn't punish Rachel for running away. Rather, they punished the knights and maids in charge of looking after her for failing to stop her from running away. Not only that, they even proceeded to cover up what actually happened. They also blamed Lancaster, who abandoned his own family to rescue Rachel, as one of the people responsible for the disastrous incident.

England ended up making fools out of millions of their citizens to preserve Rachel's image as the child who would lead their country in the future.

Too many people had been sacrificed because Rachel had been born a

princess with special talents. Even her most loyal knight became a criminal without her knowing it.

The young Rachel went into a coma at the time and everything had already been taken care of when she woke up. She only found out the truth once she grew up, but could no longer right that wrong.

The Hampton Palace Tragedy changed England as a whole and Rachel never slept well after that day.

“That sounds complicated...” Yoo Yeonha muttered after listening to her summary.

Rachel looked at her and smiled. “I thought you would already know everything.”

“I was young back then too. Also, I wouldn’t have dug deep into it either way. After all, that’s England’s business.”

“...”

Rachel couldn’t help but briefly glare at Yoo Yeonha. However, Yoo Yeonha’s words weren’t wrong. England’s business meant it wasn’t that important. The incident that shook their foundation didn’t even deserve a glance from South Korea.

“Hey... How can you say it like that? Are you just saying whatever comes to mind because it doesn’t affect you?”

Surprisingly, Chae Nayun got all worked up.

Yoo Yeonha shrugged. “I’m sorry. I’m more of a rational person. Anyways, what are you going to tell Lancaster once you meet him? Are you going to apologize? Or are you going to try and convince him to stop this madness?”

“...”

Rachel deeply pondered for a moment before replying.

“I have to fight.”

More people would die if Rachel didn't stop Lancaster. She couldn't abandon the present to rewrite the past.

She had to fight as the vice leader of the guild that represented England and also as the successor to the English throne. Even if she disappeared into nothingness along with Lancaster while bearing the burden of that incident.

“Alright, let's start preparing for real now,” Yoo Yeonha said with a smile.

* * *

Fermin and the other English Royal Court members found the underground tunnel that Marcus used thanks to assistance from their ally, Reislaufer.

“So that rat bastard escaped through here!” Fermin exclaimed after locating the small tunnel hidden behind overgrown bushes.

The English Royal Court members rolled up their sleeves and clenched their fists. They seemed ready to beat the living crap out of the traitor.

“Shall we go?” Kayle asked.

Fermin pondered for a moment after becoming the guild's temporary leader.

“*Hmm...*” She stole a glance at Sehat and the Reislaufer guild.

They nodded and smiled.

“We'll go with you,” Sehat said.

That was all she needed to hear.

Fermin gripped her staff and spoke without hesitation, “That settles it!

Let's go and kill that rat!"

"Yes!"

"Give me my money back!"

The guild members raised their weapons in the air as if they would charge inside the tunnel at any moment. However, Fermin slowly lowered her hand.

"But... before we go in... I think we should thoroughly prepare first..."

* * *

Marcus stood on top of the Big Ben the next day and looked down at England in the middle of the night.

This world precisely resembled pre-reformation England, but it wasn't real.

Marcus turned on his smartwatch and felt the cool night breeze on his face.

His guild members should slowly be making their move now. They would reach this place once they found the passageway and would probably make their choice once they arrived.

"Marcus, I think there's an intruder," a voice suddenly spoke from behind him.

This didn't surprise him. Instead, he turned around and calmly looked at the gigantic man.

"Yes, I'll go and check it right away."

"No, I'll come with you."

However, he hadn't calculated this. The large man wouldn't back

down so easily.

“I can go check by myself.”

“No, it’s time for me to move as well.”

The man ignored Marcus’ words and stood.

Marcus grew anxious and felt certain that none of his guild members would survive if this monster went there.

“Lead the way.”

“Yes...”

He went along with the large man, but secretly tapped on his smartwatch. Messaging Rachel now would be akin to suicide, but he had no choice. He couldn’t simply let his guild members die.

“Please, follow me,” Marcus said with a slight bow.

He hid his left hand behind his back and urgently typed a message to Rachel.

* * *

Bzzzt!

Rachel suddenly felt a vibration in the peaceful sewers. Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun also noticed it and looked at her.

Rachel nervously gulped, “What was that?”

Yoo Yeonha nonchalantly pointed at her wrist, “It came from you.”

A message appeared on her smartwatch.

“Ah...” Rachel checked the message.

[Marcus: The English Royal Court members are crossing over through the passage I used. I'll send you the coordinates. A hit squad has already been formed to intercept them, so your urgent support is required.]

Rachel's eyes widened after reading the message.

"It says that our guild members are on the way here! However, Lancaster seems to have caught on to their arrival..." Rachel urgently said as she activated her mana without realizing it. Her guild members were in danger.

However, Yoo Yeonha remained calm and analyzed the situation.

"..."

The English Royal Court members... We'll be exposed as well if we save them... but there are still four days left before that day...

"Yeonha?" Rachel muttered.

Yoo Yeonha sighed, "I guess we have no choice. There won't be much difference whether we start now or in four days. We'll proceed as planned and I'll command from this sewer."

She placed Kim Hajin on her back and went further underground. They built an underground bunker to ensure Kim Hajin's safety. This bunker had several monitors inside and even the spirit mirror.

Yoo Yeonha placed Kim Hajin on the bed and picked up the walkie-talkie.

"Testing, one, two, three... testing, can you hear me?"

— Yes, I can.

— Yeah, I can hear you.

"Good, then I'll send the drones first."

— Okay.

Yoo Yeonha pressed a button and numerous drones instantly took flight. She had to get visuals on the location before anything else. Rachel gave her coordinates to the east at the end of the Thames River.

“Be very careful not to attract attention on the way.”

“...”

She suddenly felt someone staring at her from behind. Yoo Yeonha turned around, but didn’t find anything.

She shook her head and spoke into the walkie-talkie again, “I’m briefly cutting off London’s power supply.”

She detonated two of the bombs they installed.

Boom!

A small blast resounded in the distance and London became pitch-black.

The darkness would continue for at least ten minutes. Rachel and Chae Nayun used this opportunity to zigzag through the alleyways undetected.

“Huh?”

The drone monitors suddenly turned black.

Yoo Yeonha looked into the black monitor and saw the reflection of something hideous behind her. She couldn’t tell if it was a person or monster twitching and squirming in the corner.

A chill went down her spine and cold sweat broke out on her back.

“Guek... Guek... Gueeeek... Gueeeeeeeek...”

She heard faint groans and goosebumps rose all over her body.

— Estimated to arrive in one minute...

Yoo Yeonha couldn't hear the walkie-talkie as she stiffened from fear and anxiety.

She slowly reached for her waist and tightly gripped her whip.

Side Stories 34

Dream in a Dream (34)

Yoo Yeonha suspected that her mind simply played a trick on her since she could only see the creature through its reflection on the monitor. However, the reflection looked too hideous. She had never heard of nor seen such a grotesque monster.

“...”

She slowly turned her head sideways to steal a glance at the hideous figure. Yoo Yeonha still couldn't tell if it was a human, monster, or large insect.

The hideous creature had red eyes and squirmed grotesquely.

Guo... Gueeek...

She felt her heart drop when she realized it wasn't a hallucination. Yoo Yeonha tightly gripped her whip, but couldn't muster the courage to turn around and attack. She had never seen such a scary monster before in her life.

Yoo Yeonha nervously gulped and shifted her position. She could no longer see the creature now.

“Haa... Haa...”

Her heart pounded so hard that it could burst out of her chest at any moment.

She couldn't even watch a horror film alone, but had to deal with this horrifying thing. Could it be a ghost or a monster?

She had no reason to fight if it just stayed there and didn't move,

right?

Yoo Yeonha calmed her breathing when she suddenly remembered Kim Hajin. He lay on the bed not far from where she sat.

Ddrruuk...

She slowly moved in her wheeled chair and placed Kim Hajin in another chair. Then she pulled him towards the desk. Yoo Yeonha could easily lift a 75 kg adult male with one hand, but the fact that she had to do this without turning around or looking back made it slightly difficult.

“Hey... Wake up...” she whispered into his ears.

He didn’t respond, but just having someone sit next to her made her more comfortable.

Yoo Yeonha finally managed to compose herself thanks to Kim Hajin’s company. She thought about how that hideous creature managed to enter the bunker. They carefully planned this location without digging or breaking the sewer walls, so no enemies would spot it.

Did that creature manage to enter when she opened the door a while ago?

Chills spread throughout her body again and she slowly reached for the walkie-talkie.

Her hands trembled and she wanted to call for help. However, she stopped and didn’t press the talk button. Yoo Yeonha knew very well that everything would be ruined if she called for help.

She looked at Kim Hajin sound asleep beside her.

“When are you going to wake up?” she pleaded while tightly holding his hand.

He didn’t answer this time either, but she felt better with him leaning on her shoulder.

The city went into an uproar after the bombs cut off the power supply. Rachel and Chae Nayun safely reached the edge of the Thames River without being detected.

“Is this the right place?” Chae Nayun asked.

“...”

Rachel silently observed the riverbank and sensed someone underneath the water.

“In the water,” she said.

“Is that so? You go in,” Chae Nayun said.

“What about you?” Rachel asked.

“It seems we have a bothersome bunch to keep me company,” Chae Nayun smirked and turned around.

Boom!

A huge man suddenly landed on the ground from the sky and asked, “Are you the intruder?”

His entire body looked hard as a rock. He had broad shoulders and a chest so wide that someone could fit across. His black-painted body towered at least three meters.

The man looked like Colossus from ancient mythology.

However, Chae Nayun didn’t seem fazed at all and confidently stepped forward.

“Hey, what are you doing? I told you to go on.”

“Alright, I believe in you,” Rachel replied and dove into the river.

Only the two of them remained on the riverbank.

“Who the hell are you?” Chae Nayun asked.

The man didn’t respond and only stared at her. Chae Nayun cracked her neck and pulled out her 130 cm longsword from her back.

The man smiled as if he found her amusing.

Then another man wearing a robe suddenly appeared. He looked familiar to Chae Nayun.

She peeked under his hood and he seemed to fit the description of Marcus that Yoo Yeonha and Rachel told her about.

“And who the hell are you?” Chae Nayun asked.

“This man here is Chiffelin. He’s a djinn known as the Lord of the Arena at Pandemonium,” Marcus suddenly explained.

Chae Nayun sneered in disbelief, “*Hmph...* So what?”

She infused her mana into her longsword and it glowed bright blue.

“Sounds good to me. I can cut you in half if you’re a djinn.”

“*Haha!*” Chiffelin laughed as if he found her amusing.

Chae Nayun kicked off the ground and charged at the djinn. She instantly closed the gap and swung her longsword.

Bam!

The djinn grabbed her mana-infused longsword with his bare hand and her sword couldn’t budge an inch in his grip.

“What the hell is this?” Chae Nayun muttered in disbelief.

She became speechless at what happened when Marcus suddenly burst into laughter and exclaimed, “*Hahaha!* Chiffelin has great resistance against swords and steel! Something like your pathetic sword can never win against him!”

“...”

Chae Nayun realized that Marcus wanted to provide her with information regarding the djinn.

Chiffelin found his actions suspicious and glared at him. “Thanks for the praise, but you should shut up Marcus.”

“*Huh? Ah*, yes. I apologize, Chiffelin. I got irritated seeing that greenhorn act all high and mighty towards you,” Marcus replied while rubbing his hands together.

“*Hmm...* I see. I understand.”

“...”

Their exchange astounded Chae Nayun. This Chiffelin guy seemed dumber than he looked. She couldn’t help but wonder if his brains were also made of rocks.

“*Hmm...* Is that so? A sword won’t work against him?”

Chae Nayun withdrew her sword.

Marcus quickly spoke as if he had been waiting. “That’s right! Anything made from metal won’t work against the great Chiffelin! Idiots like you who only depend on weapons should just obediently kneel before greatness! *Hahaha!*”

“*Mehehehe!*” Chiffelin tried to suppress his laughter, but his shoulders shook.

Chae Nayun became flabbergasted by the djinn’s stupidity. She smirked and also laughed.

“Kehehehe!”

Chiffelin could no longer suppress his laughter after seeing her laugh, *“Mwahahahaha!”*

The two of them heartily laughed for a while before Chae Nayun raised her sword again.

“That’s only because you never met me before, you son of a bitch.”

She infused her mana into her longsword once more.

“Hey...” Marcus muttered in disbelief. He couldn’t understand after he already gave her all the hints to fight this musclehead.

However, it didn’t take long for the frustration on his face to turn into horror.

“What the hell is that?” he muttered in surprise.

Chae Nayun’s sword grew larger until it became the size of a tower crane.

Marcus had never witnessed such a sight in his life. He couldn’t help but stare in awe at the gigantic, majestic blade towering to the heavens. Even Chiffelin, who confidently laughed a moment ago, stared dumbfoundedly at her sword.

The giant mana sword that ascended to the heavens came crashing down with full force.

“Bwahahahaha!” Chae Nayun laughed like a maniac as she swung at the djinn.

* * *

The five English Royal Court and three Reislauffer guild members marched through the passage. The place had a sinister aura, but they didn’t worry after all their preparations.

“Don’t you think we went overboard and prepared too much?” Tilma grumbled while looking at the dozens of sacks tied around their waists.

They looked more like a traveling merchant troupe than heroes because of the sheer amount they brought.

“One cannot be too prepared,” Fermin replied as she infused mana into her staff and made a fire that served as their torch.

Thud!

A huge sound echoed from somewhere and the group stopped in their tracks. They nervously waited for what would appear, but nothing happened. They nodded at each other to confirm the coast was clear before marching onwards.

“I think this is the second continent. Does this mean that Vice Leader is here as well?” Darren asked.

“Who knows?” Fermin replied.

“Guee...”

They suddenly heard a low growl from somewhere. It sounded like the wind playing tricks on them or maybe something really lurked in the darkness.

“Wait a moment,” Fermin stopped the group after sensing something.

She sent a fireball into the darkness to illuminate the surroundings. The fireball went on until a hideous creature moaning in the corner appeared.

“What in the world is that?” Fermin furrowed her brows.

The creature looked like a wriggling tentacle, but it also resembled a human upon closer inspection. The humanoid creature stretched out its long arms and legs that wriggled. Smaller tentacles wriggled out from its red eyes.

The wriggling tentacles briefly stopped before darting towards the group.

“Ack!”

“Everyone, fall back!” Sehat exclaimed as he reacted first and swung his sword.

Clang!

The sound of clashing steel reverberated.

“Gueeeeeee!”

The creature opened its mouth and also shot out grotesque tentacles from it. The reddish-black tentacles shot forward and tried to grab the party members by their legs.

“Heup!” Tilma activated her mana shield. She jumped high and smashed her shield at the incoming tentacles.

However, the monster tentacles had already filled the entire passage.

“What in the world is that monster?” Fermin exclaimed in disbelief.

A serene mana suddenly flowed from somewhere when they had no idea what to do. The English Royal Court members flinched in surprise at the familiar presence.

“Kieeeeeee!”

The monster sensed the mana as well. It began convulsing hideously and shot its fluid all over the place. Its hot, gooey body fluid that seemed like acid covered their surroundings.

Whooooosh!

However, a powerful gust came through and swept away the monster’s body fluid.

The English Royal Court members felt surprised again, but at how powerful the gust had been.

Rachel appeared with Galatine in her hands.

“Is everyone alright?” she asked.

“Yes, but...” Fermin staggered and fell on one knee.

The smoke rising from the monster’s body fluid made her dizzy.

“It could be poison!” Sehat immediately shouted at Rachel.

She nodded and swung Galatine again. The water spirit came forward this time and slashed the monster’s tentacles.

“Kieeeeeek!”

The monster made an ear-piercing shriek and tried to shoot its body fluid again, but Rachel swung Galatine once more and swept its attack away.

The monster finally realized that it stood no chance against Rachel and gave up on fighting.

Instead...

Bam! Bam!

It stuck its limbs into the ground and its body began turning bright red.

Rachel quickly caught on to the monster’s self-destruct plan.

“Run!” she screamed and flung everyone to the far end of the passage with her wind spirit.

-----!

The monster exploded and a powerful force of mana blasted through the passage.

Shwaaa... Kabooooom!

Rachel tightly gripped her necklace as the explosion occurred.

In that instant, she summoned all her spirits and harmonized them together.

* * *

Meanwhile, Yoo Yeonha became locked in a fierce battle of her own. Well, it seemed more like a battle of wits regarding who looked at who first.

She observed Lancaster's movements through the monitor with one eye while observing the hideous monster with her other eye.

"Kieek... Gueek..."

The monster's voice grew louder by the minute.

"Hiiing..." Yoo Yeonha let out a whelp.

Fear, horror, and anxiety. She felt all three despite being a hero. After all, being a hero didn't mean immunity to these emotions. Most heroes had no qualms fighting djinns and monsters, but quite a few feared supernatural beings like ghosts.

Yoo Yeonha was one of them.

Gueee...

A breeze blew from within the closed-off space. It came from the hideous monster's breath and Yoo Yeonha felt it coming closer.

She suddenly felt something on her shoulder. A horrifying chill spread throughout her body and made her completely numb with fear.

Yoo Yeonha stole a sideways glance at Kim Hajin tossing and turning in his sleep.

Her eyes widened in surprise.

He shouldn't be tossing and turning. Someone in deep sleep wouldn't move like that. Movements only occurred in light sleep. This meant... Kim Hajin would soon wake up!

"Gueeeeeeeek!"

The monster made a horrifying shriek and snuffed out Yoo Yeonha's small ember of hope.

Gulp!

She mustered all her courage to finally turn around and face the creature.

The hideous monster stood just a few feet away. It stared at her with deep red eyes and a wide-open mouth that exposed all the grotesque contents inside.

The monster seemed to be smiling.

"Ugh... Euk! Hiccup! Hiccup!"

Yoo Yeonha felt like passing out. She tightly held onto Kim Hajin and uncontrollably shook from the chills throughout her body.

Then she formed an electric barrier around herself and Kim Hajin.

"Gueeeee!"

The monster finally made its move. It slammed against the barrier with its long arms.

Bam!

“Ugh!”

Yoo Yeonha trembled at the impact. However, anger slowly replaced her fear.

“Hey, are you taking me for a fool just because I let you off the hook?” she angrily spoke.

Yoo Yeonha clenched her fist and glared at the monster. Now she wanted to beat the living daylights out of this hideous thing.

However, the monster simply responded by widening its red eyes and small tentacles crawled out from its eye sockets.

A chill went down Yoo Yeonha’s spine. She couldn’t easily overcome this fear with just anger.

“What the hell is that?!” she screamed in horror.

Yoo Yeonha shut her eyes and tightly grasped Kim Hajin. She also infused as much mana as she could into her barrier.

Bam! Bam! Bam! Bam!

The monster continued knocking on the barrier. Its attacks grew more aggressive by the minute.

Yoo Yeonha became so overwhelmed by fear that she couldn’t even look at the monster anymore. She racked her brains for a way to kill the monster without looking at it.

She managed to keep defending while coming up with a solution. A way to deal with the monster without looking at it... Kim Hajin’s pocket contained the answer.

Something glimmered there. The weapon that she hoped he would gift her one day, his Desert Eagle.

Side Stories 35

Dream in a Dream (35)

Did he have this handgun in his pocket the entire time?

Yoo Yeonha tilted her head in confusion, but didn't have the luxury to think about it too much. She quickly took his handgun.

Click... Clack!

Yoo Yeonha learned how to shoot a long time ago since Essential Dynamics sold firearms as one of their main businesses.

Kieeeeek!

Her hands tightly gripped the handle. She slowly turned towards the monster, but tried her best not to look it in the eye as she aimed.

"Kieeeeeek!"

The monster slammed against the barrier with its tentacles again. Sparks flew all over as the electric barrier formed from millions of volts collided with the tentacles. The monster seemed unaffected by the electricity.

First, it was those moles and now it's this thing? Do all monsters living underground here have resistance to electricity or something? Yoo Yeonha inwardly grumbled in disbelief.

"Haa..." she sighed and composed herself.

"Gueeeeeek!"

Yoo Yeonha waited until the monster swung its arms at the barrier again before pulling the trigger.

Bang!

The bullet zipped through the air and penetrated the monster's body.

"Kieeeeek!"

The monster hideously shrieked after being struck.

Yoo Yeonha realized that the Desert Eagle actually worked and kept pulling the trigger.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

The sound of gunshots filled the underground bunker.

She finally stopped after using all the bullets in the handgun.

"Kiie... Kieeek..."

The monster's red eyes slowly faded and black blood similar to tar flowed from its body. The monster convulsed a few times before going limp and finally died.

"You weren't anything after all..." Yoo Yeonha muttered while trembling in her chair. She looked at the Desert Eagle in her hand and wondered. *How could a handgun pack so much firepower? This Desert Eagle also looks like an older model. Should I just keep it for myself?*

"Ughh..." She groaned at the hideous monster's carcass.

It looked much more horrifying than a ghost. She had grown used to grotesque insect monsters after working as a hero, but felt the urge to vomit when she saw this one.

"Ugh... Uek... Euk..."

Yoo Yeonha turned to Kim Hajin and tried her best to forget about the hideous monster. She only focused on him and suppressed her turning stomach.

“Sigh...” She returned the Desert Eagle to his pocket.

“I survived thanks to you,” she said with a smile and tapped his cheek twice.

Her attention returned to the monitors. The power had been restored to London while the police and heroes scoured the streets investigating.

Yoo Yeonha began thinking after witnessing that.

Did Lancaster send that monster here? Has our location been compromised? But... why would he do something so inefficient if he knew where we were? It would've been better to send his main forces to deal with us...

“Hmm...”

Regardless, she concluded that the underground bunker was no longer safe. The alarms in her head began ringing when she sensed a sinister aura lurking somewhere nearby.

Yoo Yeonha immediately stashed the portable monitor and walkie-talkie into her bag and carried Kim Hajin. She chose to evacuate for now.

* * *

Bam!

A gigantic sword smashed the ground. It smashed into the ground so many times that a part of the Thames River wharf crumbled. Only a crater remained where Chiffelin stood a while ago.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

Chae Nayun smashed her gigantic sword a dozen more times. She struck in a very systematic and rhythmical manner as she minced up Chiffelin.

“Huh?” Chae Nayun stopped swinging her sword.

The dust cleared and the djinn stood again.

She raised an eyebrow and muttered in amazement, “What a surprise.”

Chiffelin seemed much tougher than she initially thought.

However, Chae Nayun didn’t give him time to recover. She took the initiative again and minced the bastard into pieces. She didn’t care even if it took hundreds or thousands of strikes.

She planned to simply overpower the enemy with strength without being careless or arrogant. Chae Nayun called this battle style, *Beat the living hell out of your enemy with strength*.

Her giant mana sword smashed Chiffelin again, but the djinn didn’t dodge and faced it head-on. However, visible cracks began to form on his body after taking Chae Nayun’s onslaught.

Then...

“Stop!”

Chae Nayun looked around and saw that she had been surrounded.

“Are you a djinn?!” one of the heroes asked while aiming a bow at her.

“Huh? No, that bastard I’m beating up is a djinn,” Chae Nayun replied while tilting her head in confusion.

“How insolent! How dare you accuse Sir Chiffelin!”

“Ah...” Chae Nayun realized that this was how things went in this world. She found herself in a dilemma after being surrounded.

She wouldn’t lose against the hundreds of heroes surrounding her. In

fact, she felt confident that she would definitely win. However, killing other heroes didn't sit well with her.

She briefly pondered before suddenly grabbing the closest people to her, Chiffelin and Marcus.

"Ack!" Marcus exclaimed in surprise after being yanked.

"I'll kill these two if you come any closer!" Chae Nayun threatened everyone.

"H-Hey! Let them go!"

The heroes tensed up and readied their weapons. One of them shot a mana arrow at Chae Nayun, but she easily blocked it.

"Are you crazy?! I'll cut their heads off if you try that again!" she angrily shouted.

"Enough! Everyone, stop! Sir Chiffelin's safety is our utmost priority right now!" the hero who seemed to be their leader exclaimed.

Chae Nayun slowly retreated with her two hostages. She glanced at her smartwatch and noticed that twenty minutes had passed. She figured that Rachel would've already safely met the others coming from underground.

"Take this!" Chae Nayun smacked Chiffelin's back.

Baaam!

The djinn, no, Sir Chiffelin flew and crashed into the heroes. A cloud of dust kicked up and the sudden turn of events caused disarray among the heroes.

Chae Nayun took this opportunity to grab Marcus and jump into the water.

"Bastard!"

The heroes rushed over, but they couldn't catch up to Chae Nayun swimming away as fast as she could while using mana.

* * *

Rachel slowly opened her eyes.

Pat!

A water droplet fell from the ceiling and a gentle breeze whispered in her ears.

Was this still underground or in the afterlife?

She looked around in a daze when something shone near her collarbone. It came from the necklace Kim Hajin gifted her.

The necklace shone in four different colors. This light symbolized all four major elements working in harmony.

“Ah!”

Only after seeing the necklace did Rachel finally stand up.

She checked the well-being of her guild members first: Fermin, Dale, Karen, Spleen, and Sliven. Sehat, Tilma, and Maurice from Reislauer also came. Thankfully, none of their lives seemed to be in danger.

“Hmm?”

The guild members brought numerous sacks that caught her eye. She opened one and found all sorts of potions and medicine.

“Wow...” Rachel muttered in amazement.

Who knew they would come so prepared? She opened the potions and fed them to her comrades.

Around thirty minutes passed before Fermin finally woke up.

“Eh?!” she exclaimed while looking around.

Rachel bitterly smiled and asked, “Are you alright?”

“Y-Yes, Vice Leader! *Huh?* Vice Leader!” Fermin cried out and jumped into Rachel’s embrace.

The others woke up one by one thanks to the commotion. Most of them had the same look on their faces before rushing over to Rachel like Fermin.

“Wait, hold on a minute. Calm down, everyone.”

Rachel placed a finger between her lips and motioned for them to be quiet. She felt happy to reunite with them too, but they didn’t have the luxury to rejoice right now.

“Things aren’t looking good,” she said. Rachel went straight to the point since they didn’t have time to sit around and chat. “Listen up, everyone. The owner of this place is Lancaster.”

“*Huh?!?*”

“What?!”

“Lancaster?!?”

“Yes, Lancaster is here,” Rachel replied and explained his plans to them.

At first, they seemed to be at a loss while listening to her. However, their faces slowly distorted into anger and confusion towards the end.

“Is something like that even possible?” Fermin asked.

Switching this recreated England with the real England sounded absurd.

“We can’t let it happen at all costs. Replacing what’s real with a

fake... We can't let such a thing happen. That's why we have to stop him at all costs," Rachel told them.

"..."

Sehat rubbed his chin and muttered, "It's crazy that he even thought of something like that."

Rachel nodded and looked west as the breeze from that direction seemed to call her. She turned to her guild members. "I'm sorry, but we don't have time to rest. Also, Lancaster is over there. Will all of you be okay?"

They nodded without a hint of hesitation as if saying, *We wouldn't have come in the first place if we weren't ready*. Rachel truly felt grateful to have them.

"We'll help too."

"What?"

On the other hand, she felt slightly burdened by Reislaufer's assistance. This was England's business. Rachel and her guild members were prepared to put their lives on the line to stop this madness, but dragging a third party into their problems didn't sit well with her.

Sehat smiled and said, "We might be members of Reislaufer, but we're all heroes before that. A hero shouldn't turn a blind eye to saving people, upholding the peace, and stopping evil."

"..."

Rachel looked at the other two members, Tilma and Maurice. It seemed that both of them had already made their choices as well.

She hesitated for a second before finally nodding.

"I'll definitely reward you for your help."

The word Reislauer basically meant Swiss mercenary. Rachel made a joke by referencing it.

Sehat and Tilma laughed in response.

“Yes, we’ll make sure to charge you heftily for this.”

“Alright, that sounds good. Let’s work together to stop this madness.”

Rachel’s forces multiplied by three times as she made her way west towards the Hampton Palace.

* * *

Meanwhile, Yoo Yeonha walked along in the sewers while checking the monitor and spirit mirror. She headed towards none other than the Hampton Palace.

“Ah... Stop tossing and turning will you?” she grumbled when Kim Hajin suddenly moved and almost fell off her back. She immediately held and repositioned him.

“Sigh...”

Yoo Yeonha decided to check the location of the others.

Both Chae Nayun and Rachel were underground as well. Rachel headed west from the Thames River towards the Hampton Palace and Chae Nayun seemed to be right behind her. This meant that all three of them were heading to the same place right now.

“Then that means...”

Yoo Yeonha deeply pondered when Kim Hajin’s arm suddenly slid down and touched her somewhere very intimate.

“Ack! Where the hell do you think you’re touching?!” Yoo Yeonha exclaimed and jumped in surprise with her face flushed red.

Splash!

Kim Hajin fell into the sewage.

“Hey! You’re awake, aren’t you? Answer me!” Yoo Yeonha shouted while covering her body with her arms.

“*Sigh...*”

However, she didn’t receive any response from him and picked up the walkie-talkie instead.

“Can anyone hear me right now?”

— Me.

Chae Nayun quickly responded.

Yoo Yeonha looked around before asking, “What about Rachel?”

— No idea. I’m with that Circus guy right now.

“Circus?”

— It’s Marcus! Who the hell is Circus?!

— Oh, right. Marcus.

“*Ah...* I see...”

It seemed that Marcus, who was either a traitor or an ally, had met with Chae Nayun.

Yoo Yeonha looked at the portable monitor and confirmed Chae Nayun’s GPS location.

“You’ll find Rachel if you keep going straight from where you are. Try to meet up with her first and provide me with an update on what’s

going on.”

— What about Kim Hajin? No, what about you?

Yoo Yeonha grimaced. Who did this girl really worry about?

“He’s safe, for now.”

— For now? What do you mean? Hey, did you abandon him by any chance?

“No, a hideous monster infiltrated the underground bunker. I suspect that the location has been compromised, so I decided to head towards you.”

Shwaa...

A chilling breeze blew.

Yoo Yeonha flinched and turned around.

Shwaa...

The dark sewers looked like a monster opening its jaws to devour her.

— Alright, so we’re meeting at the Hampton Palace then?

“Yeah... I think that’s what’s going to happen. Anyways, I’ll switch my walkie-talkie off for now.”

— Alright.

Yoo Yeonha had no idea when another monster would pop out.

Ah... Damn it... the moles were a thousand times better than that hideous thing...

Yoo Yeonha picked up Kim Hajin and began walking again. A brilliant

idea suddenly flashed in her head.

“That’s it!”

She found a long wooden plank lying in front of her and tossed it into the sewage. Then, she infused her mana underneath the wooden plank to create an electric current.

Bzzzt... Bzzzt!

The current stabilized the wooden plank on top of the water. Yoo Yeonha sent a powerful burst of mana into it that made the wooden plank spring forward like a speedboat. This would be a hundred times better than walking.

Whoosh! Whoosh!

She rapidly sped through the sewers, but soon found herself in a completely different environment.

“What the hell?”

Her surroundings had changed in an instant. The sewage dried out and a huge door stood in front of her.

“This is?”

Yoo Yeonha got off the wooden plank and looked at the door with various extravagant engravings.

Should she try opening it or just wait here?

“Grrr...”

However, it seemed that she had no other choice as a sinister aura approached from a distance.

Something lurked in the darkness and her hero senses continually alarmed her of the looming danger. She could smell the same

repulsive scent from the hideous monster in the underground bunker.

Yoo Yeonha opened the door with no other choice.

Creak...

The huge door eerily creaked open.

She surrounded herself with mana just in case, but hadn't expected what lay beyond the door.

Side Stories 36

Dream in a Dream (36)

A palace lobby lay beyond the door. Yoo Yeonha didn't know if it was the Hampton Palace, but she didn't sense any threats or dangers.

Was this the door that Marcus mentioned?

Yoo Yeonha briefly pondered and slowly walked in while holding onto Kim Hajin. She opened one of the bedroom doors in the lobby.

The room had creaking tiles, a desk, and a bed. Yoo Yeonha entered and placed Kim Hajin on the bed.

"Phew..."

She remained alert the entire time, but didn't sense any hostility in the surroundings. It seemed she could finally get some rest.

Yoo Yeonha wiped away the sweat and dirt on her before analyzing the situation.

First, what was that monster in the underground bunker? Its blood looked like tar and it exuded an evil aura. She suspected that various spirits had been mashed together to form that monster's physical body.

That could only mean one thing. Lancaster had captured those spirits of the dead.

"..."

Yoo Yeonha gritted her teeth. She found it despicable no matter how rational and calculative she acted. She was a hero, no, a human too in the end.

Just what in the world was Lancaster doing? Did he really believe he could change the past by doing this? Did he believe he was right to the extent that he would taint those souls?

Anger rose from within Yoo Yeonha.

“Haa...” she sighed to suppress her boiling anger and looked out the window. The sky turned dark as if ash covered the entire world.

Yoo Yeonha aimlessly looked around before heading towards the bed.

Kim Hajin peacefully slept there and she walked over to sit beside him. Then she switched on the walkie-talkie.

* * *

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Rachel and her party carefully walked through the passageway when a loud noise suddenly came from behind them.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

It sounded like something gigantic rushing towards them.

The party members immediately drew their weapons and turned around. They anxiously waited for whatever came.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Was it a monster or a human?

All of them waited in suspense when the thing charging at them shouted out.

“It’s me!”

“Ah!”

Rachel immediately sheathed Galatine after recognizing the voice. The rest followed suit and also lowered their weapons.

Chae Nayun popped out from the darkness.

“Phew...” Rachel sighed in relief.

The others recognized Chae Nayun and looked at her full of respect. Honestly, Chae Nayun became something like a celebrity among heroes. They naturally felt starstruck in her presence.

“Hey, why weren’t you picking up your radio?” Chae Nayun grumbled.

Rachel glanced at the person Chae Nayun was carrying covered from head to toe in a robe.

“My walkie-talkie got destroyed. Rather than that, who are you carrying? I don’t think that’s Hajin?”

“Oh, this guy is yours. Take him,” Chae Nayun replied as she threw the robed man.

The robe flung back and Marcus’ face came into view.

“Hey! T-That! It’s that bastard!”

“It’s that son of a bitch Marcus!”

The English Royal Court members surrounded Marcus lying on the floor. It seemed like they would start beating him at any moment.

Chae Nayun nonchalantly ignored them and took out her walkie-talkie.

“Hey, Yoo Yeonha. I’ve arrived.”

Bzzt... Pssh...

It didn't take long for Yoo Yeonha to respond.

— Got it. I'm at some palace with him right now.

“Is that so? Where are you exactly?” Chae Nayun asked.

— I think... I think this is the Hampton Palace.

“Hampton?” Chae Nayun muttered.

Rachel reacted before a slight migraine struck her. The strange sensation felt as if hundreds of small needles had pierced her head.

— Yes. Marcus is with you, right? Can you ask him for me? I got in through a door, but can you ask him if this is the right door?

“Ughh...” Marcus groaned as he woke up just in time.

He looked around dumbfoundedly before gasping in horror and realizing the situation.

“You little bastard!” Fermin gritted her teeth and glared at him while cracking her knuckles.

Not just her, but the other guild members also expressed their hostility towards him.

Marcus raised his arms and tried to calm them.

“Wait a minute! I had my reasons for doing that!”

“What reasons could there be? Let's hear it after pulling out your arms and legs first!” Fermin roared.

“Stop,” Chae Nayun interfered in Marcus' judgment and stopped him from being executed. She managed to make the angry mob step back with just words. Then she asked Marcus, “Is there a door underground? Yoo Yeonha says that she entered through a door just now.”

"Huh? Ah, yes... that's right," Marcus replied with a nod. He proceeded to explain, "There's a door at the end of the western underground passage. It's a place that Lancaster treasures, so it's always locked and hidden away from view. However, I snuck in last night and opened it. She's probably at the right place if she found a door."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah, but that place is filled with illusions. They better be careful over there."

"Illusions?" Chae Nayun frowned.

"Yeah," Marcus replied with a grimace. "That entire place is no different than a dream."

* * *

Yoo Yeonha closed her eyes for a second while radioing Rachel and Chae Nayun. She yawned a few times as drowsiness overcame her. Then she shook her head awake, but found that the walkie-talkie had been disconnected.

"Huh? What happened?" she wondered and got up to leave the room.

The palace lobby was well-lit. It didn't look extravagant, but preserved the period when this place was built. A few tiles and walls were chipped here and there, which showed the place's old age. The candlesticks and plates added to the strong Renaissance atmosphere.

Yoo Yeonha took her time looking around before she suddenly felt a strange aura from somewhere. She spotted a strange shadow in one corner of the lobby. It looked like a human, but she couldn't tell with its hands covering its face.

Yoo Yeonha fixed her gaze on the shadow as she slowly took out her whip.

The shadow suddenly showed its hideous face and charged at her.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

Its bloody eyes and torn chin came inches away from her. The face looked even more grotesque from up close.

“Euk!”

Yoo Yeonha felt so surprised that she couldn't even scream. She just stood there as her heartbeat stopped. The floor around her slowly turned black and her body slowly sunk into the dark floor. She couldn't move a muscle as the hideous ghost flashed a smile.

A warm breeze blew from somewhere and burned the ghost away as Yoo Yeonha sunk into the black swamp.

“Kyaaaaaahk!”

The ghost screamed in agony as it turned into ashes.

Yoo Yeonha helplessly fell to her knees after the ghost died. A set of arms pulled her out from the swamp and asked, “Are you alright?”

Her eyes instantly shot open at the familiar voice. She immediately looked at the person without realizing she was drenched in her own sweat and tears.

Kim Hajin tried to suppress his laughter at Yoo Yeonha's messy state. He had never seen her like this before.

“Hmm... You don't look too good right now.”

Yoo Yeonha wanted to reply, *I know that*. However, she couldn't muster her voice as her body uncontrollably shook.

“Pfft!” Kim Hajin finally let out a snicker after seeing Yoo Yeonha's pale face trying to speak.

The way he laughed sounded quite mischievous for some reason.

“Where... W-Where are we? W-Where is this place?” Yoo Yeonha finally uttered, but she stuttered as her lips and body violently shook. “Ah... N-No... W-When did you wake up? Y-You could have... t-told me if you were awake...”

Kim Hajin gently wiped away her tears as he replied, “I didn’t wake up yet.”

“What do you mean by that?” Yoo Yeonha asked with a frown.

Kim Hajin looked around before telling her, “This is a dream.”

“...?”

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t understand what he just said.

Could a dream feel this vivid? Also, wouldn’t anyone wake up if they were shocked to this extent?

No, rather than that... Why did this guy speak so formally and gently all of a sudden?

“Anyways, why don’t you get up first?” Kim Hajin smiled and took out his Desert Eagle.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly felt killing intent from all around them. The hostility came from numerous evil spirits surrounding them.

“You’ll end up peeing yourself if you stay here,” Kim Hajin said with a mischievous smile.

“W-What?! W-When did I piss myself?!” Yoo Yeonha retorted, but Kim Hajin didn’t say anything as he pulled her behind him and pulled the trigger.

Bang! Shwoooooosh!

A bullet flew in slow motion.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly opened her eyes.

“...!”

She found herself in a completely different environment after waking up.

Rachel and Chae Nayun sighed in relief.

“She woke up. *Phew*... I thought you got poisoned by that dream thing too...” Chae Nayun said.

Yoo Yeonha stared dumbfoundedly at them for a while.

“What zhe...?”

She noticed herself slurring and touched her cheeks to find them quite swollen.

Chae Nayun awkwardly laughed, “*Oops*, sorry. I think I struck you a bit too hard while trying to wake you up.”

“What...? *Ack!* It hurts! Why you little!” Yoo Yeonha screamed as she grabbed a handful of Chae Nayun’s hair in anger. The pain from both her cheeks came rushing all at once.

* * *

The situation slightly calmed in the Hampton Palace’s grand ballroom. Twelve individuals sat around a long table for a serious meeting.

“We know that this place is safe for now and we also know that this place has a mysterious power. Even Lancaster won’t be able to come here carelessly. However, that means we won’t be able to stop him if we don’t leave this place,” Marcus seriously said.

He couldn’t help but feel tense with so many sharp gazes from the English Royal Court members on him. He slightly tilted his head to avoid their gazes before continuing with his explanation.

“We also need to keep in mind that we’ll sink into our subconscious the more we try to move up to the surface. In short, we’ll fall asleep. The best thing would be to not fall asleep in the first place, but we’ll be dragged to the dream world if we doze off for even a split second. So...”

“That won’t be a problem,” Yoo Yeonha interrupted him.

Marcus turned around to say something, but Yoo Yeonha didn’t give him the chance.

“That person will be in our dreams,” she said while pointing at Kim Hajin sound asleep with his head on Rachel’s lap.

Rachel faked a cough after feeling awkward with all their gazes on her.

“*Huh?* What do you mean by that?” Marcus asked while tilting his head in confusion.

“I dreamt too and that person appeared in my dream. Not only that, but he also helped me,” Yoo Yeonha explained.

The Kim Hajin she met in her dream was quite powerful. He acted fearless too and didn’t even bat an eye against the ghosts.

How was it possible for someone to not even flinch and massacre those hideous ghosts?

“In your dream? He helped you?” Marcus frowned.

“Yes, and if we fall into a dream... then the one in a deeper slumber will be more powerful, right?”

“That sounds possible.”

“Well, this person is currently poisoned by the Empty Dream. That means he’s stronger than anyone else in the dream world,” Yoo Yeonha said as she pointed at Kim Hajin with her chin.

However, Marcus remained skeptical.

“That could be true, but... it’s not possible to appear in someone else’s dream. I dare say it was just a coincidence you met him in your dream or maybe your mind recreated him as a coping mechanism—”

“No,” Rachel cut him off. “It’s possible for Hajin. Rather than that, is what you just said true, Yeonha?”

She looked at Yoo Yeonha with a hint of jealousy.

Yoo Yeonha haughtily scoffed in response, “It’s true.”

“I see...” Rachel muttered.

Fermin and the other English Royal Court members looked at each other. All of them wanted to ask the same question whether that man sleeping on the vice leader’s lap called Kim Hajin was Xtra.

“Excuse me—” Fermin spoke out, but Rachel didn’t give them an inch and immediately cut her off.

“Have all of you enjoyed your meals?” Rachel suddenly asked her members.

The long banquet table in the grand ballroom was filled with food that Fermin and the others brought. They took everything out and everyone ate to their heart’s content. It would be quite ironic if hunger held them back at the most crucial moment later on.

“Yes, it was a delicious meal.”

“It was really good. I’m glad we brought all that with us.”

Sehit and Tilma replied while wiping their mouths with a napkin.

The rest of the party members wolfed down their food.

“We’re done too.”

“Then... shall we start moving, Marcus?” Rachel asked.

“Yes, ma’am,” Marcus replied.

They left the grand ballroom.

“I’ll lead the way,” Marcus said as he walked in front.

They found themselves in front of a giant staircase at the center of the lobby. This staircase didn’t exist in the original Hampton Palace.

“This is the place. Everyone, please be careful,” Marcus warned them before climbing the staircase.

Rachel felt a strange sensation as she climbed the stairs. It felt as if time slowly became irrelevant and she grew lighter with each step.

Step... Step...

They continued climbing without a word until one of them suddenly collapsed. It was Dale.

“I’ll carry him,” Marcus said.

The rest of the party resumed climbing and they finally caught sight of the end after almost a hundred steps.

“It’s a door. Everyone, follow me...” Rachel said as she opened the door and entered.

The space beyond the door contained absolutely nothing.

“Rachel?”

A warm, gentle voice that sounded like a soft breeze called her from the other side of the room.

Rachel suddenly felt dizzy, but forced herself to look towards the voice.

“You’ve grown into a wonderful young lady,” the voice said.

Rachel’s heart sank.

The person she had only ever seen in portraits stood in front of her with eyes full of warmth.

“Come over here. Come to your mother.”

Rachel had never met this person before.

“You have truly grown into a wonderful person. Your mother is so proud of you.”

Rachel’s feet slowly walked towards her mother.

Her mother wore a blue dress and her voice and gesture calling for Rachel felt so affectionate for some reason.

Rachel began tearing up as she walked towards her mother as if bewitched.

“Don’t go there.”

Another voice suddenly spoke.

Rachel flinched and turned around to find Kim Hajin behind her.

How and where did he suddenly come from? Why did he tell her not to go to her own mother?

She found herself in a dilemma and didn’t even realize she was currently stuck in a dream.

“Come to me instead,” Kim Hajin said as he walked over and hugged her.

He hugged her as tight as he could so she wouldn’t leave for that illusion bewitching her.

“Stay by my side,” he told her.

Rachel looked into his eyes full of certainty.

“Stay by my side until you wake up.”

He took off his coat and placed it over her.

She felt her eyelids growing heavy as the coat’s warmth enveloped her. His scent tickled her nose.

This warm, cozy feeling felt so familiar in the foreign dream world.

Side Stories 37

Dream in a Dream (37)

“You have to... wake up... now...”

A clear voice slowly faded into the distance as Rachel opened her eyes.

She sat in a daze for a while before touching her face and the ground. She could feel the stone’s coldness underneath her. Then she suddenly recalled her dream.

“Are you alright, Vice Leader?”

Another familiar voice completely woke her up. It belonged to Marcus this time.

“It’s time to get up.”

He extended a hand towards Rachel.

“What about the others?” she asked as she grabbed his hand.

A piece of her clothing suddenly fell when she stood. Rachel quickly tried to hold on so she wouldn’t be undressed. However, the clothing was far too big for her.

“Huh?”

She definitely didn’t have this coat on a while ago.

Rachel recalled what happened and looked around, but couldn’t find Kim Hajin anywhere. They left him behind in the bedroom downstairs with Yoo Yeonha since Marcus suggested that would be the safest place for him.

“...”

Rachel caressed the coat before taking a whiff of its scent. She could still smell him.

This truly felt mysterious and borderline supernatural. They had only met in her dream, so how could she have his coat?

Unless I'm still dreaming right now... She thought to herself and rummaged through the coat.

Marcus tilted his head in confusion as he observed his vice leader squirming in embarrassment with her face flushed.

“Hmm...” Rachel looked around her surroundings. It seemed she hadn't been dreaming until she got up to this part of the staircase.

Fermin, Dale, Karen, Sehit, Tilma, and even Chae Nayun sprawled out on the stairs asleep.

“Almost all of them fell asleep,” Marcus said.

Chae Nayun suddenly got up screaming, *“Whoaa!”* She looked around with a shocked expression and Rachel couldn't help but wonder what she dreamt about.

“What the hell? Was it all just a dream?” Chae Nayun grumbled in a daze.

After that, the others began waking up one by one. Every one of them had a different reaction. Some of them screamed at the top of their lungs while others violently convulsed before waking up.

“Is everyone alright?” Rachel asked after they woke up.

She told them to do some light exercises and stretch to wake up their mind and body. They resumed climbing the staircase after a round of aerobic exercises.

Step... Step...

Rachel could hear them murmuring from behind after they climbed a few steps.

“What kind of dream did you have?”

“I... It’s something from the past.”

“Me too.”

“It seems that whoever is doing this is purposely targeting our traumas. Don’t you think so?”

“Yes, but it was exactly as Yoo Yeonha said. That man appeared in my dream and helped me.”

“*Huh?* He appeared to you too?”

Rachel faked a cough and straightened her back. She felt somewhat proud for no reason after hearing that Kim Hajin helped them.

“Hey, what’s that?” Chae Nayun asked as she grabbed Rachel’s coat.

Rachel nonchalantly replied with a shrug, “A coat.”

“Isn’t this the coat Kim Hajin was wearing? When did you have the time to make a trip back down to get this? No, there’s no way that’s possible. Am I dreaming right now?”

“You’re not dreaming and I did receive this from Kim Hajin.”

“Who are you trying to fool? I know very well this is all a dream,” Chae Nayun said with a scoff.

They continued climbing for quite a while, but could no longer distinguish the boundary between dreams and reality.

Soon, they began collapsing one by one again and had to take a break

if the ones carrying those who fell asleep also fell unconscious. It took them an eternity just to climb the staircase.

“I see a light over there.” Rachel pointed into the distance.

Marcus looked and nodded. “Yes, that’s the entrance to the central hall.”

The other party members grew exhausted already.

Marcus turned around and smirked at them, “We somehow managed to come all the way here, *eh?*”

He spoke as he usually did since it seemed like everything had returned to normal.

“Shut your filthy mouth.”

“You better watch it before I kill you.”

“Has that bastard finally lost his mind?”

However, the English Royal Court members still treated him like an outcast.

“*Ehem...* Shall we go?” Marcus opened the door.

Creak... Ddruuu!

He pushed the door as hard as he could.

A vast, empty hall appeared before them. However, the original Hampton Palace hall had never been this vast and empty.

Rachel stepped forward after looking around, but Marcus grabbed her shoulder and stopped her. He pointed at a large stone statue on the other side.

“That’s the gatekeeper.”

The large statue with broad shoulders and a long beard slowly moved its empty hands when it spotted the intruders.

The party members prepared for combat when Rachel suddenly pondered if she was still dreaming.

— Can you hear me? We don't have much time.

Yoo Yeonha's voice rang out from the walkie-talkie to inform Rachel that the sky over England was turning red. That definitely seemed like an ominous omen.

Marcus frowned at the bad news.

"I'll handle this guy," Chae Nayun stepped forward with her greatsword. She turned around and told them, "We don't have much time, so why don't you all go on ahead."

The stone statue opened its eyes.

Creak...

The ground trembled as the statue took a step.

"Got it?" Chae Nayun urged them.

Rachel and the others nodded. They firmly believed that Chae Nayun wouldn't lose against that gatekeeper.

Chae Nayun infused mana into her sword and it grew exponentially until its tip reached the ceiling.

"Guuuuu!"

The party members ran towards the corridor on the other side when the huge sword distracted the stone statue.

Chwaaaaak!

The stone statue shot out hundreds of tentacles to tie up the intruders, but Chae Nayun released a ray of light that disintegrated the tentacles.

* * *

Rachel opened the Hampton Palace's main entrance and proceeded inside.

Lancaster waited for her across the pond surrounded by withered grass. The sky here had turned purple with gray clouds.

He held a sword and was fully dressed in armor, which made him look exactly like the knight from her memories.

"Have you arrived?" Lancaster asked. His voice sounded clear despite the distance between them.

Rachel took out Galatine while pondering if this was still a dream or reality.

"I have a lot of things I want to talk about with you, princess."

"..."

Rachel stepped forward and felt something strange.

"Guuuoooh..."

The bloody face of a spirit that resembled a human eerily cried out.

Rachel felt the urge to puke, but suppressed it.

"You!" She glared at Lancaster with seething anger and gripped Galatine so tightly that her hands turned pale.

"All of these spirits were born that day. They lost their bodies and were reborn as spirits," Lancaster nonchalantly said. He pulled out his sword and added, "They are regrets embodied and pain manifested..."

“Kyaaak! Kwuaaak!”

Rachel felt a sharp pain in her head from the spirits’ constant screaming.

Dozens of tentacles suddenly shot up and tried to grab her, but she quickly cut them down.

“Kieeeeek! Gwuoooh!”

The spirits cried out even louder. Their cries seemed to carry both anguish and agony.

Rachel felt her heart being torn to pieces as she listened to their tormented cries.

“Princess,” Lancaster said as he slowly walked towards her. Then he asked, “Do you still not understand?”

Tears welled up in his eyes as he spoke, but Rachel couldn’t understand his sadness.

“This dream... This is the only way we can change the cogs of fate. This is the last chance we have to turn back time and right our mistakes,” Lancaster said before extending his hand towards her. “Join me and let us save these people. You have already suffered enough too, princess.”

The spirits’ tormented cries grew louder after Lancaster finished speaking.

“...”

“Please, take my hand.”

Rachel remained silent as she thought. She may have accepted his offer a year ago when she was still weak. She was too young, dumb, and naive at the time.

However...

“No,” Rachel refused and decided to stop blaming herself for everything that happened. She decided to march forward from now on for the people that trusted and supported her.

“You shouldn’t try to change something that can’t be changed. The only thing we can do is to honor them by remembering them as we live on,” she told him.

A large hole appeared in her heart after that incident, but that hole had already healed and left a scar. Rachel would never forget because of that.

That was the difference between her and Lancaster, who still had a gaping hole in his heart.

“Is that so...” Lancaster muttered as he stared at Rachel. He sighed and nodded in acknowledgment of how much she had changed from her younger days.

“I guess I have no choice then,” he said.

“Kwuaaaaaah!”

The spirits of the dead shot up from the ground and gathered to form a monster. The monster had a large head and dozens of arms and legs hanging all over its body. The cries of hundreds of spirits could be heard from each limb.

“Have you finally decided to become someone who can’t be redeemed?” Rachel asked as she gritted her teeth and gripped Galatine.

The monster shot hundreds of tentacles towards her.

Rachel summoned her spirits and a bright light shot out from the coat and her necklace.

Shwaaaaa!

Her spirits appeared and shone a bright light on the monster.

Lancaster watched the entire scene with a smile. He looked at Rachel with warmth in his eyes.

* * *

Chae Nayun could easily distinguish between dreaming and reality. Her sharp instincts noticed the slightest difference. This meant that she could recklessly swing her sword without any worries. Chunks of the stone statue broke every time she slammed her sword against it.

The stone statue shot out its tentacles, but couldn't even touch Chae Nayun before she cut them down.

Chae Nayun felt confident in winning. No, she felt confident in never losing. After all, the difference in their strength was close to ten times apart.

“Ah... Damn it...”

However, something kept bothering her. A sad cry from somewhere in the hall grew louder every time she cut down the tentacles and smashed the stone statue. The cry began tugging on her heartstrings.

The stone statue contained numerous spirits in its body, which left a bitter taste in Chae Nayun's mouth. However, that didn't deter her as she continued her merciless onslaught without a hint of hesitation. She swung her sword again and again without stopping.

The stone statue seemed greatly taken aback by her composure and coldness.

“You...” The stone statue spoke for the first time in a low depressed voice that seemed to evoke one's empathy.

Chae Nayun smirked at the stone statue's attempt. “Cheap tricks won't work on me you little shit.”

The stone statue tried to wage psychological warfare against her like a

coward since it couldn't win against her physically. However, such cheap tricks would never work against Chae Nayun.

I'm probably in the top ten in the world when it comes to mental fortitude.
Chae Nayun's mind slightly wandered before her face suddenly hardened.

“ ... ”

She sensed the emotions of something whenever she slashed the stone statue. Her sharp instincts automatically picked it up.

Chae Nayun looked at the stone statue, the ground, and then the ceiling. Countless spirits squirmed all over the place. No, this entire space was made up of the spirits themselves.

She looked at them and muttered, “All of you want to regress as well, right? Regardless if it's real or not...”

They seemed aware that their regression wouldn't be the real thing. Lancaster himself seemed aware of it too. However, Lancaster chose an eternal dream anyways and tried to drag Rachel along.

That's not what I want. What I really want is...

Chae Nayun spoke with the spirits as she swung her sword. They knew they had already died and seemed to want eternal rest now.

Chae Nayun swung her sword with all her might when she suddenly spotted a dark silhouette behind her.

“Huh?” She immediately turned around.

“Ack!” She screamed and her eyes shot wide open.

Kim Hajin shouldn't be here, but he suddenly stood behind her and shocked her.

“W-What?! What the hell?! When did you come here? No, why are

you here?! You surprised me!” Chae Nayun exclaimed before nervously gulping.

Side Stories 38

Dream in a Dream (38)

The darkness receded as I stood in the brightly lit garden with her.

I knelt on one knee and looked at the princess, small and delicate as a rose. It felt as if she would break if I squeezed a bit too hard.

The princess smiled at me. Her bright and innocent smile made me smile too.

Then a thought suddenly crossed my mind. Why did I swear to protect her? What conviction pushed me to the brink of destruction? No, could that even be called conviction in the first place? Or was it the price I had to pay for turning back on my oath?

Multiple VIP guests gathered in Buckingham Palace's rear garden.

The royal family and the queen watched as I swore my oath of fealty. Even my wife and child were there, albeit at a distance.

I looked at myself kneeling on the ground and beaming with pride.

I recited my oath starting with the words, *My lord...*, and I swore to protect her for the rest of my life.

The princess looked at me with a bright expression. She had no idea what was going on as I knelt on the ground and recited my oath to protect her for the rest of my life.

“Awright!” she exclaimed in her squeaky voice with a huge smile.

However, I didn't smile or laugh at her adorable actions. Instead, I looked at her in amazement when I realized this little bird would be England's hope.

“Shank you!” she said in the purest voice I had ever heard.

Her cheerfulness felt contagious.

Yes... now I remember...

My desire to protect the princess stemmed from my empty self. It didn't come from the princess' request and no one forced me to swear an oath to protect her.

Honestly, no special reason existed. Everything began with some words I picked up somewhere while growing up when I had no idea what being a knight meant.

I solemnly declared that I would risk my life to protect the princess of my own volition.

* * *

Shwaaa...

Rachel's spirit illuminated the heavens and earth. The blinding light disintegrated the evil spirits.

Meanwhile, Lancaster calmly observed Rachel from a short distance away.

“...”

He smiled at the warm dream that suddenly popped up in his mind. The warmth from her spirit's light reminded him of his memories buried deep inside.

Now, Rachel walked towards him as her spirit's light rapidly spread like the wind. The evil spirits couldn't withstand the light and they either ran away or disintegrated. However, she suddenly stopped when an agonizing pain brought her to her knees.

The situation... is getting... better...

It will... soon... happen...

The noise she often heard resounded in her head. No, it felt like the noise was pounding in her brain.

She gritted her teeth and tried to endure. “*Keuk!*”

Rachel forced herself back up and aimed her sword at Lancaster, who stood quite close.

Shwaaaak!

Her spirit pierced through the evil spirits between them. She saw him looking down at her. He had a sad solemn look on his face before suddenly smiling.

“Vice Leader! Vice Leader!”

Someone violently shook her and Rachel’s eyes suddenly shot open. She blinked a few times and looked around.

The sky above looked clear and sunny.

Rachel looked at the people who shook her awake. Her guild members all seemed worried.

“Where am I? Where is this?” she asked.

She felt extremely confused about what just happened. Wasn’t she just with Lancaster a moment ago?

“We aren’t sure ourselves, but we suspect that we’re now outside the Hampton Palace.”

“Then was I dreaming just now?”

“Yes, I think you were.”

Rachel frowned at the realization that everything had been a dream

when the ground violently shook.

Dozens of hooded figures appeared around them and looked exactly like the robed minions who attacked them on their way to the general assembly.

They appeared one by one until numbering in the hundreds and fully surrounded Rachel's party.

"Hahahaha!" A burst of laughter echoed out.

The laughter came from a gigantic rock-like person a distance away.

Marcus flinched after seeing the djinn Chiffelin who served Lancaster.

Chiffeling snickered and said, "Marcus! Great job! It would've been impossible to lure the princess and these English Royal Court bastards if it wasn't for you!"

The guild members instantly glared at Marcus, who vigorously shook his head in denial.

"No! It's not what you think! I didn't do anything!"

"You damn bastard... You dare trick us until the end!"

"Hey, you piece of scum!"

"This was another trap? How could you do this to us?!"

"No! I said it wasn't me!"

"Shh!" Rachel hushed her guild members and gripped Galatine.

She looked around and even over Chiffelin's towering height, but couldn't find Lancaster anywhere.

Chiffelin shouted to start the main event, "Now! It's time to activate the spell since the main character is here!"

The ground underneath their feet began to squirm like a slithering snake and a powerful energy surged from beneath them.

They stood on a massive magic circle that slowly painted the sky gray.

“We have to stop it—” Marcus tried to shout, but a louder noise interrupted him.

Wooong... Kaboom!

Bzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt!

An electric current shot out from the ground and zapped them.

“What’s going on... *Ouch!*” Rachel wondered what happened when she realized that Yoo Yeonhwa had detonated the homemade bombs across England.

The magic circle stopped activating thanks to her efforts.

“Which stupid son of a whore did this?!” Chiffelin cried out in anger.

He and his minions instantly glared at Rachel’s party.

Rachel didn’t have to say anything for her party members to immediately prepare for combat. She wielded Galatine in reverse even though she knew the back of the blade wouldn’t be able to cut anyone.

However, that was exactly what she wanted. She felt sick and tired of this endless cycle of revenge and hatred from someone losing their life. She would put an end to all this once and for all.

* * *

Step... Step...

Chae Nayun slowly walked towards Kim Hajin. The stone statue stood there looking for any gaps in her defense, so she couldn’t carelessly

turn her back.

Kim Hajin laughed while looking at her carefully approaching him.

“Why are you here?” she asked him.

She could smell his nostalgic stench of cigarettes.

Kim Hajin didn’t respond and simply continued staring at her.

She stole a glance at him before suddenly looking away. Strangely enough, her cheeks became flushed red and her hands trembled.

Why did she get so nervous when she knew full well this was just a fake Kim Hajin?

“This... This is all a dream, right?” she glanced at him and asked.

The breeze in the hall stopped blowing and the stone statue suddenly froze. It seemed as if time had stopped when Chae Nayun realized this was all a dream.

“Yes, you already destroyed the stone statue. Remember?” Kim Hajin replied.

“Did I? Maybe I can’t remember because I destroyed it in a single blow. I’m that strong after all...”

“Exactly, the stone statue released a wave of illusion when it got destroyed.”

“No wonder, I had a strong feeling this was all a dream. You know my instincts are never wrong, right?”

Her memories slowly returned after talking to Kim Hajin. She suddenly looked downcast and asked, “Then, I won’t be able to wake up like you?”

“No,” Kim Hajin shook his head. After all, he already finished

deciphering the secrets behind the dreams in this place.

He grabbed Chae Nayun's wrist.

"Crazy bastard!" She flinched and tried to pull her hand away, but Kim Hajin tightly gripped it and refused to let go.

No, more like she only pretended to pull her hand away. She didn't want him to let go of her.

"Hey, what are you doing right now? You... Hey... hey hey hey hey!"

"Stay still, will you? I'm trying to detoxify you."

Kim Hajin applied the antidote from his Medicinal Memory Physique. Chae Nayun shuddered at the strange sensation when he directly injected the antidote into her vein.

"Done," Kim Hajin said as he let go of her wrist.

Chae Nayun slightly regretted when his touch left her skin.

"Is that it?" she asked.

"Yeah, you'll wake up soon," he nonchalantly replied.

"*Hmm...* Is that so?"

Chae Nayun crossed her arms over her chest and stared at Kim Hajin.

She figured that the Kim Hajin in this world was just a fake who didn't have the same complicated relationship with her as the real one. It would probably be fine not to be so awkward around him.

"Hey."

"Time for you to get up."

“H-Huh? What?”

“I said, wake up.”

“No thanks, I still have a lot to tell you.”

Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes and asked, “You’re from this world, right?”

She asked just in case since the real Kim Hajin could also have been transported here like her. However, it looked like Kim Hajin had no idea what she meant.

Chae Nayun sighed before shaking her head. “Nothing. Never mind.”

She got the result she wanted. Now she had an idea of how to get the Miracle Stone Fragment from this place. The evil spirits gave her a hint about the real owner of this dream.

“Sure,” Kim Hajin replied with a smile.

His smile looked warm and gentle for some reason, but that was the last she saw of him.

Chae Nayun pouted when she woke up from her dream.

The sun brightly shone on her. She squinted her eyes and covered them with her hand as she got up. How many hours did she sleep? Why did her body hurt so much?

“Ughh!”

She stretched and got up on her feet.

“Phew...”

One two... One two...

Chae Nayun lightly stretched and walked towards the door. She flung

open the main doors and steeled her resolve to finally obtain the Miracle Stone Fragment.

Creak...

The world beyond the door appeared.

“...?”

Chae Nayun stood there dumbfounded and blinked a few times.

Blink... Blink... Blink... Blink...

She closed her eyes a few times and even rubbed them in case she was seeing things.

“What the hell is this?!” she exclaimed in disbelief.

This wasn’t the Hampton Palace anymore. No, forget about the Hampton Palace... An entirely different world had popped up in front of her.

“Isn’t this just... England?” she muttered in astonishment before jumping in surprise.

The general assembly had kicked her out without her noticing.

“What the hell is this? *Huh?* Hey... wait a minute... but why?”

A thought suddenly flashed across her mind when she felt completely flabbergasted and at a loss about what to do.

“Wait a minute...” She calmly looked around.

Her instincts were telling her something. No, the spirit that clung to her wanted her to realize something.

It tried to tell her that the ending she wanted was somewhere nearby.

“Heup!”

Yoo Yeonha detonated all the bombs she installed across the fake England.

Wooong... Booom! Boooooom! Boooooom!

A powerful tremor could be felt even underground. The atmosphere around her instantly changed after the explosions.

“...”

Reddish-black spirits that looked hideous emitted sinister auras.

“Hey... this is a bit too scary for me. I might actually lose my mind here.” Yoo Yeonha weakly complained with tears welling in her eyes.

“Kiiieeee...”

She looked at the ceiling where the sound came from. An evil spirit suddenly pushed its face through the ceiling and stared at her with its wide open mouth.

“Hiccup! Argh... Ahh...” Yoo Yeonha froze and jumped sideways to avoid the evil spirit’s drool. Then she carried Kim Hajin and ran out of the room.

She almost fell on the way out with Kim Hajin when her legs suddenly gave out.

“Mommy!” she screamed and looked around the lobby.

Not only the bedroom, but evil spirits crawled all over the place. Rather, the entire place was made up of evil spirits. Her feet sunk into the jaws of evil spirits whenever she took a step.

“Ah... Eugh... Hiccup! Huk... Huk...” Yoo Yeonha began

hyperventilating from the fear and suddenly noticed her back felt quite light.

Her face turned ghastly pale and she instantly turned around to find that Kim Hajin had gone missing.

Don't tell me I threw him away without realizing it? She questioned herself as her entire body trembled.

Yoo Yeonha looked around the floor in hopes of finding him when someone suddenly spoke from behind her, “What are you looking for?”

She flinched and turned around to find Kim Hajin smiling at her.

Then, she finally realized that this was once again just a dream. She would wake up from this nightmare soon enough.

Contrary to her expectations...

“This isn’t a dream. I’ve woken up,” he said with a smile that didn’t suit their situation. His smile definitely felt mischievous.

Yoo Yeonha composed herself and asked, “No... ah... I mean... really... geez... You sure took your time sleeping, didn’t you? Hey, do you even know how long you’ve been asleep?”

“Of course, I can go back to sleep if you want me to,” Kim Hajin teased her while snickering.

He looked into the distance at something.

[Medicinal Memory Physique has fully detoxified the Empty Dream.]

[Tower of Wish Bonus — You have received a special inheritance!]

[You have inherited one skill stored in the player’s storage!]

Inherited Skill ► [Extraction, Materialization, and Synthesis]

A string of notifications appeared in front of him without Yoo Yeonha's knowledge.

"What are you doing?" she asked while pouting.

Kim Hajin took out his Black Lotus Bow, nocked a dark ore arrow, and aimed at the ceiling.

Then he shot the arrow and activated one of the Black Lotus Bow's effects, which could purify evil spirits.

The evil spirits that filled the place slowly disappeared after screaming in agony.

"Let's go up now," he said.

"*Hiing...* Well... I guess guarding you all this time came with some benefit. Alright, let's go," Yoo Yeonha replied with a nod.

She regained her confidence and haughty look after he vanquished all the evil spirits. They promptly climbed the stairs.

However, the walls and stairs began to melt like candle wax. The wailing spirits gave them a sharp headache.

"*Kieeeeeek!*"

Yoo Yeonha tightly held onto Kim Hajin. She asked him some questions to distract herself from the horrifying screams.

"How long were you stuck in your dreams? It must've been quite a long time, right?"

"..."

Kim Hajin glanced at her and nonchalantly replied with a shrug, "Perhaps around... fifteen or twenty years? At least that's how it felt."

"WHAT?!" Yoo Yeonha's jaws dropped. "Fifteen... Fifteen years?!"

Then... Then... do you remember everything that happened in your dreams?”

“Yeah, I do. Rather, I tried to remember them.”

“Why? Isn’t it better for you to just forget about them?”

He flashed a smile filled with sadness.

“I got to meet everyone that I’ve been wanting to meet.”

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t understand what he meant. She stared at him intently for a while before looking away and feeling sorry for him.

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

“I see...”

She didn’t say anymore and quietly followed him.

The long staircase leading up kept winding and she gradually grew drowsy for some reason. She staggered up the stairs and buried her face into Kim Hajin’s back.

“We have a problem...” she muttered.

Kim Hajin stopped and turned around.

Yoo Yeonha looked at him with droopy eyes.

“I feel so sleepy. I think I’m going to die at this rate if I don’t sleep...”

Her voice trailed off as she rubbed her face against his back.

Kim Hajin smirked at her, “You can go to sleep. I’ll let you have the sweetest dream ever.”

His voice sounded reassuring for some reason. Yoo Yeonha smiled before collapsing and Kim Hajin carried her on his back.

Step... Step...

Yoo Yeonha fell into a deep slumber with her chin resting on his shoulder. Only the sound of his footsteps filled their surroundings.

She didn't know why, but she knew she would have a good dream this time.

Side Stories 39

Dream in a Dream (39)

Rachel engaged in a fierce battle where one of the most disastrous events in England's history had occurred, the Hampton Palace. She marched forward and knocked out her enemies with the back of Galatine's blade.

She resolved to stop the magic circle at all costs and her party members felt the same.

“Keuk!”

However, the enemy had no intentions of fighting and only stalled for time. Lancaster already finished his preparations to destroy England. She knew very well that not only her, but the real England would also be destroyed if Lancaster activated this gigantic magic circle.

“This looks tough,” Marcus said while smiling with his forehead drenched in sweat.

“We managed to stop the magic circle thanks to the bombs, but... *Argh!*” He couldn't finish as an energy blast from an enemy flung him back.

Rachel didn't have the time to check on him as the same attack struck her too.

Clang!

However, she summoned her spirit just in time and parried the energy blast with Galatine. She pushed back the enemies in front by combining her fire and wind spirit. However, they were still far too outnumbered and severely disadvantaged.

It was ten against a battalion that numbered in the thousands if one counted the undead and monsters as well.

“Rachel,” Sehat called her. “That man called Chiffelin is standing at the core of the magic circle. Can you see it?”

Sehat had been racking his brains the entire time to find a way to destroy the magic circle.

Rachel nodded at his words. As he said, Chiffelin undoubtedly stood at the magic circle’s core judging by the fact that all the mana gathered there.

“We’ll attract his attention, so you should focus on destroying it,” Sehat said.

“SAYS WHO?!” someone suddenly shouted.

A hail of bullets rained on them.

Rachel blocked them with Galatine, but hundreds of mana-compressed bullets immediately followed the barrage.

“It’ll be difficult to charge in,” Rachel said as she summoned her earth and wind spirit to form a barrier against the bullets.

“No, it’s possible,” another voice suddenly spoke.

Rachel felt a chill down her spine and her eyes widened. She turned towards the voice and saw a man standing on top of the Hampton Palace’s roof. He smiled brightly at her.

“I’ll protect you, so it’ll definitely be possible,” he reassured her.

“...”

Rachel stared at him for a while before finally nodding. She could proceed as planned with a light heart now that he arrived.

“I’ll give you the signal,” Kim Hajin said as he pulled his bowstring.

Rachel prepared to dash forward at any second with Sehat, Tilma, Marcus, and the others behind her.

“One.”

Creak...

He pulled the arrow on his bowstring and aimed at Chiffelin.

“Two.”

Rachel infused mana into her legs and summoned her wind spirit to spring forward at any moment.

“Three. Now!” Kim Hajin shouted and released his arrow.

Shwiiiiii!

The arrow ferociously flew towards Chiffelin while burning through every enemy and spirit in its path. Rachel dashed right through the path opened by the arrow.

She headed towards where Chiffelin stood.

Mana would gather at the magic circle’s core just like a human’s mana gathered in their core. They could stop the magic circle if they destroyed that spot.

The enemies rushed in from both sides to close her path, but another arrow and bullets rained down to protect her. A few of the enemies managed to slip past the cover fire, but Rachel’s party members suddenly appeared and blocked them.

“You dare!” Chiffelin growled when Rachel finally reached the magic circle’s core.

Rachel immediately flashed her spirit’s light at the djinn. Chiffelin

could feel his body slowly disintegrating from the purifying light.

“Kuuuuuuh!”

She shoved the screaming djinn as hard as she could.

“Haaaaap!”

Then she screamed the loudest she ever had in her entire life and stabbed Galatine into the magic circle’s core.

Rumble... Rumble...

Galatine spread the power of Rachel’s spirit throughout the magic circle as if laying down its roots. Rachel squeezed every last ounce of her strength and pushed her spirit deeper into the magic circle.

Her wood spirit manifested into roots and blocked the movement of mana within the magic circle. Her earth spirit shook the ground and hampered the magic circle’s progress. Her water spirit erased and altered parts of the magic circle. Lastly, her fire and wind spirit combined to unleash a powerful blaze that melted the magic circle.

She was showing the classic example of easier said than done right now. The magic circle was enormous and spread across all 243,610 square kilometers of England. Rachel was destroying that enormous magic circle all alone.

Ddrruu... Ddrruuu...

The sound of cogwheels turning and screeching could be heard before the magic circle finally stopped operating.

“Ah...” Rachel fell to the ground after exhausting all her energy, but someone’s warm embrace caught her before she hit the ground.

She saw that it was Kim Hajin and couldn’t help but smile like a fool.

“You finally woke up...” she weakly muttered.

“Yes, I have. Just leave the rest to me,” he replied.

“Will you be alright?”

Rachel was still worried even though they stopped the magic circle. Chiffelin and the number of enemies still posed a huge threat.

However, Kim Hajin didn’t seem concerned at all and leisurely pointed into the distance.

Rachel squeezed whatever strength she had left and turned to where he pointed.

“Huh?”

A person’s silhouette came into view. This short woman wore a dress accompanied by a tall woman wielding a bow.

Rachel’s eyes widened in surprise.

Aileen and Jin Seyeon had somehow arrived.

“Hey, you criminal! Chiffelin, I’ve come to arrest you!” Aileen shouted.

She sounded adorable, yet dependable at the same time. Rachel passed out with a peaceful look and fell asleep without a single worry.

* * *

They destroyed the gigantic magic circle, but Lancaster didn’t seem bothered at all. He didn’t expect the magic circle to be completed in the first place. He worried in the dark if he was right.

Was his revenge justified?

He already realized a long time ago that justified revenge didn’t exist. The emotions he buried deep inside himself surfaced again as darkness surrounded him.

Grief initially consumed him and he lost all purpose in life. Then anger and resentment overcame him and he tried to inflict as much pain as possible on Rachel. In the end, he finally realized that his main purpose in life was to destroy the cogs of fate and rewrite the past tragedy that should never have occurred.

However, Rachel viciously fought even in this dream world. She could've lived a peaceful and happy life if she just gave in. She could've even put down all the burdens she carried.

Despite all that, she chose to fight against this dream. Her subconscious floated around like an aimless buoy, but suddenly shone brightly like a steadfast lighthouse in the dark.

Lancaster recalled the warmth of the tiny girl he once held in his arms. He slowly opened his eyes and saw the princess from the darkness. The princess was smiling in the embrace of another man.

"I regretted it a lot," he slowly said while looking at her.

"It saddened me too. The fact that all this happened because of you and me."

He shouldn't have let Rachel go that day. Lancaster always regretted his actions.

That day's tragedy wouldn't have happened if he was a bit more strict with her. If only he fulfilled his obligations as a knight and protected her.

"However, it'll be different now," Lancaster muttered while looking down at the shining stone in his hand.

This force had made everything possible. The fragment of miracle that he obtained after painstaking efforts.

"I will make you happy now. In this place..."

Was this what they called a gift?

Lancaster had no idea. He tightly gripped the stone in his hand that sapped his life force in exchange for fulfilling his desires.

“Forever...”

This stone’s power would now complete the world he envisioned and Rachel would be trapped in this dream world forever. She would finally live a happy life without ever realizing that she was trapped in a dream.

Through that, he would finally fulfill his duty as her knight.

Lancaster smiled as his consciousness slowly drifted into the darkness.

He heard the voices of those he dearly missed and slowly melted away. He saw the faces of his beloved family.

* * *

Chae Nayun ran as fast as she could while only relying on her instinct. England’s scenery whooshed past her and she arrived at the location where the spirit guided her.

It was a warm and cozy garden with bees, flowers, and trees living in harmony.

Lancaster sat at the center of this garden. The flowers and trees peacefully surrounded him. He gave off a gentle aura despite the decades of hatred he harbored.

Chae Nayun slowly and carefully approached the knight. She noticed the faint golden glimmer from a stone after taking a few steps towards him.

“Were you the one who took it?” she asked.

However, Lancaster didn’t reply and kept his eyes closed as if in a deep slumber.

“Are you pretending to be asleep?” she asked again while thinking, *There’s no way that’s going to work on me.*

She tapped his shoulder and he spoke in a very faint voice, “I have returned...”

“What the hell are you talking about? Returned from where?”

“...”

Lancaster smiled with a rose in his hand.

“*Hmm...*” Chae Nayun roughly understood the situation.

Lancaster injected his mana into the Miracle Stone Fragment and probably wished for a dream that continued forever. He probably wished to live in a world that satisfied him instead of the cruel reality that tormented him.

“I’ll be taking this. It was mine to begin with,” Chae Nayun said and took her Miracle Stone.

She infused her mana into the fist-sized golden stone and the fragment with Lancaster slowly flew towards her. It combined with the Miracle Stone in her hand and became whole again.

“Well, that was kinda anti-climatic...” she grumbled.

Lancaster didn’t resist or put up a fight. Of course, she would’ve crushed him and beaten him to a pulp if he did.

“*Sigh...*”

Anyways, she successfully retrieved the fragment and everything finally ended.

She sighed in relief and bid the knight farewell, “I’ll get going now.”

It was time for everyone to wake up from their dreams now.

Chae Nayun smirked as she looked at the completed Miracle Stone.

However...

Krrrwaaaaa!

A huge amount of mana surged out from the sleeping Lancaster. This powerful energy shook the entire world they were in.

“What the hell?!” Chae Nayun cried out as the Miracle Stone began resonating with this powerful energy.

The Miracle Stone shot out silver threads and bound Chae Nayun.

She screamed in anger, “Hey! Let me go! I said let me go! Why you little! Hey! Wait a minute... Hey!”

The world Lancaster created was Rachel’s dream and didn’t permit Chae Nayun’s existence. She found herself in a different world after she blinked.

No, she had returned to the real world.

“Gasp!”

Chae Nayun immediately stood and looked around. Numerous people slept on beds under a white ceiling.

This place was called the Empty Dream Patient Center at Severance Hospital.

Chae Nayun looked around for a while and muttered under her breath, “Fuck.”

That damned bastard Lancaster used the fragment’s power to expel her from that world. This meant she could no longer interfere in that world and she couldn’t save Rachel either. Rachel would have to wake up from that dream by herself.

“Ah... This has gotten annoying.”

Chae Nayun jumped out of bed and rushed somewhere. She arrived at the hospital's top floor where the VIP wards were located.

[VIP Ward]

“You can't enter here—”

“I'm Chae Nayun! Get out of my way!”

Bam!

She shoved the bodyguard guarding the entrance and barged in.

“*Kiyahk!*”

Rachel lay in bed like a dead person. Evandel slept at her side and chirped like a frightened chick when Chae Nayun barged in.

“*Huk... Huk!*”

“Oh, my bad. Did I scare you?” Chae Nayun asked before sitting down beside the shaking Evandel and patting her head.

The news flashed on tv.

[Twenty days have passed since the incident caused by the Tower of Miracle. The Sleeping Shockwave sent out by the tower when it collapsed has caused tens of millions to enter an Empty Dream. They are currently not showing any signs of recovery...]

Chae Nayun let out a sigh.

They succeeded in the Tower of Miracle, but something no one expected had occurred and affected the entire world.

The Empty Dream Shockwave happened right after the tower collapsed. It not only affected all the Essence of the Strait members

who participated in the raid, but it also dragged in other people like Rachel.

None of the affected had woken up yet.

“*Tsk...*” Chae Nayun clicked her tongue in frustration while looking at the sound asleep and smiling Rachel.

A person having a wonderful dream would obviously resist waking up from it. Lancaster would win at this rate.

Was this really Lancaster’s ultimate goal? To let Rachel dream forever? Would this quench his thirst for vengeance?

“E-Excuse m-me...” Evandel stuttered and nervously looked back and forth between Rachel and Chae Nayun. The way she twiddled her thumbs looked too cute.

“What?” Chae Nayun frowned and curtly replied.

“That is... That is... That... is... *Sniff! Sniff!*”

Tears began welling up in the little girl’s eyes after seeing Chae Nayun’s face. All of Evandel’s stress came crashing after seeing Chae Nayun’s scary face.

“Hey hey, don’t cry. Nothing’s going to happen,” Chae Nayun said as she placed Evandel in a headlock and scuffled her hair.

Evandel finally burst into tears at Chae Nayun’s violence.

“Right, where is Kim Hajin?”

“Hajin just left...”

“Is that so? He must’ve gone looking for a way to fix this mess. Alright, I’ll be off now.”

“*H-Huh?* Oh, okay. Then, goodbye...”

Chae Nayun left after releasing the poor girl from her headlock.

Lancaster used the Miracle Stone Fragment to create a dream world for Rachel. This meant she had to wake up for tens of millions to be freed.

Chae Nayun sighed while walking through the corridor and leaned against the wall.

“What am I supposed to do now?” she weakly grumbled.

She finally managed to retrieve the fragment, but couldn’t wake Rachel up anymore.

She could only infiltrate Rachel’s dream in the first place thanks to the connection between the Miracle Stone and its fragment. However, that connection had been lost when she retrieved the fragment.

Despite that, she couldn’t afford to turn her back and leave now. That would leave a very sour, no, bitter taste in her mouth.

She rummaged through her pockets and a box of cigarettes fell out. Chae Nayun bit the cigarette and prepared to light it when she suddenly recalled something that made her crumple the cigarette and throw it on the ground.

The crushed cigarette turned into ashes that littered the floor.

* * *

Rachel, Kim Hajin, and the others stuck in the dream world returned to Tomer’s continent.

Tomer heartily laughed and welcomed them, “Excellent! You did great! I’ll purify that fake England later, so don’t worry about it. I’ll wipe them off the map!”

“No...” Rachel shook her head.

Tomer probably meant she would exorcise the evil spirits on the other side.

“I hope those people can continue living a normal life... without ever realizing the England they are living in is a fake...”

“Huh?”

“Is that possible?”

“Well, that’s a bit unexpected. I’ll try nevertheless.”

“I’ll visit frequently to help out.”

“Ah, that will make things easier.”

Tomer patted Rachel on the shoulder and asked, “So what are you going to do now?”

Her voice carried a commanding aura befitting a king.

Rachel pondered for a moment before replying, “I’ll need to leave the general assembly for now. I have a lot of things to inform them about. Starting with Xtra and Lancaster...”

“Hmm... You’ll need a trophy to bring back too, right?”

“That’s...”

Tomer called her subordinates before Rachel could respond. Her subordinates rushed over with an expensive-looking chest. Tomer opened it and Rachel’s eyes sparkled at the contents.

“This is an artifact that won’t disappear even outside the general assembly. Of course, I’m not sure what it’s worth in the current market. I think it’ll fetch at least two billion won,” Tomer nonchalantly said.

Forget about two billion, this artifact would easily fetch five billion

won outside. What shocked Rachel most was that this chest contained twenty of these artifacts.

She couldn't suppress her joy and greedily salivated over the artifacts.

"Thank you. I will never forget your kindness."

"What kindness are you talking about... Geez..."

Knock... Knock...

Someone knocked on the door and Kim Hajin soon entered.

"Are you ready, Rachel? We're going to leave now," he said with a smile.

Rachel replied with a bright smile, "Yes! Let's go together!"

"Erm... but what's that treasure chest?"

"King Tomer bestowed it to me," Rachel proudly showed off the chest.

"Wow! Let me take a look," Kim Hajin exclaimed and walked towards the chest.

The two of them stood face to face with the chest between them.

"Hmm..."

Kim Hajin busily inspected the contents before looking at Rachel.

"..."

The two of them ended up gazing into each other's eyes.

Rachel felt a strong urge welling up in her chest, but failed to muster the courage. She awkwardly squirmed without doing anything in the end.

“Ehem...”

Kim Hajin avoided her gaze first as his face flushed bright red.

Rachel felt good seeing him like that.

“Ehem ehem...” What do you think you’re doing in my office? Get out,” Tomer growled and couldn’t stand the strange atmosphere between the two of them.

“Ah, I apologize. We’ll take our leave now,” Rachel bowed and left with Kim Hajin.

She suddenly stopped when she felt a strange sensation throughout her body. Just now, it felt like someone had called her...

“What are you doing?” Kim Hajin asked.

Rachel flinched and shook her head.

“It’s nothing. Let’s go,” she said and continued following him.

Side Stories 40

Dream in a Dream (40)

“*Bam!*” Aileen shouted as she slammed her seal on the letter of approval. “Here! You can now increase your guild members to twenty people! Congratulations, you’ve progressed a step further!”

“Thank you,” Rachel replied with a bow before receiving the letter.

She had earned this reward from the contribution points she gained while fighting against Lancaster, which allowed her to bring more guild members to the general assembly.

“Alright then. Go and have a great time,” Aileen said as she waved them away.

Jin Seyeon smiled from next to her and spoke, “Have a pleasant trip back home. Oh right, Mr. Kim Hajin?”

“Yes?”

Jin Seyeon suddenly extended her smartwatch towards him. Rachel nervously watched in anticipation as to what would happen.

“Shall we exchange contact information? It’s been a long time since I met someone like you. It must be fate that brought us together,” Jin Seyeon smiled at him.

“Ah... Sure... it’s an honor...” Kim Hajin replied with an awkward smile.

The memory of them shooting arrows while standing back to back left quite an impression on him too. She would be a dependable ally one day if he ever needed one.

“ ... ”

Rachel looked at the two of them smiling and exchanging contact information. She turned around and left the general assembly first. The rest of her guild members followed and Kim Hajin came out last.

Both of Rachel's cheeks puffed out as she grumbled, “This must be fate my butt. Sounds more like a coincidence to me...”

Fermin flashed a mischievous smile when she heard Rachel's faint grumbling from behind.

* * *

It took five days for the guild members to reach Mumbai from the general assembly. They took the portal there to return to England.

However, the press was already waiting for them at the airport's portal for some reason.

— Please tell us what kind of tests were waiting for you at the general assembly!

— Why do you think the English Royal Court guild was eliminated first... Hey! Don't push!

— Which guild is leading the general assembly right now? Is it Essence of the Strait or Creator's Sacred Grace?!

The press unleashed a torrent of questions assuming that the English Royal Court had been eliminated from the general assembly. This made Rachel scoff under her breath.

“The English Royal Court has not been eliminated from the general assembly. In fact, our campaign has been quite successful,” Rachel confidently replied and began to list every one of their achievements.

She proudly showed off their loot and talked about the endless possibilities in the general assembly. Not only that, she even revealed Lancaster's evil deeds and proclaimed Xtra's innocence.

The press went silent for a moment before bursting into laughter. They thought Rachel's bold claims were nothing more than baseless lies.

Skeptical questions poured in like, *Aren't those just consolation prizes instead of loot?* She almost wanted to exert some violence on them.

Rachel barely managed to suppress her anger and deeply reflected on trying to boast for her own people.

The press conference concluded and she returned to the English Royal Court's headquarters.

"What are all of these? And why are you in my office, Prime Minister?"

A mountain of documents on her table greeted her. Surprisingly, England's prime minister also paid her a visit.

The prime minister said in a serious tone, "The English Royal Court received a substantial amount of investments while you were away, Vice Leader. These are the documents listing the investors."

"*Huh?* What do you mean?" Rachel muttered in disbelief before rushing over to check the documents.

[Investment Company – EXTRION Hathshire]

Only then did Rachel finally notice the newly constructed building outside her office window. That building definitely hadn't been there when she left for the general assembly.

She grabbed her hair while immersing herself in the documents that detailed their new investors. Her eyes grew bigger when she saw the total amount invested into their guild.

"..."

Rachel looked at the prime minister without saying anything, but the confusion in her eyes seemed to be asking him for an explanation.

The prime minister sighed and explained, “The English Royal Court’s situation plunged to the worst it’s ever been in history after you left for the general assembly. All of our financial credit lines were blocked and the banks began to foreclose our assets. They came attacking from all sides as if they had been waiting for an opportunity to strike all along. Then this investment company suddenly popped out of nowhere and offered us their proposal.”

The prime minister initially thought it was some sort of relief money aimed at taking over the English Royal Court. However, EXTRION Hathshire offered an absurdly good proposal. No, it was near perfect and exactly what they needed at the moment.

They simply had to agree to the terms and the blueprint provided by the investment company. The guild would immediately receive twenty-five trillion Korean won^[1].

“Not only that, their blueprint is almost flawless. It looks like they used Essence of the Strait as a benchmark for it. The English Royal Court is faithfully following every step laid out in their proposal. I will try to arrange a dinner meeting so we can meet them and discuss further,” the prime minister added.

Rachel read the document while listening to the prime minister's explanation. She looked up after he finished speaking. His last words suddenly bothered her. What did he mean by a dinner meeting?

The prime minister immediately looked away and avoided her gaze with a fake cough.

“The investor says that he has always respected Vice Leader Rachel. I believe that it would be possible to gain more from them if you have a meal together and casually talk with them...”

Rachel looked down at the document again, specifically at the words EXTRION Hathshire and the twenty-five trillion won written on it.

Twenty-five trillion won was simply too big of a figure no matter how successful their general assembly campaign had been.

“Then, I’ll be taking my leave now. Oh, and please let me know of a

convenient time, date, and place for the dinner meeting,” the prime minister seemed to be hinting that he wouldn’t take no for an answer. He bowed and left her office.

“Haa...” Rachel sighed after being left alone. She tapped her finger on the document while seemingly in a dilemma.

She didn’t mind having a meal with someone. No, she had to accept this dinner meeting for the sake of her guild and country. However, she felt uneasy about it for some reason.

“...”

Rachel stared into space for a while before tapping her smartwatch and sending a message to the person who caused her uneasiness.

[What are you doing right now (☉⊥☉)?]

Her smartwatch screen suddenly changed as a call came in.

[Master Shin Yeohwa]

It came from her elementalist teacher and master, Shin Yeohwa.

Rachel flinched and her shoulders trembled when she read the name. She almost instinctively blurted out, *I’m sorry*, out of pure habit.

However, she suddenly recalled what Kim Hajin told her last time. Could she really consider someone who suppressed her talents as a teacher and master? The answer was obvious now that she thought about it. She had been acting ignorant and stupid for far too long.

She would make her decision now and no longer needed to hang her head in shame.

Rachel was the vice leader of the glorious English Royal Court guild as well as England’s princess. Not only that, she was the one and only spirit swordsman in the world. She could definitely be proud of that.

“Hmph!”

Rachel steeled her resolve to hate Shin Yeohwa from now on and growled at the portrait that popped up on her smartwatch.

Of course, she didn’t answer the call.

* * *

[Hajin-chan! I’m attaching the investment report for the English Royal Court! Give it a read! I wrote it so you could easily understand nyang!]

I read the report on our new investment in the English Royal Court guild. Kim Hoseop invested in them and also gave them a blueprint to become like the most advanced guild in the world, Essence of the Strait. It would aid the English Royal Court in their future developments.

It would’ve been difficult for them to accept a third party’s opinion, but the English Royal Court lowered their pride and accepted because of the huge twenty-five trillion won.

I set down the report and called Kim Hoseop.

— Hajin-chan!

“Hey, I just looked at the investment report. Great job, Hoseop.”

— Okay! Is everything finished?

“Yeah, it’s almost done.”

I probably owed Kim Hoseop the most out of everyone now that I thought about it. I had no idea how I would’ve made it without him.

— Was the general assembly fun, nyang?

“I’m not sure...”

Could I call it fun?

I went through all sorts of hardships, but failed to find a way to return to my original world. Well, seeing my parents again even though it was just a dream gave me some comfort at least.

“I guess it was a bit fun?”

— Okay. Anyways, I’m hanging up now. It’s time for me to watch my anime!

“Alright.”

I ended the call and turned on the TV.

— The famous EXTRION Hathshire is about to add another successful record to their legacy. They have invested an astronomical twenty-five trillion won into the English Royal Court guild, which has been going through severe financial difficulties in recent months. The risky gamble placed by EXTRION Hathshire seems to be paying off as... and the public’s sentiment towards the English Royal Court guild seems to be improving day by day...

Evandel slept nearby and squirmed when the TV blasted on. I patted her head and eased her back to sleep.

I worried about her quite a bit since I left for such a long time. However, only a few tears welled up in her eyes when I returned.

Her lack of reactions slightly saddened me. I didn’t expect her to say something like, *Don’t you dare disappear for so long ever again!* Still, I felt disappointed that she didn’t seem too bothered by my absence.

Bzzt... Bzzt... Bzzt...

My smartwatch vibrated with a message from Rachel.

[What are you doing right now (◉└◉)?]

I looked over at Evandel and decided to take the initiative this time.

[I was thinking of you, Rachel.]

I wanted to introduce her to Evandel, but had no idea if Rachel would feel afraid, disgusted, or even like Evandel once they met.

Evandel had resulted from my foolish mistake when I treated this world as just a novel. I had a responsibility to clean up my own mess.

A sharp pain struck my head when I thought about how to make them meet.

“Euk!”

However, the pain only lasted for a split second and disappeared. The sudden pain left me stupified.

The strange sensation felt as if this world was nothing but a fleeting dream. As if this world was too rich and vivid...

I absent-mindedly sat on the sofa.

Rachel would probably reply back any minute now, but I decided to switch off my smartwatch.

* * *

On the other hand, Rachel's hands trembled after reading the message on her smartwatch. Her face grew so red that it would probably explode because of one sentence.

[I was thinking of you, Rachel.]

That message sounded too aggressive.

[Really? That's a bit surprising...]

Rachel almost hit send, but deleted it. She couldn't sit still and began

pacing around the room.

Should I cancel the dinner meeting with EXTRION Hathshire? What if he finds out about the dinner meeting? Will he be disappointed? I mean... that's not my intention for agreeing to it but...

Rachel racked her brains for a while before finally sending a reply.

[Thank you.]

She sounded too impulsive!

Rachel tried to delete the message before he read it, but it had already been marked as read. However, a reply didn't come back no matter how long she waited.

"Ah..."

Rachel squirmed and struggled while looking at her smartwatch. She sent another message after exactly eleven minutes passed.

*[I didn't mean anything by that. I was just thinking the same thing too... *💧*]*

Five minutes passed... Ten minutes...

The clock ticked away, but no reply came. He didn't even read her last message.

Rachel felt depressed by the sudden turn of events and jumped into bed. She began venting her frustration on her innocent blanket.

* * *

Public sentiment towards the English Royal Court slowly improved after Rachel returned from the general assembly.

They relaunched an investigation into the issue regarding Xtra. Kim Hoseop supplied them with detailed and crucial information regarding

Lancaster's minions. The government successfully captured all the criminals thanks to him.

Not only that, Rachel finally received a long-awaited reply from Kim Hajin! Was it because everything seemed to be going too smoothly? Rachel felt her mood brightening up.

She sat in front of the clay oven and watched a piece of meat being slowly grilled.

"It's meat! Meat! Delicious meat!" Rachel exclaimed.

A party took place at the English Royal Court's garden, but the prime minister had to watch Vice Leader Rachel sitting in front of an oven and singing praises to a piece of meat.

The English Royal Court had solved their financial crisis thanks to EXTRION Hathshire, but they still had a lot to gain from the new partnership.

The prime minister had heard that EXTRION Hathshire's CEO was a young man. They would probably receive much more investments if Rachel wooed him with her charms.

"Vice Leader, when do you plan to have the dinner meeting?" the prime minister asked.

Rachel briefly pondered as she placed the grilled meat on her plate.

"We have the ribbon-cutting ceremony for our newly constructed training ground, right? I heard it's been completed."

It was only right to display one's gratitude towards their benefactor. Having a meal together surely wouldn't cause any misunderstandings.

"Yes, it's a state-of-the-art training ground we constructed thanks to EXTRION's investment," the prime minister heavily emphasized where the investment came from.

"Then we shall dine together after the ribbon-cutting ceremony,"

Rachel coolly replied since she was in a good mood these days.

That seemed like the perfect time to have the dinner meeting.

The prime minister nodded in satisfaction with a smile. “I understand. I’ll make the necessary arrangements.”

* * *

— Hajin-chan! The English Royal Court invited us to the ribbon-cutting ceremony for their new training ground.

[The English Royal Court would be tremendously honored if EXTRION Hathshire’s chairman graces us with his presence during the ribbon-cutting ceremony...]

I felt slightly embarrassed hearing them refer to me as EXTRION Hathshire’s chairman since the company was too small for me to be called a chairman.

The company simply ran by itself thanks to the cash and stocks that Kim Hoseop and I put in. Nothing great particularly stood out about the company.

Of course, we reluctantly hired some talented individuals after news of our successful investments spread like wildfire in the market. Numerous talents came flocking in at our main office in Seoul, South Korea. It was also undoubtedly the most prime real estate in the world.

We only had thirty employees, so I didn’t consider us to be a major company.

“Sounds good. Tell them we’ll be going.”

I planned to introduce Evandel to Rachel on that day.

— Alright, nyang!

My identity would be exposed if I attended the ribbon-cutting ceremony, but I also wanted to live a normal life as a salaryman from now on without having to lurk in the shadows.

I wanted Evandel to be proud of me.

“Hey... Evandel...”

“Yes?”

I called her as she played a game with her eyes fully fixated on the screen. She seemed to be playing some kind of racing game.

“Do you want to go somewhere with me next Friday?”

“No, I promised to go watch a show with my friends.”

I didn’t expect her to shoot me down like that. I froze for a while before speaking again in a stern manner.

“No, you have to come.”

“I don’t want to.”

“No, you have to come with me.”

Evandel squinted and glared at me before growling like an angry kitten. She tried to express that she didn’t want to go with her entire body.

“I told you. I have to watch a show with my friends.”

“You can go watch it next time. Come with me just this once. I guarantee that you won’t regret it.”

“Why?”

“I’ll tell you once we get there, so come with me.”

“...”

Evandel puffed her cheeks and stomped towards her room.

“Haa... Geez...”

Is that punk going through puberty these days or is she putting up a front because I was away for too long?

I suddenly received a message on my laptop.

[Pleasure to meet you.]

It came from Rachel, but her manner of speech seemed quite tense for some reason.

“What the heck?”

I wondered what was wrong with her this time, but noticed that she had messaged me through official channels. She hadn’t messaged Kim Hajin, but EXTRION Hathshire’s CEO.

A fun idea popped up in my head after reading her message.

[Hello, pleased to meet you too. My name is Im Jinha.]

I feigned ignorance and replied. This would probably surprise her even more, right?

[I am the vice leader of the English Royal Court guild, Rachel.]

Tap... Tap... Tap...

I immediately typed a response.

[Hoho! Have you eaten dinner?]

[Yes.]

I looked at the time on my laptop that read 4:17 P.M.

[It's only four o'clock, but you already had your dinner?]

[Yes, I tend to have my meals much earlier than others.]

Oh, is that so? I flashed a mischievous smile and typed away again.

[We will probably communicate quite often from now on. What do you say we have a meal together sometime?]

It took her five minutes to reply back.

[I have prepared a meal for us after the ribbon-cutting ceremony.]

[I mean, before that.]

It took another fifteen minutes for her to reply this time.

[I have prepared a meal for us after the ribbon-cutting ceremony.]

[Huh?]

[I have prepared a meal for us after the ribbon-cutting ceremony.]

Why did she suddenly turn into a computer? I sent her a simple *[Okay]*. Then I messaged her with my personal smartwatch.

[Have you had dinner yet?]

[Not yet ☹️!]

She replied so fast that I found it scary. She sent another message before I even had the chance to think of a reply.

[But why are you asking? Are you in London by any chance ㄥ ?]

“ ... ”

I looked back and forth between the two chats and felt the drastic difference in her reactions. I couldn't help but wonder if this meant she was giving me the green light.

I began typing a reply as my heart fluttered.

[No, I was just curious. I'll be there next week. Do you want to meet? Let's have a meal or something if you're free. There's something I want to tell you.]

[Of course! I'm free 100% > ☐ < !]

[Alright, I'll contact you then.]

Let's meet at the ribbon-cutting ceremony. I thought to myself with a mischievous smile as I turned off my smartwatch.

1. Roughly 25 billion USD. 🤞

Side Stories 41

Dream in a Dream (41)

Rachel went shopping for clothes on a sunny and peaceful day with Fermin at a famous formal attire store.

“That investment company seems to be quite famous,” Fermin said while looking through the formal attire in the store.

Formal attire felt foreign to heroes used to wearing casual attire most of the time.

“You mean EXTRION Hathshire?” Rachel asked in response.

“Yeah, they’ve only been around for four or five years. However, they’re known for having most major stocks in the world in the palm of their hands. I was shocked when I looked them up. Their annual revenue can only be described as... astronomical...”

Rachel had also heard of their renown. They were especially influential in South Korea and possessed enough influence to raise or ruin a country at whim.

“A company like that swept up a majority of our shares! It’s become a hot topic on the internet these days!”

EXTRION had bought more than 40% of the English Royal Court’s stocks while Rachel was away at the general assembly.

Ding!

Rachel’s smartwatch suddenly rang when she was about to say something. She frowned at what came in.

Fermin tilted her head in confusion and asked, “What is it?”

“A message,” Rachel replied.

“From who?” Fermin curiously asked.

Rachel frowned again as if she found Fermin annoying and replied,
“The CEO of EXTRION.”

“WHAAAT?!” Fermin screamed in shock. Her eyes widened and her jaws dropped. She set down the formal wear and ran towards Rachel.

“What did he say?” she asked.

“Nothing much.”

The content of the message went something along the lines of, *[Have you eaten? I'm looking forward to our meeting next week.]*

“Wow! As expected of our Vice Leader! Even a super rich person like him is dying to meet you!”

“Please don’t exaggerate...” Rachel grumbled and shrugged.

A worrying thought flashed across her mind after she read the message. If she remembered correctly, Kim Hajin also said he would visit her in London next week.

What if... just maybe... their dates happened to overlap?

That worry spread throughout her mind like wildfire and she found herself in a dilemma. She subconsciously raised a thumb to her mouth and began biting her nail.

“Ack! What are you doing, Vice Leader?!” Fermin exclaimed and smacked Rachel’s hand away. She reprimanded the princess, “You should be mindful of your appearance!”

“Ah... Sorry... it was a mistake...”

“The formal wear you requested is here,” the store clerk told them.

Fermin grinned and received the clothes from the clerk. She placed it on top of Rachel.

“Wow...” Fermin couldn’t help but gasp in admiration.

It looked perfect on Rachel. The white blouse, black jacket, slacks, and coat that went down to her knees could only be described as a perfect fit.

“Try wearing it! Hurry!” Fermin pushed Rachel towards the dressing room.

A moment passed and Rachel finished changing into her formal attire. Fermin exclaimed in awe again.

The formal attire accentuated Rachel’s sharp features and complimented her figure quite nicely. Not only that, the black colors somewhat made her look colder. However, her beautiful features made her look warm at the same time. On top of that, her golden hair was tied in a ponytail and she wore high heels. She simply embodied perfection.

“What do you think? Is it alright? Do you think it’s a bit too much?” Rachel asked while smiling awkwardly.

She turned a few times in front of the mirror seemingly unsure whether the attire looked good on her or not.

Fermin and the store clerks stared at her. Rachel looked more beautiful than anyone else in the world. All of them gave her a thumbs-up to express their approval.

* * *

Rachel’s daily schedule became packed after she returned from the general assembly. Conferences, interviews, public events, charity works, etc...

She didn’t even have time to meet friends or send them a message. Her twenty-four hours only consisted of events in England and other

countries.

She couldn't help but feel a bit insecure because she couldn't talk to the person she wanted to speak with most due to her busy schedule. Rachel worried that he might think ill of her or misunderstand.

"Haa..." She sat in her office chair with a sigh. Rachel stared at her smartwatch and contemplated whether to send a message or not. She had a lot of work to finish today.

First, she had to reinstate Dake. He used to be their human resource manager and was the one who secretly hired Xtra. She had reunited with Kim Hajin thanks to him.

Rachel decided to reinstate him and send him as the person in charge of their general assembly branch.

Rumble... Rumble...

A commotion occurred outside her office as someone ran through the corridor. Rachel had a good idea who and began counting down.

Three... Two... One...

Bam!

Someone slammed open her office door as if intending to break it.

"Vice Leader! We have a problem!"

As expected, Fermin had barged in. She immediately shut the door and shouted, "An article popped up in Korea!"

"Is that so?" Rachel calmly replied with a nod.

She didn't feel surprised about an article since she had more than one million members in her fan club.

Fermin showed it to Rachel, who still felt smug about herself. Rachel

began trembling when she read the article.

[EXTRION Hathshire's CEO is rumored to be dating the English Royal Court's vice leader.]

Ding!

It felt as if a gong rang out in her head and she stood flabbergasted after reading the article.

“W-What is this?” she muttered and doubted whether it was just a bad dream.

However, anger welled up in her when she realized it was real. *Who in their right mind would write this cheap tabloid?!*

These types of articles usually contacted the people themselves to confirm the rumor before releasing it. This had been the industry standard since time immemorial.

To think they would look down on England this much... Wait a minute... What if this was all a ploy hatched by EXTRION's CEO?

Rachel's eyes trembled from the anger and shock. That could be the case. No, that probably was the case since certain industries often used such tactics.

“Should we release a statement?” Fermin carefully asked.

“Please prepare one at once and step out of my office for now,” Rachel said with seething anger.

She immediately browsed through her smartwatch contacts for a specific name. Her finger trembled when she found the name.

“Hoo... Haa...” she inhaled and exhaled a few times to calm herself and tapped the call button.

The phone rang a few times before he finally picked up.

— Hello?

Kim Hajin's voice came from the other end.

Rachel flinched when she heard his voice. It seemed that he had seen the news as well.

“Hajin?”

— Yes?

She suddenly felt self-conscious and began stuttering, “*Uhm...* the thing is... did you perhaps... see the article... by any chance?”

— *Ah*, yes. Do you mean the one where you were dating someone? It was on the morning news too.

What she feared most had happened. Rachel grabbed her hair in frustration.

“That... you shouldn't believe it... It's not true...”

— Oh, it's not?

“Never. Over my dead body. That would never happen.”

— Over your dead body?

“Of course! Yes! Never ever!”

Kim Hajin became silent for a few seconds before sighing.

— *Ah...* That's a bit... unfortunate...

“*Huh?*”

— Anyways, I'm hanging up now. I'm a bit busy, so I'll contact you later. *Sigh...*

Kim Hajin ended the call without any further explanation.

Rachel stood dumbfounded for a while before her body began trembling again. She plopped to the floor like a doll cut from its strings.

“That... That basta...” she muttered.

Rachel immediately sent a message to EXTRION Hathshire’s CEO. She asked if he was the culprit behind the article, but he didn’t reply.

Of course, he didn’t reply since Kim Hajin just said he was busy. He was drawing up plans with Kim Hoseop on how to develop not only the English Royal Court guild, but all of London.

* * *

Rachel couldn’t help but be conscious of Kim Hajin after the article came out. Of course, he reassured her with his awkward messages and laughed it off.

[Hehe, I’m alright. I’m sure you’ll tell me what happened later on.]

He didn’t seem alright at all to her. She could tell that it bothered him. He wouldn’t be able to fool her after they fought together with their lives on the line. They had spent countless days and nights together in their dreams.

“Vice Leader! Vice Leader!” a staffer urgently whispered to her as she spaced out at the podium.

“Oh... yes...” Rachel regained her senses and grabbed the mic.

She had been invited to give a speech at the Britain Academy today in their largest hall with almost every student in attendance. They all gathered to see England’s pride and future, the one and only princess and vice leader.

The crowd clapped and cheered when she grabbed the mic. Rachel bowed at their enthusiasm and recited her speech.

“I always hated myself for such a long time. I sincerely loathed myself because I kept failing and disappointing people with my shortcomings...”

She shared how she broke through her limits by overcoming her self-loathing. She shared how a positive mindset coupled with her training allowed her to progress. Then she showcased her ability to harmonize spirits that she gained from the general assembly.

“Thank you for your hard work.”

“Thank you.”

Rachel finished her speech and rode her limousine to where the ribbon-cutting ceremony would take place.

The English Royal Court called their new state-of-the-art training facility the Raid Ark. The guild members and Britain Academy students would be able to train there together.

She arrived at the training facility that spanned thirty-three thousand square meters.

“Welcome, Your Highness.”

The prime minister, guild executives, Britain Academy’s dean, and various government officials had already arrived.

“Thank you. Where is the CEO?” Rachel asked.

“He has not arrived yet,” the prime minister replied.

She had a lot to say to EXTRION’s CEO. Something along the lines of, *Do you know what sort of trouble you caused because of the rumor you spread?* She began loading the bullets to shoot him with and wanted to give him a piece of her mind once they met.

Fermin and the other guild members busily chatted away with each other.

“How much were his total assets again?”

“Who knows? All I know is that he has enough money to buy an entire country.”

“I heard this is the first time he’s appearing in public, right?”

“Yeah, that proves how much he likes our Vice Leader!”

They only talked about EXTRION’s CEO.

Fermin listened to all the gossip with a mischievous smile. However, she felt surprised when she looked sideways and saw a familiar face.

“*Huh?* Hajin?” she muttered in disbelief. Her voice hadn’t been that loud, but Rachel’s ears somehow perked up at those words.

Rachel immediately turned and saw Kim Hajin arriving with his attendants.

“*Ack!*”

She gasped and immediately ran towards Kim Hajin. Tons of questions filled her mind like, *Why is he here?*

The prime minister and government officials all glared at Kim Hajin when she ran over to him.

The prime minister looked at Rachel happily skipping over like a kitten running to its owner. He finally understood why she had been so hesitant about the dinner meeting.

“Look into that guy,” the prime minister discreetly said to one of his agents.

“Hajin! What brings you here?” Rachel asked while trying her best to hide how happy she felt.

“Well, I had some business to attend to and I heard you were here

so... I came to meet you *haha... ha... ha...*” Kim Hajin awkwardly laughed.

Rachel failed to catch the meaning behind his awkward laugh.

“Ah... Is that so? Come, follow me,” she said.

“Huh?”

Rachel grabbed his hand and dragged him around to meet various people. She introduced him to the prime minister, the other ministers, the dean, and the VIPs who ran the country.

Kim Hajin didn't like being dragged around and forced to meet people, but he tried his best not to show it since it was Rachel showing him around. He could only bitterly smile and shake the hands of everyone she introduced him to.

“Ah, just give me a moment Hajin. There's something I want to give you. I'll be right back,” Rachel said as she suddenly recalled something.

The prime minister and other officials from the palace approached him with visible hostility as soon as she left.

“Who are you?” they asked with apparent hostility.

“Ah... I'm Rachel's friend,” Kim Hajin awkwardly replied.

“Rachel?” the prime minister frowned and scanned Kim Hajin from head to toe. He wore an expensive suit, but the fact that some commoner even tried to dress like them was laughable.

Then the prime minister received a message on his smartwatch from his agent.

[It seems he's just another typical person who struck it rich.]

The prime minister smirked and spoke in a condescending tone,

“You... I don’t know what kind of relationship you have with the princess, but I hope you know your place.”

“*Huh? Ah*, yes. I’m well aware of my place,” Kim Hajin replied with a smile.

“That’s a relief,” the prime minister replied while still scornfully looking at Kim Hajin, but his expression immediately softened when Rachel returned. “So you were one of our princess’ friends. I hope you enjoy the banquet.”

“*Huh? Oh*, yes, thank you,” Kim Hajin replied.

“But when is our guest of honor coming?” The Britain Academy dean asked while sipping on champagne.

The identity of EXTRION Hathshire’s CEO was veiled in secrecy. Not a single soul knew him, but he was publicly revealing himself for the first time just to see Rachel.

They all scornfully looked at Kim Hajin for this reason. They wanted him gone before their esteemed guest arrived.

“I suggest you give him a call,” the prime minister said.

Rachel glanced at Kim Hajin. He avoided her gaze and nervously looked around their surroundings.

In the end, Rachel was forced to call that person with her smartwatch because all the officials kept pressuring her.

Side Stories 42

Dream in a Dream (42)

Rachel called EXTRION's CEO, who was supposed to attend the ribbon-cutting ceremony today.

Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring...

A crease formed on her forehead. The ceremony would begin at 6:00 P.M. and it was already 5:50 P.M., but the man still hadn't arrived.

Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring...

She didn't like people who took promises lightly and especially those who took their sweet time answering a call.

Ring... Ring... Ring... Ring...

The dial tone kept ringing. It was the only sound that echoed in her ears and began annoying her.

— Hello?

“Yes, hello.”

The CEO finally answered, but his voice continued to echo.

Rachel tilted her head in confusion at the poor connection.

“Hello?”

— Yes, hello.

“Yes, hello.”

She was hearing his voice for the first time, but it sounded oddly familiar for some reason. Not only that, the people around her suddenly began acting strange. Everyone froze and looked at the same place in horror.

Rachel also looked in the same direction when...

“*Huh?*” she gasped without realizing it.

Kim Hajin looked at her with a mischievous smile and spoke into his smartwatch.

“Nice to meet you, Rachel. My name is Im Jinha.”

— Nice to meet you, Rachel. My name is Im Jinha.

The sound echoed again.

Kim Hajin ended the call and looked at Rachel, who remained flabbergasted.

“Im Jinha. Jinha in reverse is Im Hajin, right?”

“...!”

An exclamation mark literally appeared on top of Rachel’s head and she suddenly recalled the messages she sent the CEO. She slowly grimaced as tears welled up in her eyes and glared at Kim Hajin. Then she covered her face and ran away.

“Excuse me...” the prime minister carefully said as he approached Kim Hajin after Rachel left.

“Yes?” Kim Hajin replied with a smile.

“It’s nice to meet you... *Haha... Haha... Ha...*” the prime minister awkwardly greeted him and bowed with cold sweat forming on his forehead.

“Ah, it’s fine. After all, I was the one pulling a prank. Shall we proceed with the ribbon-cutting ceremony? Of course, we’ll have to call back the person who ran away,” Kim Hajin nonchalantly said while pointing at Rachel.

She hid behind the ornamental plants decorating the venue. Her bright red ears and cheeks stood out among the greenery.

* * *

The ribbon-cutting ceremony proceeded smoothly.

Kim Hajin explained his plans to develop not only the English Royal Court, but all of London. The prime minister nodded in awe along with the other officials as they agreed to his plans.

The ribbon-cutting ceremony ended without a hitch and Rachel guided Kim Hajin to a famous restaurant she booked in advance.

“...”

“...”

The entire restaurant was empty except for the two of them.

Rachel stole glances at him amid their silence. Only the sound of their clinking cutlery could be heard. She had a hard time lifting her head from the embarrassment.

“Don’t worry about it too much. It’s my fault, so you don’t have to be self-conscious about it. I never expected you to take it so seriously,” Kim Hajin said as he bitterly laughed.

Rachel glared at him and retorted, “That’s right! How could you pull... such a... mean... prank...”

Her voice slowly grew quieter until she hung her head again.

“I think I gave you a lot of hints though. I mean, was the name not

enough?”

“Korean isn’t my native language. I didn’t think of rearranging the name.”

Kim Hajin warmly smiled at her and set down his knife. The two of them barely touched their food. Rachel simply felt too nervous, but Kim Hajin felt the same too.

“There’s something serious I want to tell you today, Rachel,” he said in a deep voice.

Rachel looked up at him and her cheeks blushed when he mentioned something serious.

Don’t tell me... Is it that?

“Ehem... Ehem...” Kim Hajin cleared his throat a few times and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

Rachel hid her trembling hands under the table, but her heart kept pounding faster.

“This... will you take a look at this?” Kim Hajin said as he showed her his smartwatch gallery.

Rachel held her hands together and looked at the hologram projected from his smartwatch. It showed a small and cute girl who looked like a smaller version of herself. She immediately recognized the little girl.

“Oh, it’s Evandel,” she said.

“This little girl is... *Huh? Eh? Eh?* What did you just say?” Kim Hajin asked. His eyes widened in surprise as if he had seen a ghost.

Rachel tilted her head in confusion before replying, “You told me in our dream, right?”

“*Hmm? Oh...*”

Kim Hajin couldn't exactly remember what he said or did in his dream. It wouldn't be a dream if he remembered everything in the first place.

"Did I? I can't remember what happened in the dream..."

"You told me that you fed a seed my blood and nurtured it."

"*Huh? Ah...* that sounds about right. I guess I did tell you in the dream," Kim Hajin said with a nod.

"Then, where is the child right now?" Rachel asked. She really wanted to meet Evandel. An unexplainable joy and urge welled up inside her.

"Give me a moment..." Kim Hajin said as he called someone on his smartwatch.

He said a few things over the phone and exactly three minutes passed before a child entered the restaurant only occupied by them.

Rachel immediately recognized her. The little girl wore a hat and sunglasses, but she was certainly Evandel.

Evandel carefully walked over to their table with Hayang in her arms.

"*Ah...*" Rachel gasped before she immediately stood and walked over to Evandel.

It definitely felt strange. They had just met for the first time, but it felt like reuniting with a long lost relative.

"Are you Evandel?" Rachel asked.

Evandel looked up at Rachel and blinked a few times. Tears began welling up in her eyes.

Could she somehow instinctively tell that she came from Rachel?

"It's alright. You don't have to cry... *Heup!*" Rachel smiled at the little

girl, but a sharp pain suddenly struck her. It felt like a sharp object had stabbed her in the forehead.

“Excuse me...” Evandel meekly muttered.

Rachel grimaced from the pain, but immediately smiled at the girl.

“It’s been a long time. I missed you.”

Why did she say it’s been a long time and why did she say that she missed her?

Rachel couldn’t understand it herself after saying those words. Perhaps she felt too nervous about meeting the girl that she made a mistake? She decided to ignore it and knelt to look the little girl in the eyes.

“I... missed you... too...” Evandel said as she slowly stepped towards Rachel and hugged her.

Kim Hajin watched them hug and couldn’t help but smile. He felt somewhat proud of himself. He was also in disbelief that the issue he thought to be insurmountable was solved so easily.

* * *

“Wow! Wow!”

I went to Clancy Islet with Evandel and Rachel.

Evandel exclaimed as she looked around here and there. The luxury island seemed like a mystical place for a curious and energetic child like her.

“But don’t you think people will misunderstand? Evandel looks so much like you,” I asked Rachel while holding a balloon and looking at Evandel.

“*Hmm?* Let them misunderstand if they want. I decided a long time

ago not to be so conscious about what others think of me. Besides, there aren't that many people today since the island's reopening is tomorrow," Rachel nonchalantly replied.

"I see..."

"Rachel!"

Evandel approached Rachel and extended her hand out. Rachel looked at me before grasping Evandel's hand.

The two began walking while holding hands and I watched them from behind.

"*Hmm...* I wonder what it is..." I muttered and shook my head.

It felt like I was forgetting something important. This feeling at the back of my mind kept telling me that, but Evandel's voice snapped me out of it.

"Hajin! Hajin!"

Rachel turned around and looked at me too. She brightly smiled and motioned for me to come over.

I walked over to them with a smile and held Evandel's hand. I held Evandel's left hand while Rachel held her right hand and we walked with Evandel between us.

* * *

"Nice to meet you all. My name is Rachel and I am the vice leader of the English Royal Court guild..." Rachel greeted the Britain Academy students at the hall in Raid Ark.

"Your efforts will never betray you! Negative thoughts will only hamper your growth and lower your self-esteem!"

She conducted her speech in a stern voice and stressed the importance

of training to the students.

“Do you understand?!”

She tried to imitate the infamous tiger instructor from Cube and it seemed to work as the students tensed up.

“Now, we will start with a very simple test.”

Rachel began to search if anyone among the students could also use spirits like her. She summoned her wind spirit, Windy, and asked it to sniff out the students.

— There is one person here who possesses quite the talent.

Windy transmitted to Rachel, who nodded in response.

People talented with spirits were uncommon, but not as rare as they were believed to be. The only reason they were thought to be rare was because of other selfish elementalists.

The first elementalist only took in one disciple, Shin Yeohwa. Likewise, Shin Yeohwa only took in one disciple, which was Rachel.

“You, what’s your name?” Rachel asked the girl in a strict voice.

The brown-haired girl began trembling after Rachel showed a completely different attitude from her public persona.

“My name is Jerin!” the girl replied.

“Follow me,” Rachel said.

“*Eeek!* I apologize!”

“You did nothing wrong, so be quiet and follow me.”

Rachel planned to separate her and enroll her in the Elementalist Academy she created.

She spent almost half a day at Raid Ark before returning to her guild office.

“*Hoo...*” Rachel sat in her chair and sighed in relief. She blankly stared at the ceiling for ten minutes before leaving her office again.

She walked along the corridor before stopping at an office with a nameplate that read, [*EXTRION Hathshire – Kim Hajin*].

“*Ehem...*”

Rachel created an actual office within the guild for Kim Hajin, who now became an important partner to the English Royal Court.

Knock... Knock...

She composed herself and knocked on the door, which suddenly swung open.

Rachel flinched and jumped back in surprise, “*Hiiik!* That surprised me...”

“*Huh?* When did you get here? Did I ask you to come? Rather, are you alright?”

“*Ah...* I got here just now... just now...”

“Well, that’s great. Come on in.”

Rachel grinned and entered his office. Kim Hajin sat in his chair and Rachel took a seat across from him.

She felt good looking at him like this. It helped to recharge her energy for some reason.

“How’s the office? Do you like it?” she asked.

The English Royal Court went all out while building this office for him.

Kim Hajin also stayed here with Evandel at a luxury penthouse he bought a while back. This sixty-floor building boasted one of the most expensive price tags in all of London.

Rumors said that Kim Hajin, as EXTRION's CEO, owned a unit in every major city in the world or something like that. Fermin mentioned that he looked more attractive because of his wealth.

Rachel shook her head and tried to forget the mischievous things that Fermin mentioned.

"I like it. Going to work is fun too. Oh, right," Kim Hajin suddenly stopped mid-sentence and brought out a sack.

Whoosh!

A Pomeranian with golden fur suddenly jumped out from it.

The puppy momentarily surprised Rachel, but she caught the cute furry creature and hugged it.

"Wow! So cute! I really like animals. This one looks so cute and innocent!" Rachel exclaimed and showed her feminine side.

The cute furry creature huffed a few times before opening its mouth and talking, "*Hehe... It's Rachel... Hehe...*"

"Huh? Kyaaah!"

Rachel screamed and jumped back from the puppy, but the puppy only giggled and walked towards Rachel while calling her name.

"Rachel."

"What... What is... this?"

Kim Hajin and the puppy both had mischievous smiles on their faces.

"It's one of Evandel's tricks," Kim Hajin told her.

“Evandel?”

“Yes.”

The puppy slowly transformed and turned into Evandel. She proudly stood with both hands on her waist and said, “*Hehehe*, I bet you were surprised!”

“Geez... really...” Rachel sighed in relief and hugged Evandel, who continued giggling in her embrace.

Rachel patted the little girl’s soft golden hair and looked at Kim Hajin.

He smiled and walked over to them. The sight of Rachel hugging Evandel reflected in his eyes. He felt a sense of happiness and sadness at the same time deep within his heart.

Wiiing! Wiiing!

A siren suddenly blared. This particular siren meant an emergency had occurred.

“Let’s go,” Kim Hajin spoke first.

Rachel nodded and looked at the little girl in her arms. “Evandel, you stay here.”

The two of them ran out as soon as they received the coordinates on their smartwatches.

“Wait a minute!” Kim Hajin shouted.

He went to an empty area and opened a briefcase that suddenly turned into a helicopter.

Rachel took a few steps back in surprise as Kim Hajin called out to her, “Hop on. This will be much faster than running.”

She stood there flabbergasted and couldn’t believe a mere briefcase

transformed into a helicopter. Soon, she snapped out of it and hopped into the helicopter along with other guild members passing by.

“Hold on tight. We’ll be there in two minutes,” Kim Hajin said as he skillfully maneuvered the controls.

* * *

Beep... Beep... Beep...

Beep... Beep... Beep...

“Ugh...”

Rachel groaned as her alarm woke her the next day. Her head felt like it would split in half. She grabbed her aching head and sat on the bed only to find Kim Hajin sleeping beside her.

“...”

She absentmindedly stared at the man sound asleep next to her when her eyes suddenly widened and she looked around her surroundings. She was in a penthouse, on the same bed, and under the same sheets as him. Then, she suddenly recalled what happened last night.

She went to a bar with her guild members after feeling good about making quick work of the monsters that appeared. They drank... and drank... and drank... and... she couldn’t remember anything after that.

However, she found herself in bed with him now.

Rachel’s face turned bright red as she tried her best to remember if anything happened. However, she could only recall drinking and chatting with her guild members. There was also the part where she wanted to get drunk, so she purposely drank some hard liquor...

“Haangmm...”

“...!”

Kim Hajin rolled over and she almost jumped out of bed when he moved. He looked so peaceful while sleeping. He was certainly still asleep.

“Phew...”

He showed no signs of waking up and slept like a baby.

Rachel stretched and got out of bed.

She decided to look around Kim Hajin’s house. The penthouse wasn’t just huge, but also luxurious. Every piece of furniture in the unit had a certain brand.

Huh? Jinzel? Is this really Jinzel? Is this for real? That Jinzel that costs billions of won and is only sold at auctions? Rachel doubted her eyes.

“Wow... It’s my first time seeing one in person...” she muttered while staring at the furniture.

Jinzel was considered a premium among premium brands and even Rachel knew them. No wonder she didn’t feel tired at all despite drinking so much last night.

Rachel nervously gulped and looked at Kim Hajin.

One second passed... two seconds... three seconds...

“Yaaawn...”

Rachel contemplated for three whole seconds before yawning and lying back down next to him. Her heart pounded, but she forced herself to fall asleep.

However, she felt somewhat uncomfortable and tossed and turned for a bit. Then, her head finally found the perfect place on his arm.

“Hehe...”

Rachel giggled in satisfaction after resting on his arm. She slowly closed her eyes with a smile and feigned ignorance.

Side Stories 43

Dream in a Dream (43)

“Haaa...” Rachel sighed in relief after lying in bed for fifteen minutes.

She couldn't sleep for a variety of reasons. The biggest one keeping her up was the conversation going on in the *[English Royal Court Group Chat]*.

[Marcus: Wow! It's freaking huge in here!]

[Kayle: Awesome!]

[Fermin: The bathroom is bigger than my house;;]

The other guild members seemed to be in the building as well.

Rachel left a note before tiptoeing out of the room.

An absurdly spacious corridor greeted her along with various furniture and doors. It seemed like the penthouse used up the entire floor with so much space.

Rachel walked along the corridor and heard someone's footsteps coming towards her. She straightened her posture and cleared her throat.

Fermin peeked out from the corner and greeted Rachel with a sleazy smile, “Vice Leader.”

Nothing seemed out of the ordinary about Fermin's demeanor, so Rachel decided to carefully ask, “*Uhm...* Fermin... I... No, did something happen yesterday... by any chance?”

“Hmm? Yesterday?” Fermin tilted her head in confusion before

flashing another sleazy smile. Her smile turned evil as she tapped on her smartwatch.

Tap... Tap... Tap...

“I knew you would say that, so I recorded everything. Vice Leader promised to give us all a vacation that day,” Fermin said as she projected a hologram that showed what happened last night.

“...”

Rachel stared dumbfoundedly at the video.

— Thank you for everything you’ve done for us... We only managed thanks to you Hajin...

She saw a very drunk version of herself stubbornly clinging onto Kim Hajin. She had her arms wrapped around his and kept rubbing her face on his shoulder. Fermin jokingly touched Kim Hajin’s shoulder and Rachel glared at her before smacking her hand away.

— How dare you!

“N... No!” Rachel cried out as she turned off the video.

It was more accurate to say that she channeled out her mana and destroyed the hologram. Her face turned ghastly pale like she had seen a ghost.

Fermin mischievously smiled and began teasing Rachel, “Why? I thought you were extremely cute last night. I’m sure the CEO found you cute as well. As for the other guild members... I think they were probably too drunk to even remember anything.”

“Ah... That’s a relief...”

“Oh right, you kept clinging onto him until we got here. So... did something happen between you two?” Fermin asked while feigning ignorance.

It seemed the guild members now treated Kim Hajin as their CEO too.

Rachel decided to act thick-skinned and said, “No... Nothing happened... and that person in the video isn’t me...”

“Then who is it?”

“Who knows? There are a lot of blonde women in England, you know?”

“...”

“Please delete the video.”

“Well, I just want you to know that I’m not against it. In fact, this might be a good thing.”

“What is?” Rachel glared at her.

Fermin snickered before snapping her fingers. “Oh right! Have you noticed most of the furniture here is from Jinzel?”

“Yeah...”

Anyone remotely interested in furniture would know the premium Jinzel brand. One couldn’t simply buy this brand even if they had the money. However, the fact that this brand littered the entire penthouse was a testament to Hajin’s enormous wealth.

“These are really good! I took a nap on one of them and felt like a newborn child! I think he has lots of beds from this brand. Do you think he’ll give us one if we ask?”

“Don’t, we’re already troubling him enough,” Rachel crossed her arms over her chest to look as strict as possible.

* * *

Summer neared as the English Royal Court planned to raid a dungeon.

They aimed to fully conquer and subjugate one of the ten dungeons that appeared in England.

However, their vice leader Rachel announced that she wouldn't participate. She made this decision so the guild members could gain real experience without her help. Each hero had to break through their own limits for the guild to grow stronger as well.

Of course, Rachel didn't want any of them getting hurt. She ordered their data department to establish a special task force and thoroughly analyze every dungeon's mana density and monsters.

However, she soon realized just how much she had neglected the guild's administrative sectors. The data department performed quite poorly. No, that would be an understatement. Most of their skilled personnel had left and their equipment had been sold off during their harsh financial times.

Rachel pushed herself to the limits and investigated seven of the ten dungeons herself. Marcus, Fermin, and the other guild members fortunately finished investigating the remaining three.

"Haaa..."

However, investigating a dungeon wasn't an easy task. She couldn't even finish one dungeon after twelve hours without rest.

Snore... Snore...

Evandel's snoring could be heard in Rachel's office. The little girl had fallen asleep while waiting for Rachel to finish working.

Rachel felt bad as she watched the sleeping child, but a knock on the door interrupted her.

Knock... Knock!

"Yes, come in," Rachel responded in a tired voice.

Kim Hajin entered and she straightened her posture without realizing

it.

“Are you working overtime again?” he asked while placing an energy drink on her desk.

“My workload just somehow keeps increasing...” Rachel tried to sound nonchalant and hide her nervousness. She hoped that she sounded normal.

Kim Hajin sat on the sofa and stroked Evandel’s head. He looked at the mountain of documents on Rachel’s desk.

“What kind of work is it?” he asked.

“Ah, I’m calculating the dungeons to see if we can raid one...”

Kim Hajin stood and walked over beside her. He took the document from her and asked, “Do you have a pen and paper?”

“Eh? Ah, yes. Here you go...” Rachel replied somewhat flustered.

She became self-conscious about how close they were. Their lips could practically touch if either of them moved an inch closer. She tried her best to suppress her pounding heart and passed him the pen and paper.

“Give me a second,” Kim Hajin said as he scribbled something down.

Rachel initially wondered what he was doing and looked on with curiosity. Her curiosity slowly became replaced with shock.

Kim Hajin quickly drew up the dungeon.

Ironically, Rachel had been working on this for almost half a day. She had to check every piece of information available, consult with experts, and post questions on online forums to barely make sense of the task.

However, this man inches away from her managed to complete it in

less than ten minutes.

“What do you think? It should be pretty accurate,” Kim Hajin said as he passed her the finished product.

He not only calculated the mana density and monsters in the dungeon, but even drew the dungeon’s layout.

Rachel dumbfoundedly stared at it before nodding, “I don’t know but... I’m sure everything is right since you’re a genius.”

“Where are the rest?”

“H-Huh?”

“You said there were other dungeons. Give them to me. I’ll do all of them for you.”

Kim Hajin stole all of Rachel’s work with his trustworthy skills. He worked on them for a while and presented her with the finished product. It took him less than an hour to finish all her work.

“Here you go.”

Rachel received two notebooks from him. He had calculated all seven dungeons and compressed their information into two notebooks. Honestly, she felt that this was impossible and wondered if she was dreaming.

“Ah... Thank... Thank you very much...” Rachel spoke while still seemingly dazed.

“Hmm? No problem,” Kim Hajin replied with a smile.

Rachel opened the notebook when Kim Hajin suddenly said, “Oh right, wait a minute.”

He took something out of his bag that looked like blue leather armor.

“Here.”

“What’s this?”

“It’s a gift.”

She stared at him and blinked a few times before checking the blue leather armor. She could instantly tell that it had been crafted with mana and possessed incredible abilities.

“Wow...” she gasped in awe without realizing it.

To be frank, Rachel could feel her materialistic side coming back these days. It may have been because she began using social media again or that the guild’s finances had greatly improved.

Whatever the reason, she started to notice and felt bothered whenever she saw other European heroes bragging about their new equipment.

A gift at this moment simply...

Rachel stared at Kim Hajin without a word. For some reason, he looked extremely handsome today. His jawline and hair made him look like a handsome doll.

“What do you think?” he asked with a smile.

Rachel found him extremely charming and attractive. All her fatigue from working until late at night caused her to... impulsively wrap her arms around him and tightly hug him.

* * *

“There are ten files in total. The dungeon’s interior as well as other information are compiled in them. We just got them vetted from the association last week. They declared the files to be flawless.”

Rachel presented Kim Hajin’s files to everyone at the English Royal Court’s executive meeting. It shocked all the guild executives.

“Then... I guess we don’t have to hesitate any longer. We should start training our members based on the information provided!”

“Yes, please distribute these files to all of our senior members.”

[In-Depth Analysis of Ten Dungeons – by Kim Hajin]

The meeting concluded with Kim Hajin’s files being distributed to all their senior guild members.

Rachel left the meeting room as her secretary walked up to her.

“It’ll soon be time for the press conference.”

“Yes, let’s make our way there now. Please tell them to get ready,” Rachel replied as she fixed her clothes and headed towards the main hall.

The guild members leisurely chatted during their lunch. All of them greeted Rachel whenever she passed by.

Rachel walked with her chest out and her head held high. The leather armor that Kim Hajin gifted her brightly shone as she strutted through the corridor.

* * *

The English Royal Court granted vacations to the guild members who participated in the general assembly. The guild members faced a new dilemma about where to go for their holiday. Their pockets became quite full thanks to the rewards from the general assembly.

A certain generous individual soon resolved their dilemma. That individual suggested they visit South Korea and he would even let them use his private beach and villa during their stay.

“Wow, this is my first time seeing someone with a vacation house in Gangwondo.”

Gangwondo's mountainous terrain featured the most famous dungeon in the world, but the world's most famous vacation spot could also be found east of it. The East Sea's pristine water made it one of the few remaining clean seas in the world. The world-renowned mountain guild, Blessing of the Mountain, also patrolled the mountains overlooking the sea. That made the area around the East Sea much safer and more tranquil. Many considered it an even better place to live than Seoul.

Of course, the price of land reflected all of that. Owning a vacation house there was equivalent to owning an entire commercial building in London.

However, Kim Hajin owned tens of thousands of acres and his private beach resided in an even more expensive area.

"I know right? Wow, they say this sea is safe to swim in and there aren't any monsters."

"Yeah, it's clear of monsters."

Marcus, Dale, Karen, and the others who participated in the general assembly looked towards the East Sea's horizon in awe.

The white, sandy beach and the beautiful landscape meticulously crafted with magitech captivated them. It felt as if the open sea was enticing them to jump in.

However, they had to unpack their luggage first before enjoying a swim. The nearly dozen guild members became encumbered with the sheer amount of luggage they brought.

"Everyone, follow me," Rachel led the way with her blue leather armor brightly shining under the sun.

The guild members snickered at Rachel, who insisted on wearing her leather armor instead of casual wear. This wasn't the first time she did this. She wore that leather armor everywhere. It was a given that she wore it while subjugating monsters, but she even wore it during meetings, press conferences, and meals.

“This is the place,” Rachel said while standing in front of a door.

She sounded like the owner, but the guild members didn’t mind as they stared in awe at the lush green garden that spread out towards the horizon.

“Wow...”

“What the hell...”

“Really... does he even live in the same world as us?”

How was this even possible in the first place? The penthouse they slept in last time already shocked them enough, but this garden looked even larger than most parks. Also, who kept the grass so neatly trimmed and all the flowers looking so healthy?

As they all admired the lush garden...

“Welcome,” Kim Hajin opened the door and greeted them with Evandel and numerous staff.

The guild members became dumbfounded when they saw the cute, little girl with blonde hair.

“Shall we eat first?” Kim Hajin asked them.

* * *

The English Royal Court members ran to the beach after eating. All of them dressed to play in the water.

Rachel, Evandel, and Kim Hajin didn’t join and built sandcastles on the beach instead.

“...”

Rachel stole a glance at Kim Hajin. He didn’t seem too fond of the water for some reason.

“Hey, Rachel,” Evandel called out to her while poking her blue leather armor.

“*Hmm?*” Rachel looked down at her.

Evandel innocently looked at her before asking, “Don’t you want to go back, Rachel?”

“...?” Rachel blinked a few times.

A strange sensation spread all over her at Evandel’s words, but it instantly disappeared.

“*Huh?* What did you say?” Rachel asked just to make sure.

What did Evandel mean by wanting to go back? Did she perhaps mean to go into the water?

Evandel shook her head and brightly smiled, “No, it’s nothing.”

“...”

It simply felt too strange. Rachel placed a hand on her chest and could feel her heart wildly beating. She tightly hugged Evandel out of frustration.

Rachel smiled and asked her, “Do you want to play in the water with me?”

“*Hmm...* I’m okay as long as I’m with Rachel,” Evandel replied.

However, Evandel looked a bit sad for some reason and Rachel couldn’t understand why.

Rachel looked towards the sea and the horizon. The sparkling surface and the gentle waves felt so peaceful, but she couldn’t shake off the strange feeling that made her heart pound.

Side Stories 44

Dream in a Dream (44)

The guild members returned to the villa and gathered at the rooftop by dusk. They lit a campfire underneath the orange sky and began grilling barbeque.

Rachel looked at the peaceful scenery of her guild members chatting, the gentle breeze blowing from the sea, and the campfire crackling in the background. Such a peaceful sight felt unfamiliar to her.

She looked around seemingly downcast before spotting Kim Hajin. She decided to approach him and whisper in his ear, “Hajin...”

He turned around with a smile, “Yes?”

“...”

She wanted to say a lot of things, but felt afraid.

Did Kim Hajin also feel the strange sensation from before? Or did he not feel it? She wasn’t sure which answer would scare her more.

“No, it’s nothing,” Rachel replied and shook her head.

Kim Hajin smiled and held her hand as she bitterly smiled.

“Hey! Put that down!”

The guild members’ rowdy shouting interrupted them. Marcus had snatched the expensive whiskey that Fermin brought. He acted as annoyingly as possible while running away from Fermin chasing him. The guild members laughed while looking at them playing cat and mouse.

Rachel ended up laughing at them as well. She looked up at the night sky again. Bright, sparkling stars littered the sky with the moon shining brighter than all of them. The view looked surreal.

“...”

She tightly held Kim Hajin’s hand and he tilted his head at her before smiling and locking their fingers together. Rachel’s face turned bright red before she shifted her gaze to Evandel, who fell asleep beside her. Evandel looked so innocent as she slept.

Then, Rachel suddenly recalled what Evandel said earlier in the day.

— Don’t you want to go back?

She knew she hadn’t heard wrong and she felt certain that Evandel was referring to this world...

Crackle!

Rachel flinched when the fire crackled and spat out embers. Kim Hajin smiled at her.

Only then did the guild members finally notice the two of them.

“Ack!” Rachel shrieked in surprise and quickly carried the sleeping Evandel.

Evandel peeked her eyes open and looked at Rachel. She buried her face in Rachel’s shoulder and went back to sleep.

Everyone found the sight of Rachel hugging Evandel quite cute and heartwarming. All of them looked on with gentle smiles.

* * *

The English Royal Court’s preparation for their dungeon raid went smoothly. Rachel oversaw the entire process and didn’t forget to take her breaks.

She thoroughly enjoyed her time with Evandel as they went to the amusement park, aquarium, concerts, theatrical plays, movies, etc. Things she couldn't enjoy due to her usual mountain of work. Of course, Kim Hajin tagged along.

“Ack!” Rachel frowned and screamed in the center of Seoul.

The slender crane was either too weak or unwilling and kept failing to grab a doll.

“Ugh! Hey!”

Rachel failed to grab a doll for the nineteenth time today. She couldn't help but scream in frustration.

Evandel sighed as she watched Rachel screaming in frustration. She patted and comforted Rachel.

“It's alright. We can just order one online.”

“Let me try,” Kim Hajin stepped forward.

Rachel moved aside while ferociously glaring at the crane in the machine.

You punk... I'm going to smash you to pieces if you don't properly work this time! she inwardly threatened.

“Huh?”

However, the crane obediently listened to Kim Hajin. Its three arms shook a few times before grabbing and delivering the Pororo^[1] doll that Evandel and Rachel wanted.

“Here,” Kim Hajin gave the doll to Evandel.

Evandel smiled and tightly hugged the doll, but Rachel puffed her cheeks as if to say, *I like dolls too!*

Kim Hajin immediately went back to the machine and grabbed another doll after he noticed Rachel sulking.

“Thank you...” Rachel said in a small voice and smiled while hugging the doll.

The sight of her smiling and hugging the doll looked exactly like Evandel.

Kim Hajin laughed and said, “Shall we go?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah.”

Rachel and Evandel replied at the same time.

“Run! Run! Run!” Evandel excitedly shouted as she ran through the streets.

Rachel and Kim Hajin busily chased after her. Kim Hajin suddenly held Rachel’s hand and their fingers interlocked. Rachel couldn’t suppress her smile. She could only hide her embarrassment by pulling down her hat and pushing up her sunglasses. Of course, she smiled like a fool underneath all that.

“...!”

Rachel suddenly stopped in her tracks and everything around her stopped as well. Evandel shuddered and immediately turned around.

“*Hmm?*” Kim Hajin tilted his head at her.

Rachel looked at him and saw his face turning blurry like a mirage.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She shook her head and replied, “It’s nothing...”

Rachel composed herself and took a step forward. The world around her began moving again.

She continued walking as if nothing happened, but felt the corners of her eyes growing wetter. She wiped her eyes and found tears.

“Ah...”

Why was she crying? She couldn't pinpoint the reason why, but wanted to know.

“Evandel,” she called out through the busy street in Seoul.

“Yes?” Evandel replied and slowly walked to Rachel.

Rachel patted her head as the sun shone on them. Evandel's eyes sparkled even brighter while looking at Rachel.

“Shall we go back?” Rachel asked in a trembling voice.

The same strange sensation spread throughout her surroundings and disappeared, but she only focused on Evandel's response.

Evandel looked around before flashing a sad smile, “Not now. Let's play a bit more and go back when Rachel wants to.”

“Okay...” Rachel said before hugging her. She patted Evandel on the back and muttered, “Thank you...”

I still want to do a lot of things here. I want to be a bit happier. If this is all a dream, then I want to enjoy it a little longer. I'm allowed to be happy to my heart's content, right? Really... that should be alright...

* * *

Rachel's days went on as usual. These normal days made her so happy. The happiness from each passing day snowballed into even greater happiness. It allowed her to forget about her burdens and even her traumas.

She felt just as scared as she was happy. Rachel feared waking up from this dream. She didn't even know if she had the right to be happy like this.

However, those negative thoughts slowly disappeared as time went by. Soon, she realized that she couldn't delay her decision any longer. She knew she would become trapped in this world the longer she remained happy in it. She would slowly fade away like her negative thoughts.

Rachel couldn't let that happen. She was the princess of a nation and the leader of a guild. She wouldn't abandon her duties just to be happy and engraved this conviction in her heart so she would never forget or throw it away.

Rachel went to the Cornwall Lighthouse to sort out her conflicting thoughts. She sat on a bench and watched the waves crashing against the rocks. She had to make her decision now.

She couldn't afford to stay forever even if it allowed her to be the happiest person in the world. She could continue to be happy here and forget everything about the real world.

Of course, she could close her eyes and turn a blind eye to reality. She could live happily ever after if she closed her eyes like Lancaster told her.

However...

"What are you doing here?"

Kim Hajin popped up when she least expected him. Rachel looked at him and tried not to look surprised. After all, the Kim Hajin in this world showed up whenever she wanted him to.

Kim Hajin sat beside her on the bench and Rachel naturally held his hand like they always did.

"Hajin," she whispered while holding his hand.

“Yes?”

“I... *Puuu! Puupuuu! Puuuu!*”

She was about to say something when a strong sea breeze messed up her hair and a handful of hair went inside her mouth.

Rachel tried her best to spit out her hair.

“*Hahaha!*” Kim Hajin laughed at her.

Rachel puffed her cheeks and grumbled, “It’s not easy having long hair, you know?”

“Then cut it,” Kim Hajin nonchalantly replied.

“You said you liked long hair last time...” Rachel grumbled.

Kim Hajin reached out and arranged her hair. His warm touch patted her head and he tucked her hair behind her ears.

Rachel felt her heart skip a beat and something deep inside her shook. She wanted to stay like this longer and squeezed his hand tighter.

Rachel faked a cough and asked, “This place has quite a nice view, right?”

“Yes, it’s quite nice here,” Kim Hajin replied while looking at the steadfast lighthouse on top of lush green grass and the never-ending sea beyond.

This place had a stark contrast in colors and was quite famous. Heroes always had to run over and kill the sea monsters whenever the lighthouse sent a warning.

“You see...”

“Yes?”

Rachel leaned on his shoulder.

Kim Hajin looked down and saw his feet beside hers. A mischievous thought flashed across his mind. He took off his shoe and placed his feet on top of hers.

“You see...” Rachel repeated.

“Yes, tell me.”

“That is... *Ack!*”

Kim Hajin lifted her feet and placed her leg on top of his.

Rachel screamed in a panic when he lifted her. He lifted her by the knee as his hand supported her back like cradling a baby.

“Why?” he asked with a smile.

“*Ah...* That’s... no, it’s nothing...” Rachel muttered in embarrassment and avoided his gaze.

A little game of him chasing her eyes ensued. He smiled while continuing this mischievous game and found Rachel to be quite cute.

“*Eh... Eh! Eh!*” Rachel exclaimed before she mustered the courage to tightly hug him.

“Hey, wait a minute. This is...”

“Do you think I like you?” Rachel asked while Kim Hajin became flustered from her sneaky counter-attack.

She was strangely asking someone else about her own feelings that even she wasn’t certain of. She felt that she would never find out if she didn’t muster the courage here and now.

“...?”

Kim Hajin seemed taken aback by her sudden confession, no, question. He soon smiled and awkwardly scratched the back of his neck.

“Who knows... I have no idea... I mean, how could I know?”

Rachel smiled at him, “I guess so, right?”

“Yes,” Kim Hajin replied with an awkward smile.

Rachel decided to ask a slightly different question.

“Should I just give up?”

Kim Hajin had no clue what she would give up on, but he smiled and shook his head.

“No. I don’t know what you’re going to give up on, but not giving up suits you much better... just like a knight full of conviction.”

Was this answer enough for her?

Kim Hajin didn’t seem satisfied with his own answer and rubbed his chin deep in thought. Then he added in a serious tone this time, “I hope you won’t give up because... I felt that this world was worth living in thanks to you, Rachel.”

Rachel’s eyes widened. This was the first time she heard him say something like that and her heart wildly fluttered. It didn’t matter to her if this was the real world or not.

Kim Hajin looked straight into her eyes and confessed, “I’m not a person from this world.”

Rachel felt surprised again. She pondered what he meant, but couldn’t understand no matter how much she racked her brains.

“What do you mean?”

“I’m from another world. It’s probably safe to call me an alien. That

world doesn't have monsters, mana, or even heroes. It's a peaceful, yet not-so-peaceful place. Yes... the world we saw together in our dream... that's the world where I'm from."

"Huh?"

Rachel found everything difficult to understand.

Kim Hajin continued without minding her confusion, "That's why I didn't want to live in this world. I wanted to return to my world. After all, my loved ones are in that world and this world is nothing but a fake."

The sea breeze blew stronger, but Rachel's hair didn't end up in a mess this time as Kim Hajin already tied it for her.

He looked deep into Rachel's eyes and said, "But now, that's no longer the case..."

His eyes seemed to be telling her that she was the reason for the change.

Rachel stared back into his eyes as she reached her limits, "Hajin..."

Her heart fluttered.

Am I really dreaming right now? Will all of this disappear once I wake up? Will all of this really disappear?

"Thank you, Rachel."

She suddenly thought of something. It didn't matter if all of this disappeared and the dream ended once she woke up. As long as she didn't forget...

"Then... just a bit longer..." she leaned back on his shoulder and continued, "Let me stay by your side for just a bit longer..."

The wind blew and the sun shone on them.

Rachel wanted to take in all these feelings and engrave them deep in her heart. She didn't want to forget this moment. She had no idea how to describe her feelings... this anxiety coupled with a warmth that felt so familiar, yet foreign...

Now that she thought about it, she never asked for these emotions. Rachel slowly closed her eyes and a voice called out to her.

— Princess...

A familiar garden appeared in her mind and she somehow saw Lancaster standing in it.

— You won't be happy if you leave this place.

Rachel nodded. She knew she wouldn't be happier anywhere else than here. Kim Hajin wouldn't feel the same way as now once she returned to the real world.

Nevertheless, Rachel acted according to her heart.

“My happiness comes from my country's peace and prosperity. My great-grandmother said that this is the duty of the royal household.”

— Those are just excuses...

“I know. I know they're just excuses, but it doesn't matter to me. I've decided not to give up.”

Her response rendered Lancaster speechless. He turned into dust and scattered away in the wind.

“Ah...”

Rachel opened her eyes with Kim Hajin still beside her.

She brightly smiled at him and felt satisfied spending her days in this world that didn't feel like a dream and this person who felt so real... even though this was all just a fleeting dream.

“Hajin,” Rachel called out his name and wrapped her arms around his neck.

She closed her eyes and muttered, “Thank you too...”

Rachel looked at his face, inches away, and closed her eyes again. She slowly moved her lips towards his.

Their lips met.

It was her first kiss.

His lips felt dry and rough, but also tender for some reason.

He seemed surprised as his lips remained stiff. She wanted to open her eyes and look at his expression, but abandoned such thoughts.

She only wanted to focus on this moment right now.

The only thought on her mind during this magical and beautiful moment was...

I don't want to forget this memory even when I wake up.

I hope these memories will always stay with me and give me strength when I feel like giving up.

That's all I want and all I'm asking for...

1. Pororo is a Korean cartoon penguin beloved by children. 🐧

Side Stories 45.1

Dream in a Dream (45)

Rachel went to work the next day.

The guild hall grew crowded and bustled with people early in the morning after the English Royal Court became the center of attention.

The guild members filled the hall with journalists looking to score interviews, students on a site visit, etc.

Rachel composed herself and fixed her clothes before walking into the guild hall.

“Hello, Vice Leader!”

“It’s... It’s an honor to meet you!”

“W-Wow! I’m a huge fan!”

“Yes, yes, thank you very much. Good day to all of you,” Rachel replied while waving to all of them.

She tried her best to reply to everyone while heading to her office and wasn’t used to such attention.

However, Fermin kicked open the door and barged in as soon as Rachel sat in her office.

“Vice Leader, there’s an emergency!”

Rachel was going through the stack of documents on her table when she stopped and looked at Fermin like a deer caught in headlights.

“What happened?”

“Look! Look at this!” Fermin exclaimed and projected a hologram from her smartwatch.

[EXTRION Hathshire CEO Attends a Han River VIP Yacht Party.]

The news article claimed that EXTRION Hathshire’s CEO, Kim Hajin, had attended a yacht party at the Han River. It was already ten in the afternoon in England, which meant it was six in the evening for South Korea. He should still be at the party.

“What about it?” Rachel asked while tilting her head in confusion.

“Ah, what do you mean? What about it?!” Fermin shouted in frustration and projected another hologram.

The picture showed various women wearing extravagant dresses around Kim Hajin. They tried wooing him to the best of their abilities.

Only then did Rachel finally realize the meaning behind Fermin’s words.

“W-What is this?! Are you sure this isn’t photoshopped?!”

“What else could it be? Also, it’s real. Look, they’re flirting with your precious CEO left and right as we speak. Looks like he put something in his shoes to look taller too...”

Kim Hajin was already taller than the average South Korean male, but his shoe heels made him look even taller and nearly flawless when it came to looks.

Rachel frowned and asked, “Should I go there right now?!”

“Yes! Of course, you should!” Fermin fanned Rachel’s jealousy without hesitation.

Rachel stood from her chair and ran to the London portal with Fermin

cheering her on from behind. She traveled from London to Seoul in less than three minutes through a VIP portal thanks to her royal status.

The article said he was at a yacht party on the Han River, right?

Rachel used her wind spirit to zoom through the air at a tremendous speed. She spotted the bodyguards guarding the perimeter.

The bodyguards immediately tried to stop her and felt surprised when a blonde woman wearing blue leather armor popped out of nowhere.

However, one of them recognized her, “*Huh?* Isn’t that Princess Rachel?”

They immediately stood down and thought she had also been invited to the party as a VIP guest. It wasn’t strange for them to think so given her royal status and fame these days.

“I wish to enter,” Rachel declared.

The bodyguard scanned her from head to toe and awkwardly scratched his neck, “Yes... but you are violating the dress code, Your Highness...”

“No way. This is an excellent piece of equipment,” Rachel replied and proudly puffed out her chest to emphasize her leather armor.

The bodyguards inspected her leather armor and noticed that it was indeed an excellent piece of equipment. The leather armor exuded a powerful aura that they had never seen before.

The bodyguards looked at each other before sighing in resignation and nodding.

“Yes, you may enter, Your Highness.”

It was a tough decision for them since this was a VIP party, but it also didn’t make sense to deny a royal at the door because of the dress code policy.

Rachel boarded the yacht that was the size of a cruise after the bodyguards gave her permission.

She stood out like a sore thumb among the crowd wearing luxury dresses and tuxedos, but their gazes didn't bother her as she walked around looking for Kim Hajin.

Soon, she found him in the distance when a waiter suddenly passed her a tray. The waiter seemed to have mistaken her for a fellow staffer.

Anyways, she found Kim Hajin surrounded by a crowd. Some were very famous people that even Rachel recognized. They included famous European heroes, Yi Jiyeon from Essence of the Straits, and even Jin Seyeon from the Temple of Justice.

Only then did Rachel finally realize EXTRION Hathshire's greatness.

She put down the tray and walked over to him.

Some of the men and women in the area noisily chattered among themselves.

"Somebody call the guards! Some woman wearing leather armor is here!"

"..."

However, Rachel ignored them and only looked at Kim Hajin with several women surrounding him. Anger welled up inside her and she thought it was rude of him to attend a party without informing her.

"*Hmm?*" Kim Hajin also spotted Rachel.

She pouted when she knew that he saw her.

"Ah, she's here just in time," Kim Hajin brightly smiled as if he had been waiting for her all this time.

He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into his embrace. Rachel flinched in surprise at the sudden turn of events.

“Let me introduce her,” Kim Hajin said to the people around while tightly holding her with one arm.

“This is my beloved,” he publicly declared to everyone.

Rachel felt like she would have a heart attack. She literally felt like her heart would burst and stop at any moment from how fast it beat.

“Ah, no wonder. I thought that would be the case. It was from during that time, right?” Jin Seyeon asked with a smile.

The women flirting with Kim Hajin a moment ago clicked their tongues in disappointment.

“Would you like to greet them as well, Rachel?” Kim Hajin asked.

“...”

Rachel slightly trembled in his embrace.

The confidence and bravery she came with to make a scene had long disappeared. She looked at Kim Hajin and flashed an awkward smile as her cheeks blushed from embarrassment.

“Yes... Hello, it's nice to meet all of you. My name is Rachel...” she introduced herself to the VIPs gathered around.

She barged in like a tank armed in leather armor, but now shyly introduced herself while awkwardly touching her hair.

Some of the VIPs looked at her in disbelief because of her actions.

* * *

Rachel diligently prepared dinner on a peaceful evening.

She made kimchi stew, egg rolls that were Evandel's favorite, and steamed rice. She hadn't prepared a lot of dishes, but did her best.

"*Hmm...*" Rachel scanned the dining table one more time.

She nodded in satisfaction after thinking this would be more than enough and called Kim Hajin.

"Hajin."

Kim Hajin and Evandel were playing video games in another room and came waltzing out.

"Come and eat."

Rachel looked nervous as she watched them lift their spoons.

How would it taste? Would they like her cooking? Or would they find it disgusting and horrible?

The two of them took a bite before their eyes shot wide open.

"Wow! It's delicious!"

"Yeah, this is really good."

Thankfully, their reactions weren't bad. Rachel sighed in relief and took a seat to eat as well.

"*Yum.*"

She came to the same conclusion after taking a bite.

"Fortunately, it came out good," she said with a smile.

"Yes, it's quite good," Kim Hajin replied.

"*Hehe...*"

The three of them finished eating dinner.

Rachel took a bath with Evandel and helped to dry her hair. Then the three of them watched TV in the living room until Evandel fell asleep.

They carried Evandel to her room and lay with her in bed. Kim Hajin and Rachel patted her head while watching her sleep.

“Yawn...”

Both of them felt sleepy too and hugged each other with Evandel between them.

Rachel watched Kim Hajin fall asleep and found it quite cute. She mischievously poked his cheeks a few times.

Poke... Poke... Poke... Poke...

“It’s a relief...” she muttered.

She wanted her final days to be normal and everything seemed to be going according to her wishes.

Rachel got up from the bed and stretched. She quietly walked over to the balcony and made sure not to wake them up.

“Haa...” she sighed while leaning on the rails and looked at the night sky filled with stars.

What was she thinking and feeling? Even she wasn’t sure. Was it anxiety, regret, or just wishful thinking? She had no clue.

However, she didn’t let it sway her and already made up her mind. She decided to treasure the memories from this world no matter what.

“Rachel?” Someone called her from behind in the most gentle and warm tone.

“Ah...”

That person walked over as she leaned on the rail and warmly hugged her from behind. She could feel her heart fluttering.

Rachel bitterly smiled at his sudden show of affection. She wanted to be alone right now and always hesitated whenever he did something like this. She kept delaying the choice she already made whenever he made her heart flutter like this.

“What are you doing?” Kim Hajin asked in a warm, yet slightly drowsy voice.

Rachel tried her best to act as normal as possible.

“Me?”

“Yes.”

“I was...”

Rachel turned around and buried her face in his chest. She looked up and smiled at him before continuing, “I was getting ready to wake up.”

“Wake up?” Kim Hajin asked while tilting his head in confusion.

“Yes,” Rachel nodded, “I’m going to wake up.”

She wondered what would happen after she woke up from this dream. *Would I be able to see you again after I wake up? Can I still be with you? Even though you won’t love me like right now...*

Rachel wrapped her arms around Kim Hajin’s waist and buried her face in his chest again.

“Still, I’m not going to give up.”

Did Kim Hajin know what she was talking about right now?

“Yes, don’t give up,” he gently said with a smile.

Rachel looked into his eyes and saw the stars reflecting in them. She smiled without even realizing it.

They watched the night sky in each other's embrace. It felt as if every star in the world was shining down on them. She took in every bit of this scenery while in his arms.

The sun began to rise and lit up the horizon.

It was time for her to wake up from this sweet dream now.

However, Rachel wanted to whisper something to her beloved in his embrace for the last time... before she woke up from this dream.

She decided to keep the words she whispered a secret for the rest of her life.

Side Stories 45.2

Dream in a Dream (45)

The nurse taking care of the patient at the Severance Hospital VIP ward went about her business and checked the patient's condition like usual.

Blood pressure... normal.

Pulse... normal.

Nutrition... normal.

Surprisingly, the patient didn't suffer from any nutritional deficiency despite not having eaten or been injected with anything for the longest time. It seemed her body remained in its most optimum condition while asleep.

The nurse went through her checklist before checking the patient's eyes.

"Huh?"

The patient's blue eyes seemed to be looking at the ceiling after opening. A tear formed and sparkled like a crystal.

"H-Huh?!" the nurse screamed and fell on her butt. She crawled on all four and left the ward as fast as she could, "Doctor! Doctor!"

Rachel finally woke up from her slumber after the nurse left. She groaned and turned in bed to find Evandel asleep beside her.

A smile full of love bloomed on Rachel's face.

It seemed that Evandel also had the same dream to stay with me...

Bam!

Someone loudly barged in through the door. It wasn't the doctor or nurse, but Kim Hajin. It seemed he just woke up too.

He walked towards her with a relieved expression.

"Hajin?" Rachel weakly smiled in response.

"Yes, it's me."

It's me.

He didn't sound any different from usual, but Rachel felt something heavy push down on her chest after hearing those words. However, she tried her best to suppress the pain welling up from her heart and stroked Evandel's head before changing the topic.

"Evandel must still be dreaming, right?"

"Yes, it must be related to the dream. Rachel..."

"Yeah, her dream was connected to mine."

Evandel followed her all the way inside the dream and probably wouldn't wake if Rachel didn't.

"Are you alright?" Kim Hajin carefully asked.

Rachel smiled at him, "Aren't you curious what kind of dream I had?"

"*Huh? Ah...* Yeah, I'm curious..." Kim Hajin replied with a nod.

Rachel already prepared a response if he ever asked about her dream.

"A dream about never giving up."

"What? Never giving up on what?"

He seemed quite dense right now for some reason.

Rachel flashed a mischievous smile and thought about what kind of a person he was to her.

“Hmm... Hajin...” she muttered with a finger on her lips.

“Yes?”

“Do you want me to give up?”

Kim Hajin tilted his head in confusion, but Rachel didn't explain as she pressed him for a response.

“Hurry up. Answer me.”

“Hmm...” Kim Hajin contemplated for a moment and smirked, “No.”

He gave the same response like in her sweet dream, “I don't know what you're going to give up on, but not giving up suits you much better... like a knight full of conviction.”

It was a satisfactory answer. Her heart ached, but she felt proud of herself for some reason.

“But why are you suddenly asking that? And what aren't you giving up on?” Kim Hajin asked with a curious look.

Rachel grabbed his arm and pulled him towards her for a hug. No, she tried to hug him, but noticed someone standing at the door looking at them. She chose to wrap her arms around his neck and put him in a headlock.

Only after Kim Hajin coughed a few times and seemed to be suffering did she finally let him go.

“W-What was that all about?”

Rachel shrugged and flashed a mischievous smile, “I'm not going to

tell you. Never ever.”

She sounded like the bright and cheery Rachel that Kim Hajin always knew.

* * *

Rachel and Evandel went to the East Sea on a bright summer day after Evandel said she wanted to play at the beach.

“Hihihi! Kim Hayang lost to me!”

“Meow!”

Evandel was having a competition with Hayang on the beach while Rachel summoned her spirits and tried to harmonize them.

“It still works...” she muttered in surprise.

The growth she achieved in her dream had remained.

The dream world was actually a smaller world created by the Tower of Miracle from what she heard. It could be considered another dimension, so half the things that occurred in it could be considered real.

The theory was difficult to understand, but that was all in the past now.

Of course, she missed that past from time to time. She missed that person always inches away from her... swimming in happiness all the time.

However, Rachel gained a powerful motivation after waking up from her dream.

She felt confident that she could overcome anything and everything now. She could accomplish all her goals in life. That dream gave her the conviction to never give up under any circumstances and that

became her new life motto.

Someone familiar approached as she reminisced about those memories.

“Are you okay?”

Rachel realized who it was from that single sentence and didn’t even bother looking. The person sat next to her on the bench.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” Rachel replied.

“Nice try. What do you mean you’re fine? I bet you’re dying inside right now,” Chae Nayun teased her by being ever so direct.

Rachel looked at her.

Chae Nayun stuck out her tongue to annoy Rachel.

“Pfft... No, I still have a lot of time left,” Rachel said with a laugh.

“A lot of time?”

“Yeah, I think I might actually have a chance.”

“What? What chance are you talking about?”

“I decided not to give up, you see.”

Rachel decided to accept the challenge. She steeled her resolve to not run away anymore whether it be England, her guild, or love. She resolved to pursue them until the very end. She no longer wanted to be a coward who ran away from challenges.

“Also, I think Evandel will like me the most from now on,” Rachel said with a smile.

“*Ha!* You’re funny,” Chae Nayun scoffed in response.

Chae Nayun muttered something under her breath along the lines of, *What kind of childish nonsense are you talking about?*

Rachel went on the offensive this time, “What about you? Are you okay?”

“Me? *Ah*, I’ve finished my preparations as well,” Chae Nayun took out something that looked like a piece of ham.

“What’s that?”

“A time capsule. Kim Hajin gave it to me a long time ago.”

The Miracle Stone gifted Chae Nayun the ability to regress using this time capsule as a medium.

“Oh,” Rachel found the whole thing quite intriguing. Then she asked, “So what are you going to do if you go back?”

“Who knows? I don’t have any plans to be honest. I don’t really want to meddle with things... Oh, I’ll save my brother at least,” Chae Nayun replied with a shrug.

“That sounds like something you would do.”

“You seem to have changed a lot.”

Rachel smirked at Chae Nayun’s words.

Chae Nayun pursed her lips and looked at Evandel playing on the beach with Hayang.

Rachel followed Chae Nayun’s gaze and asked, “In your world... Evandel might not exist, right?”

Chae Nayun yawned and leaned back on the beach. She looked carefree like always.

“Again, who knows? After all, I do have some attachment to that

kid...”

Then, she opened the locks on the time capsule.

Click... Clack!

Rachel curiously peeked inside the time capsule.

Chae Nayun placed the fully recovered Miracle Stone in the time capsule and closed it again.

“Are you going now?” Rachel asked.

“Yeah, I should get going now that you’re back,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly replied.

“Ah... Thanks for everything.”

“Thanks for what?” Chae Nayun looked at Rachel and continued, “Well, take care. Explain to the others for me if I suddenly disappear, princess.”

Chae Nayun saluted Rachel in a mocking manner and raised her left hand to her forehead.

“You should use your right hand when you salute...” Rachel corrected her.

Chae Nayun squinted at her and grumbled, “What does it matter whether I use my right or left hand? Are you a boomer? Ah... I almost forgot. Here, take this.”

She extended something towards Rachel, “Here.”

“...?”

Rachel tilted her head in confusion when Chae Nayun placed a purple stone fragment in her hand.

“It’s a fragment of the Miracle Stone that created your dream. No, it was a bit too real to call it a dream. Let’s just call it another world. Anyways, it’s what remains of that world. Oh, Kim Hajin was also in your dream by the way.”

“*Huh?* Hajin was?” Rachel’s eyes widened.

Did that mean not only Evandel, but also Kim Hajin was in her dream?

Rachel’s face turned bright red as she recalled her memories from the dream.

“Yeah, he spent a week trying to save you. I don’t think he remembers anything from the dream though. I doubt he was even able to act according to how he wanted in your dream. He became quite weak, you see.”

“*Ah...* what the...”

“I have no idea what that’s for, but I just thought I should probably give it to you. After all, I was able to retrieve my fragment thanks to you. Think of it as a little souvenir from your dream.”

Rachel looked down at the purple stone the size of her nail. It didn’t feel like an ordinary stone that simply looked pretty.

“Then, I’m going for real this time.”

Chae Nayun sounded like she was taking a short trip somewhere not too far away. Rachel couldn’t say goodbye and only watched her leave.

Goodbyes were always painful, but everyone had to live with them.

“Take care,” Chae Nayun said as she walked away while waving.

The sun began to set and painted the sky orange, but a bright ray of light suddenly exploded and illuminated the entire world.

Rachel closed her eyes and opened them again.

Shwaa...

The waves gently swayed and the sun slowly set as if nothing had happened.

Chae Nayun, who was just beside her, began a journey to somewhere no one else knew and disappeared like a mirage that never existed.

“Evandel... It’s time to go home,” Rachel called out with a smile.

Evandel had been making a pillar out of seashells and ran towards Rachel while giggling and racing with Hayang.

“Hihihi!”

Evandel jumped into Rachel’s embrace after beating Hayang again. Rachel watched the sunset as she hugged the child.

The setting sun looked breathtaking.

“*Haa...*” Rachel sighed when the memories she treasured in the corner of her heart popped up in her head again. Her memories from the dream when she confessed to the person she loved. She reminisced about those beautiful memories one by one as she left the beach with Evandel.

The cool breeze brushed past her hair and the last rays of sunlight shone on her before the sky turned dark. The waves crashing against the rocks could be heard and a bird flying through the sky let out a small cry.

No one remained on the bench anymore.

Rachel would now go against the tides of reality armed with the newly found conviction she obtained from the sweetest dream in her life.



PbF by: traitor/SEN



The Novel's Extra

WUXIA
WORLD

KW

The Novel's Extra

- 소설 속 엑스트라 -

- VOLUME 6 -

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Side Stories 46

Chae Nayun (1)

March 7th

The Tower of Miracle raid was successful.

I managed to obtain the Miracle Stone, but the crystal violently shook when I held it. It bounced in my hands like a slippery eel before falling to the ground.

A small portion of the crystal broke off and caused a huge shockwave.

March 8th

Tens of millions, including Rachel, fell asleep because of the shockwave. They became stuck in an unending dream and the Miracle Stone's fragment was most likely in that dream.

March 15th

I decided to enter their dreams after deliberating about it for a long time.

...

June 13th

Rachel woke up from the dream and everything ended. She was praised as the hero who ended the long dream and was invited to various TV shows, press conferences, etc.

I can't help but feel jealous. It's not wrong since she was the one who stopped it.

...

June 20th

My regression.

Chae Nayun closed her diary after scribbling a few things. Keeping a diary helped her make sense of everything that happened, but not much made sense to her right now.

The regression happened in an instant. It happened so abruptly that her mind became jumbled.

“Ah... Did I put in the wrong date?”

It was currently 2:40 A.M. and she found herself in the penthouse given only to the top cadets at Cube. This proved that she had indeed traveled back in time.

Chae Nayun scratched her disheveled hair and checked the time on her smartwatch.

[First Period: Relativity of Mana and Magic (Beginner)]

She deduced from her schedule that she was currently halfway through her freshman year. They already finished their hectic midterm exam and a report written by Kim Hajin sat in front of her.

[Report on Chae Nayun]

Chae Nayun only shoots her arrows from obvious spots. In short, she lacks the common sense to be an archer.

...

A sharpshooter requires terrain knowledge and the ability to analyze. Chae Nayun lacks both and background knowledge on various monsters to fight one-on-one against them.

...

She is quite gifted with the ability to read her opponent's movements, but lacks the ability to calculate an arrow's speed.

...

To summarize, Chae Nayun is not suited to use the bow. It is a weapon that requires meticulous calculation every second in battle.

"This still irritates me..." Chae Nayun pouted and grumbled.

She recalled how angry, no, how enraged she felt when she first read this report. It didn't anger her anymore though. In fact, she was happy this report existed because it was another link between them.

"Ack! Ah, damn it. My head hurts..." Chae Nayun groaned and grabbed her head while standing still.

A sharp pain struck her.

"This side effect is too painful..." she grumbled.

Her throbbing head made her realize that she had indeed regressed. She suppressed the sadness welling up inside her and switched on the TV.

— What are we going to do there? We need to know before going there...

— What are you talking about? Just go and do whatever they ask once you get there!

— We can just go to Seoul instead then, right? Why the hell did they choose Africa of all places...

A show she often used to watch and enjoy was playing.

All seven individuals on the show were ex-heroes. The show sent them

to various local and foreign places to clear challenges. Everyone considered it the best Korean variety show until it was discontinued for some reason.

Chae Nayun smiled while watching the nostalgic show and reminisced about the past. Her head felt like a mess due to the regression, so she decided to distract herself by watching TV.

* * *

She finished watching the TV show in her penthouse living room.

“I’ll start the briefing now...” Chae Nayun said to her dolls lined up in front of her.

“First, we will prioritize every opportunity to coincidentally bump into each other. After all, people are bound to think coincidences are fate.”

The agenda of her briefing was, *[Coincidental Meetings]*.

“Our first target is at the cafeteria. Kim Hajin always eats alone at the same time and hour.”

She figured that she would naturally end up talking to him if she went there.

“The second target is during workouts. Kim Hajin always works out alone at the same time every day.”

It was quite natural for someone to work out after eating. He wouldn’t think too much about it, right?

“Alright, the third target is during the final exam.”

The midterms had already finished, but they still had the final exam. Chae Nayun planned to maintain a friendly relationship with Kim Hajin until then.

“Oh right, there’s Evandel as well...”

She suddenly remembered, albeit a bit late.

Rachel had asked about Evandel, who likely wasn’t born yet in this timeline.

In the end, Chae Nayun decided that the best course of action was to ask Kim Hajin to give the seed to Rachel.

“Or... should I just raise her?”

Chae Nayun imagined how Evandel would turn out if Evandel took after her instead of Rachel...

— No! I don’t want to! I don’t like ham sandwiches! I’m not going to eat it if there’s no truffle! No! No! No! Truffle and shark fins!
Gyaaaaaaah!

“That would be a disaster.”

A chill went down her spine when she imagined a smaller version of herself throwing tantrums. That made it much easier to decide that Evandel should take after Rachel just like in her original timeline.

“Also... the most important thing is...” Chae Nayun muttered with a serious look.

She picked up a family portrait on the table. Chae Jinyoon brightly smiled in it with his hand on her shoulder.

“I’ll have to wake up oppa...”

Of course, it would be difficult to wake Chae Jinyoon even though Baal had disappeared. That didn’t mean a solution didn’t exist.

“Haaa...” Chae Nayun sighed and looked at the time.

7:00 A.M.

It would be time for class soon.

Chae Nayun changed into her uniform. It had been ages since she last wore a Cube uniform, but she felt quite comfortable in it. The Cube uniform looked like a formal suit, but it felt like wearing comfortable trainers.

She put on her necktie without bothering to tie it nicely and left the penthouse unit.

Chae Nayun rode the elevator down to the dormitory lobby on the first floor^[1].

A few cadets were already eating or just finished their breakfast in the lobby.

“Oh! Hi, Nayun.”

“You’re up early?”

Some of them greeted Chae Nayun.

“Yeah, yeah. Hi,” Chae Nayun lazily waved to them.

“Ah, Nayun! You woke up early! Do you want to eat with me?” Yi Jiyeon suddenly popped out of nowhere and asked.

She hadn’t changed at all in this regressed life compared to Chae Nayun’s previous life.

Chae Nayun smirked and replied, “No, I already ate.”

“Ah, is that so? Alright.”

Chae Nayun passed by them and went outside. The breeze carried a salty scent from the East Sea that could be seen in the horizon. The gentle waves under the bright sky felt calm and tranquil.

“Haaa...”

Chae Nayun inhaled the scent of this scenery that she dearly missed. It was good to be back... and the fact that she became younger was a bonus.

“Good... good...” she said with a smile.

Chae Nayun walked to the building where freshmen took their classes. She passed the café that cadets often went to, the library with its lights always on, the gym that smelled like sweat, and the training grounds where wooden swords resounded even early in the morning.

Chae Nayun arrived in front of her classroom.

[Class — Veritas]

She looked at the door plate and calmed her breathing.

That person will be in here... that person who I had nothing but bitter memories with...

Chae Nayun didn't hesitate any longer and opened the classroom door.

Rachel sat in the second seat of the first row. Then she spotted Yoo Yeonha and finally Kim Hajin after looking around for a while.

Kim Hajin sat at the back and hunched over the table as if he was hiding.

Chae Nayun pondered where she should go first, but Yoo Yeonha found it strange that Chae Nayun came to class so early and interrupted her thoughts.

“Nayun?” Yoo Yeonha called out to her.

“Y-Yes?”

“Come sit here,” she pointed to the seat beside her.

“Y-Yeah...”

Chae Nayun sat next to Yoo Yeonha, but kept looking back and stealing glances at Kim Hajin.

“You’re up early today,” Yoo Yeonha asked with a curious expression.

“*Hmm?* Well, it happens,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly replied while stealing glances at Kim Hajin.

“Is today special or something?” Yoo Yeonha tilted her head in confusion.

“*Hmm?* No, it’s not. Why would it be?” Chae Nayun replied while continuing to steal glances at the back.

Glance... Glance...

She couldn’t help but steal glances at him. His face during his Cube days looked quite interesting.

Yoo Yeonha frowned at her, “What are you looking for like a meerkat?”

“*Huh?* No, when did I? I’m not looking for anything,” Chae Nayun awkwardly replied while faking a cough.

Her eyes kept trying to steal glances at Kim Hajin, but she did her best to suppress the urge.

A while passed and more cadets arrived to class one by one. Their chatting grew louder until the entire classroom became rowdy.

Chae Nayun found the atmosphere very familiar.

Their noisy chattering immediately died when their instructor, Kim Soohyuk, entered the room.

Kim Soohyuk made some announcements before their first period began. The Veritas cadets went to the magic hall on the fifth floor for their first class of the day.

A magician waited for them at the magic hall filled with various instruments for experiments.

“Welcome, everyone,” the magician greeted them.

Chae Nayun tried her best to recall the magician’s name, but she had completely forgotten. No, she had never been interested in this subject and always yawned in class without listening to a word.

“Our class today is... That’s right... outside. We’ll... Oh, also, we will be having an on-site lesson tomorrow. You will be forming pairs...” the magician informed them.

Kim Hajin frowned at the magician’s words. It seemed he didn’t want to pair up with anyone.

Chae Nayun saw the look on his face and smirked.

“However, you won’t be forming pairs or groups right now. You will be paired once you get there,” the magician added.

Hmm? Wait a minute? Was there such a class before? Chae Nayun wondered and felt that something was off for some reason.

Bzzt!

She felt a small vibration on her wrist.

[Hunting Club – Winter Cabin Trip]

[We’re going on a trip to the cabin this Wednesday.]

[All Hunting Club members are requested to attend.]

[Please inform us in advance if you won’t be attending.]

[Thank you.]

It came from the Hunting Club that Chae Nayun joined during her

Cube days.

She read the message and instantly turned towards Kim Hajin, who also checked his smartwatch.

“Nice!” she exclaimed under her breath.

He probably saw the same message and she was certain Kim Hajin was also a Hunting Club member in her previous life.

Chae Nayun inwardly cheered in triumph.

* * *

Chae Nayun had a glass of mango juice at the café after their morning classes.

She wanted to follow Kim Hajin and identify his daily routine, but a bunch of kids caught her and forced her to sit with them.

Damn it...

Blurb! Blurb!

She played with her mango juice to quell her anger.

Yeah! That's right! Keep boiling little mango juice! She gritted her teeth and blew on the straw as hard as she could.

“What’s wrong with her?” Yoo Yeonha muttered and sighed at the sight of Chae Nayun puffing her cheeks and blowing into a straw as hard as she could.

Chae Nayun suddenly glared at her.

Yoo Yeonha flinched and asked, “W-What?”

“Nothing... Don’t mind me...” Chae Nayun said with a shrug before looking around the table.

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan... Yoo Yeonha and Shin Jonghak...

They always hung out together during her Cube days. She was glad to see them again, but could always see them whenever she wanted.

“Hey, Chae Nayun. How are you with that guy Kim Hajin these days?” Shin Jonghak suddenly asked.

The other three at the table naturally shifted their gaze towards her.

“What?” Chae Nayun grumbled in response.

“You agreed to some bet with him, right? Was it archery? Why are you wasting your time with someone like him?” Shin Jonghak asked with a scoff before sipping his coffee and continuing, “Why would you let some peasant like him get near... *Ack!*”

Chae Nayun nudged the coffee cup that Shin Jonghak was about to drink from.

“W-Why?” Shin Jonghak stood and muttered with wide eyes.

The coffee spilled all over his face and pants. A coffee stain formed around his lips and looked like a beard.

Yoo Yeonha pulled out some tissues and gave them to him.

“Isn’t it hot?” she asked.

However, Shin Jonghak ignored her and still looked confused. He wanted an explanation from Chae Nayun, “Why?”

“Shut up. You’re annoying,” Chae Nayun frowned and grumbled.

“...”

Shin Jonghak quietly sat again.

An awkward silence descended at the table before Yi Yeonghan broke

the silence, “Oh, right. Do you guys want to join the Board Game Club?”

What the hell is that guy saying all of a sudden? Chae Nayun inwardly grumbled while yawning.

“It’s a bit different from the established clubs since it’s more of a hobby club, but we can still get funding from the academy. Don’t you think it’ll be fun?” Yi Yeonghan continued his nonsense.

Chae Nayun yawned and ignored Yi Yeonghan when she suddenly remembered something.

“Ah!” she exclaimed and stood from her chair.

The others flinched in surprise at her sudden action.

“W-Why? What is it this time?”

Club... Club... Club...

This single word continued to ring in her mind.

“Should I make a club as well?” she asked.

“What kind of club? A board game club?” Yi Yeonghan asked in response.

“No, a pharmacy club or something like that?” Chae Nayun said with a shrug.

“Nayun... what are you saying all of a sudden?” Yoo Yeonha asked with a sigh.

“I want to make a medicine that can wake up my oppa,” Chae Nayun cut her off.

“...”

Everyone fell silent at her words. They glanced at each other, but no one dared to say anything.

“So, what do you think? Do you guys want to join? We just need five people to form a club, right?” Chae Nayun pressed on with sparkling eyes.

A standard club required a minimum number of members from each year, but a hobby club only required the bare minimum of members.

Kim Suho nodded and said, “I’m in...”

Yi Yeonghan seemed to be bitter about the fact that his Board Game Club was shot down. He mumbled something like, *It’s not fair if you use a cheat like that*. However, he also nodded after hesitating.

Chae Nayun smirked.

Alright, Yoo Yeonha will definitely agree. I just have to convince Kim Hajin to join! Chae Nayun excitedly thought.

“I’m in too.”

Shin Jonghak suddenly expressed his interest to join as well. He bitterly smiled as if he didn’t really want to join, but had no choice.

“You can get lost,” Chae Nayun replied.

“Huh?”

“You don’t even know what med in medicine stands for,” she grumbled.

“Hahaha...” Shin Jonghak burst into laughter. He waved while laughing and thought Chae Nayun was joking.

Does this idiot think I’m joking right now? Chae Nayun glared at him.

Yoo Yeonha carefully asked, “But Nayun... we need five people to

form a club, right? Who are you going to bring if Jonghak isn't joining?"

"Ah, I already have someone in mind," Chae Nayun nonchalantly replied.

"Who?"

Kim Suho, Yoo Yeonha, and Yi Yeonghan asked at the same time.

Shin Jonghak began to nervously fidget after realizing Chae Nayun was dead serious.

She smirked when she saw all of them waiting in suspense at who she would mention.

"Kim Hajin," she said with a grin.

Silence ensued after she said his name.

1. All buildings in Korea start on the first floor instead of the ground floor. The ground floor and Mezzanine concept are not that widespread in Korea. That's why most novels refer to the ground floor as the first floor. 🤔

Side Stories 47

Chae Nayun (2)

Chae Nayun went to the main building to look for Instructor Kim Soohyuk at six in the evening.

“A club?” Kim Soohyuk was working in his office and tilted his head in confusion.

“Yes,” Chae Nayun said as she handed him a piece of paper.

Yoo Yeonha already completed the club application form.

“It’s called the Pharmacy Club! The details are written on the club application form!” Chae Nayun said as she emphasized every syllable like an elementary kid during a presentation.

Kim Soohyuk stared at her for a while before taking the application.

“*Hmm...*” he scanned the paper.

Chae Nayun couldn’t help but feel nervous. After all, Kim Soohyuk was quite infamous for being strict and inflexible among the cadets.

He opened his drawer and placed their application inside. Then he said, “Alright. I’ll assign you a club room and send an advisor soon.”

“*Ah! Yes!... Huh?*” Chae Nayun cheered before tilting her head in confusion at Kim Soohyuk’s last few words.

“Advisor? Do we need one?” she asked.

“Why are you asking the obvious? Each club gets a room and a budget sponsored by the school, so it’s obvious you’ll also need an advisor to supervise you. The clubs you participate in during your academy days

will have a huge impact on your hero career later on,” Kim Soohyuk explained.

“Ah... I see... Thank you very... much...” Chae Nayun said with a bow and tried her best to hide her disappointment.

“Alright, get going then.”

“Yes, sir!”

Chae Nayun left the staff office.

Bzzt!

Her smartwatch vibrated when she left the office. It came from her father, Chae Shinhyuk.

“Hello,” Chae Nayun answered in a bright and cheery tone.

— Hi, Nayun.

A familiar voice called her from the other end.

Chae Nayun responded in an even cheerier tone, “Yes, what’s up?”

— Ah, I just called to ask you something since I need your opinion on the matter.

“What is it?”

— A proposal to reform Cube came...

Chae Shinhyuk received a request from Cube executives since the Daehyun corporation was their largest sponsor.

Cube wanted to reform their classes and asked for Chae Shinhyuk’s opinion on the matter.

— So I was wondering what you thought.

“Ah...”

Chae Nayun recalled this event in her previous life before regressing. She vaguely remembered telling her father something like, *Why would they even want to change it?* The regression seemed to be gnawing away at her memories bit by bit starting from the ones that held no significance.

“I don’t really mind. Just do whatever you want,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly replied.

— Alright, study hard.

Chae Shinhyuk ended the call.

Chae Nayun looked at her smartwatch with a smile before happily skipping out of the building.

“Wow...”

The sunset outside mesmerized her as it shone over the sea and sunk below the horizon.

Cadets busily walked under the streetlights to their dormitories.

Chae Nayun stood still for a while and took in the sight around her. She could only describe the sight as one she missed, was too familiar with, and sick of all at the same time. In short, it felt complicated.

“Haaa...” she sighed at the thought of going to Cube for three years again.

She wanted nothing more than to enjoy these three years this time around. She didn’t want to deal with any tragedies, disasters, or emergencies. She didn’t want to be lonely or depressed like last time.

The setting sun shone on her before disappearing into the horizon.

Chae Nayun could feel her troubled heart slowly being filled with darkness and tried her best to remain optimistic. It felt as if a large boulder was pressing down on her chest and suffocating her.

“...”

Chae Nayun fixed her hair being blown by the sea breeze. She had to face the problem she feared no matter what.

Step... Step...

She spotted the back of someone's head. It looked quite familiar for some reason. That person had long, golden hair and walked with her head held high. It was Rachel.

Chae Nayun thought about just walking past her, but saw Rachel hiding behind a lamppost for some reason.

Why is she hiding? Chae Nayun wondered as she continued to observe.

“Oh?” she muttered and one of her brows went up.

Kim Hajin was up ahead and Rachel bit her nails while tailing him!

Chae Nayun felt something raging inside her and decided to sneak behind Rachel. Then she grabbed Rachel's shoulders and asked, “What are you doing?”

“...!”

Rachel jumped like a frightened cat with all its fur standing.

“Hiss!”

She immediately turned around and hissed at Chae Nayun.

Chae Nayun laughed in disbelief before asking, “Who are you tailing?”

“...!”

Rachel tried to compose herself and rearranged her necktie and shirt. However, her hair remained standing and showed no signs of going down. On top of that, she broke out into cold sweat despite her best efforts to appear calm.

“I’m not sure what you’re talking about,” Rachel nonchalantly replied while arranging her disheveled hair.

Chae Nayun crossed her arms and sneered, “Oh right, you got crushed by Kim Hajin in theory class. Are you tailing him to find out his secret or something?”

“...!”

The blonde cat hissed again, but silently this time. She seemed to be glaring at Chae Nayun with the eyes of a beast. Chae Nayun couldn’t help but think, *Oh... I’m shaking in my boots.*

“*Hihi*,” Chae Nayun snickered after seeing this childish version of Rachel.

This was more than enough since Kim Hajin had already long disappeared.

She tapped Rachel on the shoulder, “Just go to your room and get some sleep. You won’t be able to win against him in theory no matter how much you try.”

“*Hmph!*” Rachel scoffed and continued glaring at her.

Then she quickly ran away, which reminded Chae Nayun of a cat again.

Chae Nayun couldn’t help but smile as she watched the blonde cat zoom into the distance.

* * *

[Reformation of Cube Classes]

— *Proposal to reduce or consolidate the number of classes and focus more on practical tests geared towards combat.*

— *Addition of practical combat score to the grading of cadets...*

News of classes being reformed circulated campus the next day. They said the academy would reduce or consolidate existing classes and add a special class once a week. This didn't exist in the original story.

It was understandable since djinns made a ruckus during the midterms. However, something about it bothered me.

“There's no reaction at all these days...”

I looked down at my smartwatch. It used to notify me whenever things changed from the original story. This was a special privilege given to the author or something, but no notifications appeared for quite some time now.

Had my early-stage bonus ended already? This made me nervous for some reason.

Clack...

I put down my tray at the collection booth.

“Ah, that was good.”

The food at Cube tasted delicious. Not only that, it was quite cheap too. I didn't starve to death thanks to the food costs here. A chunk of beef cost only four thousand won.

“Huh? You're that guy, right?”

Someone poked my shoulder as I prepared to leave the cafeteria. This girl of western descent seemed to be in her second year at Cube.

She looked at my face and smirked, “You're that gunner!”

“*Huh?*” I laughed in disbelief when she spoke in a rough manner that didn’t suit a refined western lady.

“Yes, that’s me,” I replied.

I had no idea who she was, but had grown accustomed to such situations. I became somewhat famous after the midterms.

“Let’s take a picture together,” she raised her smartwatch above her head and switched on the selfie mode.

A square appeared and captured us. Meanwhile, I glanced at her nametag as she busily took pictures.

[Scarlet]

She didn’t seem like a complete nobody since her name sounded somewhat familiar. I walked past her after she finished taking selfies.

“*Hmm?* Hey, where are you going?” she asked.

“*Ah*, I’m sorry. I have a theory class to attend,” I looked at my smartwatch and pretended to be in a rush.

I really was busy with theory classes in the morning and an outdoor class, *[Mountain and Forests]*. The latter sounded cool, but was just hiking.

Of course, there was something special about it.

— What the hell is wrong with him?

— Come on, there’s no need to get so worked up. He’s just a clueless freshman.

— How can he not know who I am? I’m Scarlet. Who the hell does he think he is to...

Yes, I don’t know who you are. I inwardly thought while doing my best

to ignore them badmouthing me.

My superior sense of hearing tended to pick up strange things from time to time.

* * *

The theory class this morning was on one of the most notorious subjects in all of Cube's curriculum, [*Mana Theory*]. Our topic for the day was mountains and mana veins. The class was quite easy for me and the professor in charge treated me favorably.

I noticed Rachel tightly gripping her pen in anger, but what could I do about it?

The class ended after two hours.

I went straight to the portal after finishing my lunch. I traveled to Pyeonganbuk-do for the next outdoor class.

The Veritas cadets showed up one by one when I was about thirty minutes away from the rendezvous point.

"Is everyone here?"

The instructor appeared exactly on time and the one hundred cadets taking part today had gathered as well.

However, I couldn't help but feel surprised.

"Nice to meet all of you. My name is Seo Youngji. I am the hero tasked with leading the class today."

Our instructor for today was the rank 7 hero from the association, Seo Youngji. She was a famous hero who frequently appeared on TV and social media, so all the cadets felt surprised to see her.

"I'm sure most of you are surprised by the sudden change, but things won't be too different from the usual."

We saw her once during the midterms, but who would have known she would show up again so soon?

I checked my smartwatch for any notifications, but nothing out of the ordinary appeared.

“You will be climbing a mountain today. It’s called the Yulak Mountain, which is infamous for its rough and difficult terrain.”

The cadets noisily murmured among themselves at the instructor’s briefing, but simply because they still felt starstruck after meeting Seo Youngji.

Seo Youngji bitterly smiled and found the attention burdensome. Nonetheless, she continued.

“Your goal is to find a mana vein. You might run into monsters or beasts in the process. However, you should be able to deal with them as long as you remain calm. I advise you not to panic or get scared. Just do...”

“Hajin.”

Someone suddenly called me. This handsome guy brightly smiled with his perfect white teeth. It was Kim Suho.

“Yeah, what?” I briefly replied, but Kim Suho still approached with a smile.

Then he whispered, “You said that you like Chae Nayun, right?”

“What?” I immediately frowned.

What batshit crazy nonsense is this guy spouting?

However, I soon understood because of what I said when we were in Paris.

— *I’ve been thinking about her for far longer than you and I’ve been*

watching over her all this time.

— *So I know far more about her than you.*

It seemed I created a cringeworthy moment of myself. I shuddered at my own words and vehemently shook my head to explain, “No, that was...”

Kim Suho didn’t seem interested in my explanation and cut me off, “So I was thinking... You can score some points with her. You see, Nayun decided to make a Pharmacy Club.”

“Pharmacy Club?”

“Yeah, that’s... I don’t know the exact details to be honest, but I think it would be great if you joined us too. What do you say? If you’re interested, no, give it a thought and let me know. It sounds like the perfect fit for you since you’re really smart...”

“Now, let’s start!”

Seo Youngji’s sudden shout interrupted Kim Suho.

Kim Suho flashed a cheeky smile that seemed to say, *Think about it, okay?* He walked away to the front.

I watched him leave before slowly walking as well.

“...?”

However, I couldn’t help but feel someone intently staring at me. I pretended to nonchalantly walk before suddenly turning around. A girl turned her head away at the same time.

It was Chae Nayun.

“*Sigh...*”

I guess what happened in Paris bothered her too. *Why did I have to say*

something so crazy...

I shook my head and began hiking up the mountain.

* * *

“Fwuuaaa!”

Meanwhile, Seo Youngji reached the peak in less than three minutes. She yawned out of boredom.

She had never imagined becoming a Cube instructor, but had no choice since the higher-ups basically commanded her to.

Cube requested the association’s assistance to ensure the safety of their cadets. She somewhat understood why they included her.

However, the association gave her another command that was a bit strange.

“What do they want? Geez...”

She had no idea what the higher-ups intended, but she would do her best in every task.

Seo Youngji discarded her distracting thoughts and focused on the hundreds of monitors in the tent. These monitors showed every cadet in real time.

Seo Youngji boasted the highest agility among all the association heroes. She also possessed a vision that far surpassed normal humans, which allowed her to simultaneously monitor every cadet.

“Oh, it’s Kim Hajin.”

She noticed Kim Hajin out of the hundred cadets. He was at the center of attention these days. The words that described him best would be gun and orphan.

“The only orphan among Cube cadets...”

She could relate to his upbringing since she grew up without parents too. She had parents unlike Kim Hajin, but her mother ran off and her father passed away.

Both of her parents weren't good people from what she recalled. Her mother always had a warm and gentle smile, but ended up abandoning her. Her father tried to work hard and raise her alone, but ended up meeting a tragic end.

A saying went that misery loves company. Perhaps that was the biggest reason why Kim Hajin caught her eye, but that wasn't the only reason.

Kim Hajin possessed a strange and unknown ability among the cadets. An unknown ability was considered dangerous in this industry.

Seo Youngji analyzed the path Kim Hajin would take through the cameras. He moved alone without anyone else by his side.

“Wow, he's quite agile. I'll give him that.”

Flutter!

The tent's entrance fluttered as someone entered.

It was Oh Junhyuk, another high rank hero from the association. They dispatched him just like Seo Youngji to assist Cube with classes.

Oh Junhyuk looked at the monitor, “Oh, it's that guy.”

He pointed at Kim Hajin on the monitor.

“I was reading the analysis report on him on my way here.”

“Analysis report?” Seo Youngji looked at him.

Oh Junhyuk smirked and tapped on his smartwatch, “Yeah, the videos

from the Cube midterms have already been uploaded. There are several analysis reports on him on the Mid Hero Forum.”

Mid hero referred to intermediate rank heroes and the Mid Hero Forum was a community that only those above intermediate rank could join. You could call it an advanced version of the Hero Community.

“Is that so?” Seo Youngji muttered while thinking, *I should take a look later.*

However, her curiosity got the better of her and her hand immediately darted towards her smartwatch.

[High Hero Community – Mid Hero Forum]

[Hot Topic: A gunslinger appeared in Cube?!]

Heroes from all over the world gathered on the Hero Community, but the gunslinger named Kim Hajin proudly took the top spot.

“Hmmm...”

“Hey... focus on the job in front of you...” Oh Junhyuk grumbled and waved over the hologram that projected from Seo Youngji’s smartwatch. He handed a piece of paper to her, “Take a look at this.”

“What is it?” Seo Youngji frowned as she took the A4-sized document.

It had some strange words written on it.

[Club Application Form]

[Pharmacy Club]

“Club application form? Pharmacy Club? What the hell is this?” Seo Youngji asked and glared at Oh Junhyuk for an explanation. Her expression seemed to be asking, *Why the hell are you showing me this?*

Oh Junhyuk smirked and replied, “What else is it? You’re going to be their advisor.”

Side Stories 48

Chae Nayun (3)

[Class Objective]

— *Locate a mana vein.*

A short and straightforward message popped up on my smartwatch when I set foot on the mountain.

I began hiking and braved through the overgrown forest.

The Yulak Mountain was a 2,750 meter tall mountain that appeared after the great mana explosion. The Daehyun Group currently owned it. It had an overgrown forest and lush vegetation due to the high concentration of mana.

Decreased oxygen levels from the denser mana in the air also made it more difficult to climb. Still, I didn't find it that difficult. Probably because my stamina improved.

Whoosh!

The cool mountain breeze blew against my sweaty face and shook the leaves. The surroundings were tranquil and the sun pleasantly shone.

I stopped at a clearing to better appreciate nature's beauty.

"Hooo..."

I took out a lunchbox from my rucksack. It was a modest meal of beef, doenjang-jjigae^[1], and brown rice.

It looked modest, but tasted extremely delicious.

I enjoyed my lunch while thinking to myself, “There should be something around here...”

Munch... Munch...

A mountain with high mana density was bound to have monsters.

Munch... Munch...

I wondered what episode would occur today.

Munch... Munch...

Or would it just be another peaceful class?

Munch... Munch...

“Ah... That was good.”

I cleaned up after finishing my meal and began hiking again.

I walked around for twenty minutes when I spotted a familiar face ahead.

“Ah...”

This person was quite troublesome to deal with.

Chae Nayun carried a huge rucksack on her back and squatted on the floor. No, she was digging something with a hand plow.

I looked a bit further and saw two other familiar faces with her, Yi Jiyeon and Kim Jinsu.

I walked towards them since there was only one way up the mountain.

“Who’s there?!” Chae Nayun turned around when she sensed my presence, but she jumped in surprise when we made eye contact.

“W-What... W-When did you get here, K-Kim Hajin?”

Chae Nayun stuttered for some strange reason. Who the hell was K-Kim Hajin, seriously?

I simply shrugged and ignored her. I continued on my way, but Chae Nayun awkwardly squirmed and aimed her hand plow at me.

“T-This is our territory,” she awkwardly said.

“Territory?”

“Y-Yeah. Also, I was just digging for medicinal herbs. I wasn’t doing anything else...”

“I didn’t say anything...”

Dirt covered her face like a mole. No, she looked more like a puppy digging through dirt now that I took a closer look. I stole a glance at the pit she was digging and noticed something that looked like a plant.

“Nayun is right. This is our territory,” Yi Jiyeon said as she intently glared at me. It felt like lasers would shoot out of her eyes.

“Yeah, sure. Whatever you guys say...” I replied and tried to sound as disinterested as possible. I couldn’t really be bothered by what they were doing.

However, Chae Nayun suddenly ran up and grabbed my sleeve.

“Wait.”

She looked at the ground and acted all shy.

“Well... still... You helped me out last time, so... I can let you in if you want...”

Well, this was unexpected.

Yi Jiyoong flinched at Chae Nayun's words and said to me, "Alright, we'll let you in!"

"Are you a parrot?" I asked.

"What did you just say?"

"Nothing. Just forget about it. Also, you don't have to."

I refused their offer and Chae Nayun awkwardly scratched her neck.

I planned on walking away, but the plant that Chae Nayun dug up suddenly bothered me.

I pointed at the plant in her hand and asked, "Hey, what are you planning to do with that?"

"*Huh?* Oh, this one?" she replied with a bright smile and lifted the entire sack of plants she had dug. Then she asked, "Do you want some of these medicinal herbs? We have more over there."

"...?"

What was wrong with this girl all of a sudden? She diligently dug all these plants judging from her dirty face, but offered to give them all to me? Did she even know what those herbs were?

I bitterly smiled and declined, "No, I'm alright."

"*Huh?* Why? You can take these. I can just dig more whenever I want," Chae Nayun said as she pushed the plants towards me more aggressively this time.

Nudge... Nudge...

She pressed the medicinal herbs against my shoulder.

Nudge... Nudge...

“Hey... It’s not what you think... Those plants are... You should probably just throw them away...”

“*Huh?* What are you talking about?” Chae Nayun tilted her head in confusion.

I sighed after reading the notification above the plants that Chae Nayun had been calling medicinal herbs.

“Those are poisonous plants.”

“*Huh?* What? Poison?” Chae Nayun pursed her lips and I inwardly snickered.

She was trying to set up a Pharmacy Club, which seemed out of character. However, this was indeed the Chae Nayun I knew.

“Yeah, so throw them away.”

“No... that can’t be... How is this a poisonous plant? Yi Jiyeon said these were medicinal herbs. Don’t you know what yumun herbs are? Look, they look exactly like yumun herbs! Do you want me to show you the almanac?” Chae Nayun innocently retorted.

“Ah, those look like yumun herbs, but...”

“No way, I think you’re mistaken. How could these be poisonous plants?” Chae Nayun grumbled and I couldn’t even finish my sentence before she sniffed the poisonous plant.

When she sniffed it...

Fart!

The poisonous plant farted a cloud of gas directly at her face and pushed her back quite a distance.

“Uwaaaaagh!”

“That’s actually a poisonous plant that spews toxic gas on par with biological weapons.”

“*Ah!* What the hell is this?! *Ack!* I’m dying! AAAACK!”

Chae Nayun plopped to the ground.

The poisonous plant that Chae Nayun dug up was called a gas root plant. It spewed toxic gas equivalent to or more potent than those used in gas chambers^[2]. There was no way she would be fine after taking it straight in the face.

Haaa... Haaa...

Chae Nayun squirmed on the ground with her face covered in snot and tears. She looked like someone lamenting the loss of her country and loved ones. No, even someone like that wouldn’t cry like how she was right now.

Yi Jiyeon looked at me visibly shaken by what happened.

“*Ehem...*” I faked a cough and couldn’t do anything about the situation.

I decided to ignore the trio and continue hiking up the mountain. No, I tried to ignore them, but...

“*Aaaack!*”

The sound that kept coming from behind me was quite difficult to ignore.

“*Aaaack!*”

It was hard to tell if someone was crying or screaming their lungs out. Was that how pterodactyls sounded?

“*Aaaack! Kyaaaahk!*”

I decided to walk faster and get farther away since the screaming unnerved me.

* * *

Thirty minutes later...

“Heuk! Shame... Sniff... Heuk! The shame! Ughh!” Chae Nayun cried as snot and tears covered her face.

There was undoubtedly a huge difference in her body before and after she regressed. Something like a poisonous plant would have never posed a threat before. She never imagined in her wildest dreams that she would one day end up covered in tears and snot because of some poisonous plant passing gas on her face. Her hands and feet uncontrollably shook and her insides churned. She felt like puking.

“Blueerrghhh!”

“Are you alright, Nayun?” Yi Jiyeon carefully asked.

Chae Nayun turned and threw a handful of dirt at her.

“Kyahk!”

Yi Jiyeon was the one who said the poisonous plant was an extremely rare yumun herb. She shrieked and ran away.

“You did that on purpose, didn’t you?” Chae Nayun asked while glaring at the sly culprit.

“N-No... not at all! I... I didn’t know!” Yi Jiyeon shouted.

“Hey, stop lying. Ah, forget about it. Just go away. I’m going to be moving alone from now on,” Chae Nayun got up and said.

She ended up showing an unsightly side of herself to Kim Hajin because of Yi Jiyeon.

Splash!

She washed her face and hands before hiking up the mountain again.

Stomp! Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!

Chae Nayun angrily stomped up the mountain while Yi Jiyeon and the others cautiously followed her.

She reached the peak in no time after angrily stomping away. Only then did she bitterly smile.

Right... this was a class. I should've looked for a mana vein on my way up, but I completely forgot...

A large boulder caught her eye. The big and odd rock formation stuck out from the cliff.

Chae Nayun narrowed her eyes and her curiosity got the better of her. She jumped towards the rock.

“Oh...”

She could see the entire mountain from a bird's eye view after landing on top of the boulder. She felt as if her nose could touch the sky and clouds from this height. The overgrown forest lay beneath her.

“The view is amazing from here,” Chae Nayun muttered as she plopped down on the large boulder and enjoyed the sun slowly setting.

One of the events that bothered her popped up in her mind.

The Kwang-Oh Incident...

The merciless slaughter was masterminded by the association and Kim Sukho, the current president at that time. Almost a hundred innocent civilians died that day and it stayed on Chae Nayun's mind ever since she found out about it.

“Haaa...”

A long sigh escaped from her.

Could she say the incident had nothing to do with her if Kim Hajin found out about it? Or would he say she had nothing to do with what happened once he learned the truth behind that incident?

“Why did Grandpa do something like that...”

She could ask all the questions she wanted, but couldn't do anything about it.

The Kim Hajin from before she regressed knew about the Kwang-Oh Incident, but he didn't despise her over what happened. He even went as far as to say that he didn't harbor any ill feelings towards her because of it.

But was that because of his guilt from killing Chae Jinyoon? Or was there another reason?

Chae Nayun rummaged through her pockets while lying on the boulder. She instinctively craved a smoke, but it was just out of pure habit. A hero's body didn't suffer withdrawals from not smoking.

“Sigh...”

The sky turned dark and the stars appeared one by one. Chae Nayun sighed and began counting the stars.

She counted thirty-seven stars when she felt someone's presence behind her. A familiar scent tickled her nose and she turned towards that person.

“You came?”

“Yeah, just now.” Kim Suho smirked and sat beside her.

Chae Nayun asked him, “Did you find a mana vein?”

“Huh? Ah, yeah. I found one.”

“Tell me where it is on the way down.”

“Come on. That’s cheating.”

“What’s cheating? Sounds rich coming from you.”

“Haha...” Kim Suho awkwardly laughed.

Chae Nayun puffed her cheeks like balloons in response.

Kim Suho stared at the stars in the night sky and said, “I asked Kim Hajin.”

Whiik!

Chae Nayun immediately looked at Kim Suho and asked, “What did you say?”

“The club.”

“...”

“I didn’t say much. I just asked if he was...”

“Hey! You crazy little fucker! Why were you the one who asked him?!”

Puk!

Chae Nayun smacked Kim Suho’s shoulder. It was quite a powerful blow.

Kim Suho dumbfoundedly stared at her while massaging his shoulder.

“Ah... Damn it! I was going to carefully ask him!”

“That hurts... Hey, Kim Hajin told me he was kind of interested, so...”

“Hey, what kind of nonsense is... *Huh?* What? Are you serious?!” Chae Nayun shouted in surprise.

Kim Suho nodded while rubbing his bruised shoulder, “Yeah... I kind of discussed it with him.”

Honestly, Chae Nayun had no idea what Kim Hajin was thinking at this point in time. Sure, that thing happened in Paris, but she wasn’t sure if he sincerely liked her or not.

She had no way to check how he really felt about her.

Chae Nayun had no choice but to muster her courage and ask, “What... What did he say?”

However, Kim Suho shook his head and replied, “*Ah*, that’s a secret.”

Chae Nayun dumbfoundedly stared at Kim Suho for a while as the urge to push him off the boulder welled up inside her.

Seriously, what was he doing right now? It was only customary for someone to either finish speaking or just shut up if they didn’t plan to.

Chae Nayun couldn’t help but wonder, *Is this guy some sort of sociopath?*

* * *

The sky grew dark quite early by seven in the evening. However, it remained bright for me thanks to my superior vision.

I spotted Yoo Yeonha lighting a campfire in the dark. She was discussing something with her minions.

— They said the class might last more than a day, so it doesn’t really matter if we’re late or not. What matters right now is locating a mana vein.

Yoo Yeonha said without a change in her expression, but the atmosphere around the campfire had turned sullen.

It seemed the minions under Yoo Yeonha would be replaced after tonight.

— Let's rest up for a bit before searching again.

— Yes...

The minions looked pitiful even though it wasn't their fault that they couldn't find a mana vein.

I smirked and walked towards them.

“...?”

Yoo Yeonha looked at me without saying a word, but her eyes seemed to be saying, *Why is he coming here?*

The five minions also dumbly blinked at me.

I didn't pay them any mind since the goal of this class was to locate a mana vein. They were on top of a mana vein right now.

“What do you want?” Yoo Yeonha asked after observing me for a while.

I was less than a foot away from her and squatted to dig the ground. I began shoveling dirt into a plastic bag.

“What are you doing? Why are you digging all of a sudden? This is my land,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“I didn't see your name anywhere,” I nonchalantly replied.

“*Ha?* Hey, what do you think you are doing?” Yoo Yeonha stood and retorted.

She seemed quite alert and on guard against me.

“This is the center of the mana vein,” I replied with a shrug.

“What did you just say?” Yoo Yeonha frowned and looked around her surroundings.

She looked back at me with visible skepticism.

It probably only looked like a normal piece of land to them since this mana vein was located deep underground. I barely found it thanks to the system.

“This place is?” Yoo Yeonha asked and I nodded.

“Stop lying.”

“I already told you, so let me borrow this campfire. Alright?”

“What? You’re being a nuisance right now!”

Yoo Yeonha grumbled and glared at me with skepticism, but took out her shovel from her rucksack.

Her minions did the same. All of them began shoveling dirt into plastic bags while trying to look as skeptical as possible.

I didn’t care and took out everything I needed from my rucksack.

Pork kimchi stew, rice, egg omelets, ramyeon, etc.

Yoo Yeonha froze with her mouth wide open after seeing my food. She licked her lips a few times before sitting in front of the campfire and staring at my rations.

“Do you want some?” I asked.

“W-Who eats that stuff? I don’t eat those kinds of low quality food...”
Yoo Yeonha turned her head away and haughtily replied.

“Suit yourself. Hey, what about you guys?” I asked the minions.

They all stole a glance at Yoo Yeonha before shaking their heads.

“Fine, more for me then,” I said with a shrug.

I began eating alone and started with the pork kimchi stew with the rice and egg omelet on the side. Then I put the ramyeon in the kimchi stew after finishing half of my rice.

“That looks horrible... You submerged the meat in water and turned it into rubber... Hey, why are you putting ramyeon in that? Is that egg? It looks like a chick laid it. It’s so small and looks so pale. That looks like a pig’s feet rather than the meat... *Ah*, maybe it’s a guinea pig’s feet?” Yoo Yeonha went on a tirade.

“It’s delicious,” I nonchalantly retorted.

“Who said I’m talking to you?”

“You kept criticizing my food.”

“Hmph!”

I ignored Yoo Yeonha hurling insults at my food and finished my meal.

I wiped the sweat off my forehead and saw Yoo Yeonha glaring at me.

“I’m going now. *Ah*, I’ll leave the cleanup to you guys.”

“W-What?! Hey, have you gone insane? *Ha!* Look at this guy!”

“What? I found a mana vein for you guys.”

“Is this really a mana vein?” Yoo Yeonha asked with a hint of skepticism.

My face stiffened and I took out my gun from its holster.

“What are you doing?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“*Shh...* Listen.”

A low vibration echoed in the silent forest.

Boom... Boom... Boom...

It came from quite a distance away, but was moving fast judging from how much louder it got.

Boom... Boom... Boom...

The vibrations grew stronger along with the sound.

“Looks like it’s a troll,” Yoo Yeonha said.

I nodded and replied, “I’ll take care of its eyes.”

“Then we’ll take care of the rest,” Yoo Yeonha added.

Her minions assembled beside her in their battle formation. They seemed to have practiced a few times and moved in sync.

Crash! Crash!

Dozens of trees fell in the distance and the troll finally appeared.

The mountain troll flashed a hideous smile at us. It was overjoyed with finding a large group of prey late at night.

I immediately pulled the trigger.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

My bullets accurately dug into the mountain troll’s eyes. However, a chill that screamed danger went down my spine.

I instinctively activated bullet time and stretched out my hand.

A set of fangs shot out from the bushes towards Yoo Yeonha's head. I managed to push her just in time and the fangs bit down on my arm instead.

I felt a sharp pain, but didn't even groan as I immediately turned to identify the culprit.

A goblin had attacked us.

1. A staple Korean stew. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doenjang-jjigae> 📖

2. The gas chamber reference here is NOT the one used by a certain European dictator in the past. The gas chamber here refers to a kind of training that all male Koreans serving national service (military) have to go through. They lock them in a room with faulty gas masks and they have to withstand the gas blown into the room. 📖

Side Stories 49

Chae Nayun (4)

An army of goblins emerged from the bushes. I spotted even more crouched behind the bushes and aiming their ranged weapons at us.

I prioritized freeing my arm from the goblin's jaws. I felt a sharp pain again, but endured it.

“Are you alright?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

Everything happened in an instant, but she had already finished analyzing the situation. We didn't have time to discuss any strategy with an army of goblins around us and a hungry troll in front.

“*Haaap!*”

Yoo Yeonha's minion number one shouted and raised his shield. The mana-infused shield split into multiple shields and guarded us in every direction.

— *Krwuuuaaah!*

The mountain troll smashed its club into the ground. The club carried a ridiculous force, but couldn't break through the minion's shield.

Bam! Bam! Bam!

The minion became drenched in sweat as he continued to block the mountain troll's barrage. The real fight began as the minion blocked the enemy's attack.

“*Heup!*”

Yoo Yeonha cracked her whip and wrapped it around the mountain

troll's neck while I fired at the goblins hiding in the bushes. Yoo Yeonha's second and third minions spread out to the sides and slashed the mountain troll's ankles.

The goblins scurried away after I unloaded my gun a few times. The cunning monsters instinctively knew their chances of winning had decreased to near zero.

I aimed and fired at the mountain troll again.

Bang!

A medium-sized mountain troll didn't pose much threat to the six of us. Most Cube cadets already knew how to fight by the time they turned seventeen. The battle concluded anti-climatically and Yoo Yeonha's party leisurely watched the mountain troll collapse before sheathing their weapons.

"Great work," Yoo Yeonha said.

However, I was preoccupied with the goblins that just appeared.

"Is there a new dungeon around here?" I asked.

"I think so... Nayun just hit the jackpot if it's a goblin dungeon," Yoo Yeonha replied while looking envious.

Goblins in this world were different from other monsters. They could craft artifacts, medicine, weapons, etc. Humans usually tamed them rather than subjugating them. Properly managing goblins gave whoever owned them a handsome profit.

Goblins showing up from a dungeon was equivalent to striking oil back in my original world.

"This place belongs to Chae Nayun?" I asked.

"You didn't know? I think we're only able to use this mountain because Nayun approved it. After all, Yulak Mountain is quite famous," Yoo Yeonha replied.

“I see...” I wrapped my injured arm with a bandage.

Yoo Yeonha looked at me for a while before asking, “Are you alright?”

“No, it hurts really bad.”

I had no idea if I was poisoned or not, but I had finished applying first aid with stigma’s mana.

Yoo Yeonha stared at my arm before nodding, “You seem just fine.”

“I just said I’m not.”

“Whatever. I think we should descend now. Follow me,” Yoo Yeonha began walking down the mountain alone.

* * *

It was ten in the evening by the time we descended the mountain.

We scored big time by finding a mana vein, killing a mountain troll, and identifying the presence of goblins.

“Those are quite the achievements. Congratulations,” Seo Youngji praised us with a smile.

I received a Cube badge for doing a good job with Yoo Yeonha and her minions. I somehow ended up being lumped with them.

— I’m telling you the mole was fucking huge!

— I ran into a golem. Ah, but it looked so freaking disgusting. You know, right? The grotesque golems that appear on mountains.

Other cadets also finished the class and sat on nearby benches while chatting about their experiences. Most had encountered a monster or two.

“I’m going,” I waved to Yoo Yeonha, who stood with her eyes fixed on

her smartwatch.

She suddenly stopped me from leaving, "Wait a minute."

"What?"

Yoo Yeonha looked at my bandaged hand before rolling her eyes, "No, it's nothing."

"What the?" I grumbled in response.

She pouted, "I could've easily taken care of a goblin, you know?"

She looked quite cute, but her words contained a thorn.

I smirked at her, "I'm sure you would've."

"I'm serious. It's not that I'm not grateful for the help, but I want you to know that I didn't need it."

I was well aware. After all, Yoo Yeonha would become a strong hero. She was stronger than me right now. That meant her pride was quite strong too. The feeling of being protected didn't sit well with her.

"I know. I'm serious."

I tried to show her that I agreed before she finally waved and dismissed me, "Alright, you can go now if you understand."

She sounded a bit embarrassed and annoyed at the same time.

"Yes, ma'am," I sarcastically replied.

I felt someone's gaze scanning me from head to toe. I immediately stopped and looked around, but the feeling disappeared.

"What the hell is it this time?"

I wasn't sure if I had been mistaken because I felt too tired. This was my limit no matter how much my stamina improved. I tried my best to ignore the feeling and checked my smartwatch as I walked.

[You have gained 47 SP]

[You have gained 27 SP]

[You have gained 15 SP]

[You have gained 32 SP]

“Hoho...”

I gained an abundant amount of SP these days. This made me grin from ear to ear when a message popped up on my smartwatch.

Ding!

[Our Hunting Club will finally go on a trip tomorrow! ^-^]

[We're going to Norway, so please inform us right away if you can't make it.]

* * *

Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep...

“Today is the day!”

Chae Nayun jumped out of bed.

She woke up early today. No, she didn't sleep at all. Today was originally a day trip, but it had changed into a two day trip.

“Heup!”

She carried her bag and ran to the meeting place as fast as she could.

Most of them had already gathered at the Seoul portal, but she couldn't find Kim Hajin.

That guy would probably appear right before they departed judging from his personality.

“Hi, Nayun.”

“Hey, long time no see.”

Several cadets greeted her and she greeted them back while leisurely walking.

However, she felt anxious deep inside. A mishap had occurred during their last meeting, but she steeled her resolve to properly do things this time.

Chae Nayun was dead set on pairing with Kim Hajin and casually talking with him.

“Someone isn't here yet? *Hmm...* Kim Hajin? Who was that again?” the club president grumbled.

“The gunner. You heard of him, right?”

“*Ah*, that guy?”

The sophomores talked about Kim Hajin.

A man wearing long sleeves and slacks walked towards the crowd. Kim Hajin bowed and greeted his seniors before joining the group.

Chae Nayun suppressed the smile forming on her face and slowly inched towards Kim Hajin.

“Listen up everyone! We're going to depart now!”

The group made their way to the portal after the club president announced their departure.

Cube cadets didn't have to line up and could access the portals mainly reserved for the military. They reached Norway in no time thanks to that.

They finished checking out at the portal airport and took a car to the winter villa.

Chae Nayun maintained a certain distance from Kim Hajin as they traveled. She made sure not to be too close while staying three or four steps away.

Their eyes occasionally met and Chae Nayun would awkwardly flash a smile. Kim Hajin just looked away without any reaction. Nevertheless, Chae Nayun felt happy since she would soon be paired with Kim Hajin.

However...

“*Eh?* What is this? This shouldn't be happening. Damn it! Who did this?! What's going on?”

Chae Nayun muttered to herself like a crazy person at the villa. The future in this world had slightly changed. This specific event of all things had changed!

Kim Hajin ended up getting paired with some random girl.

“*Ah...*”

Chae Nayun fumed over what happened. She still had a lot of time before the event ended, but all her enthusiasm disappeared as she dragged herself to her room.

The sudden turn of events annoyed her, but she couldn't do anything about it. She had to start planning what to do with their remaining time.

Chae Nayun jumped into bed and closed her eyes.

Snore... Snore... Snore... Snore...

She snored a few times and opened her eyes.

“Yaaawn?”

She let out a big yawn after waking up and felt strange for some reason. Her mind felt clear and all her fatigue had washed away.

Chae Nayun nervously looked at her smartwatch.

“Huh?”

11:40 P.M.

11:40 P.M.

11:40 P.M.

“Heok!”

She gasped in horror, jumped out of bed, and began tapping her innocent smartwatch. Of course, the time wouldn't change just because she desperately tapped on it.

“Ah fuck, what the hell is this?!” Chae Nayun exclaimed in horror and ran over to open the window.

“H-Hiiik!”

The sky had turned pitch black. In short, every program they planned for this trip had already concluded.

Chae Nayun despaired at the night sky.

You stupid fool! You lazy sleepyhead! Your IQ is lower than a dolphin's...

She pulled her hair and cursed herself, but froze when a familiar scent tickled her nose.

“Wait a minute...”

This oddly familiar scent came from outside and slowly invaded her room.

Chae Nayun wondered what it was when her eyes suddenly widened and she exclaimed, “It’s a cigarette!”

A bolt of lightning struck her as she recalled the book, *[103 Ways to Build Successful Relationships with Others]*.

The author said the most important one among the 103 ways was... sharing something in common!

* * *

How could those stars shine so brightly when the night sky, darker than anything else, surrounded them?

The cold evening breeze blew past me and the swaying trees resonated like a quiet melody.

There I was, smoking a cigarette in the tranquil Norwegian woods.

“...?”

Someone’s footsteps interrupted the peaceful surrounding.

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

I initially thought it was a monster judging from how loud the steps were, but the footsteps soon stopped a distance away to collect its breath.

I looked towards the direction out of curiosity when Chae Nayun suddenly appeared with a “*Tada!*”

“...”

“...”

My brain stopped functioning for a moment when she popped out of nowhere. Why did she suddenly appear here when she spent the whole day who knows where.

Chae Nayun nervously gulped before pointing at me, “Hey, what’s that? What are you doing right now?”

I looked down at the cigarette in my hand and looked at Chae Nayun again, but my brain still wasn’t functioning. I couldn’t think of an excuse.

Chae Nayun pushed her hair back and asked again, “What? You’re smoking now?”

She slurred her speech and her eyes looked a bit swollen as if she had rushed over after waking up.

Did the stench of my cigarette wake her? Now I felt slightly sorry for her. No, I didn’t. I couldn’t say anything in response.

Chae Nayun reached out and said, “You little hooligan. Hey, hand that thing over.”

“What thing?”

“What else is there? Hand it over.”

“This?”

I looked down at the smoldering cigarette in my hand.

Chae Nayun licked her lips for some strange reason as she looked at the cigarette.

“Hey, hand it over. I said give it to me.”

“I can just throw it away. Why should I give it to you?”

I was about to rub the cigarette on the ground when her hand suddenly rushed in and snatched it away.

I jumped in surprise.

Chae Nayun casually placed the cigarette between her index and middle finger. She looked well-versed with it for some reason.

“Hey... what are you doing?” I asked, but Chae Nayun took a drag of the cigarette without giving me a chance to stop her.

She continued inhaling the smoke before puffing it out with a “*Hooo.*” She spat out the smoke while leaning against a wall.

“I suddenly got a craving. It’s nothing big. I smoked this before thanks to some guy,” Chae Nayun said with a smirk.

However, her face soon turned purple. Her cheeks swelled and her hand holding the cigarette began trembling too.

I looked at Chae Nayun in disbelief.

“Hey.”

“What?”

“Why don’t you just stop?”

“Stop what... I’m really... fine right now...” she replied while trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. She took another drag of the cigarette. “What’s wrong... with me?” she asked while wobbling.

I passed her a water bottle and she drank it so fast that she ended up coughing.

“*Cough! Cough!*”

“You can’t even eat junk food, so how did you expect to smoke a cigarette?” I sighed in disbelief.

Chae Nayun had a sensitive palette, so it would be impossible for her to smoke unless she lost her sense of taste.

“What? How did you know about that? I’ve never... told anyone...”
Chae Nayun looked at me with wide eyes.

She was still quite sharp despite her current condition.

Her question slightly flustered me, but I tried my best not to show it and nonchalantly replied, “You’re quite famous for it, you know? You don’t even eat our school’s food.”

Chae Nayun seemed to be deep in thought before nodding in agreement. She shook her head and nodded several more times.

“Well, I guess that makes sense. This is nothing like that though. My body just isn’t used to it because it’s been a long time since I last smoked. You understand?”

“What long time? Did you start smoking when you were thirteen or something? Why are you trying to put on airs all of a sudden?”

“Put on airs? Hey, it’s not like that. I’m not bluffing, but... *sigh*... Never mind, what would you know?” Chae Nayun said as she looked at me in disappointment.

She squatted on the ground out of frustration and refused to get up for a while.

I looked at what she was doing. She drew something in the snow. A circle with eyes, a nose, and lips. Its eyes looked fierce for some reason.

“*Hum hum...*”

I took this opportunity to escape and slowly inched my way towards the building. I felt like I would freeze to death out here, so...

“Hey...”

However, Chae Nayun turned around and looked at me with eyes like a lost puppy. Where did she learn this new skill?

“...”

“Hey. Hey. Hey. Hey.”

“...”

“Hey. Hey.”

“What is it?”

“What is what?”

Chae Nayun spoke again, “I heard Kim Suho told you.”

“Told me what?”

“The club.”

“Ah... He did.”

Chae Nayun suddenly sighed at my response.

I had no clue what was going on in her head and there was no way to find out. Was it because I mentioned Chae Jinyoon last time? Or was it because of the incident in Paris? It felt as if Chae Nayun had drastically changed recently.

Chae Nayun composed herself and asked, “Do you want to join? The club I mean.”

I silently stared at her, but she avoided my eyes and looked at my chest instead. Her hands were trembling and I could see her white breath from the cold.

Crackle... Krwaaaaang!

Something flashed in the sky and sounded like an explosion.

“Ah fuck! That scared the shit out of me!” Chae Nayun screamed as she jumped onto my back.

Something soft rubbed against my back when she hopped on. I suddenly felt nervous because of a totally different reason.

Anyways, I looked at the night sky.

Krwaaaaang!

Numerous streaks of light flashed across the sky.

I tapped Chae Nayun holding onto me. No, she was squeezing the living daylights out of me.

“Open your eyes. It’s not something to be afraid of. I think you’ll be disappointed if you miss it.”

“What?”

“It’s a mana phenomenon.”

This mana phenomenon was something that occurred when mana intertwined with each other in the air. It resembled lightning to put it simply. No, it would be more appropriate to compare it to an aurora since we were in the northern hemisphere.

Mana zipped across the night sky in a straight line and pierced through every cloud standing in its way. It left behind a wave of mana that mixed and illuminated the clouds.

“Wow... what is that?” Chae Nayun asked with sparkling eyes like a child. “Hey, I asked you what that is. *Huh?* What the hell?”

She noticed that she had her arms and legs wrapped around my body.

Chae Nayun blinked a few times and screamed, “*Kyaaaah!*”

She fell off my back as if struck by lightning.

“Ah, sorry. My bad. Sorry. It was a mistake. Sorry. What? Why are you looking at me like that? I said it was a mistake!”

“I didn’t say anything.”

“It was really a mistake! I’m serious!”

“Alright...”

“I didn’t do that on purpose! Hey, are you thinking I did that on purpose by any chance?”

Chae Nayun stirred up a fuss over nothing when my smartwatch buzzed for the first time in a long time.

Bzzzt!

I looked at my smartwatch without much thought.

[Main Character Setting Has Been Edited – ■■■■]

[You have met ■■■■ in your world.]

[The episodes from here on out will significantly change.]

[Your luck has activated!]

[You have gained a massive amount of SP.]

[You have obtained 4,500 SP.]

The system greeted me with an absurd message after a long absence. It felt like getting struck hard in the back of my head.

Side Stories 50

Chae Nayun (5)

[You have met ■■■ in your world.]

[The episodes from here on out will significantly change.]

[Your luck has activated!]

[You have gained a massive amount of SP.]

[You have obtained 4,500 SP.]

A sharp pain stung my eyes and traveled to my brain.

I checked the system message again to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I had to pinch myself a few times to be certain. Then I looked at Chae Nayun.

"Hey, are you joining the club or not?" Chae Nayun asked while pouting with her arms crossed over her chest.

However, my mind was preoccupied with questions that I desperately needed the answers to. I began to fidget anxiously after reading the system messages. Did the ■■■ in the system message refer to Chae Nayun? Did the system somehow intervene and do something to her?

"What the hell? Hey..." Chae Nayun grumbled.

I didn't know the answers to those questions, but Chae Nayun was definitely related to the system messages just now. My next course of action became obvious. After all, I couldn't just ignore such a huge variable, right?

"Let's do it..."

“*Hmm?* What? Do what?” Chae Nayun’s ears turned red and her eyes trembled.

Her reaction slightly bothered me, but I ignored it and clarified the misunderstanding.

“The Pharmacy Club.”

“*Ah,*” Chae Nayun muttered while blinking a few times.

She made a strange noise that resembled a boiling kettle before finally clearing her throat, “*Ehem.* Alright, I’ll let you join. However, I have one condition.”

“What condition? You were the one asking me to join...”

“Regardless, I’m the club president! Anyways, I want you to come to the club room every day.”

“What if I don’t want to?”

“Then that leaves me no choice,” Chae Nayun looked at me with a solemn expression and stretched out her right hand, “You pass.”

“...”

I didn’t bother shaking her hand. Chae Nayun frowned and continued shaking her hand in front of me. She kept trying to force me to shake her hand.

I reluctantly shook her hand in the end, which made her feel triumphant for some reason.

“Hey.”

I decided to tell her about something that had been bothering me for a while.

“What?”

“You have eye boogers.”

“What?”

I pointed at her left eye and she immediately wiped it with her sleeve. A huge eye booger the size of a chip crumb appeared on her sleeve.

“Oh, this? This isn’t eye booger. Geez, does this look like that to you? This is...” Chae Nayun mumbled before suddenly running away.

I couldn’t help but smile at her childishness, but my face soon stiffened after she disappeared. I looked at my smartwatch again.

[You have met ■■■ in your world.]

[The episodes from here on out will significantly change.]

It seemed I would have to stay up all night again. No, there honestly wasn’t even much time left for me to catch some sleep.

I scratched my head and looked at the overgrown trees in the forest. The snow-covered trees seemed to encircle the entire world. I could see the moon peeking out from behind them. It brightly shone with a pale coldness.

* * *

I woke up without my alarm on the last weekend of the month. I stretched and checked on the almond (Evandel), who continued to snore in the makeshift nest I made. Then I hopped into the shower.

[Monster of the Day]

[Cube’s Night View.jpg]

[Images of the new, infamous group in Pandemonium, Girasong.]

[Association News: We will definitely solve the discrimination against heroes who didn’t graduate from Cube.]

[Modern Tycoon vs Prestigious Hero Family]

I glossed over trending topics on the community forum before logging into a site similar to *Youtube*.

“Hmm?”

I saw a familiar face after scrolling for a bit.

[Seo Youngji’s Hero Survival – Season 3]

Our new Cube instructor, Seo Youngji, had participated as a judge in some sort of survival program. The TV program gathered hero academy dropouts and the winner would be able to become a hero. The program was quite famous and already in its third season.

[Youngji unni is so pretty ㅇㅇㅇㅇㅇ]

[That’s what the most agile hero looks like... Wow... She’s unbelievably fast...]

[I can’t stand that Kim Yongin guy... Argh!]

[They aren’t dropouts for nothing hahaha! Look at how shitty their mindsets are.]

[Did that Daniel dude come here to flirt with women? Crazy bastard...]

I wasted around twenty minutes watching the program before turning it off and leaving.

Ding!

I received a message when I reached the first floor.

[Hey, r u ub?]

[Go 4 food if ur ub?]

The messy texts came from Chae Nayun. She looked like the one who needed to get up first. I didn't bother replying and made my way to the cafeteria.

"Thank you."

The breakfast menu consisted of bibimbap, crab stew, salad, and ribs. I brought my tray filled with nutritious food to the table and sat down. The cafeteria didn't have too many cadets on a Sunday morning.

I ate my breakfast while focusing on the system. Not one of my concerns from last week had been resolved yet. I hadn't found a use for the absurd amount of SP I gained or who the ■■■ in the system message referred to.

► *[Dazzling Dexterity] [Low] [No Attribute] [Evolving] [Grade 10]*

— *Dexterity*

The user's hands will become quite flexible and crafty.

— *Dazzling*

The user's hands will move in ways that defy logic and common sense.

I contemplated whether or not to create this gift since yesterday. Dexterity might not seem flashy or useful, but this useful ability would help me with daily tasks like cooking, drawing, and writing. It would also help in combat with shooting, swordsmanship, hand-to-hand, etc.

However, it cost a hefty 3,000 SP. It originally cost only 2,000 SP, but adding the word dazzling increased the price by another 1,000 SP.

[Do you wish to save this setting?]

I contemplated whether to hit save or not when someone took a seat at another table across from me. We looked at each other with one table between us.

She just got out of the shower with her hair still drenched and had a towel around her neck.

“Oh, it’s Kim Hajin. Hi!”

Chae Nayun covered her mouth in surprise and waved at me.

I nodded and stood from my seat. I wasn’t avoiding her or anything. I just finished eating and didn’t see a point sitting there any longer.

* * *

— *Welcome, Rank 934 Kim Hajin.*

A mechanical voice greeted me as I stepped into the training room.

I hated this thing whenever I came here. Did this robot like making fun of me for being ranked 934th?

I changed into my training attire and began the session. I lightly stretched before sitting on the bench and lifting weights.

— *Welcome, Rank 4 Chae Nayun.*

I heard a familiar name and my eyes naturally went to the entrance. Chae Nayun stood there with her wet hair.

She waved after seeing me, “Oh? It’s Kim Hajin. Hi!”

I simply nodded and focused on my workout again.

Around a minute passed and Chae Nayun returned with her training attire on and came next to me.

She grabbed a dumbbell in each hand.

“Heup!”

Chae Nayun proceeded to lift the weights that were... quite heavy. Her weights were three times more than what I could carry.

“Huff! Huff!”

“...”

Is this some sort of new hazing? Why did she feel the need to show off in front of me? More importantly, how could she have so much strength with those thin arms? Which crazy bastard created this story setting?

“Fwah! Fwah!”

Chae Nayun began to get on my nerves, but I didn’t show it on my face. I left the training center after working out for just ten minutes.

“Fwah! Fwah!”

* * *

The third thing on my agenda was the firing range.

— Rank 934, Kim Hajin, confirmed.

— Creating targets. Please choose the number of targets. You may choose a minimum of two and a maximum of twenty.

“Maximum targets. Start.”

— Creating targets. Please choose your difficulty. You may choose from one to nine.

“7.”

— Training will soon begin. Difficult Level: 7.

Twenty holographic images of flying monsters appeared.

I aimed at them and pulled the trigger. The flying monsters instantly fell.

— Training has ended. Duration: 29.86 seconds. Score: 83/100

— Training has ended. Duration: 28.97 seconds. Score: 91/100

— Training has ended. Duration: 29.15 seconds. Score: 87/100...

I repeated the thirty second training sessions around a hundred times.

“It only increased by 1%?”

My *[Master Sharpshooter]* no longer grew with just training alone. I only gained 0.6% after grinding for two hours. I didn’t have many options since real-life combat still scared me.

“Should I start going to dungeons...” I grumbled to myself and made my way out of the training room.

I didn’t know if it was just a coincidence, but I bumped into Chae Nayun outside the door.

“Ack!” I jumped in surprise.

“Oh? Hi Kim Hajin!” Chae Nayun waved at me with a huge smile.

I couldn’t respond as I calmed my heart from the shock. Anger began to surge from within me for some reason as I looked at her brightly smiling.

“Hey, what the hell are you up to?”

“What?”

“Why do you keep popping up in front of me? Are you following me?”

Chae Nayun frowned at my words and retorted, “Hey, what bullshit are you spouting? I came to train too.”

“You came to what?”

“Wow, this bastard is quite delusional. Are you a narcissist? Do you think everything revolves around you? *Ah*, get lost if you’re done training. I have to train too.”

“...”

Only then did I manage to compose myself. Well, she was also a sharpshooter and she wasn’t the type to be lazy. It made perfect sense for her to come train instead of following me around.

[Main Character Setting Has Been Edited – ■■■■]

I guess the ■■■■ kept bothering me.

“You didn’t forget about tomorrow, right?”

“*Huh?* What’s tomorrow?”

“*Ah*, damn it. I knew you wouldn’t see the message. Go check your messages. I sent you something,” Chae Nayun grumbled in frustration and pointed at my wrist.

I checked my smartwatch and found several messages.

[Come to the club room as soon as class is finished tomorrow. We’ll be having our inauguration ceremony.]

She must’ve meant this. I simply nodded after checking the message.

“Don’t be late. Everyone else will be there too.”

“Alright, alright. I’m leaving now.”

I lightly waved and walked past her.

She suddenly said something in a small voice, “Also...”

It was quite uncharacteristic of her to sound like that, so I stopped in my tracks.

“Can’t you reply just once?”

I turned around and looked at her.

Chae Nayun was smiling, but there was something different about her this time. There seemed to be a hint of sadness in her smile.

But I wondered... what was there for her to be sad about regarding me?

I checked my message log in case I missed something important. I had ignored a lot of her messages.

[Hey, r u ub?]

[Go 4 food if ur ub?]

[R u eating alone?]

[Why are you eating like a pig? Haha!]

[Who knew I would run into you at the cafeteria?]

[Hey, are you free tomorrow after class? We’re having the inauguration ceremony, so you should come too.]

[Got it?]

[Answer me if you got it.]

[Hey, are you going to ignore the club president?]

[Ah... you’re pissing me off now kid.]

[Hey, fucking bastard.]

[Sorry.]

[Picture Attached]

[Video Attached]

[Mobile Gift Cards Attached]

[Did you get fooled? Hehe.]

[—.—]

[Hey, can't you reply if you read it?]

[Wow... Look at this punk...]

[Ah, forget about it.]

[Come to the club room as soon as class is finished tomorrow. We'll be having the inauguration ceremony.]

I never knew she sent me so many messages.

“Alright... I'll be there tomorrow...”

* * *

The next day, Chae Nayun woke up in class when the bell rang. Well, she actually slept through the bell and only woke up when Yi Jiyeon shook her awake.

“Nayun, it's time to get up. Class is over.”

“Huh? Oh, ok... *Slurp...*”

Chae Nayun wiped her drool and sat in her chair dazed for a while before shaking her head. She opened her eyes and saw a bunch of nauseating formulas on the board.

“Wow... what the hell are all of those? Is that some sort of alien language or something?” she grumbled.

She still had no talent for theory despite regressing and couldn't understand why she had to sit through such a class. After all, she had no problem barging into a dungeon and navigating through it by instinct instead of using all this complicated jargon.

Yoo Yeonha spoke while arranging her pencil case, “Nayun, I heard our club room has been decided.”

“Oh, right! Hey, I'm going ahead!” Chae Nayun ran out of the room like the wind.

Yi Yeonghan, Kim Suho, Yoo Yeonha, Yi Jiyeon, and Shin Jonghak watched her scurrying away like an excited puppy before they walked out as well.

The club room was located on the fourth floor of the Serenity Wing, which was just constructed last year. Their room was called the wood room.

“Oh, this place looks nice,” Chae Nayun softly exclaimed while looking around.

It was more spacious than most classrooms and decorated with expensive furniture and items thanks to her family background. They also had expensive leather sofas, computers, research tools, medical almanacs, etc.

“*Hmm...* Looks like they did their best. This seems usable for now. Besides, I've always wanted to make my own club. Something related to medicine will also be a good boost to my resume. Oh, which brand are these furniture from?” Yoo Yeonha asked as she inspected the leather sofas and the room.

Clack... Clack... Clack... Clack...

Her high heels soon stopped at the kitchenette with a refrigerator and basket of snacks. Yoo Yeonha inspected the basket while trying to look as disinterested as possible.

Potato chips, cup noodles, chocolates, and various other snacks sparkled like jewels in her eyes. She stood there bewitched by them.

“Do they expect us to read all this?” Chae Nayun grumbled as she took out the medical almanacs one by one.

Flip... Flip... Flip...

She flipped through the pages before putting them back on the shelf.

Kim Suho suddenly appeared and said, “We should read them.”

“You scared me! When did you get here?”

“I was right behind you. Anyways, you should read all of those and do things properly if you’re going to start something.”

Kim Suho seemed serious about pharmacy now.

Chae Nayun smirked and sat on the leather sofa, “Yeah, I should... but what is she doing?”

Yoo Yeonha stood motionless in front of the snack basket and stared at it like a ghost who died without being able to eat snacks or something. Her long hair didn’t help with her ghostly appearance.

Ddruuk...

The door to the club room opened again.

Chae Nayun assumed it was probably Yi Yeonghan, so she didn’t pay much attention to it. She was half right as Yi Yeonghan entered with Seo Youngji.

“*Huh?*” Chae Nayun felt surprised at the sight of Seo Youngji.

Seo Youngji was quite tall and also had an imposing aura as a high rank hero. She fixed her glasses when she made eye contact with Chae Nayun and Kim Suho.

The two cadets respectfully bowed and greeted her without even realizing it.

Meanwhile, Yoo Yeonha's full attention was still on the snack basket.

"Ah, hero Seo Youngji? Are you perhaps...?" Chae Nayun asked.

"Yes, I will be the supervisor for the Pharmacy Club. It will only be for this semester though," Seo Youngji said with a shrug.

Chae Nayun nodded while in a daze and wondered to herself, *Oh... so our supervisor is Seo Youngji, but why would a hero of her caliber work as the supervisor for a hobby club? Is she that free?*

Someone rummaging through plastic could be heard amid their awkward silence. Yoo Yeonha kept poking at a bag of potato chips for some strange reason.

Poke... Poke... Poke... Poke...

"Then, shall we start by introducing ourselves?" Seo Youngji asked as she looked around the room.

"My name is Kim Suho."

"I'm Yi Yeonghan. I'm a huge fan! I follow the survival program you're..."

"Shut it. I'm Chae Nayun."

"...Shin Jonghak."

"Huh? What the? Hey, Shin Jonghak! When did you get here? No, why are you even here?"

"I told him to come. I'm Yoo Yeonha. It's been a while, hero Seo Youngji."

Yoo Yeonha snapped out of her obsession with the snack basket and

nonchalantly sat on the sofa. Some drool could still be seen on her lips.

“Alright, my name is Seo Youngji. I’m the rank 7 hero from the Hero Association,” Seo Youngji introduced herself with a smile.

Meanwhile, Chae Nayun looked around the room like a meerkat. *Where the hell is he? Why isn’t he here? Don’t tell me he’s not coming... but he said he would.* She anxiously thought to herself.

“I’ll be speaking informally to all of you from now on. I hope everyone is fine with that,” Seo Youngji continued.

Ah, crap! I didn’t tell him where the club room is! Chae Nayun inwardly exclaimed.

Chae Nayun was about to message him on her smartwatch during Seo Youngji’s speech when the door to the club room suddenly opened.

“I’ll be your supervisor and...?” Seo Youngji stopped midway in her sentence.

She looked over at the door and saw the cadet she referred to as the Cube mutant, Kim Hajin.

Kim Suho smiled and Yoo Yeonha narrowed her eyes at him. Yi Yeonghan only focused on Seo Youngji while Shin Jonghak grumbled under his breath. Chae Nayun covered her mouth with both hands when Kim Hajin entered the room.

“Are you a member of this club too?” Seo Youngji asked.

Kim Hajin only nodded at her question.

A vein protruded from Seo Youngji’s forehead at the Cube mutant’s rude response. However, she tried her best to suppress her anger and forced a smile, “Alright, then...”

Despite her efforts, Kim Hajin completely ignored her and looked at something else on his smartwatch. His actions were indeed quite rude.

Seo Youngji was a high rank hero supervising their small club. It would only be for a semester, but his reaction was still unexpected. Did he not know what an honor it was to meet a high rank hero because he never met one before?

There were less than three thousand high rank heroes in the world, so it was quite difficult to meet one. What was wrong with this kid and his rude behavior?

People would kill to meet Seo Youngji and she knew her worth quite well.

Seo Youngji, the high rank hero from the association, could easily subdue a group of cadets with only one hand. She gritted her teeth in frustration and growled, "Can you all focus? Especially you, Kim Hajin."

Side Stories 51

Chae Nayun (6)

“I will explain the basics of medicine.”

Seo Youngji stood in front of the whiteboard and lectured us. I never imagined an important character like her would become a supervisor for a school club. She was supposed to appear in the middle of the story, but suddenly appeared now.

I couldn't help but find her intentions suspicious.

“The basics of medicine are none other than materials,” Seo Youngji explained as she began her lecture.

She prepared quite thoroughly and even used a beam projector to present a PowerPoint.

“Take a look at this medicinal plant known as the white frost. You might think it's easy to spot because of its white leaves, but you'll only be able to find this plant in permafrost because it lives by sucking the essence of snow. That's why this is a precious plant that's quite difficult to find. As you all know, the color white represents the absence of attribute and protection. You can use the roots of the white frost plant to make liquor...”

Seo Youngji explained various medicinal plants as the cadets earnestly listened.

I continued to watch this scene that didn't exist in the original story. I paid attention to everything with my own eyes.

“Ah, teacher,” Chae Nayun raised her hand.

This girl always slept through classes, but enthusiastically held a pen

and a notebook now.

“Yes?”

“Then, does something like an elixir exist?”

Yoo Yeonha covered her mouth and snickered. Yi Yeonghan also openly sneered at Chae Nayun. Both of them were well aware that something like an elixir was just a myth.

However, an elixir actually existed in this world unbeknownst to them. This godly medicine’s rarity could be compared to a unicorn, the Ruyi Jingu Bang^[1], or Excalibur. Only I knew for a fact that it existed, but even I didn’t know how to make one.

“The elixir is nothing but a myth. However, modern medicines known as elixirs do exist,” Seo Youngji explained.

She was surprisingly prepared for such a question and immediately transitioned to a slide about modern elixirs as Yoo Yeonha and Yi Yeonghan laughed at Chae Nayun.

A picture of something sold at an auction thirteen years ago appeared on the screen.

[Tears of Heaven – 50,000,000,000₩]

“Tears of Heaven?” Chae Nayun’s eyes suddenly widened.

The snickering Yoo Yeonha also sat up straight. Even Shin Jonghak, who seemed disinterested ever since the lecture began, showed interest.

The rare item drew everyone’s attention and they all turned serious.

“That’s right. I’m sure all of you know that potions or healing abilities can’t treat illnesses, but the Tears of Heaven is known as a miraculous medicine that can cure anything and everything.”

The Tears of Heaven was the closest thing to the godly elixir. No one knew if it was manmade or something that naturally appeared. It was sold at the auction house in the neutral state of Rukr and an anonymous buyer bought it for fifty billion won in cash.

“But isn’t that auction house in Pandemonium?” Kim Suho raised his hand and asked.

Seo Youngji smiled and shook her head, “No, neutral states like Rukr are completely different from Pandemonium.”

She proceeded to introduce the few known neutral states: Rukr, Leon, New Alliance, etc.

I had created some of them and never heard of others since the story didn’t progress far enough for them to appear.

“Neutral states can survive on their own without external help. They don’t depend on trade such as importing and exporting goods. Also, you shouldn’t think that only djinns live there. They probably have fewer djinns than ordinary people.”

Yi Yeonghan tilted his head in confusion and asked, “Then are we allowed to go to those places?”

“Nothing is stopping you. You will all be heroes one day, so you can even go to Pandemonium if you want,” Seo Youngji replied with a shrug.

Pandemonium was quite peaceful despite its infamy as the center of all evil. Of course, murders occurred in the streets every day and survival of the fittest reigned as opposed to civil laws. However, not every living being there was a djinn. Numerous humans such as mercenaries, bounty hunters, dungeon hunters, corrupted heroes, and Jin Sahyuk lived in the metropolis known as Pandemonium.

Neutral states were quite peaceful too considering even Pandemonium enjoyed peace. Other nations had no reason to conquer these neutral states with powerful backers lurking in the shadows. More importantly, these states usually paid protection fees to ensure their survival.

“You can even meet other races there. It might be a rare occurrence though. Of course, they restrict normal people from entering their cities. It should be fine for us since I’m a hero and you are all soon-to-be heroes,” Seo Youngji informed them.

This world differed from the modern one I came from where unclaimed territories didn’t exist. Nearly half of this world remained desolate and unclaimed. Humans definitely didn’t rule the world here.

“Oh...” Chae Nayun muttered in awe.

On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha looked serious for some reason. Knowing her, she was probably calculating the risks and rewards from those neutral states.

Kim Suho reacted the same as Chae Nayun, but also seemed more serious.

As for me? Well...

“So, shall we visit that place this weekend for our club’s first excursion?” Seo Youngji asked.

I looked at her and she smiled back. Her stunning beauty resembled a fox.

I lowered my gaze to her smartwatch and attempted to hack it.

[150 SP will be required to hack Seo Youngji’s smartwatch.]

“Hmm... 150 SP...”

It would be useful to access her smartwatch, but 150 SP was too steep a price. However, it wouldn’t be a good idea to follow her to a neutral state without knowing her intentions.

Chae Nayun suddenly raised her hand and asked, “Will there be any issues? We need permission before going to such places, right?”

“We’ll be easily approved if we choose the most peaceful neutral state, which is New Alliance,” Seo Youngji replied.

I rubbed my chin and contemplated whether or not to hack her when I thought of a brilliant idea. I stared into the air and waited for the text to appear.

► *[Hacking] [Intermediate Rank] [No Attribute]*

— *Hacking*

**Break through an object’s security system and take control of it.*

**The amount of stigma consumed will vary based on the strength of the security system.*

I added a few more words to the new gift I just created.

[3,000 SP is required.]

[Do you wish to save this setting?]

It was quite expensive because we lived in an age of information. It seemed crazy to spend 3,000 SP on a support ability like *[Hacking]*, but...

[The cost of Hacking will be reduced if it is added as a subcategory to your authority, Setting Intervention.]

[The required SP has been decreased to 1,500 SP.]

[Do you wish to save this setting?]

I welcomed this unexpected discount that made it more feasible. I contemplated one last time before hitting *[YES]*. The golden text in front of me scattered into the air like spring petals.

[Your luck has activated!]

[The effect of your gift, Hacking, has been increased...]

“Then, our first destination will be New Alliance.”

“Yay! That sounds great!”

Meanwhile, the club finished choosing their trip.

“Hey, it’s fun, right? Right?!” Chae Nayun asked me with a huge grin. She seemed to be enjoying herself.

I nonchalantly nodded without a word.

* * *

Seo Youngji’s ability to get things done was truly commendable and befitting of a high rank hero. We finalized the trip on Monday, but she already formed a detailed plan and distributed it to us the next day.

Thanks to that, we went to the portal after classes ended on Thursday. We headed to St. Petersburg through the portal. All five of us looked tired after finishing our classes.

The Pharmacy Club members stood at the square of the second city in Russia, St. Petersburg. We curiously looked around our surroundings.

“Ah... It’s been a while since I got to enjoy the weekends, but... what is this...?” Yi Yeonghan sighed and complained.

I felt the same. I would be busy this weekend and didn’t have the luxury to be tied down here.

“Hey, get lost if you’re going to keep complaining,” Chae Nayun crossed her arms over her chest.

She displayed her authority as the club president and Yi Yeonghan could only grumble.

“Kim Hajin, are you alright with this?” Yi Yeonghan asked.

“Not really.”

“*Huh?* Hey, club president! This guy wants to leave too!” Yi Yeonghan shouted and pointed at me.

Chae Nayun squinted her eyes at me, but I didn’t shy away from her inquisitive gaze. She could only pout in the end and didn’t say anything.

“What the? Why aren’t you saying anything to him?” Yi Yeonghan protested.

“Kim Hajin is smart. We need him.”

“Oh... you’re right...”

Yi Yeonghan backed down after Chae Nayun’s simple explanation.

Meanwhile, I opened the map on my smartwatch and checked the neutral state of New Alliance. It seemed to be located somewhere with a very damp and gloomy climate.

“Looks like it’ll be cold,” I grumbled.

“What? Cold? Don’t be such a wuss. I’ll be there with you!” Chae Nayun smacked my shoulder.

Seriously, she kept hanging around next to me since a while ago?

I took a step back, but she stepped back as well. I stepped to the right and immediately went left. Chae Nayun tried to follow, but my sudden change in direction caused her feet to tangle.

“*Hmm?* Hey, I think that’s our ride,” Kim Suho said.

A vehicle appeared around the corner and drove towards us. The sturdy, black SUV arrived with the sunset’s orange hue behind it.

The SUV stopped in front of us and the window rolled down. As

expected, Seo Youngji sat in the driver's seat.

"Oh? Nobody is late?" she said.

"Wow!" Yi Yeonghan exclaimed as he looked at the car with sparkling eyes. He admired it so much that he didn't even dare to touch it.

"Is this the Silverwood series?" he asked.

"Yes, that's exactly right. I got it recently too," Seo Youngji replied.

"It's a used car..." I thought in my head, but ended up saying it out loud after reading the car's description. I quickly covered my mouth, but it was too late as Seo Youngji glared at me.

"You... You seem to know a bit about cars?" she asked.

"*Huh? Ah*, well, this car would still fetch seven to eight hundred million won even if it's used," I said with an awkward smile.

Chae Nayun stood there and muttered something strange under her breath, *So he likes cars...*

"Hop in," Seo Youngji curtly said after I dampened her mood.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Kim Suho sat in the passenger seat. Yoo Yeonha and Yi Yeonghan sat in the first row. Chae Nayun was about to enter the car when she flinched and stopped.

"*Hmm...*" She looked back and forth between me and Shin Jonghak a few times.

Then she looked back at the car and muttered something under her breath. Chae Nayun waved after finishing her calculations.

"Hey, Shin Jonghak. You go in first. Sit beside Yi Yeonghan."

“Why?” Shin Jonghak grumbled and vehemently opposed when...

“Just go home if you don’t want to.”

“I was about to get in. Don’t worry.”

Yoo Yeonha, Yi Yeonghan, and Shin Jonghak sat in the first row. Only two seats remained behind them.

Chae Nayun pushed me and said, “It’s your turn. Go in.”

I went inside without a word and Chae Nayun naturally sat beside me. I had no idea why, but she couldn’t stop grinning from ear to ear.

Hoho! This is great. I didn’t know a club president had this much power!
She seemed to be thinking something like that.

I frowned at Chae Nayun. She suddenly stopped grinning and blushed when I stared at her.

“W-What? W-Why? It just happened by coincidence. Do you have a problem?”

“No, not that.”

“Then w-w-what?”

“Forget it.”

I must’ve been mistaken, so I decided to just ignore it.

Phew...

Chae Nayun sighed in relief for some reason.

“I’ll start driving now. This car is quite safe despite being used, so don’t worry about anything,” Seo Youngji coolly said.

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan laughed at her remark while Shin Jonghak glared at me through the rearview mirror. Yoo Yeonha seemed to be conscious of Shin Jonghak looking at Chae Nayun.

Chae Nayun took out a game device she brought and handed it to me.

“Hey, Kim Hajin. Let’s play. This is really fun,” she said.

“I’m going to sleep.”

“Hey, come on. Let’s play just a bit before you go to sleep. *Ah*, open your eyes... You better open your eyes while I’m being nice. This is your club president’s order. Damn you...”

The car drove off as Chae Nayun threatened me.

* * *

The SUV seamlessly drove on the paved roads for a while, but soon crossed over to rugged mountain terrain. The comfort level didn’t change much despite the bumpy mountain roads. As expected, the Silverwood was a reliable model right below Goldwood (similar to S-class vehicles in my original world). The used car ran perfectly.

Kim Suho looked out the window and asked, “It’s starting to get dark. Are you sure there’s a city around here?”

“It’ll take us a while to reach it. I think we might have to camp outside tonight,” Seo Youngji replied.

“Camp outside?”

“Yes, it’ll be fun. Also, you’ll be camping outside quite often once you become heroes. It’s not a bad idea to get some experience now.”

New Alliance was a neutral state known for its medicinal herbs, so even I felt curious about it.

Chae Nayun kept dozing off and leaning on my shoulder. I pushed her

away with a finger every time, but her head always immediately returned. I was forced to let her use my shoulder in the end.

We traveled for thirty more minutes into the woods. I was certain some of us wondered, *There's no way Seo Youngji is trying to kidnap and bury us somewhere, right?*

[Yeah, I'm going to be a babysitter for a while. I'm sure it'll be fun though.]

[Oh Junhyuk] [Is it manageable? What do you think of that gunner kid?]

[He's alright if you disregard the fact that he can be quite rude. I swear he seems more fickle than Shin Jonghak sometimes. He had the nerve to call out my used car.]

[Oh Junhyuk] [Kekeke! Who told you to buy a used car in the first place? I told you, right? You have to buy a new car if it's an SUV. It's not like you're poor.]

[Shut up.]

[Oh Junhyuk] [Anyways, don't forget the task that the association gave you.]

[I'm already on it.]

I felt relieved after hacking Seo Youngji's smartwatch.

Then I spotted several bright lights flickering above the trees. These bluish lights looked like will-o-wisps from afar. I couldn't help but stare at them for a while.

“Wow! Hey Kim Hajin, what are those? Do you know what they are?”

Chae Nayun woke up and looked outside the window with her chin resting on my shoulder.

“Those are will-o-wisps. We should probably stop driving and set up

camp,” I replied.

Seo Youngji slowed the car, which woke up Yoo Yeonha.

Yoo Yeonha pretended to have never fallen asleep as she woke up. “Have we arrived?” she asked.

“*Hmm?* Didn’t you hear me a while ago? We’re camping outside tonight,” Seo Youngji replied.

“What?”

“We’ll get there by tomorrow. Time to get out.”

Seo Youngji smiled and got out of the car. All of us naturally followed her.

“*Hmm...*”

I observed our surroundings and thought it was an adequate spot to camp. Trees surrounded us and we stood on a flat surface with a clearing ahead. It was the perfect spot for a campfire and to pitch our tents.

Kim Suho asked Seo Youngji, “But we didn’t bring anything?”

“Consider this a part of your lecture. A high rank hero like me from the association has the authority to write letters of recommendation to cadets. I’m willing to use my authority if you show me what you’re capable of,” Seo Youngji replied.

Honestly, this proposal didn’t interest Chae Jong Hwa (Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak, and Yoo Yeonhwa). However, Yi Yeonghan’s eyes lit up with determination and Kim Suho seemed pleased with the offer too. After all, Kim Suho was the reincarnation of determination itself.

“Alright, I’ll be pitching my tent and waiting for all of you here. Why don’t you go hunt for food? I’ll be watching over you, so don’t worry. Oh right, it’ll be better if I divide you into pairs.”

I didn't feel the need to pair up and prepared to leave on my own, but a small head already blocked my path before I could take a step.

I ignored Chae Nayun and continued walking, but she followed right behind me. I turned around and looked at her.

“...”

“What? What do you want, Kim Hajin? Is there something on my face?”

“What do you mean?”

“...”

“Speak, will you?”

I looked behind her and saw that everyone had already paired up. Kim Suho went with Yi Yeonghan and Yoo Yeonha paired with Shin Jonghak. Shin Jonghak kept glancing at me, but Yoo Yeonha forcefully dragged him away.

“Nevermind...”

I shook my head and sighed in resignation. This was still better than pairing up with Shin Jonghak.

Chae Nayun looked at my face and smiled, “*Hihi...*”

Her smile looked quite stupid as if she was about to freeze to death or something. She probably felt cold since her cheeks and nose flushed red.

I decided to flick her on the nose.

Tak!

Oops... That sounded quite loud. Maybe I struck her too hard?

“Ack! Hey! What the hell?! *Ha!* Look at this punk. Have you gone crazy?!” Chae Nayun fiercely growled.

I had no idea why I decided to flick her nose. I just couldn’t suppress the strange urge. However, I found it funny as she rubbed her nose. I laughed and changed the topic.

“I’m going to have to work harder because of you. I’m a busy person, you know?”

“Do you want to die? Hey, I’m watching you Kim Hajin. Don’t try to act all high and mighty in front of me, little runt. I can knock you out with a single punch, you got that?”

She spoke roughly, but wore a funny smile on her face.

Rather, why did she keep calling me little? Was it because her birthday came before mine? But we should be the same age?

I found it annoying that someone seven years younger than me (my actual age) kept calling me little like I was the younger one.

I decided to ignore it and dragged Chae Nayun into the woods.

“Just shut up and follow me.”

1. Sun Wukong’s staff. 🙏

Side Stories 52

Chae Nayun (7)

I trudged through the snowy mountain path. I could feel my feet sinking and the sound of crunching snow could be heard with each step.

Chae Nayun's voice echoed in this peaceful forest, "There must be a lot of monsters here, right?"

"Yeah, but I don't think you have anything to worry about," I replied.

Seo Youngji was fast. She was a high rank hero who specialized in agility and I recalled her title was supersonic something if I wasn't mistaken. She would come running to us in less than five seconds if we sent a distress call.

"Who says I'm worried? I can easily handle them alone."

"Did you even bring your weapon?"

"No, I don't need it."

"Sure..."

We continued walking while talking about numerous things. I didn't find this situation particularly bothersome since I had to find out as much as I could about ■■■.

"Hey! There's something over there!" Chae Nayun shouted as she stepped in front of me and spread her arms as if she was my bodyguard.

I abruptly stopped thanks to her and looked in front of us.

A creature that resembled a wild boar hid behind a thicket.

“It looks like a wild boar.”

“Oh, really? Will it be tasty if we cook it?”

“I don’t think you’ll be able to eat it...”

Chae Nayun’s taste buds didn’t suit camping since she grew up eating only the best food available, but it was also because of the stress and trauma from her childhood.

However, Chae Nayun puffed her cheeks and retorted, “Why won’t I be able to eat it?”

“What will you do if it has parasites in it?”

“I can just roast it properly.”

“Then suit yourself.”

Chae Nayun glanced at me as I took out my gun without another word. Then I aimed between the wild boar’s eyes, but soon lowered my gun and looked at Chae Nayun.

“You catch it.”

I thought it would be better to kill it with an arrow instead of a gun so the taste wouldn’t be ruined.

“With what?”

“Your bow.”

“You told me not to use it.”

“You can use it in cases like this.”

Chae Nayun scoffed at me before conjuring an arrow with her mana. She placed the mana arrow on her bowstring and pulled it as far back as possible before letting it fly.

Shwiiiish!

The arrow screamed as it pierced through the air and dug into the wild boar's neck.

“Bullseye.”

We went over to the wild boar, but Chae Nayun suddenly disappeared during that short walk. At the same time, I could hear someone groaning from behind, “*Uwaaah!*”

“What was that? Hey, Chae Nayun... are you alright?”

It seemed like Chae Nayun tripped and rolled down the mountain.

I knelt on one knee and looked down at her. She fell about fifteen meters back and curled on the ground.

“*Ugh...*” she replied with a moan when I called her.

In the end, I had no choice but to quickly descend by infusing stigma's mana into my shoes.

* * *

“*Ah*, I think it's broken.”

Chae Nayun acted like a baby in front of Kim Hajin, who had become a human rickshaw. He sighed as he carried her on his back with a rope tied to the wild boar wrapped around his waist

“I never imagined there would be a hole there... Hey, your back is quite wide,” Chae Nayun blabbered in an upbeat manner.

‘It looks like this guy didn't laze around with his training. Look at how

wide his back has become,’ she thought.

“Hey, did you really get hurt?” he asked with a hint of suspicion in his voice.

However, she feigned ignorance and replied, “*Huh? Ah*, sorry. I think I was slacking in my training.”

She found herself acting even more childish as she clung to his back. No, it was more accurate to say that her memories from before the regression were slowly fading away. Those memories sank to the depths of her consciousness like grains of sand, and her memories from this lifetime slowly piled on top of the old ones.

Most likely, the regression caused this phenomenon because it would be impossible for her to live properly in this life with all her memories from before intact.

“Hey, Kim Hajin.”

“What?”

“Last time... you spoke badly about my brother. What made you do that?”

Kim Hajin briefly stopped before he started walking again and replied, “That incident... would you believe me if I said I didn’t know what happened to him?”

“Yeah, I will.”

“*Huh?*” Kim Hajin looked flabbergasted at her unexpected response.

Chae Nayun smirked and repeated, “I said I’ll believe you.”

She already considered Kim Hajin one of the world’s mysteries. How did he know about her brother’s condition? Was it because he was extremely smart?

“Ehem... Is that so? Anyways, your brother is the reason you created this Pharmacy Club, right?”

Chae Nayun didn't reply and buried her face in Kim Hajin's shoulder. She recalled the painful memory of when Kim Hajin killed Chae Jinyoon in her previous life. The memory of when he pulled the trigger and blew her brother's head into pieces.

However, Chae Nayun also recalled Kim Hajin's life story. He lost his parents in the Kwang-Oh Incident and had to face life all alone at a young age.

How difficult and lonely had he felt all these years? He always carried all the burdens and faced everything alone.

Chae Nayun's heart ached the more she thought about it. She closed her eyes and fought back the tears welling up.

She composed herself and made a resolution, *'I'm not going to let my brother die in this world and I'm not going to let Kim Hajin kill him... I'm not going to let Kim Hajin carry such a huge burden by himself.'*

“Huh? Nayun is here.” Someone from the campsite spoke. It turned out to be Yoo Yeonha.

Shin Jonghak sat next to her and stood up with his spear when he saw Chae Nayun on Kim Hajin's back.

“Ah, thanks for the ride,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly said before hopping off his back.

She limped towards the campfire like nothing happened and left Kim Hajin with a look of disbelief on his face.

“Oh, it's a wild boar. Then... who's going to cook it?” Seo Youngji asked.

Kim Hajin cleared his throat and raised his hand. He volunteered to test out his new gift, *[Dazzling Dexterity]*. Everyone else, except for Chae Nayun, looked at him with skeptical eyes.

However, it took exactly forty-five minutes for their skepticism to turn into songs of praise.

Kim Suho expressed his sincere gratitude towards the chef. Shin Jonghak, who probably had the biggest ego among them, quickly ate two portions. Yoo Yeonha, who was secretly a glutton, suppressed her tears of joy while eating the food.

* * *

“That’s the New Alliance. Can you see it?” Seo Youngji said while pointing at a city.

We looked at the neutral state through the car window.

“Wow... What is that? Is it a city? Isn’t it just a mountain?” That was Chae Nayun’s first impression of it.

Most people would probably wonder if the city was built on a mountain or if the entire mountain had been used as a city whenever they saw the New Alliance for the first time.

Her words probably weren’t the best way to describe it, but that was the impression the city gave.

“A lot of retired heroes live here,” Seo Youngji added.

The New Alliance was roughly six times the size of Yeouido and it had an estimated population of four hundred thousand people.

Unfortunately, a tall wall blocked off the mountain city’s entrance.

Their SUV slowed as they approached the city. A man in full armor, probably a member of the city’s self-defense force, blocked the vehicle’s path.

“Vehicle entry is restricted from this point onwards,” the man said.

“You heard him, right?” Seo Youngji turned around to them and they

all got off the SUV.

“Do you have any IDs?” the man asked with a stern look.

Seo Youngji took out her hero license and gave it to him.

He compared the face on the license with hers before nodding, “Hero Seo Youngji’s seventh visit has been confirmed.”

Creak... Creak... Creak...

The sound of gears turning could be heard as the tall wall slowly opened. We stared at it opening like a theater curtain with our jaws dropped and our faces flushed with excitement and anticipation.

“Wow...”

“What the hell? Isn’t this just a rural province?”

The New Alliance gave off a very lively, yet cozy first impression.

Smoke rose from chimneys and filled the place with the scrumptious scent of delicious food. Horses and carriages transporting people and goods filled the streets. Quite a lot of people busily went about their daily lives.

“Follow me. We’ll be heading to an inn first,” Seo Youngji said.

We followed her while looking around the city.

I somewhat expected this when the man told us our vehicle wasn’t allowed, but the entire city was basically analog. Even the streetlamps didn’t have electricity and they purely ran on mana instead.

[Inn – Peaceful Day]

We arrived at a five-story building beautifully built with logs. A bell rang out as we entered. A western man with a thick, long beard who looked like the owner greeted us from the counter.

“Two rooms, please,” Seo Youngji said as she paid in cash.

The inn owner inspected us from head to toe before handing over two keys with 201 and 301 written on them respectively.

“Oh, they accept Korean won here?” Shin Jonghak muttered before stepping towards the counter, “Please give me the best room in the house.”

He opened his wallet with at least two million won inside.

Seo Youngji’s eyes sparkled and the inn owner’s brow went up at the sight of the rich kid’s wallet. Then the inn owner threw him a key while grumbling something under his breath.

“I’ll be sleeping alone,” Shin Jonghak said after receiving the key and heading upstairs.

We made our way up the stairs as well.

Seo Youngji gathered us after we reached the second floor and said, “You guys are on the third floor. Unpack your things and do whatever you want. It’ll be free time until I call you. Oh right, they also have an underground hot spring here.”

“Oh, really? Okay.”

The three girls went to room 201 while the three guys went to room 301.

“Ah, Shin Jonghak that sly bastard... booking his own room...” Yi Yeonghan grumbled.

I ignored him and looked around the room. Our cozy room had three beds, a fireplace, and a carpet made of animal hide. It resembled more of a mountain cabin or a lodge than an inn.

“Hey, Hajin. Do you want to take a dip at the hot spring?” Kim Suho asked after changing his clothes.

I shook my head no, but Yi Yeonghan reacted the exact opposite.

“Oh! A hot spring? Sounds good to me! Let’s go!”

“Okay, then shall we go?”

“You guys go ahead.”

Yi Yeonghan and Kim Suho left. I remained all alone and looked out the window.

Today was Friday, so it would be the evening of that day once we left on Sunday. The timing would be tight.

I called up the system.

► *[Precise Hacking] [Intermediate Rank] [No Attribute]*

— *Hacking: Break through an object’s security system and take control of it. The amount of stigma consumed will vary based on the strength of the security system.*

— *Precise: The hacking efficiency and result will be affected by luck.*

The new gift I added last time, *[Hacking]*, received a bonus called, *[Precise]*, after my luck triggered.

“Let’s see...”

This gift seemed useless in a place with no electronics, but such an assumption would be a mistake.

I looked at the light bulb illuminating the room. This magical lamp ran on neither oil nor electricity, but it was technically electronic equipment in a sense.

I used *[Precise Hacking]* on it.

[Hacking Target Identified – Magic Lamp]

[Loading...]

[Connection Established – You have taken over the target.]

It required a bit of stigma, but I successfully hacked it.

I tried changing the lamp's color to blue, red, yellow, etc. 'Not bad.' I returned the lamp to its original color and looked out the window again.

I spotted a luxurious leather carriage on the street.

"I wonder if it'll work on that too..." I wasn't sure as I tried connecting to the carriage's rear wheel.

[Hacking Target Identified – Carriage Rear Wheel]

[Loading...]

[Connection Established – You have taken over the target.]

The wheel I hacked suddenly locked itself as if clamped by something. The horse also stopped, which made the entire carriage stop in its tracks.

A person wearing a robe as luxurious as the carriage stepped out from it. That person looked around and almost spotted me when he looked up.

"...!" I immediately ducked and hid.

I had no reason to hide, but I just felt like it.

* * *

We went out after I took a refreshing shower.

Seo Youngji divided us into two teams. She took all the guys, except for me, into her team. I ended up with Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha.

“Let’s go! Just follow President Chae!” Chae Nayun exclaimed as she confidently led the way.

Yoo Yeonha looked a bit tired and disappointed because she didn’t get to be with Shin Jonghak.

“Are you tired?” I asked.

Yoo Yeonha glanced at me and replied, “Not really.”

“Work hard and I’ll cook you tasty food. I’m good at making ramyeon too, you know?”

“What? Do I look like someone who would eat crappy junk food?”

“Forget it then if you don’t want to.”

Yoo Yeonha scoffed at me and walked ahead, but she seemed much more energetic now for some reason.

Our first destination for today was the apothecary.

“*Huh?* Hey, Kim Hajin. Look over there.” Chae Nayun stopped in the middle of the street and pointed at a merchant peddler on the street.

The merchant sold a variety of things like food, tools, and medicinal plants. What caught my eye wasn’t the wares, but the merchant herself. She had long pointy ears and wore a tattered robe. In short, she was an elf.

“What is this?” Chae Nayun asked.

“It’s a necklace made from the branch of a spirit tree that has expended all of its life force.”

“Oh.” Chae Nayun continued looking at the merchant’s wares while Yoo Yeonha became distracted by the different food on sale.

I suddenly felt someone observing me.

“...?”

It definitely came from somewhere nearby. I turned and saw the person wearing the luxurious robe looking at me.

I felt an unexplainable sense of anxiety creeping on my skin. My instincts rang like an alarm as my anxiety grew and cold sweat broke out on my back.

I noticed a smartwatch on the robed person’s wrist.

[Hacking Target Identified – E013 Unidentified Smartwatch]

I immediately activated *[Precise Hacking]* and felt a large amount of mana leaving my body. I had no idea why so much mana left my body, but I suddenly felt weak. My instincts and luck definitely weren’t lying to me. That robed person was dangerous.

[Loading...]

[Connection Established – You have taken over the target.]

My smartwatch successfully connected to the robed person’s smartwatch. The first thing I did was check for their name.

[Jin Sahyuk]

It felt as if the ground beneath me caved in and my heart sank along with it.

“Here we go.”

Someone placed something on my neck. I flinched in surprise and instantly grabbed the hand inches away. It turned out to be Chae Nayun. I seemed to have scared her as she also flinched and backed away.

“...”

“W-What?” Chae Nayun asked with her eyes wide in surprise.

“He doesn’t like it,” Yoo Yeonha said from next to me.

She went on a monologue as if casting some sporting event or narrating a show, “You can say it’s a habit. A person who’s had a close call with death is bound to have a habit or two whenever they sense danger. They usually hate being touched by someone else without their permission and tend to be especially sensitive with their necks.”

“Oh, right...” Chae Nayun muttered.

‘*What bullshit logic is that?*’ I grumbled inwardly before looking back at Jin Sahyuk, but she had already disappeared.

Well, at least I successfully managed to hack her smartwatch.

“Ah, sorry. You don’t like wearing necklaces?” Chae Nayun asked, but I ignored her and focused on wiretapping the hacked smartwatch.

Step... Step...

I could hear someone’s footsteps followed by a conversation.

— *Huh?* Why are you back so soon?

— The carriage broke, so I sent it for repair.

— *Ah*, what? That sturdy carriage broke?

It seemed like the carriage I hacked earlier belonged to this person.

I intently eavesdropped on the conversation when Chae Nayun came close to my ear and whispered, “Hey, Kim Hajin. What are you doing?”

“*Huh?*”

She glared at my smartwatch and seemed pissed off for some reason.

“Who are you talking to?”

“It’s nothing... More importantly... medicinal plants. Yeah, let’s go look for medicinal plants. I’m sure the apothecary is around here somewhere.”

I feigned ignorance and looked around for the store. Lo and behold, it wasn’t far off from where we stood and I pointed it out.

Chae Nayun didn’t even bother looking as she glared at me with her arms crossed over her chest.

“You look suspicious...”

“Alright, let’s go!” I completely ignored her and led the way to the apothecary.

Truth be told, my heart still pounded from the earlier anxiety for some inexplicable reason.

It didn’t take long for us to reach the apothecary and I immediately rushed in after opening the door.

My heart sank once again.

“Some bastard did something to my carriage’s wheel, but I haven’t found out who.”

I was sure my luck exceeded nine... so could this chain of events be considered lucky or unlucky?

“*Sigh*, what brave bastard would dare to try that on you?”

The conversation I eavesdropped on continued in front of me.

Jin Sahyuk wore a hood that covered his face as he spoke to the apothecary’s owner.

“I’ll kill them if I ever catch them.”

“Hoho... Ho... I wonder which brave bastard it is... that person is in a world of trouble now... Oh! It’s a customer!”

I immediately turned off my smartwatch.

The apothecary owner greeted us with a big smile while Jin Sahyuk observed us from the counter.

Chae Nayun stole a glance at Jin Sahyuk before asking the owner, “What’s your best seller here?”

Meanwhile, I looked at Jin Sahyuk and my eyes peered through the hood covering his face.

“What the...?”

However, something was strange. I couldn’t understand when I saw Jin Sahyuk’s face.

Jin Sahyuk was supposed to be a man, but a woman’s face appeared underneath the hood. I looked from all sorts of angles just in case, but nothing changed.

What in the world happened? Why did he suddenly change into a woman? Did he just look feminine? No, I could also make out the curves in his body...

I furrowed my brows at the unexpected turn of events.

On the other hand, Jin Sahyuk’s eyes suddenly formed into crescents as she smiled for some reason.

At the same time, an alarm regarding Jin Sahyuk popped up on my smartwatch.

Side Stories 53

Chae Nayun (8)

[Jin Sahyuk's gender has been changed according to the change in Kim Suho's storyline.]

[Jin Sahyuk's special ego was not fully changed by ■■ and a part of it remains.]

I thought Jin Sahyuk would be a guy since he was a male in my original story. Nevertheless, this wasn't completely out of my expectations. Jin Sahyuk's story setting directly correlated with Kim Suho's, so the co-author could've changed his gender.

"Our best selling medicinal plant is the hope plant, but... is there anything specific you're looking for? We sell most known medicinal plants," the owner asked Chae Nayun.

On the other hand, I kept my focus on Jin Sahyuk. She continued to smirk with her legs crossed.

"Oh, you're right. It has most things except for what I'm looking for. I'm looking for information regarding the Tears of Heaven," Chae Nayun replied.

She sounded quite experienced while dealing with the apothecary owner. The way she stood in front of the counter without showing any emotions also made her look like a veteran.

However, I felt like walking on thin ice with cracks forming underneath me.

"Ah, Tears of Heaven? Something like that doesn't exist."

"Doesn't exist?"

“Yes, that was only created because a coincidence happened on top of a coincidence on top of another coincidence. It was nothing less than a miracle. I mean, logically, who would be able to create such a thing? It was probably made naturally and humans just found it.”

“...”

Chae Nayun didn't show any emotion on her face. Not even a hint of disappointment could be seen. I found it quite surprising since the Chae Nayun I knew would probably have already lashed out with something like, *'How does that make any sense?!'*

“Tears of Heaven, *eh?* I know about it quite well,” Jin Sahyuk interjected.

She didn't lower her hood, but her figure became slightly visible when she stood up and the robe partly opened. She wore a tight leather suit of all things...

“Who are you?” Chae Nayun asked.

Jin Sahyuk shrugged and nonchalantly replied, “I was there when the Tears of Heaven was auctioned.”

“Really?”

“Yeah, the Rukr Auction House. I thought about killing the guy who bought it, but decided otherwise since it would be too troublesome,” Jin Sahyuk replied before glancing at me. No, she blatantly looked at me.

“*Hmm...* This is quite strange...” Jin Sahyuk muttered while tilting her head in confusion. She had a perplexed look on her face. Her face appeared inches away from mine and she asked, “Why do you seem so familiar?”

“...”

“Hey, have we met before?”

I wanted to retort with, *‘What in the world are you talking about?’* However, my mouth wouldn’t move because I knew very well that Jin Sahyuk could kill everyone here with a wave of her hand.

Chae Nayun suddenly stepped in front of Jin Sahyuk and growled, “What are you trying to do here?” She glared at her in a threatening manner.

However, Jin Sahyuk didn’t back down. In fact, she flat-out ignored Chae Nayun and kept her gaze on me.

“You,” she extended her smartwatch towards me.

Then an alert rang on my smartwatch.

[Unidentified Smartwatch E013 has sent you a friend request.]

“Accept it. I’ll kill you if you don’t,” she added.

It was a very straightforward and efficient way to ask someone to do something in my opinion.

“What? Hey, ignore it,” Chae Nayun told me with a scoff.

However, I knew very well that Jin Sahyuk wasn’t the type to make empty threats. I immediately pressed *[Yes]* and accepted the friend request.

“I accepted it,” I said.

“*Huh?* Hey, why did you accept that?” Chae Nayun protested.

Jin Sahyuk checked her smartwatch and nodded in satisfaction, “Alright, I checked it. *Ah*, don’t be mistaken. I’m not considering you a friend or anything just because I added you.”

“Let’s go,” I dragged Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha out of the shop with Jin Sahyuk’s gaze still on the back of my head.

I had no idea why or how, but she seemed to know who I was.

* * *

“What was that just now? Why did you suddenly add him as a contact?” the owner asked in disbelief.

Jin Sahyuk didn’t bother to respond and sat back in her chair. She felt strange since a while ago. The guy’s face looked familiar for some reason. No, familiar was an understatement.

She felt her heart oddly resonate with him and had never felt this foreign feeling before.

“I don’t know,” she muttered.

“You don’t know?”

“*Hmm...* Okay, listen...” she explained how she felt to the owner.

The owner intently listened until she finished and said, “That... isn’t that love at first sight?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk suppressed her urge to kill the apothecary owner. She may have fallen in status, but she wouldn’t fall for a loser like that guy. However, she couldn’t deny that she felt confused after pondering. She never felt this way before, so she decided to spare the apothecary owner.

“Can you find out more about that guy?” she asked.

“*Hmm?* Well, I heard he’s a Cube cadet.”

“Cube?”

“Yes.”

Jin Sahyuk rubbed her chin. That guy was also at Cube right now.

“Is there a way for me to infiltrate that place?”

“I think South Korea will be quite tricky. Things have recently gotten strict due to a bunch of lunatics causing a scene there,” the owner shook his head and replied.

His information network rivaled Pandemonium executives, but it would still be difficult.

“I see... Okay, get things ready for me then.”

However, Jin Sahyuk didn’t give a fuck about what he said. It had been a long time since she felt such a surge of emotion in her mundane life. It felt like a strong wave suddenly rose out of nowhere and crashed into the hull of her ship. She couldn’t simply let go of this exhilarating excitement.

“*Huh?*”

“A week should be enough, right?”

The owner became flabbergasted at the sudden turn of events, but Jin Sahyuk didn’t care and immediately left after making her request.

* * *

Chae Nayun felt bothered by what happened. Who was that person just now? She would’ve immediately known if she rummaged through her memories before regressing, but that person covered their face too well and she never got a glimpse.

In the end, she decided to ask Kim Hajin instead, “Was that someone you knew? Hey, I asked you a question. Who was that? Don’t tell me... Your ex-girlfriend? No... that can’t be... Hey, Kim Hajin! You better answer me right now.”

She went on a tirade, but Kim Hajin simply sighed and picked his ear. This went on for a while until they reached the city outskirts.

“Hold up. That’s a cave, right?” Kim Hajin said after spotting a cave. This discovery meant his luck would trigger again.

“That isn’t important right now. Who was that? Did you even know who that was before accepting their friend request?”

“*Hmm...* I’m curious now too. Who was that? What kind of relationship do you have with that person?” Yoo Yeonha chimed in.

“*Ah*, you guys are too noisy. Just be quiet and follow me,” Kim Hajin grumbled and dragged them into the cave to change the topic.

“*Ha...* Why you little...” Chae Nayun gritted her teeth in anger.

They ventured for five minutes before the limestone in the cave ceiling brightly shone red. The ray of light slithered to the ground like a snake. It was truly a rare natural phenomenon.

“Wow... what is this place? That’s freaking awesome...” Chae Nayun muttered in awe at the sight.

Kim Hajin smirked while looking at her, *‘Is she a carp or something? What’s with that face?’*

“*Hmm...*”

On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha thought about what happened a while ago as she intently observed the phenomenon.

The hooded person from before seemed quite strong, but such a person somehow knew Kim Hajin. Could Kim Hajin have come to this place before? But he was only seventeen years old?

If that was true, then what in the world was this guy? His size and face couldn’t be any plainer than a passerby on the street, but what he had accomplished so far alone was...

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t help but feel more intrigued and fearful as she dug deeper into Kim Hajin’s identity. She got the chills as she learned more about him.

“Follow me.”

She flinched at Kim Hajin’s sudden words.

He walked somewhere without a hint of hesitation in his steps. The darkness only grew as they ventured further inside, but he didn’t seem bothered.

“Hey, walk slowly. I can’t see anything,” Chae Nayun whined.

Kim Hajin grabbed her hand and led her. That seemed to do the trick and shut her up.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha confirmed once again that this guy also liked Chae Nayun.

“It’s over there...” Kim Hajin said while pointing into the distance.

They looked at where he was pointing and spotted a source of light in the darkness. It looked like an orb or a jewel on the ground and gave off a gentle glow.

“What is that?” Yoo Yeonha asked while staring at the orb in a daze.

Kim Hajin smiled and picked up the orb that actually turned out to be a bundle of grass.

“We’re quite lucky,” he said. “It’s a hope plant.”

[Hope Plant] [Rare]

A rare plant that grows in extremely dark environments. Its roots contain a dense concentration of mana that allows it to glow brightly. This plant is also known to be a superior material that possesses the spirit property.

Information regarding the plant appeared in front of his eyes.

Chae Nayun stared dumbfoundedly at the plant.

“What do you think? This is quite a rare plant,” Kim Hajin said with a smug smile.

The plant lit up his face as he held it near his chin and he looked quite funny from that angle.

“Pfft...”

She couldn't help but snicker at how he looked. Not a single part of him looked good, but she found him adorable nonetheless. In fact, he even looked handsome to her now. This emotion blossomed within her seven years ago and she still couldn't understand it.

‘What did I like so much about this guy?’ she wondered.

Whatever the reason, she knew that some feelings didn't require any justifications. The desire to be with him all the time simply overcame her and she couldn't suppress it.

“Let's go,” Kim Hajin said after foraging the hope plant.

Chae Nayun continued to daydream with her cheeks flushed pink. She stood up after him and asked, “That's something valuable, right?”

“Yeah, it could become even more valuable once we use it to make an elixir or the Tears of Heaven.”

The hope plant in Kim Hajin's hand glowed even brighter as if accepting him as its rightful owner.

The plant's sudden glow mesmerized Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun.

“This is probably needed to make both of those.”

This plant would be their first required ingredient.

Boom!

A tremor shook the ground and they all flinched before turning towards the source. A silhouette of something big moved in the dark.

Yoo Yeonha recognized it first, “It’s a bear with a crescent on its chest.”

The crescent moon bear wasn’t a monster, but an apex predator among normal animals. Its bright red eyes glared at them.

“Hey, Kim Hajin. Support me with cover fire,” Chae Nayun whispered as she unsheathed her sword.

“A sword?”

“Yeah, I’ve been practicing.”

“Hey, a few weeks of practice won’t—”

“Just shut up and watch me.”

Kim Hajin expressed his skepticism, but Chae Nayun seemed confident.

In the end, Kim Hajin and Yoo Yeonha had no choice but to take out their weapons and support Chae Nayun.

“Krwuuuaaaah!”

The apex predator shook the cave with its roar, but Chae Nayun didn’t even bat an eye as she infused mana into her sword.

Both of them clashed head-on.

“Here I go!”

* * *

That was how we also managed to obtain bear bile. We finally returned to Cube on Sunday.

The Pharmacy Club members stored the items from their New Alliance trip in the club storeroom. However, President Chae seemed dissatisfied with it and ordered a custom [*Manatech Mobile Greenhouse*] to store all the items and medicinal plants.

The club members returned to their daily lives after that. Chae Nayun left first and said she had somewhere to go. Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan went to train and Shin Jonghak returned to his penthouse.

Then there was me...

[Pharmacy Club]

I went back to the dormitory, changed my clothes, and returned to the club room. I wanted to expose my almond (Evandel) to the mana in the expensive manatech greenhouse.

Drrrk—

I was caught by surprise after opening the door to the club room, but the person inside seemed even more shocked.

“What do you want?” Yoo Yeonha asked while staring at me with a devastated look. Cup ramyeon, potato chips, choco chips, etc. littered the table.

It seemed like she ate all of it alone.

Yoo Yeonha continued staring at me for a while before stuttering, “T-Thief...”

“Thief?”

“I... h-heard there was a thief, so... I came to look...”

“...”

I looked around the club room and muttered under my breath, “Ah... So a thief came in to eat potato chips and cup ramyeon? Without even

touching that expensive greenhouse and everything inside?”

Who would ever believe a thief ignored that mobile greenhouse the size of a piano and the hope plant inside for snacks in the club room instead?

“Y-Yes... there’s no way I ate all of this, right?”

“Then we should report this immediately.”

“Ack!”

Yoo Yeonha screamed when I began tapping on my smartwatch.

“Ack! Ack!”

“Geez... You’re too loud. What is it this time?”

“*Ehem ehem...*” She cleared her throat and brazenly changed the subject, “Have you seen the notice?”

“What? What notice?”

“The specialization class notice.”

I checked my smartwatch, but didn’t see any notice no matter how much I scrolled through my messages.

[Heyyyyyy u wa the hzcek eh you ahwhw]

Only a strange indecipherable message came from Jin Sahyuk. She probably didn’t know how to use a smartwatch or didn’t know how to type since she came from a planet with no electronics. Rather than that, how did she even manage to send a friend request at that time?

“You probably didn’t receive it yet since my father sent it to me in advance,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“Then why did you even bother asking...” I replied in disbelief.

Yoo Yeonha scoffed in response and cleared the table, “I feel bad for the thief, so I’ll let them off this time. Imagine how hungry they must’ve been to eat this trashy food. Also, why would you report them to the police? Are you really that petty? Haven’t you read *Le Miresable*?”

“It’s *Le Misérable*, not *Le Miresable*.”

“Anyways, why did you come here?”

I hid my almond (Evandel) in my pocket.

“I came to check on the medicinal plant,” I replied before sitting on the couch.

The hope plant’s luster shone through the glass greenhouse. Increasing the security around it would be a good idea.

“When did you start liking her?” Yoo Yeonha asked another random question out of nowhere.

“What are you talking about?”

“I’m talking about Nayun.”

“What?” I furrowed my brows and grumbled in response.

What bullshit was she spouting this time?

She totally misunderstood my reaction and continued in a serious tone, “There’s nothing to be so surprised about. There are a lot of guys who like Nayun. I think half of the boys in her previous school had a thing for her or something...”

She sounded tired while reminiscing.

“I have no idea where you got that idea or who told you, but I don’t have a thing for her.”

“That’s good then. Nayun has no interest in you whatsoever.”

“Hey...”

I almost retorted back, but decided to just shut my mouth.

Yoo Yeonha glanced at me before adding, “Oh right, Nayun probably went to see her brother.”

“I didn’t ask.”

Yoo Yeonha went on a childish tirade of mocking me for a while before moving on to the next topic, “Enough about that. You seem to have gone to that neutral state a few times judging from how you bumped into someone familiar.”

“No, that was... *Ah*, never mind. Think whatever you want.”

I couldn’t make up any excuses since even I had no idea how Jin Sahyuk knew me. The co-author probably pulled some stunt, but I had no idea what those plans were.

“Did you lie about your age by any chance? Or maybe your birth was registered late?” Yoo Yeonha took a jab at me.

Her sharp question stung me because I technically did lie about my age. Yoo Yeonha picked up on my reaction and nodded in satisfaction.

“No, I didn’t lie about my age.”

“Is that so?”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t say much after that, but her last three words carried some weight. It seemed like she was imagining all sorts of scenarios in her head.

“The specialization class will start tomorrow. Don’t be surprised if cameras suddenly appear,” Yoo Yeonha said while stretching her arms.

“Cameras?”

“Yes, they said they’re filming a documentary.”

Another troublesome thing had occurred.

“They’re calling us the golden generation these days,” Yoo Yeonha grumbled and sighed in resignation.

The people’s reaction was understandable. Forget about Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, Rachel, and Yoo Yeonha. Even other cadets in this batch like Yi Jiyeon, Yi Yeonghan, Kim Horak, etc. would all be amazing heroes in the future.

Well, only if I managed to survive in this world until then.

“The Cube executives are trying to recover their public image because of the last midterm exam. I wanted to oppose this decision, but Daehyun, I mean Nayun’s side has already agreed to it so... We just have to endure even if it’s annoying,” Yoo Yeonha said as she stood from her seat.

“I’m going now,” she patted my back before leaving.

That girl acted exactly like her set character. No, she became more than what I set her to be.

I sighed with a mixture of awe, frustration, and relief before opening the greenhouse door.

“Let me know if the hope plant bothers you or if you don’t like it here. I’ll take you out immediately...” I placed the squirming almond (Evandel) into the greenhouse.

Thankfully, the almond (Evandel) seemed to like her new environment and happily squirmed a few times before burying itself in the soil.

Side Stories 54

Chae Nayun (9)

Chae Nayun stood at the VIP ward surrounded by a military grade manatech barrier that didn't allow even a single ray of sunlight to enter. She stared at Chae Jinyoon lying on the bed.

"I'm here..."

Her precious person was fast asleep as he had always been. He wasted almost a decade of his youth in this ward and his final moments had been filled with anguish and agony because of those devils.

"Hey..."

However, Chae Nayun shook her head to forget the past. Bell and Baal no longer existed in this world. That tragedy wouldn't happen to Chae Jinyoon here. A devil would no longer hatch from him.

"You can get up if you try, right?"

Chae Nayun sighed while caressing her brother's forehead. He looked younger than her now.

"I believe in you."

She took out a forever flower she foraged from New Alliance and placed it in a vase. The forever flower was a mysterious flower that remained beautiful throughout numerous seasons as its name suggested.

"They say this flower doesn't wilt for three years. I'll come back to wake you up before it wilts," Chae Nayun said while resolving herself.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and left the ward like nothing

happened.

“Are you alright, Young Lady?”

Two gigantic bodyguards waited for her outside.

Chae Nayun greeted them with a quick bow and walked out of the hospital.

“Please get on, Young Lady.”

A driver from Daehyun waited for her at the hospital entrance. She didn’t say anything as she got into the car.

“Shall I drive you directly to Cube or do you wish to rest at the house first?”

“Please go directly to Cube.”

“As you wish, Young Lady.”

The Goldwood limousine smoothly accelerated as if floating above the ground.

Chae Nayun leaned against the window and looked at the scenery outside before suddenly messaging Kim Hajin.

[What are you doing?]

He quickly replied this time.

[Playing a game.]

[Oh? What game?]

[Half of Legend]

[Awesome. I play that too. Do you want to play together? I’m really good. I

can carry you keke!]

[I only play solo.]

“Bastard...”

She knew he would respond like that, so she didn’t expect much in the first place. She proudly smirked at her foresight and thought of the next topic to talk about.

“The product you requested has been prepared, Young Lady,” the bodyguard in the passenger seat said as he extended a box to Chae Nayun.

“Ah, thank you,” Chae Nayun took the box and opened it. “Ohh...”

It contained numerous bottles of elixirs and potions, even a wild ginseng that was known to be extremely precious.

Chae Nayun had personally requested these items from her father.

“The chairman says you may ask for more if you need anything else,” the bodyguard added.

Chae Nayun didn’t plan to receive any help from her family after regressing. She even lashed out when her father and grandfather offered to help. It was nothing more than her stubbornness and pride. However, there was something more important than her pride right now. That’s why Chae Nayun had no choice but to seek help from her family.

“There should be another one aside from this, right?” she asked.

“Yes, Young Lady. The other product is currently being shipped from overseas. It should arrive within the week,” the bodyguard replied.

“Ah, alright,” Chae Nayun smiled.

She had prepared a gift for Kim Hajin and it was quite an awesome

one. She planned to shove it at him and pretend it was her way of paying him back for the hope plant.

“Let’s see...” Chae Nayun muttered as she ripped a root from the wild ginseng and munched on it.

Munch... Munch... She could feel the energy seeping out from the root as she chewed it. She happily ate as many roots as she wanted until she suddenly stopped.

“*Hmm...*”

She couldn’t help but think of that guy while eating something good. She had no idea if he would like it, but decided to share some with him later.

After all, a saying went that people would become closer if they shared a single bean... or something like that...

* * *

[Yyy uuu isss whooooo]

I received a strange message at four in the morning. It said something along the lines of, ‘*Who are you?*’

“*Haaa...*”

“Why did you want my number if you had no idea who I was?” I grumbled while sighing and yawning at the same time.

Rather than that, she could’ve just typed what she wanted to say with a keyboard. Why was she struggling so much?

“Could it be... she doesn’t know how to activate the keyboard?”

That theory sounded somewhat plausible if she didn’t know that the smartwatch was actually just a tool to project holograms of what one needed.

[A Cube cadet.]

I replied since I didn't want to get into trouble.

However, no reply came from the other end. Five minutes... ten minutes... fifteen minutes... thirty minutes... I waited until five in the morning and concluded that she probably had no idea how to reply.

“What a strange fellow.”

I closed my eyes while hoping that Jin Sahyuk would continue having trouble operating her smartwatch and slowly fell asleep.

Ring... Ring... Ring...

It felt like only seconds had passed since I closed my eyes.

“Ah... Damn it... I had a nightmare...”

I dreamt that Jin Sahyuk went on a killing spree and Kim Suho's neck lay on the ground with my limbs torn apart.

“Ah... I think I have a neck cramp...”

I dragged my feet to the restroom like a corpse and showered before leaving the dormitory. I arrived to class soon afterwards.

Creak...

I opened the door and found a camera in one corner like Yoo Yeonha told me. The camera seemed to be remotely controlled with no cameraman around.

“What the hell is that?” I grumbled and felt uncomfortable when the camera zoomed in on my face.

I walked over and sat in the corner like usual. I plopped down on my desk because I felt quite tired.

Time passed as my consciousness drifted. I only woke up after the murmuring in the classroom grew louder.

“What the?”

I saw a head that looked familiar, which made me think twice if I was in the right place. However, I confirmed that I was indeed in the right place after looking around.

I stared at the head. It was Chae Nayun no matter how I looked at it, but why was she here?

“Pharmacy Club? Why so suddenly?”

“Ah... Nothing, I just thought it would be nice to join. I’m also a supporter, right?”

“*Hmm... Nah.*”

“Come on, don’t be like that. Let me join too, President Chae. President Chae...”

Chae Nayun and Yi Jiyeon noisily spoke.

Ddrrk!

The classroom door opened and everyone fell silent as a man wearing a robe walked in.

“Hello, it’s nice to meet all of you in the Veritas class.”

I opened my eyes and looked at the golden emblem on his robe.

[Head of Seoul Magic Tower, Kim Hyojun]

“I will be assisting all of you in your specialization classes. My name is Kim Hyojun. I am the head magician of the Seoul Magic Tower. I believe a few of you may have heard of me.”

I furrowed my brows when I recognized this magician. He was basically a scumbag.

This guy, according to my story setting, was born as the third generation of a renowned magic family. However, he lacked talent and became an educator instead. He had a bad temper and was ruthless.

He often got extremely jealous and obsessed with others to the point of stalking them. He always acted like the victim of the problems he caused. In short, the word trash suited him quite well.

“I’ll only be in charge of a part of your specialization class. I won’t be teaching all of it. *Haha!* Don’t look so regretful. First, shall we all stand?” Kim Hyojun said with a friendly smile.

The cadets looked lost for a while before they stood one by one.

“Then, shall we all move to the auditorium?” Kim Hyojun said as he led the way.

All the cadets still looked lost, but followed him nevertheless. The cadets noisily murmured as they walked to the specialization class that would soon start.

“Nayun, Nayun! Let’s be on the same team,” Yi Jiyoona clung to Chae Nayun’s arm and pestered her.

Chae Nayun pushed away Yi Jiyoona, who kept rubbing on her arm like a hamster.

“What same team? Who said anything about forming teams?”

“Still...”

“It could be a theory class.”

“Really? Oh, if it’s theory then...”

Yi Jiyoong transformed from a cute hamster to a fox as she slowly moved away from Chae Nayun.

Chae Nayun scoffed and glared at Yi Jiyoong in disbelief.

Yi Jiyoong flashed a smile and clung back to Chae Nayun as if she had just been joking.

However, I somehow felt that Yi Jiyoong was just biding her time and would leave Chae Nayun the first chance she got. She was probably eyeing Yoo Yeonha next.

We suddenly locked eyes and I immediately moved away when she stepped towards my direction.

“...?”

Thud—

I bumped into the blonde princess. Rachel tilted her head in confusion.

I flashed an awkward smile and asked out of courtesy, “What do you think about the specialization class?”

Rachel smiled as if to say she had no idea. I awkwardly scratched my neck as she passed by and walked a few meters behind her.

Soon, I reached the main auditorium after an awkward walk.

The main auditorium was a large hall befitting its name. It probably equaled the size of three or four football pitches put together. A viewing deck above filled with cameras zoomed down on us.

“Everyone is here, right?” Kim Hyojun asked.

Yi Yeonghan used his gifted vision to scout the auditorium and reported to Kim Hyojun.

“Thank you, class president. Alright, please line up on the side. All freshmen will be participating in this class.”

The cadets lined up to the side and sat with their backs against the wall.

It didn't take long for the auditorium to fill up as nearly a thousand cadets came in from ten classes: Moral, Intelligence, Wisdom, Character, Honor, Veritas, etc.

Instructor Kim Suhyeok appeared out of nowhere and stood beside Kim Hyojun.

“Listen up all of you!”

His thunderous voice grabbed everyone's attention.

“We will conduct a small test before commencing the specialization class. Line up according to your roles!”

The cadets separated into warriors, sharpshooters, and supporters. Of course, I lined up with the other sharpshooters.

“The test will check your basic capabilities in dueling, sharpshooting, healing, decision making, etc. to see how much you've grown!”

Various rectangular arenas shot up from the ground surrounded by mana barriers. Each one had a different theme like a desert, forest, sea, or cave.

The story had progressed in an entirely different manner from the original plot, but I remained calm. I mean, the storyline had already been screwed up beyond repair like Jin Sahyuk's appearance.

“We will start in thirty minutes! Proceed to warm up!”

I decided to compose myself and do some light stretches.

On the other hand, representatives from each guild sat in the VIP viewing box located at the auditorium's top section. These prestigious guilds had been granted a sneak peek into Cube.

"There are quite a lot..." Yun Seung-Ah grumbled as she hadn't expected a crowd.

She expected most of them to ignore such a small event since guilds were usually busy during this time of the season, but everyone dropped what they were doing and came running. This could only mean one thing.

'This year's cadets must be quite promising,' she thought.

"That's because the average potential of these cadets is quite promising even if you exclude Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak," Yi Jun, Yun Seung-Ah's subordinate, replied while busily typing on his laptop.

Yun Seung-Ah stole a glance around the VIP viewing box. A lot of world-renowned guilds had come, like Essence of the Straits, Desolate Moon, Frost Sanctuary, General, Rothschild, etc.

However, a hooded person among them caught her eye.

"Who is that?"

Yi Jun looked at the hooded person before shaking his head, "I have no idea. Perhaps Cube specially invited that person?"

"Hmm... You think so? Well, that's the only explanation, I guess..."
Yun Seung-Ah shrugged it off and turned to the auditorium.

The auditorium bustled with nearly a thousand cadets, but only half of them would survive the test.

"Nice to meet all of you. Thank you for making this event an even brighter one," a hero appeared at the entrance and greeted the viewers.

Seo Youngji had been sent by the association to assist Cube. She was

also quite skilled at handling the VIPs.

“Due to the monster invasion that occurred last time, Cube has decided to abandon its stubborn educational policies and allow outsiders to... (omitted)... so we have decided to seek your guidance on the specialization of our cadets. Also, you may find a brief introduction of our cadets in this pamphlet.”

Yun Seung-Ah took out the pamphlet and scanned through it. This pamphlet provided by Cube could arguably be considered a treasure trove of information for guilds.

“There are two main characters. It seems they had a hard time choosing only one.”

As expected, the main characters were Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak. These two handsome boys stood side by side and made the pamphlet look like a photo shoot with models.

She turned to the next page and found Chae Nayun, Rachel, Yoo Yeonha, Yi Yeonghan, Kim Horak, Yi Jiyeon, Shen Wuiyan, Miyamoto Yohei, etc. Not only guilds, but even the entertainment industry would covet these cadets.

“*Hmm?*” An interesting name caught Yun Seung-Ah’s eye.

The name didn’t appear on any particularly interesting page.

■ 934. *Kim Hajin* (金河珍)

— *Gunner*

— *Cube’s only mutant this year.*

A gunner sounded interesting.

“Oh, this guy even has a picture.”

The last bunch in the rankings usually only had a few words to

describe them, but rank 934 Kim Hajin had a picture of him holding a pistol. The impact of him beating Kim Horak during the midterm exam left a lasting impression on everyone.

Well, that duel had been impressive on account of Kim Horak's stupidity and Kim Hajin's craftiness.

"What do you think about that gunner?" Yi Jun asked while typing on his laptop.

"Who knows? I just find him interesting. That's all. It's interesting if his gift uses guns, right?"

The gun didn't have a long history and not a single gun-related gift had ever appeared among heroes. It would be interesting if Kim Hajin possessed a gun-related gift because he would be the first in the world.

"That's all, right? Nothing more than just interesting?"

"Yeah, seems like it."

"The first test will now commence," Seo Youngji announced.

Every eye in the viewing box darted towards the auditorium after her announcement. Yun Seung-Ah busily browsed through the pamphlet and instantly shifted her gaze to the auditorium.

However, something kept bothering her and she suddenly glanced sideways.

The mysterious hooded person continued looking down at the pamphlet even as the test began.

"Oh, Vice Leader. It's Chae Nayun," Yi Jun said.

Yun Seung-Ah looked back to the auditorium at his words.

Chae Nayun walked up to the arena as a sharpshooter and leisurely

drew her bowstring. Her movements didn't contain a hint of nervousness. Instead, she kept licking her lips as if she couldn't wait for the test to start.

Everyone in the viewing box intently watched her full of expectations.

Side Stories 55

Chae Nayun (10)

Jin Sahyuk watched full of expectations, but it didn't take long for her excitement to be extinguished and replaced with disappointment.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

Gunfire filled the auditorium.

That guy just stood in place and pulled the trigger. He seemed like a nobody no matter how long she watched him.

“...”

This confused Jin Sahyuk even more.

He was definitely a good-for-nothing gunner who only knew how to pull the trigger judging from his actions, but something in her kept resonating with his existence.

“Well, his aim is quite good.”

Someone's voice flowed into her ears.

It took Jin Sahyuk a while to realize that person was talking to her. She looked sideways and saw Yun Seung-Ah smiling at her.

“That cadet's name is Kim Hajin. His gift is related to guns...” Yun Seung-Ah blabbered on while trying to be friendly.

However, Jin Sahyuk paid her no mind and only focused on that guy below.

She felt as if a wave of emotions rose from the abyss and swept her away. This strange sensation truly dumbfounded her like an ego sleeping inside her was saying...

‘You should never forget. You must repay him.’

However, Jin Sahyuk had no idea what to do and couldn’t decipher the feeling that guy gave her.

— We will now start forming groups for the specialization class!

A new voice spoke from the auditorium.

— The next class will simulate a real battle, which is the most basic skill a hero should possess!

* * *

[Everyone, gather in the Pharmacy Club room. This is an emergency.]

The next day, President Chae issued a command for everyone to gather in the club room. However, I couldn’t go from my current location.

“Why is she suddenly acting like this?” I grumbled while untangling the branches wrapped around my legs and sent her a reply.

[I can’t come.]

I continued climbing as I looked for a road through the thick vegetation.

The vegetation in Mount Geomjuk of Hamgyeong Province was quite overgrown and made it difficult to see ahead. It didn’t trouble me since I already figured out the way thanks to the Book of Truth...

“Eugh!”

That’s what I thought, but a tree root suddenly caught my foot.

Thud!

I fell face-first into the ground. Only then did I see the root binding my feet.

“What is this... *Huh?* Wait a minute...”

It didn't look like an ordinary root after a closer look. I crawled on all four to inspect it. This dirty, long root was the size of my arm with more slender legs growing from it.

“Oh my god...”

I found a wild ginseng. Not only that, this looked older than the last one I found judging from its size.

I looked around.

Gulp!

I subconsciously gulped. This wasn't the first time I got lucky and found a wild ginseng, but this was definitely the first time I came across one the size of a mandrake.

“*Huff... Huff...*”

I even used stigma to dig the wild ginseng out as carefully as possible.

* * *

Meanwhile, the Pharmacy Club members gathered in the club room while Kim Hajin busily foraged the wild ginsengs on Mount Geomjuk, which was Chae Nayun's private property.

“Why did you ask us to gather?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

She sat on the sofa and pouted to show her dissatisfaction with being summoned. It was understandable since President Chae one-sidedly called for them to gather.

Chae Nayun kept looking at her smartwatch without making any announcements.

“Ah... Damn it... why is that guy not coming?”

[I can't come.]

‘I already prepared a gift for you, so you’re the only one who loses if you don’t come. Stupid.’

“Chae Nayun?”

Only after Kim Suho called her did she finally take her eyes off the smartwatch.

“Yeah?”

“Why did you ask us to gather?”

“Oh, right. Take a look at this,” Chae Nayun said as she projected the hologram of a poster from the Hero Community.

[Neutral City-State Virance – Adventurer’s Colosseum]

This poster came from Virance, a very famous neutral city-state.

The club members stared intently at it before tilting their heads in confusion.

“First place gets the Gautz Gauntlets? What about it? I know it’s a famous artifact, but only Yi Yeonghan uses fists among us.”

“Ah! Chae Nayun you... just for me?!”

“Ah, damn it. Do you have a death wish? Not that one, look at the second place prize.”

The club members slightly lowered their gaze on the poster. The second place prize had quite a unique name.

“Soul Mana Vermillion... Ah, this one?” Yoo Yeonha said with a smirk.

However, Kim Suho and Yi Yonghan still seemed clueless. Shin Jonghak pretended to know when he also had no clue.

“*Sigh*... How can you guys call yourselves members of the Pharmacy Club when you don’t even know what this is? It’s an orb with a spirit and mana concentration. Can’t you see? It’s an extremely precious medicine. I saw it on the almanac.”

‘Chae Nayun? Almanac?’

Those two polar opposite words rendered Yoo Yeonha speechless.

“But Nayun, how do you plan to win?” she asked.

“How else? I just have to participate in the colosseum, right?”

“What? Are you crazy?” Yoo Yeonha frowned at her words.

Chae Nayun’s declaration also surprised Yi Yeonghan, Kim Suho, and Shin Jonghak.

However, she seemed confident for some reason.

“Why? I don’t think it’s impossible. We just have to place second, right? I hope you guys aren’t thinking that we can’t achieve that.”

“No, Nayun. You seem to be looking down on the neutral city-states too much. No, rather than that, it might be problematic if people found out we’re cadets.”

“It’s alright. They can guarantee our anonymity, so we just have to wear a mask or something. Better yet, we could all go in wearing full disguises. Also, our value will only increase if we perform well in places like this. I already asked my dad’s friends about it.”

The information would be credible if it came from Chae Shinhyuk’s

side. Not to mention, a lot of heroes saw their value jump after performing well in neutral city-states. Prime examples of this included Yoo Sihyuk and Aileen.

However, it would still be risky nonetheless.

“Sounds like it’ll be fun,” Kim Suho said.

“What are you talking about—” Yoo Yeonha retorted.

However, Shin Jonghak interrupted her, “Sounds good to me. It was starting to get boring since I couldn’t find a match in Cube. I think it’ll be a great opportunity to test my skills against other people from neutral city-states.”

Yoo Yeonha felt appalled by Shin Jonghak for the first time in her life after hearing his bluff.

Regardless of how she felt, three of them already agreed. Only she and Yi Yeonghan remained. She glared at Yi Yeonghan, who flinched in response. It didn’t look like he opposed the idea. He probably felt more optimistic about it as a fist user because of the Gautz Gauntlets.

Yoo Yeonha glared at Chae Nayun with a dissatisfied look before finally conceding, “Then, when are we leaving?”

“When? Of course, it’ll be this Thursday,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly replied.

Yoo Yeonha frowned at Chae Nayun with quite a scary expression.

* * *

I was forced to join the Pharmacy Club on Thursday after our theory class ended. No, to be more accurate, they abducted me.

Chae Nayun said I had no choice since I missed the last club meeting. She abducted me from the gym and shoved me into an SUV. Then we headed off to the large portal at Cube to travel to China.

“So this is a Goldwood.”

The Pharmacy Club supervisor, Seo Youngji, also came with us. She admired the Goldwood SUV, which actually resembled diamond more than gold. She gripped the steering wheel with trembling hands.

“I’m going to drive now... Is it really fine for someone like me to drive a gorgeous beast like you?” she muttered like a crazy person before stepping on the accelerator. The Goldwood SUV fiercely, yet gently sped away.

“Oh right, Yoo Yeonha. You’re going against Kim Hajin, right?” Chae Nayun asked with a smirk.

As she said, I got matched against Yoo Yeonha in one-on-one combat for the specialization class.

“Yeah... it just turned out that way,” Yoo Yeonha nonchalantly replied while stealing glances at me.

“Go easy on me,” I added.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t say anything and only bit her lower lip. She seemed dissatisfied with the match-up.

Of course, a match between a supporter and a sharpshooter would always be uneven since a supporter usually hid behind the warrior. However, Cube wanted to test the supporters’ abilities if the warrior died. Besides, Yoo Yeonha was one of the rare cadets in Cube who could serve as a supporter and sharpshooter.

In short, Yoo Yeonha would be an insurmountable wall for someone like me. Our ranks were way too far apart. I was ranked 934 while she ranked in the single digits.

“You should be the one going easy on me.”

“No, I’ll treat it as a life and death situation. You should go easy on

me though.”

“Ha... Unbelievable...” Yoo Yeonha scoffed and looked out the window.

“I should quickly finish my match and come watch you two,” Chae Nayun snickered without letting go of the game device in her hands.

The SUV ran without a hitch for hours until we reached our destination.

“That’s... that’s the city...” Seo Youngji muttered. She became too excited after driving the Goldwood for six hours and seemed out of it.

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened in surprise and she asked, “We’re already here?”

“Yeah... this car is... too good...” Seo Youngji replied with a disoriented look. Her eyes caressed every inch of the car.

“Ah... Alright... let’s get out.”

The club members exited the car at President Chae’s order and Seo Youngji went to park the SUV.

“Wow... who knew a city could exist in the middle of nowhere?”

Chae Nayun’s description of the city-state was quite accurate. Virance had been built in the middle of a desert like Las Vegas, but they chose traditional architecture instead of modern designs. High-rise buildings could hardly be seen here. Most buildings had been built with bricks instead of concrete.

“Let’s go. Follow me,” Chae Nayun confidently led the way and we followed closely behind.

We couldn’t help but feel nervous approaching a city situated on the border of a danger zone. However, China was nearby and this place had enough visitors that they didn’t require any strict inspections like New Alliance.

Thanks to that, we entered the city without a hitch.

“Let’s head straight to the colosseum and register before anything else,” Chae Nayun said.

I slowed down and leisurely looked around. People crowded the streets. Most of them carried weapons on their waists or backs. They all looked like mercenaries.

“This city is famous for mercenaries.”

“Ack! You surprised me!”

“Ack!”

Seo Youngji appeared out of nowhere and surprised us.

“Ah... You’re really fast...”

“The leader of this city is a madman, so nobody dares to stir up trouble here.”

“Oh, I see.”

Everyone, including myself, understood what she meant.

The Hunters of Madness ruled this city, so nobody dared to pick a fight. I didn’t create this story setting, but easily understood her warning.

“Then, shall we head to the hotel?” Seo Youngji said before flashing a shiny card that contained the Pharmacy Club’s stipend.

“We can stay anywhere and even book one room per person,” Seo Youngji smiled and led us to a luxurious hotel called [*Angel’s Sanctuary*].

We immediately left the hotel after unpacking due to Chae Nayun’s pestering.

“We only have an hour left before the public transportation stops. Hurry and walk faster!” Chae Nayun shouted from the front.

Stomp! Stomp! Stomp! Stomp!

We ran with Chae Nayun in the lead until we spotted a crowd at the city square.

I slowed to a halt.

“Everyone! Time to place your bets! Who will emerge victorious this season in the colosseum? The minimum bet starts at one million Korean won!”

The city square featured a big board surrounded by bookies collecting money from people and handing out receipts.

I could tell from a glance that this was the place to gamble in regards to the colosseum. I tiptoed towards the betting board and looked around.

“Hey, Kim Hajin,” Chae Nayun called me.

She squatted in front of a street peddler.

“Look at this,” she pointed to a wolf cub and played with it as it barked.

“Should we raise one?”

“...”

I checked the cub’s breed. It was a black wolf, which wasn’t that special.

“Why?”

“This looks like you. It has eyes, a nose, and ears. Its hair is also black like yours.”

“Is that what looking alike means nowadays?”

Going by her logic, the wolf cub probably had five hundred million other people it looked like.

“Is that so?” Chae Nayun replied and hugged the wolf cub. She already planned to buy it.

“...?”

She extended the wolf cub towards me and motioned for me to hug it.

I suddenly noticed two hooded figures in the distance as Chae Nayun tried to shove the wolf cub into my arms. They wore black robes that covered their entire bodies and their hoods also covered their faces. They walked on the street without sparing a glance at anything.

However, I sensed a dangerous aura from them and peered through their disguises.

“...”

I could see their faces and recognized them from the midterm exam. They probably also came for the colosseum.

One of them suddenly stopped and looked around. It seemed he felt my gaze.

“Hey.”

“*Huh?* What?”

I pulled Chae Nayun’s arm towards me. I didn’t even pull that hard, but she ended up hitting her head on my chest and embracing me.

“W-What is this... *Kya!*”

I pulled her into an alley as the sudden turn of events surprised her. I treated her a bit rough, but Chae Nayun easily came along as if letting

herself be taken.

“Stay still for a moment.”

“*H-Huh?* W-Why?”

I pushed Chae Nayun against the alley wall and placed a finger on her lips while motioning, ‘*Shh!*’

Fortunately, Chae Nayun didn’t ask any questions and obediently listened.

I patiently waited until those two disappeared from view. It would be problematic if they saw me since we met during the midterm exam.

“...”

“...”

Thankfully, they left without any particular reactions. I finally sighed in relief and let go of Chae Nayun.

“Who is it this time?” I grumbled after spotting another group of robed people.

Around twenty of them walked in single file. Most of them were djinns and probably belonged to one of the evil organizations.

Our chances of winning would greatly diminish if they also participated in the colosseum event.

— Hey, do you think we can make any money out of this?

— Don’t worry. I already did my research and we have an 80% chance of winning.

— What about the remaining 20%?

— Just shut up and stop being a worry wart.

However, their goal was just to bet. A strict rule prohibited anyone and their friends from participating if they had placed a bet.

“Mmph... mmm... haaang...”

Suddenly, I heard someone moaning. I looked down and saw steam rising from Chae Nayun’s head. I wasn’t exaggerating. Actual steam came out of her head.

“Oh...”

I finally realized that I stuck too close, but why did she react like that? Was she going to throw up? Well, that would be understandable since I hadn’t showered after being abducted from the gym.

I took a few steps back and tapped her on the shoulder, “Hey, Chae Nayun.”

She looked up at me. Her eyes were out of focus and she kept biting her lips, which made me certain that she would throw up at any second.

“I’m sorry. Are you alright?” I asked.

“H... H-Huh...?”

“Are you sick?”

“W... W-Why?”

“Come on. Let’s go register.”

I left the alley and Chae Nayun obediently followed with the wolf cub in her arms.

Sniff... Sniff...

I discreetly sniffed my shirt. It did smell a bit. No, I reeked of sweat. However, I couldn’t do anything about that since this desert city was

incredibly hot.

Side Stories 56

Chae Nayun (11)

I walked alongside Chae Nayun towards the grand structure in the distance known as the colosseum. The colosseum towered above everything else, so we didn't need to ask for any directions.

“Hey...” I carefully called out.

I couldn't help but be bothered by her. She acted strong and nonchalant, but I knew very well how sensitive and emotional she was. She was the prime example of being strong on the outside, but fragile on the inside. What happened just now would probably be enough to make her loathe someone like me.

“What, punk?” Chae Nayun responded.

Thankfully, she sounded like her usual self.

I looked back with a sigh of relief as she busily petted the wolf.

“Anyways, I'm sorry.”

“Sorry for what?”

“Just now.”

“...Did you eat something wrong?”

Our conversation was cut short as we arrived in front of the colosseum. This grand structure in the middle of the desert certainly looked like the one in Rome, but it stood even taller with a roof over it.

Kim Suho and the others waited for us near the structure.

“Hey, what took you guys so long?” he asked.

He winked at me, but I had no idea why.

Shin Jonghak rushed to Chae Nayun, who simply shoved him back and went to Yoo Yeonha.

She showed the wolf to Yoo Yeonha and asked, “Hey, what do you think of this?”

“...It’s a wolf.”

“Doesn’t it look like him?” Chae Nayun asked while pointing at me.

Yoo Yeonha looked at me and the wolf before frowning.

“Alright, is everyone here? Follow me,” Seo Youngji clapped and grabbed our attention. Then she added, “We have to register. There are a lot of people, so be careful of pickpockets.”

She was our advisor, but didn’t dissuade us from joining the colosseum. In fact, she encouraged us to participate.

Chae Nayun liked this about her and replied with an affirmative yes before skipping away like a child.

“But hero Seo Youngji... Can we really do this? Do we have a chance?” Yoo Yeonha asked while walking behind Seo Youngji.

She seemed against the whole idea unlike Chae Nayun, who happily skipped in front.

“*Hmm...* I don’t think you don’t stand a chance. Besides, the colosseum has a rookie bonus system. The second place reward, Soul Mana Vermillion, will only be awarded to rookies,” Seo Youngji replied.

“*Hmpf...*” Yoo Yeonha pouted.

Meanwhile, the party reached the registration area and everyone received a registration form except for Seo Youngji.

“You don’t have to write anything else aside from your alias and your type of weapon. You can think of your alias as something like a game ID,” the registrar explained.

I immediately finished my form and handed it to the registrar.

[Alias: X-Man. Weapon: Firearm.]

“The registration fee is one million Korean won per person,” the registrar added after receiving my form.

“Here you go.”

Chae Nayun stepped up and gave six million won to the registrar to cover the unexpected costs.

“I have confirmed your registrations. Please take one card each.”

We received our cards with our respective aliases along with nine thousand points.

“*Huh?* Did you copy me?” Chae Nayun tapped on my shoulder and showed me her card.

Her nickname was *[JaJangMan]*.

“...What the hell is that?” I frowned and questioned her strange naming sense.

However, the registrar interrupted us before Chae Nayun had the chance to retort.

“Alright, I will explain how your card works. You will be fighting in the colosseum and will gain points every time you win. You may use your points to purchase things within the colosseum or convert them for cash once you leave. The participant with the highest points at the

end of the month will receive the *[Gautz Gauntlet]* as a reward. Of course, the points and rewards are different. Just because you win the reward does not mean we'll be taking your points. Do you understand?"

All of us nodded at the registrar's explanation. Honestly, I had no idea how the specifics worked, but everything here seemed to operate with a well-thought-out system.

"Then, please enter before five in the afternoon tomorrow," the registrar added.

We turned around after receiving our cards.

Seo Youngji smirked and said, "Amazing, right? Varance is quite well-known and affluent among the neutral cities. You'll get to see a lot of amazing things here. If New Alliance was a place for you to rest and recover, then this is the place for you to spend your money."

Chae Nayun went, *Aha*, as if she understood what Seo Youngji meant. Then she asked, "You seem quite knowledgeable about this."

"Yeah, I've participated in the colosseum a few times as a cadet. Forget about that. It'll start tomorrow, so you should enjoy today," Seo Youngji smiled and pulled out a credit card in a flashy, yet pointless manner.

The Dahyun corporation gave us this credit card for the trip and not even Chae Nayun knew how much it contained.

* * *

I looked out my hotel room window. It had a good view of the swimming pool and party hall. The lighting around the hotel grounds brightly shone under the darkening sky. I slightly opened the window as laughter and music flowed into my room.

I wondered if those people were really happy. Did they live without fear of their fellow humans, who suddenly turned into superhumans? I mean, could they simply accept that fact and not be bothered that another person could kill them with the slight wave of a hand?

Knock... Knock...

Someone knocked on the door and interrupted my meaningless train of thought. I didn't bother opening the door or responding, but the door opened anyway.

Everyone, except for Shin Jonghak and Seo Youngji, came into my room.

"...What do you all want?" I asked.

"Nothing much. It's our free time and we were bored, so we came to play some cards," Chae Nayun replied with an awkward smile.

"But where are the other two?"

"They said they're going out sightseeing."

"Really?"

Shin Jonghak seemed to be spending quite a lot of time with Seo Youngji these days. Could something be going on between them?

Chae Nayun and Kim Suho sat at the table and shuffled the deck while Yoo Yeonha sat on the sofa and checked something on her smartwatch.

"Why a game of cards all of a sudden?" I asked with some suspicion.

Chae Nayun tilted her head in confusion, "Why? You don't know how to play? I know you're good at it."

"No, that's not it..."

Did these four innocent kids (Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, Yi Yeonghan, and Kim Suho) know what they were getting into by challenging me?

"None of you... will be able to beat me," I said in a cocky, yet confident manner.

“Ha! Have you ever played?” Yoo Yeonha retorted with a scoff.

The perfect saying to describe her attitude was probably, *‘Fools rush in where angels fear to tread.’*

“Yeah, I’ve never lost in my life.”

“Then today is the day you’ll taste your first defeat,” Yoo Yeonha opened the briefcase she brought and took out the chips.

She looked confident as she divided the chips and probably thought all of it would come back to her in the end.

“By the way, these are real chips I bought from a hotel casino. It probably adds up to one hundred million won. I originally wanted to play at a real casino, but I guess we have to make do with this. I’ll divide this into five for each of us. Just consider it a small loan from me,” Yoo Yeonha said with her usual air of haughtiness.

“Oh, this is getting fun! Let’s play!” Chae Nayun exclaimed and further instigated the situation.

I didn’t know if it was because of the wolf pup running around the room, but Chae Nayun seemed excited about everything.

“Alright... don’t regret it if you go broke though. Hold on. One hundred million won is one year of your allowance, right?” I asked.

“What are you talking about... Wait a minute. How do you know how much my allowance is?!” Yoo Yeonha exclaimed in surprise.

“I didn’t?”

“...What the hell?”

Anyways, she really did scrape up her annual allowance and converted it into chips.

I sat at the table intending to suck her dry. It only took slightly over

an hour for the game to end.

As expected, every single chip ended up in front of me.

“Wow... What just happened?”

“Does that mean I have to pay twenty million won to Kim Hajin? That’s a bit much... You’re going to cut me some slack, right?”

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan seemed to be in disbelief over what just happened while Yoo Yeonha was in a daze with her mouth wide open. It looked as if cracks would form all over her and she would crumble if someone poked her.

Chae Nayun threw the cards on the table and grumbled, “*Ah*, fuck... It’s annoying to keep losing. Hey, Kim Hajin. I’m hungry. Let’s go and eat something.”

“...I’ll just cook for you guys. I mean, I just won a hundred million won from all of you. It’s the least I can do.”

Yoo Yeonha flinched in response, but I ignored her and went to cook.

“Wow, really? Are you sure? I don’t mind if you do,” Chae Nayun replied.

My cooking skills already reached the pinnacle thanks to my Dazzling Dexterity. I confidently took out my cooking set from my bag and started cooking.

“*Whoa... Sniff! sniff!* That smells really good... *Sseup! Sniff! Sniff!*”

Chae Nayun sneaked behind me and rested her chin on my shoulder as she sniffed the aroma.

I looked at her while marinating the meat and asked, “Are you a dog? Why are you sniffing like that? Can you get off me?”

“*Sniff! Sniff! Sniff! Sniff!*” Chae Nayun completely ignored me and

continued sniffing like a dog with a huge grin.

Meanwhile, the sound of someone lamenting, “My money... my precious money...” could be heard from one corner of the room.

* * *

The next day, we left right away in the afternoon. Of course, we headed to the colosseum.

“What’s our goal? It’s the Soul Mana Vermillion. Don’t forget that,” Chae Nayun said.

She gathered us into a huddle and gave a pep talk, but everyone aside from Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan seemed annoyed by her antics.

Yoo Yeonha, the biggest loser from last night who lost a ridiculous three hundred million won, looked like a soulless panda with big dark circles under her eyes.

“It should be fine if I place first, right?” Shin Jonghak said as he put on airs.

“Yeah, it’s fine. Either I or Kim Suho will place second if you win first anyways,” Chae Nayun replied with a shrug.

“*Hmm...* I guess you’re right,” Shin Jonghak replied with a confident smirk.

Chae Nayun became quite skilled at handling Shin Jonghak.

On the other hand, I felt nervous as opposed to the confident trio of Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, and Kim Suho.

They did mention that participants could concede during the match, so I shouldn’t die at least.

“The entrance will soon open! All participants! Please gather around!” one of the staff members shouted by the gates when the clock struck

five o'clock.

The people loitering around gathered. Some came to support their friends, some entered in parties just like us, and others covered their faces with hoods, etc.

We also wore the masks we had prepared beforehand and entered the colosseum.

“Hey, looks like we’ll be split up. Good luck everyone! I’ll kill you if you get eliminated!” Chae Nayun shouted.

“Pharmacy Club, fighting!”

“...My precious money.”

Only one corridor appeared at first, but it soon divided into multiple.

I walked for around five minutes before a woman appeared in front of me.

“Hello, I am your manager, Riyu! May you please give me your card?”

“Ah, sure.”

I looked at her pink hair in amazement before handing her my card.

She brightly smiled and took it before saying, “It’s nice to meet you. Let’s see... X-Man... your weapon is... a firearm?”

Her bubbly personality and jolly voice suddenly went down a notch. She blinked a few times while staring at my card and her expression turned into an obviously disappointed one.

“Firearm means...”

I showed her my Desert Eagle, “Yes, a gun.”

“Ah...”

Riyu didn't say anything after that and I leaned against the corridor wall.

She turned away and put a hand on her ear. Then she whispered, "Yes... yes... a gun... I think he's a mercenary... Yes... as soon as possible..."

It seemed that people looked down on guns even at the colosseum. Well, I didn't have any qualms with that since I was way below the likes of Shin Jonghak and Kim Suho. I simply smiled at the fiasco.

"Excuse me, X-Man? Please follow me. I'll quickly process everything," Riyu said.

She initially addressed me politely, but immediately downgraded me afterwards. I had no problems with that since it was somewhat true. I actually liked it since she seemed willing to fast-track the process and get it over with.

I followed her through the corridor until we arrived at a dome-shaped area.

"Oh, right. I should explain the rules since you're a rookie," she said.

"Yes."

Riyu sighed as if she found it to be cumbersome.

"There are one hundred twenty-seven arenas within the colosseum divided into their respective ranks. Sixty-four of them are the lowest, thirty-two are low, sixteen are low-mid, eight are mid, four are mid-high, two are high, and the last remaining one is the highest. It's up to the participants to decide which arena they want to fight in, but all rookies are limited to the low-mid arenas at most. Do you understand? Go on in if you do."

She finished her rude explanation and I stepped into the colosseum.

"What the hell is this?" I grumbled as pitch-black darkness surrounded me.

The lights installed in the ceiling suddenly turned on and illuminated the darkness.

— The brave contender who came here with only a single gun, X-Man!

The voice reminded me of wrestling matches and suddenly blasted across the arena as it introduced me to the crowd. Only then did the darkness disappear.

I looked around and saw around one hundred spectators in the huge arena large enough to seat three thousand people.

No one among the spectators was cheering or hooting. They just scratched their heads and looked at me as if I was a strange creature.

— First match!

Thud!

The caged door on the other side opened and a pair of aggressive eyes brightly shone from the darkness.

“Grrr...!”

A threatening growl could be heard as a two meter tall creature with green skin and a muscular body walked out.

“Oh, it’s an orc,” I muttered as I prepared my Desert Eagle.

I changed my Desert Eagle into a shotgun with the help of aether.

— Will X-Man win against the orc?!

“Krrwaaagh!” the orc let out a deafening cry and rushed at me.

I could only thank the orc for closing the distance between us.

Bang!

I pulled the trigger and my shotgun blew up the orc. A deafening silence filled the arena.

— S-Second match!

The second monster was a draco, a lizard that walked on two legs and possessed tough skin.

It stomped its large feet on the ground to threaten me and seemed to be around rank 9 judging from its size.

However, I simply pulled the trigger again.

Whoosh!

The monster quickly moved and dodged the bullets, but I already anticipated its next two moves. Two shotgun shells ended up in its abdomen.

The draco died and the crowd remained silent.

“Hey, who the hell is that guy? Why is everything dying from one hit? Is that even a gun?” someone in the crowd asked.

— Third match!

Thud! Thud! Thud! Thud!

The ground shook as something big came out from the door. I instinctively recognized the monster from the tremor it caused. It was definitely an ogre.

The crowd finally grew excited after seeing the ogre.

I prepared myself and infused stigma into my bullets.

“Gwaaaaah! Rwaaaaah!”

The ogre rushed at me like a maniac as soon as it stepped into the

arena.

I infused stigma into my feet and jumped when it swung its club. Then I aimed my shotgun at the monster and pulled the trigger.

Bang!

The bullets infused with the fire attribute exploded when they struck the ogre's head. This immediately stopped the monster from moving.

“Gwa...! Gwaa... Grrrwaaaaah!”

The ogre trembled in agony, but I didn't let my guard down. After all, an ogre was still an ogre.

I transformed my shotgun into a machine gun and unleashed a bullet shower from a safe distance. The strengthened bullets had no problem piercing the ogre's thick hide.

“Grr... Krruoh... Grrrwaaaaah!”

The ogre wildly swung its club in every direction, but it would never be able to hit me because my first attack had already burned its eyes away.

* * *

My manager guided me to the common lounge after the match ended.

“This is the common lounge, X-Man. There's a separate rest area for winners, so please feel free to rest before your next match,” Riyu said.

“Ah, sure...”

The pink-haired Riyu suddenly addressed me with the utmost respect again.

Anyways, the common lounge had various amenities like couches, computers, and a bar.

I sat on the couch and waited for my teammates. Around ten minutes passed before someone wearing a fox mask came into the common lounge.

“It’s me, codename: JaJangMan.”

“I know even if you don’t tell me.”

“Show me your card.”

I compared my card with Chae Nayun’s. She had three hundred points more than me.

“Okay, I just have to maintain enough to place second until the end of the month, right?”

“Yeah, that’s correct.”

The colosseum only went on for a month and we would probably have to go back in the middle of it for our midterms exam...

The common lounge door opened again and a group of hooded figures came in.

I immediately used Hacking to figure out their identities. The crowd was made up of evil djinns, mercenaries, sophomore Cube cadets, etc.

Fortunately, the person I was wary of didn’t show up.

“Hey...” Chae Nayun called out.

I turned to her.

“So I was saying, we have to use our points sparingly if we want to maintain our rank, right? I was thinking...”

It looked like she had something to say, but kept hesitating and bit her lips. She started mumbling gibberish.

“Ah... Uw... Uh...”

“What are you trying to say? Just hurry up and spit it out.”

“Ah... That’s...”

The way she acted frustrated me, but she soon calmed her breathing and composed herself.

“Let’s sleep in the same room to save up,” she said.

She blurted out a barrage of words before I could even respond.

“I gave it some thought and we have to save our points to place second in the rankings and obtain the reward. However, we have to save up quite a bit to do that. I was thinking it would definitely help if we shared instead of wasting points on separate rooms.”

Side Stories 57

Chae Nayun (12)

"Haaa..." Chae Nayun sighed as she lay on the sofa.

She mustered the courage to make her proposal. Fortunately, Kim Hajin agreed that it was a great idea and accepted.

"I actually thought we would go up against other people, so I was really nervous."

"Me too. I was slightly nervous as well."

Yi Yeonghan and Kim Suho respectively spoke while lying on the floor.

Yoo Yeonha also sat beside them. She wore a wrist protector, ankle protector, waist protector, and magic rings. Indeed, she lived up to her name as a gear maniac with her entire body covered in artifacts.

Anyways...

Kim Hajin misunderstood Chae Nayun's offer as having everyone in one room instead of just the two of them.

"Ah... Annoying... Argh! Annoying! Damn it!" Chae Nayun cried out.

"Hey, what's wrong with you?"

"GRRWAAAH!" Chae Nayun suddenly started screaming and stomping her feet.

Kim Hajin was meditating a distance away and opened his eyes. He glared at her because of the commotion.

“That little...”

Chae Nayun thought he should’ve picked up on the subtle hints by now, but she realized that was unlikely because of their relationship at this point. The fact that they were currently in the same club was already a miracle since they weren’t on good terms yet.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she asked.

Kim Hajin turned towards her, but didn’t say anything. Instead, he handed her the announcement written on his card.

[Choose One – Battle or Hurdle]

“What’s that?”

“It’s what we have to do next. We need to choose one. Why don’t you check your card?”

Chae Nayun took her card out of her pocket.

It seemed that ‘*Battle*’ meant an actual battle against another person and ‘*Hurdle*’ meant they would have to fight against a certain situation.

“*Hmm...* Do we have to choose one or the other? Hey, what are you guys choosing?” Chae Nayun asked.

“I’m going for battle. I should probably use this opportunity to gain some real-life combat experience,” Yi Yeonghan said as he shot his hand up.

Kim Suho contemplated for a moment before deciding to go with battle too.

Chae Nayun glanced at Kim Hajin and asked, “Hey, Kim Hajin. What are you going for?”

“Why?”

“I want to choose the opposite of what you choose.”

Kim Hajin tilted his head in confusion.

Chae Nayun continued with a disgruntled look, “We can’t meet as enemies, right? Stupid...”

Everyone looked at Chae Nayun.

Yi Yeonghan frowned and Kim Suho did the same.

“Wow... what is she doing right now? Is she being considerate? I swear she was ready to beat us to death, but not Kim Hajin?”

“I know, right?”

Chae Nayun instinctively reacted when the duo put on a sleazy smile and teased her. She grabbed the pillow beside her and threw it at their faces. The pillow struck Yi Yeonghan before bouncing off and striking Kim Suho too.

“I’m going for the hurdle...” Kim Hajin said in a small voice.

Chae Nayun nodded, “Okay, I’ll go for battle then.”

Then she looked at Yoo Yeonha, who remained deep in thought.

Yoo Yeonha finally replied, “I think I’ll go for the hurdle too.”

* * *

I entered the hurdle the next day. The hurdle was a bit, no, quite a unique place.

“...Is this the Amazon or what?”

Lush overgrown vegetation surrounded me and large trees that I couldn’t identify towered above. The environment felt humid and the hot breeze caressing my skin made me uncomfortable.

“Ah... This is starting to annoy me...”

I looked at that card from the colosseum. The manager told me that most of the things happening here would be recorded on the card.

To my surprise, the card did contain a message.

[You will gain more points the longer you survive...]

The sentence stopped halfway. Maybe the card malfunctioned because it was too hot here? I placed it back in my pocket and began walking.

“...Just how big is this arena?” I wondered while walking.

I walked and walked and walked.

I was covered in sweat after two hours due to the crazy humidity and the fact that it was quite difficult to walk through this mushy terrain.

“This heat is going to kill me sooner or later...”

However, I actually preferred this. It was worth a shot if all I had to do was survive without having to fight anyone. My card malfunctioned, so I had no idea how long I had to stay here. I needed to find some food if I wanted to survive.

I pulled out my dagger and headed towards the swamp to catch some alligators.

“Kwaaah! Krrwaaaah! Brrruaaararararah!”

“...”

Two dinosaurs fought each other in the swamp.

I instinctively retreated as far back from the swamp as possible. Then I spotted an alligator. Well, it seemed more like a lizard the size of an alligator.

“Kireuk!”

The creature hissed at me and I immediately threw my dagger. It flew like a bullet before piercing between the creature’s eyes.

The dagger moved by itself and dug into the creature’s brain. This combo was a synergy between *[Dazzling Dexterity]* and *[Master Sharpshooter]*.

“Haaa...”

I skinned the lizard and deboned its meat with the dagger. Next, I tanned its hide with stigma. The lizard’s tough hide instantly turned soft like the ones sold in the market. Then, I processed it with *[Dazzling Dexterity]*.

[Lizard Leather Bag] [Intermediate Rank]

— A bag made from lizard leather, skinned and tanned on the spot. It has numerous features and can be considered a luxury item.

[Intermediate Rank Preserve Freshness]

[Low Rank Weight Reduction]

The results satisfied me considering I used half of my mana. I placed the meat into the bag and began walking again.

Around three hours passed.

“Ukiki! Ukiki!”

I spotted a monkey swinging from tree to tree.

“Hold on...”

I realized something. This place filled with towering trees meant it was no different from a... parkour heaven.

I immediately climbed a tree and began jumping from one to another so fast that it looked like I was gliding through the air.

“Hmm?”

A familiar figure caught my eye as I sped through the trees.

Yoo Yeonha held her whip against six men wielding swords. I had no idea what was going on, but the atmosphere between them didn't look good.

I stopped on top of a tree and transformed my Desert Eagle into a sniper rifle.

The men channeled their mana and charged at Yoo Yeonha.

I aimed at them and pulled the trigger.

Pshwoo! Pshwoo! Pshwoo!

The entire situation de-escalated before Yoo Yeonha could even swing her whip.

“...What happened just now?” she muttered while looking around in disbelief.

I snapped a branch off the tree and threw it at her. The branch flew in an arc before hitting her forehead.

Tak!

“Hiyaak!” she screamed and jumped as if something electrocuted her.

The blow wasn't strong enough to kill her, but it seemed I threw it a bit too hard and she stood there rubbing her forehead.

I lightly jumped off the tree and landed behind her.

“Hey.”

“Hiiieeek!”

We had been here for close to eight hours. Yoo Yeonha seemed mentally exhausted as she shrieked in horror and jumped when I called her.

I found the sight quite funny. It looked like she had been struck by lightning.

* * *

Sixteen hours passed since we arrived in the jungle and the sky began to darken.

Yoo Yeonha sat on a tree stump and stared at the campfire, but it made her uncomfortable because the flames danced and hissed like a lizard.

“So... the spectators are watching us from somewhere?” she asked.

“They should be,” Kim Hajin replied.

“I feel like a victim of voyeurism... Such perverts...”

“At least your face is covered.”

Yoo Yeonha wore a fox mask that anyone would call a cat mask, but she insisted it was a fox.

“Haa... I wonder what part of this is a hurdle?”

“Stop whining and eat this,” Kim Hajin retorted and passed her some food.

Yoo Yeonha looked down at the food on a big leaf that he used as a plate.

It looked like normal meatballs, but she knew it was made from mushed lizard meat. It looked normal on the outside, but lizard

meat... lizard meat... she was supposed to eat lizard meat... she had no choice but to eat it if she wanted to survive... but lizard meat...

Yoo Yeonha sighed and picked up a meatball. She closed her eyes and bravely put one in her mouth.

“...!”

Her eyes slowly lost strength before opening again as the lizard meat caressed her tongue.

“*Hang...!*” she let out an unintentional moan before quickly covering her mouth in surprise.

Kim Hajin laughed and asked, “Is it good?”

“*Hmpf!* Beats me...”

“Then don’t eat it.”

“*Ah!* It’s good! It’s delicious! It’s so good that I would buy them if it’s sold at the market...”

Yoo Yeonha’s pride took a hit, but the meatball definitely tasted delicious. She gobbled up every meatball that Kim Hajin gave her.

“Do we have any leftovers?” she asked.

“Do you want more?”

“No, I was just asking. We’ll have to throw away the leftovers, right?”

“I can just smoke them and keep them for tomorrow.”

“*Hiing...*” Yoo Yeonha suppressed her disappointment.

Kim Hajin was truly a jack of all trades. He easily built a shack using cordage made from animal tendons, knitted leaves together to form a roof, and made makeshift walls out of tree bark. He did all this on top

of cooking those perfect meatballs despite their environment.

Yoo Yeonha couldn't help but feel bothered by how capable and crafty he was. She wondered when he had the time to learn all these survival skills.

Honestly, she already realized the answer to that question a long time ago. He must've learned all of this while trying to survive in this world. He must've suffered unimaginable loneliness and faced numerous hardships alone.

In the end, the countless trials and tribulations the world threw at him failed to kill him and only made him stronger. He must be so level-headed thanks to surviving in this world alone.

Kim Hajin mistook Yoo Yeonha's silence as her falling asleep and said, "Go sleep up there if you're going to sleep. It's quite comfortable up there."

"I'm not sleeping," she retorted.

Ironically, she began feeling sleepy right afterwards. It was then that the thicket behind her suddenly rustled.

Yoo Yeonha felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up and goosebumps spread all over her body. She sensed strong killing intent from the darkness and two people soon emerged.

"..."

Both of them wore long robes and stood behind her and Kim Hajin.

Yoo Yeonha couldn't utter a word and felt a life-threatening danger just standing in their presence. The crippling fear made it seem as if the entire world froze.

On the other hand, Kim Hajin nonchalantly enjoyed his meal.

Yoo Yeonha couldn't understand how he kept enjoying his meal when those two figures appeared out of nowhere with such powerful killing

intent.

Even the two robed figures seemed taken aback by his eccentric behavior.

Thanks to that, the killing intent enveloping the area slightly subsided and Yoo Yeonha finally regained control of her body.

She plopped down on the ground and tried to catch her breath,
“*Haa... Haa... Haa...*”

Meanwhile, Kim Hajin glanced at the robed individuals. Their shadows danced around the campfire.

“Did you come looking for food?” he nonchalantly asked.

The two robed figures glanced at each other before one of them glared at Kim Hajin.

“It seems you have a good grasp of what’s going on,” one of them, a woman judging by her voice, spoke.

Yoo Yeonha looked at Kim Hajin, but he didn’t say anything in response.

“Hey... what... is she... saying?” Yoo Yeonha asked as her curiosity triumphed over the crippling fear incapacitating her.

The other robed figure, who was a man, courteously replied, “What she means is, this place isn’t the colosseum.”

“...?” Yoo Yeonha couldn’t say anything and simply looked at Kim Hajin again.

Kim Hajin still looked relaxed. He looked so peaceful that Yoo Yeonha wondered what the hell was going through his mind.

‘*Ah... We’re fucked...*’

Actually, Kim Hajin had blocked off all of his senses. It wasn't that difficult since he could use stigma for anything, so he used it to block all the sensory receptors in his body.

Kim Hajin felt his heart stop too. Yes, it literally stopped when those two appeared and he quickly made the decision to block off his senses to prevent the killing intent from causing him any further damage.

Thanks to that, his vision became quite limited and he could only make out their silhouettes. He could only faintly hear sounds now too. His sense of touch and instincts also became completely blocked off to avoid feeling even a sliver of the killing intent that the robed figures exuded.

The robed man looked down at Kim Hajin and muttered, "What a strange fellow..."

Then his eyes darted towards the lizard meatballs.

"Is that food?" he asked.

Yoo Yeonha became confused for a moment. She couldn't tell if he was referring to them as food or the meatballs.

"W-What do you mean?" Yoo Yeonha asked as her imagination ran wild with all sorts of scenarios where she ended up as human meat.

Kim Hajin suddenly asked, "Do you want a bite?"

"..."

The robed duo looked at each other. Eighteen hours had passed since they arrived here and they had starved the entire time.

"Boss?"

"I don't think we have to kill them," the so-called boss uttered spine-tingling words before sitting in front of the campfire.

Tak...! Tak...! Tak...!

Only the crackling campfire could be heard as the four of them looked at the lizard meatballs.

“...What’s going on?” Yoo Yeonha muttered in disbelief.

She felt it with her own skin that the robed duo were definitely seasoned veterans. The fact that their presence alone drove her into a corner proved that.

However, Kim Hajin seemed unaffected by them. He didn’t back down for even a second. In other words, he was confident enough to not lose against them!

“*Haaa...*” Yoo Yeonha sighed in relief.

The fact that she had a companion like him became a huge relief.

It was then.

Ding!

A message popped up on their cards.

Side Stories 58

Chae Nayun (13)

— The winner! The new rising super rookie, JaJangMan!

The ring announcer shouted and raised Chae Nayun's hand. The crowd went crazy after she won her third consecutive victory.

“Yes, thank you! Thank you!” Chae Nayun nonchalantly brushed it off.

The matches didn't excite her much. After all, a bunch of rookies stood no chance against her when she regressed with all of her combat experience. Most of her opponents couldn't even exchange a proper blow before being beaten to the ground.

“Great work, JaJangMan! See you next week at the colosseum!”

“Yeah, sure. See you.”

Chae Nayun and her manager greeted each other before she left the colosseum.

She stretched after finally getting a breath of fresh air. Then she looked around her surroundings. The desert's blue hue looked beautiful at dawn.

“Hey! Hey, Chae Nayun!”

Someone suddenly called her.

Chae Nayun turned around and saw Yi Yeonghan rushing towards her while huffing and puffing. He held a piece of paper in his hand.

“Why? What's up?” Chae Nayun asked.

“Hey, hey, hey! Something big happened!” Yi Yeonghan exclaimed in response.

“What is it?”

“A problem! A huge problem!”

Chae Nayun tilted her head in confusion.

Kim Suho appeared behind Yi Yeonghan with a serious expression too.

“Take a look at this...” Yi Yeonghan showed her the paper in his hand.

[Red Notice: Wanted]

Name: Derio Rekru

Age: 33

Bounty: Three billion won (Dead or Alive)

It had a picture of a man in his thirties who looked like a drug addict. Aside from that, the poster looked like any other wanted poster.

“What about this? This is that guy, right?” Chae Nayun asked.

“You know who this is?” Yi Yeonghan asked in response.

“Of course, I do. Do you think I’m stupid or something?”

The Insane Witch Doctor, Derio Rekru. He was one of the most wanted criminals in the world and every Cube cadet had to memorize his name.

Yi Yeonghan shouted, “He’s holding the entire colosseum hostage!”

“...What bullshit are you spouting? We just left the colosseum,” Chae Nayun replied with a frown.

Kim Suho shook his head, “We weren’t affected because we chose ‘Battle’.”

“Huh?”

“All the participants who chose ‘Hurdle’ along with the spectators have gone missing.”

“...”

Chae Nayun became speechless with her mouth wide open. A fly even went into her mouth and left.

A powerful gust suddenly blew and Seo Youngji appeared. She seemed to be talking to someone on the phone.

“Yes, the neutral city-state. Derio Rekrü... yeah... yeah... *hmm...* really? Alright, I guess we have no choice. Yeah, that sounds good.”

Seo Youngji ended the call.

Chae Nayun glared at her and asked, “Was that the association? Are they coming?”

“*Hmm? Ah*, no, no. The association doesn’t get involved with neutral city-states. In return, I received approval for us to get involved. Anyways, I never imagined they would be ballsy enough to mess with the colosseum. He’s truly insane. As expected...”

Seo Youngji looked relaxed while Chae Nayun nervously bit her fingernails.

Kim Hajin and Yoo Yeonha were definitely involved if everyone who selected ‘Hurdle’ had been taken hostage.

“What should we do now?” Kim Suho asked.

Seo Youngji shrugged, “We have to think. We have to find out how that witch doctor managed to abduct the entire colosseum. Let’s wait

for a bit longer since Jonghak is on his way here.”

“...”

Chae Nayun gritted her teeth and looked at the colosseum. She tried to recall if something like this happened in the past, but realized that was futile.

“Are you worried?” Kim Suho asked.

Chae Nayun glanced at him with a smirk, “No, Kim Hajin is strong.”

That guy was definitely strong. He wouldn’t get done in by a mere witch doctor, but why did she feel so anxious and frustrated despite knowing that?

“Haaa...” Chae Nayun sighed full of complicated emotions.

* * *

[Blood... s... a... Stage...]

[...K... i... ll... All... a... f...]

A bunch of difficult to understand text appeared on my card. No, this felt more like a curse than words.

“...”

I observed my surroundings a bit before releasing the restrictions I placed on my senses. Thankfully, they withdrew their killing intent and I no longer felt anything suppressing me. Also, this place was so humid that my cold sweat wouldn’t be obvious.

“P-Please help yourself.”

I ended up getting tongue-tied as I welcomed them to eat the lizard meatballs.

Both of them instantly looked at me and I blocked my senses again. This time, I cranked it up to the max. It would be impossible to deal with them if I didn't do this.

► Arts (1/3)

1. Parkour

I checked my arts that only had parkour and decided to add another one.

[Acting] [Intermediate Rank]

— *Will allow the user to express their feelings better.*

— *Will acquire mental fortitude that will not be affected by external factors.*

— *The user will attain inner peace.*

This was the best I could come up with to save myself from this predicament. It cost me five hundred SP, but I would receive a portion back if I ever deleted the art. It wouldn't be too burdensome.

[You have used 500 SP]

[Do you wish to save the new art?]

[Your luck has activated!]

I clicked *[Yes]* and my new art slightly improved because my luck triggered.

“Hoo...”

My new art immediately got to work and spread all over my body. I finally composed myself.

I offered the lizard meatballs to the two visitors, “It's cooked now.

Please help yourselves.”

“*Haha...*” the man responded first and simply laughed as he placed a meatball in his mouth. Then he flinched for a moment and exclaimed, “Wow... what’s this? It’s really good.”

One... two... three... four...

He began throwing one meatball after another into his mouth, but the woman simply watched him without eating.

I picked up a meatball and offered it to her, “I suggest you try one too.”

I had no idea why I spoke so strangely, but she didn’t mind and ate the meatball. She seemed to like it and began eating on her own afterwards.

“Wow... this is really good,” the man muttered in amazement at my cooking.

He took off his robe and finally showed his face. He looked handsome and surprisingly friendly.

The man stared at me for a while before asking, “Anyways, since when did you know?”

Of course, I had no idea what he meant. However, I knew very well that the Chameleon Troupe wasn’t running a charity. They were a bunch of strange evildoers who couldn’t be predicted like how a rugby ball could bounce in any direction.

Perhaps I shouldn’t have appeared so indifferent since that caught his attention. He exuded a strange mana that pressured me to tell the truth.

I crossed my arms over my chest and used Acting to the maximum to pretend that I was thinking.

“*Hmmm...*”

There didn't seem to be any barriers. After all, those two would've easily destroyed it if that was the case. Also, it would be too unnatural to say that we were teleported to another place. Something on this scale would require a huge magic circle and an archmage to cast.

[Blood... s... a... Stage...]

[...K... i... ll... All... a... f...]

I faintly recalled writing a similar setting as this one. I hurriedly opened the story settings and went over it. I didn't write anything in detail, but...

"...A curse?" I carefully mentioned whatever conclusion I reached.

The man smiled and exclaimed, "Wow! You really knew about it!"

Yoo Yeonha looked at me with wide eyes like an owl.

It felt like I guessed the correct answer to question number thirty on the CSAT. Having high luck surely did benefit me at times.

Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap!

"How did you know? That's amazing! You must be at least an expert!" the man exclaimed and gave me a round of applause.

Clap! Clap! Clap!

Meanwhile, the woman quietly ate the meatballs and grumbled, "... Noisy."

The man ignored her and continued, "Ah, we're actually here because of a request. We were going to assassinate that witch doctor, but I think that guy pulled some stunt. *Haha!* Unfortunately, we got caught in whatever he did."

The woman finished eating and the man got up from his seat.

I could see a reddish snake-like spear when his robes fluttered open, the Zhang Long Serpent Spear.

I looked at him and he returned a smile.

“Thanks for the food,” he said.

I simply nodded.

“Oh right, there seems to be a lot of djinns here. They probably got roped in like us, I guess? They seem to number in the thousands,” he added.

I had no idea if he was advising or warning us, so I simply asked, “Do you plan to kill that witch doctor or whatever he is?”

“We should.”

“...Do you have a way to kill him?”

“Beats me... We have to find a way, I guess?” the man flashed an innocent smile before putting on his hood.

The woman, the so-called boss, stared at me without saying anything. I had no idea why, but I suddenly tensed up from her gaze.

“Thanks for the food.”

Fortunately, she warmly thanked me before getting up and leaving.

* * *

“Amazing, right?”

The Chameleon Troupe reached the highest point in the jungle.

Lee Byul scanned the jungle to get a better grasp of the situation.

“Do you think he’s strong?”

Lee Byul didn’t respond, but the shadows around her spread out to analyze the curse. They recorded, absorbed, and analyzed the curse before returning to her.

“Is there a way for us to get out of here?”

“...”

It didn’t look easy to get out of this place. The best method would be to resist the curse. No, it would only be possible if they outright dispelled the curse. Unfortunately, no one in the Chameleon Troupe possessed the ability to do that. After all, a curse was something complex and intricate.

“There’s someone who we might be able to cooperate with. Wicked, that woman is here.”

“...”

“Or we could cooperate with those two we just met. At least we won’t be starving to death if we stick with them.”

“But you tried to kill them.”

Jin Yohan smiled, “Honestly, I planned to at first. What options did we have though? Those meatballs were so good. I mean, you enjoyed it too, right? Boss?”

“What nonsense are you spouting?” Lee Byul feigned ignorance.

Jin Yohan recalled the girl and boy they met. The girl lacked a bit in terms of strength, but she looked smart. Meanwhile, the boy was a strong one.

However, the really impressive part about the boy was that he had perfect control over his mana. Truth be told, Jin Yohan couldn’t sense any mana from him. The reason he tried to kill them was because of how skilled the boy was in controlling mana.

“He looked quite adept. It’s as if he’s also an assassin,” Lee Byul said.

She met Kim Hajin once before at Cube, but didn’t recognize him since he wore a mask this time.

“But...” Lee Byul looked at the red sky that was gradually turning dark. “He’s not strong enough,” she muttered.

Derio Rekru was capable of unleashing such a curse by channeling all his hatred and loathing for this world. He was not someone to underestimate.

Lee Byul smiled. She thought this would be an easy job, but things became slightly interesting.

“Yeah, there are quite a lot of interesting people in this world,” Jin Yohan said with a smile.

Lee Byul simply nodded in agreement.

However, Jin Yohan was referring to the boy and not who Lee Byul was thinking about.

* * *

“What’s the plan?” Yoo Yeonha asked while braving the overgrown jungle path.

“No idea,” I nonchalantly replied while scratching my chin.

I was actually at a loss too. It was only thanks to *[Acting]* that I managed to look calm.

“I think we should look for a way out first.”

“Rather than that... how did you know this happened because of a curse?”

“I got lucky.”

“What?” Yoo Yeonha squinted and glared at me like an angry cat.

“It’s true.”

I continued briskly walking while keeping a watch over my surroundings. A catalyst would be required to cast a curse of this scale no matter how powerful that witch doctor was. The value of such a catalyst would definitely be astronomical.

“Ah...” Yoo Yeonha muttered as she stopped.

I stopped too.

We both stared in awe at the overwhelming scenery on the horizon.

“Amazing... this is a curse?” Yoo Yeonha muttered.

A vast swamp stretched into the horizon like the ocean. The darkness made the swamp look like the ground, but any fool who walked into that would definitely sink and suffocate to death.

“I know, right?”

— Hey!

Someone suddenly shouted at us. I looked towards the voice and saw a group at the swamp, but we couldn’t possibly reach them over this distance.

— Hey! You guys! Over here!

— *Huh?! Someone’s there!*

— Where are you guys from?

They seemed confused about the entire situation too.

— Do you know what’s going on?!

— Hey! Where the fuck is this?!

I was going to respond when I felt a powerful surge of killing intent from deep underneath the swamp. It soon materialized as the ground shook.

Then, Death emerged from the swamp.

“_____!”

The huge darkness let out an ear-splitting cry that sounded unintelligible. The group a distance away from us heard it too.

— W-What?!

— F-Fuck! What’s that thing?! *Aaaack!*

They started to run, but I remained still and dumbfoundedly stared at the strange creature. It looked like a wild beast with its entire body covered in darkness. No, a creature that used both hands and walked on both feet couldn’t be called a beast.

The darkness threw the humans into its mouth.

Gulp!

It closed its eyes after swallowing them alive.

Yoo Yeonha tried to drag me away and I obediently followed her while whispering, “*Is that the boss of this place?*”

“...*I have no idea.*”

Someone else called out to us.

— Hey!

— *Psst! Psst!*

It sounded like they were calling for a dog or something, but we decided to head towards them nonetheless.

Surprisingly, another robed figure pulled us into the thicket.

“What are you guys doing? Do you have a death wish? That’s a swamp dokkaebi^[1]!”

“Swamp dokkaebi?”

The swamp dokkaebi was one of the strongest monsters that required a team of high rank heroes to hunt. It was also known as the owner of the Amazon.

“That’s right! A top-tier monster! You guys will die if you get caught!”

The woman seemed quite upset as she scolded us. I didn’t say a word and just stared at her.

She found my gaze annoying and scoffed, “What? You got a problem? You do know that I saved you, right?”

Whoosh!

A breeze blew past the quiet swamp. It briefly distracted me, but I looked at the woman again.

“No, it’s not that. I was just thankful. What’s your name?” I asked.

“Yes, that’s how you should respond. My name is Zomer.”

“...”

Zomer extended her hand. I almost shook it, but flinched instead. Zomer sounded like a very familiar name...

I observed my surroundings again and noticed that it went eerily silent. I pretended to shake Zomer’s hand before yanking her towards me.

“Kyah!”

I overpowered her with the help of aether and pointed my Desert Eagle at her spine.

“I’ll snap your spine in half,” I threatened.

“What are you doing?”

“How many comrades do you have? Tell me quietly.”

Yoo Yeonha quickly picked up on the situation and prepared to reach for her whip at any moment.

Zomer, no, Tomer continued to feign ignorance, “What are you talking about?”

I placed my finger on the trigger and she began making a fuss.

“WAIT! Wait! Wait! I’m going to scream! That swamp dokkaebi will come here if I do!”

“Just die, goodbye.”

Of course, I had no intention of killing her. However, my voice carried quite the killing intent. Actually, I was surprised by how scary I sounded myself. It was probably thanks to *[Acting]* that I added a while ago.

Tomer gasped in horror and immediately said, “O-Okay! Wait! Wait a minute! I’m sorry!”

“Just answer my question.”

“Alright, alright! Three. There are only three others. All of them are currently injured, so...” she stopped halfway.

I pressed the gun against her spine and forced her to continue, “So what?”

“...I was wondering if you guys had any potions with you.”

It didn't seem like she was lying. I looked over at Yoo Yeonha and she seemed to agree.

“Alright, lead the way. I'm warning you though. I'll pull the trigger if you try anything. Tell that guy up there to back off too,” I said.

'Damn... '

Tomer bit her lips and obediently led the way.

1. Dokkaebi is a mythical creature in Korean culture. 📖

Side Stories 59

Chae Nayun (14)

I walked with my gun pressed against Tomer's spine and she continued forward with both of her arms in the air. We proceeded until the mushy ground turned flat and found two injured individuals on the ground.

"I told you, right?" Tomer said.

However, I didn't drop my guard and remained alert, "Where are the rest?"

"What do you mean the rest?!"

"You're with the djinns, right?"

"...How did you know?"

"I saw them in the city."

Tomer seemed taken aback, but soon shook her head with a smirk.

"I'm just affiliated with them. I don't really care what happens to them. They can die for all I care. Besides, I'm not even officially a djinn."

"*Hmm...* Is that so?"

Fortunately, Tomer hadn't fully converted to the djinns yet.

"Are they with the djinns?" I asked while pointing at the two injured people.

“No, I met them in the city. We hung around for three months. I can’t simply let them die, so... before that, can you let go of me?”

I nodded and let Tomer go. Then I went over to check on the injured duo. Both of them sustained fatal injuries. One had his guts spilling out while the other’s rotting right arm began infecting the rest of his body.

“Sigh... I saved you only to have you threaten to kill me...” Tomer shook her head in disbelief.

“Saved us from what? Just hurry up and tell that guy up the tree to come down,” I retorted.

“Tsk... Anyways, can you save these guys?” Tomer asked while pitifully looking at them.

“Yeah, I can save them,” I confidently replied.

It wouldn’t be difficult to heal them with stigma and the mana-filled vegetation in this jungle.

“What? Really? I don’t think either of you is a healer... Do you have some potions with you? But I don’t think it’ll work unless it’s a high-grade one.”

“I have my ways... Oh, right. Before that, do you know anything about the Tears of Heaven? It’s a medicine that’s on par with the elixir of life.”

I decided to get any information I could regarding the Tears of Heaven since I had a strange feeling she knew something. I mean, I designed her to find aether by herself like a search dog.

“Oh, that one? Yeah, I know a bit about it. The djinns are searching for it right now.”

“The djinns?”

“Yeah, I’ll tell you the details after you save these two.”

The offer didn't interest me much, but Yoo Yeonha interjected before I could say anything.

"Let's do that," she whispered.

"..."

She looked at Tomer with sparkling eyes and I bitterly smiled. This was partly my fault since one of the traits I included in Yoo Yeonha's setting was that she couldn't resist recruiting talented individuals.

I began foraging the mana-filled grass around us. These plants only possessed mana and didn't have any healing capabilities. However, I could turn them into medicinal herbs by using *[Setting Intervention]*. It didn't require much SP. I only had to toggle the grass' mana and medicinal properties from *[Off]* to *[On]*.

I mashed the medicinal herbs into a paste and began the operation.

I attended to the patient with a rotting right arm first. Stigma transformed into a sharp blade and cleanly cut off his rotting right arm in one smooth motion. Then I applied the medicinal paste to stop the wound from bleeding and dressed it with a cloth.

Next, I treated the one with his guts spilling out. I covered my hand with stigma and pushed his guts back into his abdomen. Then I arranged his insides to make sure everything was in its rightful place. Of course, I applied the same medicinal paste to stop the wound from bleeding and dressed it with a cloth.

"Phew..." I wiped the sweat off my forehead.

"...Is it done?" Tomer asked.

"They won't die as long as they remain like this. Now it's your turn," I looked at Tomer.

A child suddenly emerged from behind a tree. She only stood around 140 cm tall.

The child bowed to me before running over to check on the patients.

“How are they?” Tomer asked the child.

“They look fine... Although one of them lost an arm...”

Yoo Yeonha and I looked at Tomer.

Tomer shrugged and explained, “They’re siblings.”

“Thank you, ahjussi,” the child said with a bow.

“A-Ahjussi? Is that the proper way to address your benefactor?!” I retorted.

The child smiled and Yoo Yeonha loudly cackled.

“*Haaa...* Anyways, back to the Tears of Heaven. I have no idea why you’re looking for it, but you know that it was sold at an auction a long time ago, right?” Tomer asked.

“Yeah.”

“Okay, our team tried looking for it last time, but no one knows who bought it or if it really works. You can trust me on this as we’re quite the treasure hunters. So we narrowed down our search. Our first theory was that this was the doing of a ghost.”

I almost snapped and lost my patience.

“The second one is that the Tears of Heaven didn’t exist in the first place. This is the most probable explanation. A lot of people tend to do these things to launder money.”

Yoo Yeonha frivolously nodded in agreement.

However, I was certain that the second theory was wrong because I personally added the Tears of Heaven to the item settings.

“There’s a third and fourth theory, but forget about those. I have my own theory,” Tomer said.

I crossed my arms over my chest and looked at her.

Tomer came closer and spoke in a small voice, “The Tears of Heaven was probably deconstructed. You’re familiar with the story of the goose that laid golden eggs, right? It’s similar to that. I think whoever bought it tried picking it apart to replicate it.”

“...Is that so?”

“Yeah, I believe this is the most plausible explanation since there was a mansion that blew up shortly after the Tears of Heaven was auctioned. It belonged to some rich neutral city-state noble. The land it was on became completely contaminated. Forget about the mansion grounds, all the surrounding villages got contaminated too. Do you know why?”

Tomer smirked and continued, “It was probably divine punishment for trying to deconstruct the Tears of Heaven. They say that there’s a fine line between medicine and poison, right? I’m confident that you’ll find something if you go and investigate that place. Well, I didn’t go there because it was too far and dangerous.”

“*Hmm...*”

Even I had no idea how to make the Tears of Heaven. I hoped to get my hands on it by luck, but if what Tomer just said was true then...

“Can you tell us where that mansion is?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“*Hmm? Ah*, I can tell you whatever you want for the right price. Of course, that’s only if we manage to get out of here,” Tomer replied.

She was absolutely right that we had to find a way out of here first.

It grew late and I already exhausted most of my stigma. I stood up and dusted my hands.

“What are you going to do?” Tomer asked.

I took out my dagger, “I’m setting up camp.”

* * *

I made two makeshift beds for the injured and a cozy hut with *[Dazzling Dexterity]*. The injured slept on the beds and I left the three girls in the hut.

I came out and laid my remaining ammunition on the ground.

[20 x 82 mm Essence Bullet]

I had three hundred rounds left and changed one of their settings.

— *Destructiveness has been enhanced.*

— *The bullets will now be able to pierce through mana and aura.*

I modified them to pierce through mana and enhanced their destructiveness. In short, I made them stronger. It only cost two hundred SP to change the settings. The bullets now had a dark red aura that made them easier to identify at a glance.

Tomer came out of the hut and I quickly stored the bullets in my pockets.

She loitered behind me for a bit before approaching, “Hey, aren’t you curious why you’re trapped here?”

“It should be because of a curse,” I nonchalantly replied.

“Oh? You’re quite sharp. You don’t know who did this though, right?” Tomer crouched in front of me.

I thought she would continue even if I didn’t say anything.

She went on as expected, “I’m sure you’ve heard of the Witch Doctor

Derio Rekru since he's quite famous. Anyways, he ran away with a treasure after killing everyone in my team except for me."

"He killed your entire team?"

"Yeah, I told you. I was once a treasure hunter. That bastard stole the treasure and used its power for this massive curse."

"What's the treasure?"

"..." Tomer bit her lips and flashed a cold smile, "Unfortunately, I can't tell you that."

That was more than enough for me. I could simply ask the Book of Truth tomorrow once I recovered enough stigma.

"Sure."

"What? Aren't you curious?"

"Not really."

Tomer frowned and looked at me in disbelief.

"Just go and get some sleep," I leaned against a tree and closed my eyes.

Tomer looked at me for a while before muttering, "Heart of the Amazon."

I opened my eyes.

"Ha... I guess you've heard of it too. It's obvious any item called 'Heart of Something' would be famous," Tomer grumbled.

Indeed, she was correct. Heart of Ice, Heart of the Amazon, etc. were all treasures that bestowed its owner with certain absolute properties. The term absolute meant that the treasure's owner could assimilate with the property.

Such a treasure should never fall into the hands of djinns or the Chameleon Troupe. If I had to choose between them, it would be slightly better if the latter got it.

The Amazon contained various undiscovered treasures and monsters, which made it all the more important to stop djinns from forming a base there.

“*Tsk tsk...* What I’m trying to say is... someone like you shouldn’t get involved. It’s worth hundreds of billions of won. No, it would be in the tens of trillions already. Do you really think the djinns will idly sit by and watch? All the treasures and artifacts hidden in the Amazon will belong to them as long as they have the Heart of the Amazon,” Tomer explained.

I leaned against the tree and continued connecting the dots between the three major events to come up with the most plausible story setting.

What if... what if the witch doctor hid his body in the swamp dokkaebi?

“*Hmm...* Can we have a chat, Zomer?” Yoo Yeonha suddenly appeared and called Tomer by her alias.

I furrowed my brows at Yoo Yeonha.

“Me? About what?” Zomer, no, Tomer asked in response.

“I just have something to say. That’s all.”

“*Hmm...* Okay, I guess?”

Tomer went inside the hut with Yoo Yeonha.

I had a feeling Yoo Yeonha would try building rapport with Tomer, so I didn’t stop her.

— Who’s that guy? Why does he keep acting high and mighty all the time?

- ... He's stronger than you think. Anyways, are you really a djinn?
- Why are you curious about that?
- Because I'm not a djinn.
- What kind of logic is that?
- More importantly, why don't you retire and join a guild if you're not a djinn?

* * *

The morning sun slowly illuminated the jungle.

I only slept for three hours before the cold morning dew woke me. I got up and went to the swamp where the swamp dokkaebi appeared yesterday.

“The swamp dokkaebi must be in there somewhere...”

The swamp really resembled a vast sea. It was probably bigger than the largest lake in the world.

The swamp dokkaebi must be hiding somewhere underneath those murky waters.

“I should find a spot...”

I searched for a clear view of the swamp to use as a hideout. It didn't take long to find a tall tree that had lots of leaves, which would make for the perfect hiding spot.

I climbed up and positioned myself on a branch while hiding behind the leaves. Then I infused stigma into my eyes.

My vision expanded kilometers ahead and I could almost see the entire swamp. I spotted various individuals like colosseum spectators, infamous criminals, famous mercenaries, duelists, the Chameleon

Troupe, and probably even Wicked's henchmen.

I planned to draw all of them towards the swamp. This was the most obvious course of action since it would be impossible to kill the swamp dokkaebi alone.

Clack...

I took something out from my belt. This mana grenade looked like a pine cone. I infused stigma into it and threw it into the swamp about two kilometers away.

Whiiiiing... Kabooooooooom! Kkrrrrwaaaazz!

An explosion resounded and the shockwave emitted by the grenade shook the entire swamp. A crater formed where the grenade landed.

I actually felt surprised because the crater looked bigger than I expected. The system message informed me why the mana grenade became so effective.

[Dazzling Dexterity and stigma have simultaneously activated.]

[The results will vary depending on how you handle stigma.]

— Hey, can you hear me?

I heard Yoo Yeonha's voice through the walkie-talkie function on my smartwatch.

“Yeah.”

— Where are you and what are you doing? Something just exploded.

“Just sit tight and wait. I can't make a sound from now on. The same goes for you. Don't move and just wait where you are.”

— What? *Hmph!* Okay, I'll do as you say...

Soon afterwards, the swamp dokkaebi emerged and roared,
“Gwuoooh!”

The monster stood as tall as the tree I hid in, but couldn’t see me.

I channeled more stigma into my eyes and inspected its body.

“Keuk!”

I felt a blood vessel in my eye pop, but I endured the pain and continued inspecting. My vision penetrated the giant swamp dokkaebi’s body... through all the mud... I finally spotted the witch doctor responsible for the curse curled up in the monster’s body.

“Keuk...”

I covered my bleeding bloodshot eyes. The pain felt agonizing, but I confirmed the witch doctor’s location in the swamp dokkaebi.

However, it wasn’t time for me to move yet. I had to wait for the Chameleon Troupe and Wicked to raid this gigantic monster.

Until then, I had to be one with this tree... Yes, this tree was one with me and I was one with this tree.

* * *

I opened my eyes at night. I didn’t mean to wake up, but an eerie sensation kept crawling on my skin. Goosebumps spread all over my body and my instincts warned me of something sinister.

I looked down at the darkness. The Chameleon Troupe and Wicked glared at each other with the swamp between them.

It seemed that they finally found the witch doctor’s location after four days, but they didn’t seem willing to cooperate. Neither of them opened their mouths, but they somehow communicated mentally through telepathy or something.

—... So I presume talks have broken down between us?

Wicked broke the silence and asked with a smile.

The Chameleon Troupe's boss nodded and replied.

— A temporary alliance. However, keep in mind that the treasure will be ownerless once its owner dies.

— The rightful owner is me, Wicked.

— Does that even matter right now? You do know it got stolen from you, right?

—... Alright, I won't stop you if you want to die so desperately.

The swamp began to shake as they busily taunted each other.

Ddruu...! Ddruu...! Ddruu...! Ddruu...!

Waves rose from the swamp as an overwhelming presence emerged.

I stiffened at the sight of the monster and my heart rapidly pounded as I tried to suppress the crippling fear taking over my body. I even thought of running away and leaving the rest to them. They were probably more than capable of dealing with that thing.

Besides, I probably wouldn't be much help anyways. They didn't need me here, so why should I take the risk and...

"Seup..."

However, I couldn't shake off the feeling that the treasure was somehow related to the Tears of Heaven. Perhaps it was my instinct as the original author or my absurdly high luck. Whatever it was, it would be the key to what we were looking for.

Those people considered the strongest in the world rushed towards the swamp dokkaebi, which everyone considered a mythical and

legendary monster.

Meanwhile, I remained perched on the tree and inspected my Desert Eagle and wire...

After all, I needed patience to snatch away the treasure at the most critical moment. The Heart of the Amazon. I planned on snatching it while the Chameleon Troupe and Wicked fought each other after killing the swamp dokkaebi. The enhanced bullets, aether, and my wire would be more than enough to steal it.

I closed my eyes and erased my presence. My body didn't have an ounce of mana, so they wouldn't detect me anyways.

I just had to prowl like a hyena from a safe distance that wasn't too far or too close. No, it would be more appropriate to compare me to a small pest like a mosquito trying to go between giants...

* * *

"Hey, what is she doing?"

"I have no idea..."

Meanwhile, Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan watched Chae Nayun in disbelief.

She sat on a chair and blankly stared at the colosseum. She told them there was nothing to worry about, but had been in this state since yesterday.

"Oh, she looked down."

Chae Nayun moved for the first time in two hours. She kept blankly staring for 120 minutes before looking down and pulling her hair for five minutes. No one knew what she was thinking during those five minutes, but she would do that for five minutes before...

"Haa..." she sighed again.

Then she repeated the entire process of staring at the colosseum.

However, a new pattern suddenly appeared!

“*Uh... ah... eh...*” Chae Nayun began pacing back and forth like a constipated dog.

She kept pacing back and forth while moaning before returning to her seat and covering her face.

“*Ugh... Hiing... Argh...*” she continued moaning like a sick patient.

“*Sigh...*” Kim Suho walked to her with Yi Yeonghan following behind.

“Hey, Chae Nayun,” Kim Suho called out.

“*H-Huh?* Oh, hey... What’s up?” Chae Nayun nonchalantly replied.

She magically reverted to her old self from the constipated dog a while ago.

Kim Suho wanted to tell her to stop worrying, but she beat him to it.

“What’s up with your faces? I told you not to worry, right? Don’t tell me you can’t trust me?”

She sounded quite brazen.

“*Huh...?* What did you say?” Kim Suho asked in disbelief.

“What do you mean *huh?* It’s exactly as I told you. Stop worrying! Nothing’s going to happen to them, so go back and get some sleep...” Chae Nayun said.

She repeated the same, ‘*Don’t worry. Nothing will happen,*’ tirade for around ten minutes.

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan couldn’t help but worry about her mental state. Even Shin Jonghak, who hid and observed her from nearby, was

sincerely worried.

Side Stories 60

Chae Nayun (15)

Kim Hajin couldn't follow the battle with his eyes. He could only see shadows flying around like blades and Wicked's large thorns shooting up from the swamp.

An incredible amount of mana that Kim Hajin didn't dare to measure exploded over the swamp as these humans who transcended ordinary mortals unleashed their abilities.

He focused on his objective in the presence of these monsters and connected the wire to his bullet with aether.

His plan was simple. Snipe the witch doctor in the heart and pull out the treasure from his body.

However, Kim Hajin couldn't help but doubt. *'Can someone like me pull it off?'* He was filled with anxiety. Still, he composed himself and decided to go for it.

No one had seen his face, so they wouldn't come after him. The curse would be lifted the moment the witch doctor died. They could only suspect each other once the curse disappeared and would never imagine an extra like himself had been lurking.

Kim Hajin forced himself to calm down and held his breath to lower his heart rate. Even a single fidgeting finger could ruin the entire operation. He focused his senses and infused stigma into the aether wire already connected to the enhanced bullet.

The enhanced bullet would dissolve as soon as it penetrated the swamp dokkaebi's hide and the wire would snatch away the witch doctor's heart. The plan sounded perfect in theory. He only had to execute it now.

He had to get the timing precisely to the hundredth of a second. It wouldn't be difficult since he could slow everything down with bullet time, which gave him an overwhelming advantage.

Kim Hajin could feel the moment growing closer as the clock ticked away. Everyone involved in this mess probably felt the same.

The swamp dokkaebi's body became riddled with shadows and thorns. The monster tried to resist with all its strength, but the end was inevitable.

Wicked's thorns restrained the swamp dokkaebi while Lee Byul sliced off a huge chunk of its flesh with her shadows.

The swamp dokkaebi was barely alive at this point. All they had to do was pull out the witch doctor from within.

— Also.

No one expected what would happen next.

Djinns fired their evil mana, Lee Byul controlled her shadows, Wicked shot her thorns, and Jin Yohan swung his Zhang Long Serpent Spear. Their eyes all darted in the same direction.

The dazzling light attracted everyone's attention. Something flashed during the intense battle and flew towards the swamp dokkaebi's chest like a comet.

Shwaaa!

Everyone witnessed it, but no one could react.

Guuu...

The swamp dokkaebi let out a low, eerie moan before falling to the ground. A strange tune came from its heart as moonlight shone on it.

A bullet pierced the swamp dokkaebi's hide and killed the witch

doctor inside. Then the wire attached to the bullet snatched away the Heart of the Amazon.

“What the hell?” someone muttered, but the curse disappeared before they could finish.

The curse spat everyone out after the caster died and they instantly returned to the city from the jungle.

“This is?”

Everything happened in a split second.

Wicked looked around her surroundings. She had returned to the city square and could see the colosseum in the distance. She looked to the side and saw the Chameleon Troupe.

Wicked glared at them and...

Chwaaaaak!

A venomous thorn shot up from the ground towards the Chameleon Troupe, but they easily dodged it. The thorn continued chasing, but failed to catch them.

Soon, Wicked stopped.

“That’s enough,” someone said from behind.

Wicked looked back and saw the head of the city along with dozens of hunters.

“No bloodshed is allowed in my city outside of the colosseum,” he said.

“...”

Wicked gritted her teeth and glared at the Chameleon Troupe. She realized her mistake. The Chameleon Troupe cleverly hid one of their

members and went after the Heart of the Amazon.

However, she hadn't sensed this hidden member at all the entire time they fought the swamp dokkaebi. She couldn't help but be impressed while also feeling the urge to tear this person apart limb by limb.

On the other hand, the Chameleon Troupe remained quite calm. Wicked was hot as fire while they remained cold as ice.

Wicked instinctively blamed the Chameleon Troupe, but they simply observed the angry djinn. Why would Wicked be so angry if she stole the treasure?

Lee Byul concluded that either a third party intervened or the djinns were excellent actors. However, she could tell from the fire blazing in Wicked's eyes that it was most likely the former. She knew very well that Wicked couldn't put on such a realistic act.

In the end, Lee Byul concluded that a third party stole the treasure. As to whom the third party was... that remained a mystery.

"Okay, I would like to ask everyone to disperse," the head said.

Wicked glared at the old man, but he simply looked at her with a warm smile.

"So what do we do, boss?" Jin Yohan asked.

Lee Byul simply nodded and walked away.

Wicked glared at Lee Byul and composed herself, "We're leaving. For now."

"Yes, ma'am."

Wicked and her underlings left the scene.

The mosquito hiding and observing the scene buzzed away after confirming that he was safe.

‘Success! I didn’t get caught!’

This was probably the best result I ever achieved after living as an extra for six months!

“Yawn!”

I staggered forward after all the stress finally came crashing down on me. My legs gave out and I almost collapsed when someone caught me.

It was Yoo Yeonha.

I also saw Tomer and her group, but had no idea how Yoo Yeonha managed to convince them to tag along.

“Are you alright?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

I nodded since we finally escaped the curse.

Yoo Yeonha sighed in relief after confirming my response.

— Dadadada!

“What’s that?” Tomer asked while looking at the cloud of dust that someone kicked up as they rushed towards us.

That person approached at a frightening speed.

“HEY——!”

I finally relaxed after hearing that loud voice and seeing that big smile. I confirmed it was that idiot, who ran towards me without slowing down at all.

She ran with all her strength and we came dangerously close to crashing before she fully stopped at the final step.

I ended up in Chae Nayun's arms.

“...”

I didn't expect this. It caught me completely off guard as my heart had barely recovered from the previous stress.

I couldn't tell if I was dreaming or not. Chae Nayun didn't say a word. Instead, she wrapped her arms around my waist and hugged me.

“*Hoo?* What is this?” Yoo Yeonha coyly asked.

Chae Nayun buried her face in my chest and began trembling. This went on for a while before she rubbed her face on my shirt and stepped back.

I could see a small teardrop from her eyes.

“Did you cry...?” I asked her in disbelief.

She flinched and denied it, “*Huh?* W-What? What are you talking about? I didn't cry because of you, okay? It's not because of you...”

Chae Nayun went over to hug Yoo Yeonha. She tightly hugged her as if to make it obvious she was hugging her.

“*Euk...* N... Nayun... Let... go of... *Euaaak...!* Let me go!” Yoo Yeonha cried out and squirmed as she tried to break free from the suffocating hug.

Chae Nayun finally let go... only after something popped in Yoo Yeonha's lower back.

My heart was still wildly beating in the midst of all this. Was it because of what just happened or something else? I had no idea.

“Who are these people?” Chae Nayun asked while looking at Tomer and the others behind us.

Yoo Yeonha rubbed her lower back and nonchalantly replied, “Ah, they’ll be with me from now on.”

Tomer corrected her, “Just for a while. We’ll be with her for just a while. Nice to meet you. My name is Tomer.”

“*Hmm...* I see...” Chae Nayun muttered while inspecting Tomer from head to toe.

A group suddenly appeared in the distance and shouted, “Hey! They’re over there!”

“Yoo Yeonha! Kim Hajin!”

“Are you guys alright?”

Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, Shin Jonghak, and Seo Youngji also reunited with them.

* * *

Of course, I returned to Cube without anyone finding out that I stole the Heart of the Amazon. Only after I stepped foot onto Cube did I finally feel relieved and the heavy burden on me was lifted.

However, I still had work to do.

The higher-ups at Cube called for the Pharmacy Club members involved in the colosseum incident.

Chae Nayun, Shin Jonghak, and Yoo Yeonha got away scot-free while Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan received a small penalty. Meanwhile, they interrogated and grilled me.

— I’m asking you to spill the beans on what happened over there!

— Why did you go there?! Why was someone like you over there?!

— Witch Doctor? What happened to him?

— Were you their porter?

I wondered if this was the fate of someone without any connections. Screams, threats, punishments, penalties, expulsion... you name it. I endured the stream of criticisms and threats before finally leaving. I walked through the corridor and kicked my feet at the unfair treatment until I reached the main building.

To my surprise, someone waited for me in front of the main entrance.

Chae Nayun smiled and waved, “You’re here?”

“Why are you here?” I curtly replied despite her warm greeting.

“I’m the club president. I sent the others back. No, they went back because they were busy,” Chae Nayun said.

Yoo Yeonha and Tomer went to Seoul. Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan left to train. Shin Jonghak and Seo Youngji went to a café and said they had something to discuss.

“Is that so...”

“Yeah, I’m the only one who cares about you.”

“No, I don’t have anyone I can trust,” I shook my head and walked away.

“What the... Don’t say things like that...” Chae Nayun muttered and followed me.

It had already turned dark as I walked to the dorm. A cold sea breeze blew and the moon illuminated the night.

I wanted to walk alone in silence, but that was impossible with Chae Nayun.

She smirked and asked, “Hey, hey! What are you going to do?”

“About what?”

“We skipped two days of classes.”

“Doesn’t matter to me.”

Classes didn’t mean much. I couldn’t care less if I got good grades or not. The fact that I was half a hero wouldn’t change no matter how good my grades were.

“*Hmm...* Really? It doesn’t matter?” Chae Nayun muttered.

She seemed deep in thought while rubbing her cheek and smirked at me.

“Hey.”

“What now?”

“Where do you want to go next?”

Where to go next... I hadn’t thought of that. I briefly pondered and decided it would be best if we attended the colosseum a few more times to get the Soul Mana Vermillion. Then we should go to the mansion that Tomer mentioned.

“There’s this place related to the Tears of Heaven, so I’m thinking of going there during vacation. The exams are coming up soon, right?”

“*Hmm?* Really? Okay, then let’s do as you say,” Chae Nayun replied with a nod.

Her response slightly surprised me. Our archery duel would be coming up soon, but... did she perhaps forget about it?

“Hey,” she called me again.

“What?” I curtly responded and stopped to look ahead.

We reached a fork in the road. The right path led to the girls' dorm and the left led to the boys' dorm.

"Thanks..." Chae Nayun smiled and avoided my eyes.

I caught a whiff of her scent because of the breeze blowing in my direction. No, a bed of roses must've been nearby. It smelled really good...

"...?" I tilted my head in confusion. Why did she suddenly thank me?

Chae Nayun furrowed her brows and acted all shy. She came closer and whispered, "You're doing your best. Honestly, you don't have anything to gain from this club, right?"

'Ah, that's what she meant... '

I smiled in response because she was mistaken. It would be a huge boon if Chae Jinyoon recovered thanks to me. I wanted to fix the parts that deviated from the original story and make sure everything properly flowed.

"Oh right, do you want to play *Half of Battery* together?" Chae Nayun tapped my shoulder and asked.

"..."

I would've usually refused, but felt like agreeing today.

I didn't know what changed my mind. Perhaps it was the beautiful night sky, but I kind of liked everything this idiot was doing tonight. I agreed since I figured I could be a good friend at least.

"...Just one game," I said with a nod.

"Oh! Nice! Hey, come online as soon as you get back to your room! I'll be waiting!" Chae Nayun exclaimed and ran to the dorms.

I was left all alone under the night sky. I looked up and thought about

my ten remaining years in this world. An entire decade would be a long time, but it didn't seem like it would be boring at all.

[Kim Hajin! Are you online?]

[Go go go go!]

[Go go go!]

[Go go go go go!]

I received a barrage of messages when I returned to my room.

‘Ah, maybe I should’ve refused after all. I feel so tired now that I’m home... ’

I suddenly regretted the decision I made on the spur of the moment.

I sent her a reply.

[Wait.]

[Why? Why why why why why why why why?]

[I’m going to wash up first.]

[Ah, can’t you wash up later? —.—]

[Wait.]

[Ah, why?!]

[Wait.]

[Ah... Damn it... Alright, be quick. I’ll give you five minutes.]

[Wait.]

[Hey, I got it. Hurry and wash up... You better come online as soon as you're done though.]

I looked out the window in the middle of texting and saw my faint reflection.

I was smiling.

I hadn't seen myself smile like that ever since I came to this world.

Side Stories 61

Chae Nayun (16)

Lee Suro sat all alone at the head of a rectangular wooden table in the meeting room on the highest floor of Cube.

Soon, holograms suddenly appeared around the table and nine silhouettes came to attend the secret meeting.

“I have no idea why they went there or what they were after...”

Someone raised a question before the meeting even officially began. The topic was none other than what happened to the Pharmacy Club, which became a hot topic in Cube as well.

Of course, what happened took place during official club activities under the supervision of an association hero, Seo Youngji. However, Chae Nayun’s actions these days caught the higher-ups’ attention.

“I don’t have any particular reasons, but we need to keep an eye on them. Who knows what those kids will do? They could stir up trouble while believing their backgrounds will save them...” the deep voice sounded angry.

“How? Are you brave enough to mess with them?” someone responded in a mocking tone.

The deep voice pointed his finger and retorted, “It’s better than not being able to say a single word like you...”

“Enough.”

A single word was more than enough to stop them from bickering. Everyone sat up straight after the hologram at the head of the table spoke.

The silhouette grew clearer. It was the former president of South Korea, Kim Sukho.

The other hologram silhouettes also became clear after Kim Sukho appeared. A conglomerate chairman, guild leader, neutral city-state owner, and other influential figures in society gathered around.

“I don’t think those kids are investigating us. She must be going around trying to save her elder brother.”

“But will it not be an issue if he woke up?” the chairman asked.

Kim Sukho glared at him in response and the chairman immediately lowered his head.

“There’s no way he’ll wake up. Besides, we can just get rid of him if he somehow did,” Kim Sukho said.

He was confident as long as it was the Chae family because he could easily suppress Chae Joochul. If Chae Jinyoon wanted to be a filial son and grandson, then he shouldn’t wake up.

After all, Chae Joochul was no longer the legend he once was.

“Continue monitoring the situation. I noticed two new names in their little gang.”

“Yes, they’re Kim Suho and Kim Hajin. Both of them are Cube cadets.”

These two commoners dared to loiter around Chae Nayun. One had quite the talent and potential while the other was naturally born with a bad attitude.

“Go ahead and get rid of those two if the opportunity ever presents itself. However, you must make sure to do so only at the right moment. Remember to operate covertly at all times...”

[Kekeke... We got quite a lot of items today.]

JaJangMan (Male: Barbarian) flexed his muscles at X-Man while sitting on a rock. Meanwhile, X-Man sat on the ground and looked over their loot.

[It's really strange how the loot turns out good when I'm playing with you. Keke!]

Four days passed since they returned to Cube. Hunting for items with Chae Nayun became one of Kim Hajin's new routines during those days. Coincidentally, the class synergy between X-Man and JaJangMan was quite good.

[Is that so?]

X-Man (Male: Elf) curtly replied while brushing his long golden hair.

JaJangMan crossed his arms over his chest.

[Oh right, I heard the Direkuma raid will open soon. Do you want to go raid that? Keke!]

[If I have time, but you do know finals are coming up soon, right?]

[Doesn't matter to me keke! It doesn't matter to you as well, right? Kekeke!]

X-Man simply smiled in response and passed an item to JaJangMan.

The warrior item, *[Gondor's Battleaxe]*, went to JaJangMan while the archer items went to X-Man.

[Keke! This thing will fetch at least fifty million won if I manage to enhance it five times!]

[Can you stop doing that keke thing?]

[I have to live up to my character, right? Keke! Also, this is a macro.]

Keke!]

X-Man stared at JaJangMan's hideous smile before shrugging.

[Sure, whatever you say. Anyways, I'm going to sleep. You better go to sleep too.]

[Sure keke! I'll test this ax out for a bit before going to sleep. Keke!]

The barbarian's scarred eye shone red.

[Keke...!]

The barbarian flashed a spine-tingling smile.

Kim Hajin cut off the connection and threw his VR helmet aside. He went to bed and tried to fall asleep before suddenly recalling the Heart of the Amazon he stole.

[Heart of the Amazon] [Treasure]

— *The essence of the Amazon. The holder's abilities will be significantly enhanced with this item in their possession while in a swamp or jungle.*

This treasure enhanced the holder's abilities in swamps and jungles. Of course, its main weakness was the fact that a swamp or jungle wasn't common terrain. However... I could probably change that with *[Setting Intervention]*.

Then I suddenly received a message.

[Hello, you didn't forget about our appointment tomorrow, right?]

It came from Yoo Yeonha. I stored the Heart of the Amazon inside stigma and immediately replied.

[Yeah, but do I really have to go?]

[I have something to discuss about that person. There are other things I

want to talk about as well.]

I pondered for a moment before agreeing.

[Sure, I'll see you tomorrow at three then.]

* * *

D-7 until the final exam. I went to Seoul with a week left.

“This Seoul isn’t Seoul at all...”

The scenery looked completely different from the Seoul I knew. I had no idea if it was because so many guilds crowded the place, but a lot of people walked around with swords and bows.

I stole glances at them while trying to find my way.

“*Huh?* Kim Hajin?” A familiar voice called me.

A limousine stopped in the nearby traffic and the window rolled down. Then a head peeked out.

The person smiled at me, “It’s Kim Hajin! Hey, Kim Hajin! *H-Huh?* W-Wait!”

The traffic light turned green and the limousine began to move. Chae Nayun urgently said something to the driver and brought the limousine to a halt. Then she got off.

I watched in disbelief as she ran towards me.

“Hey! What a coincidence, right?” Chae Nayun said with a wave.

I forced a smile and nodded.

“Why are you here?” she asked. “You don’t usually come to Seoul.”

“I have somewhere to go,” I replied and walked away.

“Oh, really?” Chae Nayun walked beside me with her hands behind her back. She skipped and hopped before suddenly asking, “Where are you going? What are you going to do?”

“I have someone to meet.”

“What? Who?”

“...”

I arrived at my destination just in time. I looked up at the building that was the headquarters of the second largest guild in the world, Essence of the Straits. They truly lived up to their reputation with a state-of-the-art complex that sprawled out 165,000 square meters in the heart of Seoul.

I shifted my gaze from the building to Chae Nayun.

She flinched and stepped back before asking, “Don’t tell me... You’re here to meet Yoo Yeonha...?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you?! Hey, did... perhaps...?!” Chae Nayun exclaimed with her eyes and mouth wide open in horror. Then she asked, “D... Did... something happen between you two in the jungle...?”

I could see mana smoking out of her head as she stuttered and asked in horror.

* * *

“*Hmm...*”

Yoo Yeonha crossed her arms over her chest and looked at both of them. She never imagined they would come together.

“Here, take a look at this,” she completely ignored Chae Nayun’s grumpy expression and handed them a document.

Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun’s eyes naturally shifted to the document.

“I investigated the mansion that Zomer mentioned last time. It’s quite close to Pandemonium, but it’s worth taking a look. The contamination over there is something I’ve never heard of in my life,” Yoo Yeonha added.

“Then, is this our next destination?” Chae Nayun asked as she glared at Yoo Yeonha and snatched the document she wouldn’t understand anyways. She added, “But why were you only going to tell Kim Hajin? I’m the club president.”

“...You were the one who told me you were busy. I even texted you last night that I had something to say,” Yoo Yeonha grumbled in response.

“*Hmm...* Did you? I don’t remember...” Chae Nayun muttered and checked her smartwatch.

She scrolled through her messages in an attempt to find the message that Yoo Yeonha probably never sent...

[Hey, Nayun. Are you free this weekend? I have something to tell you.]

“...You did. *Ha!* Don’t tell me you thought I forgot? I just asked for the sake of asking. I was a bit busy because I had to go to the hospital, but I ran into Kim Hajin on the way so I dropped by as well,” Chae Nayun explained.

She finally relaxed and leaned back on the sofa.

‘Heh, I got worried for nothing,’ she thought.

“But that’s not what’s important,” Yoo Yeonha said with a sigh. She looked back and forth at Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin a few times.

Kim Hajin noticed her seriousness and set down the document.

“There’s something strange these days... Should I call it being stalked? It feels like someone is following and observing me...” Yoo Yeonha said.

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened and she frivolously nodded, “Yeah, me too. I thought it was just a paparazzi or something!”

“Right?” Yoo Yeonha said as she looked at Kim Hajin.

However, Kim Hajin looked like he didn’t care at all whether someone tailed him or not. He seemed fairly confident that he could beat whoever planned to ambush him.

Yoo Yeonha realized something and said, “That’s why I’m planning to bring a few bodyguards to our club’s next activity after our final exams. I’ll make sure they don’t stand out, so don’t worry.”

“Ah, well. It doesn’t matter to me,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly agreed.

What about Kim Hajin? Yoo Yeonha intently stared at him for a while before he finally nodded in agreement.

“It might be uncomfortable for you, but please bear with it temporarily. We don’t know who is tailing us right now or why. Anyways, you can take that document. Oh, right... You can take this business card too,” Yoo Yeonha handed a business card to Kim Hajin.

He took it and saw that it had Tomer’s alias, Zomer, written on it.

“Zomer...”

“Yes, Zomer asked me to pass it on to you. She won’t be able to reply because she’s out on a mission, but you can probably reach her in two days.”

“Sure.”

Chae Nayun intently observed the exchange between them until Kim Hajin abruptly stood up and left. She hurriedly bid goodbye to Yoo Yeonha and chased after him with a smile.

“What are those two doing? They look like puppies playing tag...” Yoo Yeonha muttered.

She was left all alone in her office when someone suddenly called her phone. She frowned at the name on the screen. It didn't seem like someone she was comfortable speaking to.

— Hello, how are you?

“Hello?”

— Yes, my knees.

It was Yoo Yeonha's uncle who was banished from their family, Yoo Jinhyuk.

“...What? Knees?”

— Yes, my lovely little niece! What's up?

“You know very well. What happened to the thing I asked you, Uncle?”

She asked her uncle to investigate Kim Hajin. The abilities and strategies he showed in the jungle weren't something that could be mastered in a day or two. She couldn't help but grow curious about his secret.

— That? There's not much progress.

“That's probably because you didn't do it properly. Just give me back my money if you don't plan on doing it properly...”

— Hey, niece. What are you going to do with your lunch money?

“What did you say? Give it back this instant!”

— Alright, alright. I'll do it properly. But there really is nothing... hold on. I'll call you back... request...

Beep... Beep... Beep...

“What? No! Don’t you dare hang up! Hello! Hey!”

The call abruptly ended.

Yoo Yeonha sat on her sofa as steam rose from her head. However, she realized that someone mentioned something right before the call was disconnected.

‘...Request? Did he have a customer?’ she wondered when she received a message on her smartwatch.

[Niece, you better stop snooping around that Kim Hajin or whatever his name is. Someone just came and he seems to be quite dangerous.]

Yoo Yeonha stared at the message.

* * *

I called for a taxi outside the building.

Chae Nayun naturally sat beside me. I thought she would start chattering, but she only looked out the window for twenty minutes.

“Hey...”

I broke the silence first and Chae Nayun looked at me with wide eyes in surprise.

“You forgot about the archery duel?”

“Ah, that?” Chae Nayun smirked and shook her head, “I’m just going to use a sword from now on.”

“...What?”

It was quite an anti-climactic conclusion. I purposely practiced my archery because Chae Nayun’s growth was faster than in the original

story.

“You’re giving up that easily...?”

I probably shouldn’t have asked. I got the result I wanted without having to compete, but grew curious as to why she suddenly changed her mind.

Chae Nayun just stared at me without saying anything. I saw my reflection in her eyes, which looked clear as a lake.

“I’m not giving up...” she said with a smile. “I just chose to believe in you.”

My eyes looked into hers, and it felt as if time stopped. I couldn’t say anything and simply looked out the window.

The city’s scenery and the trees passed by as the sun shone on me.

Side Stories 62

Chae Nayun (17)

[What about this?]

I received a picture on my smartwatch.

[Calculation of Internal Mana in a Mock Dungeon]

Rachel sent me her calculation. I reviewed her work before sending back a reply.

[It's correct. Not a single thing is wrong.]

[Ah! Really? That's a relief! V-V]

[Thank you! Have a great time studying, Hajin! ★v★!]

It would be theory week soon, so the Cube Community Forum and the library became quite busy. Of course, I didn't have to study and was free compared to others.

"Hmm..."

Anyways, I finished helping Rachel and should probably continue what I was doing. I inspected the modified Heart of the Amazon floating in midair.

[Heart of Adaptation] [Treasure]

A heart that will adapt to its environment.

The heart will slowly adapt to its environment and empower its user. The user will be empowered the longer the heart remains in the same

environment.

The user will adapt to their current environment along with the heart.

The heart's power decreased, but it became more flexible to use since I removed its restriction of only being able to be used in swamps and jungles. I didn't forget to add a roll-back function just in case I found myself in the Amazon one day.

"Ah... I'm broke..."

It cost me a whopping 1,250 SP just to alter this heart's settings, which was most of my SP. I only had three remaining SP left now.

I did obtain a large chunk of SP when I stole the Heart of the Amazon, but I didn't gain as much as I thought since the incident had been kept under wraps.

"Well, this is still good enough..."

I planned on using this item as medicine one day, so it wasn't a bad idea to revert it to its original settings for a forty to fifty percent SP refund.

"Sigh..." I let out a sigh.

The description described me as its user, but it was basically... *erm...* something too grotesque to put into words.

I placed the heart on my chest and it suddenly melted into my skin. It felt like having a hot mud pack on my chest, but the only difference was that it didn't feel good at all.

Then, the heart finally finished settling in my body. I felt much better right away after that.

"Phew..."

I fell asleep immediately afterwards.

Tuesday was Cube's special class, *Rush for the Artifacts*.

Tak! Tak! Tak! Tak!

Yoo Yeonha ran through a passageway and spotted someone blocking the end of it. It was the white team's ace and gatekeeper, Chae Nayun.

Yoo Yeonha didn't slow down and ran even faster towards her. She swung the whip in her hand.

Chwaaak!

However, Chae Nayun casually turned her body and easily avoided the whip. Then she bent over and pulled out her sword.

She pulled out her sword in an instant and swung it towards Yoo Yeonha's blind spot.

Clang!

However, a bullet came flying and blocked Chae Nayun's sword. She ended up missing Yoo Yeonha after having to change trajectory.

Yoo Yeonha jumped back to safety. "*Phew...*" she sighed in relief.

"..."

Chae Nayun looked around indifferently, but couldn't spot the sharpshooter. On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha held the artifact close to her chest after realizing that reinforcement arrived.

Someone asked through her earpiece.

— Can you get past her?

Yoo Yeonha observed Chae Nayun guarding the path with a sword and bow.

There were no weapon limitations in today's class, so Chae Nayun decided to use both today. Meanwhile, Kim Hajin also used a large monster sniping rifle instead of his handgun thanks to this exemption rule.

"Cover me," Yoo Yeonha replied.

Chae Nayun suddenly rushed towards her as soon as she said those two words. She looked like an angry bull right now, and every one of her movements contained animosity.

Bang!

However, a large bullet suddenly zipped through the air and struck Chae Nayun before she could even reach Yoo Yeonha.

"*Euk...!*" Chae Nayun grunted in pain and flew far back after being hit by the bullet infused with stigma and the knockback effect that Kim Hajin added to its settings.

It was impossible for the bullet to pierce through all of Chae Nayun's defenses, but it was still possible to knock her back.

— Run.

Yoo Yeonha infused mana into her legs and kicked off the ground. She ran as fast as she could and could feel the soles of her shoes wearing down. She also felt a scary gust of wind chasing after her from behind.

Chae Nayun was coming for her.

Bang!

"*Argh! Stop it!*" Chae Nayun shouted in frustration after Kim Hajin struck her with another bullet.

Kim Hajin covered Yoo Yeonha without a hitch, which frustrated Chae Nayun. However, what frustrated her even more was the fact that she could see the bullets, but couldn't evade them. The main problem wasn't the bullet's speed, but the surface area it covered.

Boom! Boom! Boom! Boom!

Kim Hajin's bullets triggered a chain of explosions as soon as they hit the ground. They were the prototype exploding bullets developed by Essence of the Straits.

"Touchdown!" Yoo Yeonha exclaimed in delight after arriving at the end zone.

The class ended with the blue team emerging victorious.

"Alright, great job."

Kim Hyojun and Kim Suhyeok greeted Yoo Yeonha after she came out of the man-made cave.

She placed the artifact on the ground and sat beside it.

Chae Nayun came walking out of the cave as well.

"Ah, that Kim Hajin... I should have made him retire first... I shouldn't have given him a chance..." Chae Nayun grumbled in anger.

The savior of the blue team, Kim Hajin, came out of the cave with a large sniper rifle on his back. Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak followed him out and kept each other at bay the entire time. Then Kim Horak and the others who retired from the match also came out.

Kim Suhyeok gave a speech with all of the cadets out of the cave, "Alright, all sophomores are required to write a battle report."

The sophomores attended this class too and monitored the freshmen in the cave from the outside. Every one of them looked at Kim Hajin in a strange manner. His *[Parkour]* ability allowed him to move like a beast and instantly secured him a sniping spot. His vision as a sharpshooter also left quite an impression on them.

"I'm not going easy on you next time..." Chae Nayun tapped Kim Hajin's shoulder and grumbled.

Kim Haijn simply nodded in response.

On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha still trembled on the ground after being the artifact courier. Chae Nayun's aura and anger overwhelmed her, which was definitely not something a mere cadet could unleash.

"Alright, this is the end of our class. Go rest up and prepare for your final exam. Don't forget to prepare for your practical tests too!" Kim Suhyeok said before he dismissed the class.

* * *

"Bye, Kim Hajin! Great work today!"

Friday, deep within an unnamed forest in Gangwondo.

I, along with Kim Suho, acquired *[Misteltein]*. We found it at a much earlier time than in the original story because *[Misteltein]* was a weapon that would be much stronger the sooner we acquired it.

"See you at Cube."

"Okay! See you!"

I separated from Kim Suho and went my own way. I walked on a quiet path before I suddenly felt someone looking at me. It felt as if someone was watching me from behind. I turned around, but found no one there.

I brushed it off as some passerby walked past, but then suddenly recalled what Yoo Yeonha said.

'Someone seems to be following us.'

I continued walking without showing any signs that I noticed them, but the dark path felt eerie now that I knew someone was following me. I couldn't help but feel nervous inside.

I put my right hand on my Desert Eagle as I walked and prepared to

fight back if required.

Thud... Thud...

Thud... Thud...

However, there was no attack whatsoever no matter how much I walked. Soon, I reached the main road.

“...What was that all about?”

Was it an owl? Or were they looking for an opening before deciding to bail?

I stood underneath a bright street lamp and looked back, but the only thing I could see was the eerie darkness.

* * *

“Eup! Eup! Euuuup!”

Jin Sahyuk covered the struggling man’s mouth.

“Who are you and why are you following him?” she asked.

She had been watching over Kim Hajin this entire time. She wanted to find out the reason behind the strange emotions and sense of familiarity she felt towards him.

However, she suddenly noticed that insects began to swarm around him. She caught one of them before they could step out of line.

“Answer me. What’s your objective?” she asked, but the man refused to answer.

Of course, that was definitely the wrong choice as she immediately twisted the man’s neck without an ounce of hesitation.

C-Crack!

The man was killed in an instant. His smartwatch immediately conveyed the death of its owner. The signal was sent to the higher-up who ordered the covert action. The higher-up misunderstood that Kim Hajin was the culprit behind the man's death.

All of this happened in a place that Jin Sahyuk wasn't aware of and through a technology she wasn't familiar with. Of course, Jin Sahyuk wouldn't have cared even if she knew all of this. She nonchalantly threw the man's corpse away before following Kim Hajin again.

"Who are you really?" she muttered while following him.

It was still not the right time, but she was going to ask him sooner or later. That was the only way she would find out the reason why she came to this world...

"I'm certain that the key behind my identity is with you..." she said before blending into the darkness.

* * *

The Jonghwa Island located at Goseong, Gangwondo truly lived up to its name as an island. Jonghwa Island was an island the size of Yeouido that emerged after the mana explosion occurred. It quickly cemented its position as Gangwondo's main city thanks to its spectacular views and abundant monster fields.

I finished my task given by Cube's practical test, the monster hunt, and went to the cafe.

"Does this mean the final exam has been changed for this year? That's surprising..."

A problem suddenly occurred. We had to obtain the butterfly dust for our final exam, but the fact that the final exam deviated from the... No, was this actually better since it became much easier?

We had to go to the test area and obtain the butterfly dust either by ourselves or with a team. Whoever used outside help could simply justify it as foraging ingredients for medicine.

“Hey, is this difficult? Can you grade this, Yeonha?” Chae Nayun showed the exam paper to Yoo Yeonha.

It was quite surprising that Chae Nayun was studying for a change...

“Give it to me,” Yoo Yeonha took the paper and scanned it before saying, “*Hmm...* It’s easy. You get 53% for this.”

I found it funny that she stole a glance at me just in case she was wrong.

“*Aaaaack!*”

“*Yaaaawn...!*”

Yi Yeonghan and Kim Suho stretched.

“*Ah...* Theory is really difficult... Hey, Hajin, how are you so good at this?” Kim Suho asked.

I remained silent and continued drinking my coffee.

Chae Nayun threw her pencil and grumbled, “Why do we have to study this difficult crap? Where are we even going to use this?”

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled and replied, “It’s still good to study it. You’ll need to make calculations while you’re inside a dungeon after all. Of course, you’ll be going to a dungeon with a member specializing in making calculations, but who knows what could happen in one.”

“...”

I found it difficult to adapt to these so-called main characters. I initially planned to hunt alone, but had no idea how Chae Nayun caught wind of it and clung to me.

“Kim Hajin,” Chae Nayun called me.

I looked at her, but she was fixated on her paper while mumbling.

“Kim Hajin... Kim Kim Hajin... Kim Hajin... Kim Kim Hajin...”

Why did she have to mumble my name? She kept it up and even sang a tune for a while before eventually turning over her paper.

“Ah, this is too difficult... I give up!”

“Hey, you’re going to lose to Rachel again if you keep that up.”

“Nah, I’m just going to lose. Forget about it,” Chae Nayun simply shrugged off Yoo Yeonha’s attempt to instigate her.

I noticed that she had been acting quite mature these days, which was unlike her.

Yoo Yeonha continued studying before feigning indifference and nonchalantly asking, “By the way, where’s Jonghak?”

“Who knows? He must be with our club supervisor. They’ve been meeting up quite often these days,” Chae Nayun replied.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha’s face darkened for a split second before she nonchalantly replied, “*Hmm...* I see...”

She took out her smartwatch and began angrily tapping on it.

It was then.

Kkrwaaang! Khrwaaang! Kkkhrwaaaang!

Extremely loud thunder exploded in the distance and lightning with mana shook the entire cafe.

Chae Nayun jumped and clung to me, “W-What was that? What’s going on?”

“Wow... my heart almost dropped...”

The lights in the cafe went out for a moment before switching back on. Chae Nayun looked out the window while holding onto my clothes.

Krrwaaang! Kkkkrhwaaaaaang!

Thunder erupted again and it began to heavily rain as if a hole was torn in the sky.

“Wow... let’s go back now. I’m scared... What’s wrong with the weather?”

“...Good idea.”

We collected all of our belongings and left the cafe.

Whiiiiish! Whooooooosh!

The wind outside was no joke. We could see something similar to a typhoon coming from beyond the coastline.

“Ah, this is so annoying!” Chae Nayun shouted in anger before setting up a barrier.

The round barrier blocked the wind and protected our party.

“Wow, Chae Nayun. You’ve grown stronger.”

“This is nothing,” Chae Nayun smugly replied.

I could see that she was handling her mana quite well. We were amazed at her control and began walking.

It didn’t take long for us to reach the portal station. This was the only portal station on Junghwa Island, so it bustled with people.

Forget about civilians and guild members, a lot of cadets from Cube

also came to do their practical exam.

— What happened here?

— Why won't the door open?!

— Hey! I'm busy! I have a meeting to attend!

However, the portal was closed shut.

Only after the people vehemently protested did a fearful station employee come out.

The staffer repeatedly bowed and apologized, "I apologize! The portal station is closed today due to safety reasons! The lighting is too strong, so the portal is unstable! I repeat... the portal is closed today due to safety reasons..."

Everyone was disgruntled, but there was nothing they could do about natural disasters.

Chae Nayun clicked her tongue a few times, "Ah... Well, there's nothing we can do... Let's go back to the villa."

All of us turned around, but I couldn't help but feel bothered.

Rain, wind, lightning, and an island... I was pretty sure that the four of these belonged to an episode that I decided not to use in the original story...

We followed Chae Nayun, but she soon stopped after spotting a few Cube cadets loitering around the station.

"Hey! You guys!" she called out to them.

All of them looked at us. I noticed they were all freshmen judging from their name tags.

Chae Nayun brightly smiled and shouted, "Come follow us if you don't

have a place to stay! I'll let you sleep for free!"

Side Stories 63

Chae Nayun (18)

“Dead? All of them?”

A mansion standing tall in the center of Seoul brightly shone in the night.

Kim Sukho was in his study decorated with a luxurious chandelier and silver candle stands. He was writing something with his expensive pen when he received a disturbing report.

— Yes, some of them were strong ones on par with high rank heroes...

All of the people they sent to tail Kim Hajin ended up dead. It was definitely Kim Hajin's doing.

Kim Sukho bit on a cigar and didn't say anything else.

— We suspect that all of them were discovered while tailing the target and lost their lives. Fortunately, we're certain that they didn't spill anything before dying.

“I see...” Kim Sukho muttered with a nod, but the wrinkle on his forehead showed that he was visibly angry. “What a stubborn kid...”

All of the people they sent were found dead with their necks twisted, hearts pierced, limbs torn apart, and other hideous methods. It was hard to believe that a cadet at rank 934 in Cube was capable of killing people in such a gruesome manner.

— Yes, we suspect that this kid has been hiding his strength all this time. We cannot confirm the reason as to why, but we have no doubt that Kim Hajin is far stronger than we initially believed.

“Tsk...”

That was one thing, but Kim Sukho couldn't help but feel this kid was far too hot-headed. How could someone mercilessly kill in such a gruesome manner just because they were following him? Did he simply hate being followed to the point that it would trigger him or did he harbor strong hatred against someone and he simply vented it out on those he caught following him?

“Did you find anything else about him aside from that?” Kim Sukho asked.

— We are currently doing our best, but it's quite difficult to get anything about him. He seems to be guarding his identity quite well.

Kim Hajin was an orphan who graduated from the Military Agent Academy before proceeding to enroll in Cube as a cadet. That was the end of it. His records from his days at the Military Agent Academy showed nothing special. The only interesting thing from his records at Cube was the fact that he chose to use a gun.

“Continue observing him.”

However, Kim Sukho was certain that the boy was hiding something. It was also possible that he was hiding a terrifying weapon under his sleeve. Kim Sukho couldn't help but suspect that the boy was harboring some evil intentions deep inside.

— Yes sir.

The call ended.

Kim Sukho felt like he was missing something right now. The background check on the boy only produced a few lines. The only eye-catching thing about it was the fact that he was an orphan.

Kim Sukho intently stared at the date the boy entered the orphanage and the calendar on his table.

Tak...! Tak...! Tak...! Tak...! Tak...!

The rain and wind knocked on the window. The typhoon raged outside, but only the calm sound of rain could be heard inside the villa.

I watched the natural disaster unfold before deciding to open a window.

Kkhrwaaaang! Kkhhrwaaaa!

I immediately closed the window.

Tak...! Tak...! Tak...! Tak...! Tak...!

As expected, the villa's soundproofing was excellent.

“What are you doing?” Chae Nayun approached me and asked.

I simply shrugged in response.

Chae Nayun nudged me and showed me her smartwatch.

— There is a storm raging on the east coast. The downpour is so strong that the bridge connecting Jonghwa Island to the mainland is already submerged...

“They say the bridge is underwater now,” Chae Nayun said.

It seemed that our other means of leaving the island aside from the portal had disappeared as well.

“Yeah, I heard.”

“I don't think we have a way out today. We should give up on leaving and go eat something. They said the food is ready,” Chae Nayun told me.

I went to the dining hall with her. Numerous chairs surrounded the

long table in the expensive-looking and brightly lit room.

“You have no idea how glad we are to see you after such a long time, my lady. All of you are our young lady’s friends, right? Please enjoy your meals. *Hoho...*” the aunty in charge of the villa warmly welcomed all of us.

The guests, or rather us cadets, were comprised of our five club members and seven freshmen. All of us sat at the table.

“Thank you for the meal!”

The eating started after Hazuki, someone I was acquainted with, thanked the aunty for the food.

— In preparation for the sea water overflowing in land... *bzzt... bzzt...!*

The TV disconnected while we busily chatted over our meal. Then the lights went out.

“Just stay calm and wait,” Chae Nayun said before she shot her mana towards the ceiling.

A cozy blue light illuminated the dining hall and allowed us to finish our meal without a hitch.

All of the cadets gathered in the living room. They huddled up on the sofa or on the floor in front of the fireplace to keep warm. Nobody wanted to be alone right now. It was as if all of them instinctively knew that danger was lurking somewhere nearby in the corner.

“Hey, Nayun. I recall you saying that you had a training area in the basement, right?” Kim Suho asked.

“Yeah, there’s a training area down there. Go ahead and use it if you want,” Chae Nayun replied.

“Do you want to join me?” Kim Suho asked.

Chae Nayun stole a glance at me before shaking her head, “*Nah*, I’m good. Go and have fun with Yeonghan.”

“Alright, sounds good,” Yi Yeonghan stood up and stretched.

Yoo Yeonha peacefully sat on a rocking chair and sipped on tea like a grandmother.

“Alright...” Chae Nayun stood up and scanned the room after the training-crazed duo left.

She snapped her fingers and thought of a brilliant idea.

Tak!

“Shall we play a game?”

* * *

“The culprit is... you! Kim Hajin!”

We played a game that suited numerous people, the *Mafia* game.

There was one police, one doctor, six civilians, and three mafias for a total of eleven players and seven had already died.

Chae Nayun pointed at me with absolute confidence.

I was in complete disbelief. I mean, she was right that I was the mafia, but she needed a sound reason to back up her statement.

“Your reason is?” I asked.

“Hazuki will explain that. It’s no use if I explain it as you guys are probably suspecting me as well,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly replied.

Hazuki, who was a civilian in this round, flinched in surprise. “*Huh?* But... Hajin is... the doctor, right?”

“*Ha?* Why is he the doctor? I’m the doctor,” Chae Nayun retorted.

“What? R-Really...?”

“Of course! I, Chae Nayun, am the doctor and that guy is an impostor!”

I observed Chae Nayun before looking around at the people in the game. I scanned from left to right, and one more time from right to left.

“T-Then... do you have anything you wish to say, Hajin? I have to listen to both of you first...” Hazuki asked me.

I suddenly sensed something strange and a tingling sensation traveled down my spine as goosebumps rose all over my body.

“Hey, wait a minute. We started with one police, one doctor, six civilians, and three mafias, right?” I asked.

“*Hahaha!* Look at him changing the subject!” Chae Nayun cackled.

Yoo Yeonha squinted her eyes and looked at me full of suspicion, “Yeah, he’s talking nonsense all of a sudden. I think he really is the mafia. Let’s kill him.”

On a side note, Yoo Yeonha was also a mafia.

“No, listen to me first. A total of eleven people joined this game, right? Night came twice, so four died...” I said.

There were five Pharmacy Club members and seven Cube cadets in the villa for a total of twelve, but Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan went down to the basement to train.

Then, I asked in a whisper, “...Shouldn’t there only be ten of us?”

I could feel the hair on my neck stand.

Yoo Yeonha frowned and glared at me before thinking about it. Then she let out a scream and clung to my arm.

Chae Nayun suddenly shouted and stuttered, “T-T-T-That’s right! He’s right! There should only be ten of us... but how...?”

Hazuki’s face turned pale as she immediately started counting. There were only ten of us right now including the active players and the ones who died, but we were quite sure that we started the game with eleven players.

Kkhrwaaang!

Thunder erupted and all of us looked at each other with fear on our faces. There were supposed to be ten of us, but we started the game with eleven people and then went back to being ten.

Kkhrwaaaaang!

All of us were frozen stiff from the fear.

Kkraa... Bam... Bam... Baaaam...!

A loud sound caught our attention while we were all frozen stiff from fear. We ran to the window and saw the dike crumbling. This shocked everyone.

Hazuki shouted first, “*Ah!* Look! Look over there!”

There were rescue workers near the dike that crumbled. All of us looked at each other and knew what we needed to do.

The cadets opened the windows and rushed out, “We’re Cube cadets! We’ll help you!”

Some of the cadets channeled their mana and supported the crumbling dike while the others pushed the raging water back.

I stood at the back and watched the cadets bravely fight the natural

disaster since I couldn't use mana.

“...What is this feeling?” I muttered under my breath and tilted my head in confusion.

I initially wondered why the color of the water looked so dark. The water pushing through the dike was pitch-black like a shadow.

I took a closer look and realized that it wasn't pitch-black like a shadow, but it was a real shadow. A huge creature approached us from underneath the water.

“...*Huh?*”

That was the only sound that came out of my mouth.

Chwaaaaaak!

Eyes as big as the moon and a jaw large enough to take a bite out of the heavens emerged from the waters. It was a colossal whale.

“...!”

The colossal whale wanted to devour the cadets, but they instantly reacted and evaded the creature's attack.

However, Chae Nayun wasn't so fortunate and couldn't escape. She was at the front and focused all of her mana to keep the dike intact. The colossal whale was a step faster than her.

I immediately activated bullet time and the world around me slowed down. I didn't hesitate one bit as I threw aether towards her and wrapped it around her waist, but the whale's next actions were completely out of my calculations.

Shwwuuuup!

“W-What's going on?! *Aaaaack!*”

Chae Nayun lost her balance as I pulled her with aether, but she was still vacuumed into the colossal whale's mouth.

I was connected to her through aether, so I was also dragged along with her into the colossal whale's body...

* * *

Pat... Pat... Pat...

I could feel the rain dripping in this damp environment. I slowly opened my eyes and saw Chae Nayun's face.

She let out a sigh of relief after seeing me open my eyes, "Ah... that's a relief..."

However, she soon frowned and smacked my forehead.

"Hey, are you a troll? I could have escaped if you let me be! Why did you pull me all of a sudden? Damn it..."

"*Ehem...* Yeah, my bad... I'm sorry..." I immediately apologized while recalling what just happened. I couldn't help but scratch the back of my neck in embarrassment.

I didn't expect the whale's next move, but I also didn't expect Chae Nayun's reflex to be so quick. She would have been fine even if I didn't butt in...

"Are we in the whale's stomach right now...?" Chae Nayun asked.

"Yeah, I think so," I replied and stood up.

I looked around the surroundings.

Badump! Badump! Badump! Badump!

I was certain that we were in the whale's stomach after seeing the walls pulsating.

Chae Nayun crossed her arms over her chest and asked, “But what the hell is this whale? Is it some sort of ancient deep sea creature?”

“Most whales are not deep sea creatures. More importantly, I think we need to think of a way out of here.”

I closely inspected my surroundings. A whale’s body was large and mysterious, so I was confident that we could get out as long as we maintained our focus.

We were not in danger yet. Of course, it would be a different story if acid came rushing at us...

“What if we just cut our way out?” Chae Nayun wielded her sword and asked.

I shook my head, “We can’t do that. Its internal walls will be extremely tough and we might stir up its acid if we do anything to irritate it.”

“*Hmm...* I guess you’re right...”

“Give me a moment.”

I looked up the word whale in my settings.

[*Whale*]

— *Types of whales*

— *Strength of a whale...*

However, I couldn’t find anything related to escaping from a whale. I did see something quite interesting though.

“...Hold on. Follow me for now.”

“*Huh?* Where are you going?”

“I have something to find.”

“Something to find? In here?”

“Yeah. Hey, did you know that a whale stores mana in its body?”

A whale swallowed its prey and seawater at the same time, but seawater in this world contained mana. This was especially true for deeper waters as there was more mana in seawater the deeper it came from.

The mana found in the ocean had different characteristics from mana on dry land. Mana in seawater continuously flowed and didn't gather in one place, so it wasn't possible for it to compress into things such as wild ginseng or mana stones.

However, that became a different story when a whale was involved. A whale consumed large amounts of sea creatures and seawater, which made it possible for mana to solidify and take shape in its body.

“What does that mean?” Chae Nayun tilted her head in absolute confusion.

“I mean... I'm extremely lucky,” I replied with a bitter smile.

I possessed tremendous luck that would allow me to survive even if I stumbled upon a tiger's den. I was definitely feeling my luck working right now.

“Just follow me for now. I feel that we'll get quite a haul in here...”

That was how we ended up walking and inspecting the whale's body for around thirty minutes.

“Ah! It's that one!” I exclaimed after finding what I was looking for.

It was an object that resembled a crystal. We found it where the ocean's mana gathered and solidified. It was the essence of the sea that could only be found in a whale's body.

I carefully extracted the essence and showed it to Chae Nayun.

“Look at this! This is...” I was about to explain, but then I noticed that Chae Nayun looked quite pale for some reason.

Her face slowly turned purple and she started moaning.

“What’s wrong with you?” I asked.

“Ah, it’s nothing serious... *Blurgh!*”

Her half-digested dinner came gushing out of her mouth. She staggered as her knees gave in and I immediately rushed over to catch her.

Sniff... Sniff...

Only then did I notice that this place reeked of a strange stench. I sniffed the air a bit more and realized that the entire place was filled with the stench of the whale’s stomach acid.

“What the hell?”

I wondered what was wrong with Chae Nayun, but it didn’t take long to find out.

I was fine thanks to the *[Heart of Adaptation]*. On the other hand, Chae Nayun didn’t have the same resistance as I did and ended up getting poisoned.

“Ah... Damn it...” I muttered after realizing how stupid I was to have kept walking with her.

My head started to ache after seeing her veins turn purple from the poison.

I gritted my teeth and started racking my brains. I literally pushed my brain to its limits to come up with a solution. In fact, I even activated bullet time to slow down time to have more time to think.

It was then that a single ray of light shone in my head.

I immediately opened *[System Intervention]*.

[Heart of Adaptation]

— *Anyone in contact with the heart's owner will receive the same effects as long as they remain in contact with each other.*

It required a significant amount of SP just to add this single line, but I had a way to replenish my SP in times like this.

I erased one of the arts that I added last time.

[Art, Acting, will be deleted. You will receive a portion of the SP back.]

I changed the setting of the Heart of Adaptation with the refunded SP.

[Setting saved.]

[Your luck has triggered...!]

I didn't have the luxury to go over it as I hugged Chae Nayun as close as possible to my chest and channeled stigma into the heart to enhance its effects.

Chae Nayun's breathing returned to normal after a short while.

"Phew... Ah... I thought she was going to die..." I sighed in relief after getting over the dangerous part.

Chae Nayun slowly opened her eyes and gazed at me intently.

I asked her if she was alright and she weakly smiled in response. Her smile looked quite funny, but I strangely found it cute for some reason.

This girl wasn't always like this...

“Don’t smile... You should have told me if you weren’t feeling well... Geez...” I grumbled before flicking her forehead.

However, she flashed an even bigger and stupid smile after getting hit. I mean, what was so good about getting hit?

Nonetheless, it seemed like she was still struggling from the poison.

Side Stories 64

Chae Nayun (19)

We were still in the wriggling stomach of the whale.

“...You should’ve told me if you felt sick.”

I couldn’t think of anything else to say, so I started scolding Chae Nayun with her back pressed against mine.

I heard her faint laughter before she replied, “Ah, sorry... I thought I was alright...”

I couldn’t see her face right now since our backs were against each other. I had no choice but to do this due to the change I made to the Heart of Adaptation. As long as we remained in contact with each other...

“Don’t try anything funny,” I warned and squeezed her squirming fingers.

“*Argh!* That hurts!”

“I told you not to do anything funny.”

The plan was to let her lean on my back until she felt better, but she kept complaining that it wasn’t as effective. I had no choice but to hold her hands too.

“Hey... I think holding hands isn’t enough... I feel nauseous...”

“Deal with it.”

“What? You told me to tell you if I felt like fainting, right? Ah... I’m dying. I’m dying.”

“Shut up. I’m going to sleep, so don’t bother me,” I grumbled and closed my eyes.

Still, I couldn’t help but be bothered by Chae Nayun’s squirming behind me.

...Was bothered the right way to put it? I sensed something strange, so I opened my eyes.

I was aware that the pulsating sensation didn’t come from the whale, but from my own heart wildly beating. I also knew that I would have to return to my own world someday.

That was the reason why I shouldn’t let this novel get to me. The world in this novel... I would only end up saying goodbye to it. Both of us would only end up hurt if we pursued our feelings here.

I didn’t want that.

“But how are we alright all of a sudden?” Chae Nayun asked.

Her weak voice sounded different from her usual lively voice.

“Just think of it as one of my abilities,” I casually replied.

“Wow, really?”

“Yeah, think of it as something related to adapting. In gaming terms... You know what damage over time is, right? I can adapt to those trickling damages like poison and not get hurt by them later on.”

“Wow, so you don’t get damaged by ticks?”

“Exactly.”

Chae Nayun nodded after learning something new about me. Then she twisted her head towards me and rested it on my shoulder.

Her smiling face was suddenly looking at me with her back still

against mine...

“Then, how do you plan to get out of here?”

“...I have a way.”

I gently shrugged and put her neck back in place.

I was confident that I could relay my thoughts to the whale through stigma. It would be much easier since I was currently inside the whale's body.

“Hmm... Well, if you say that you have a way, I guess you really do. Anyways, what do you plan to do with that crystal?”

[Whale Crystal] [Jewel]

A crystal made out of the essence of the sea. The holder will have a whale's lung capacity while possessing this underwater.

This *[Whale Crystal]* that brightly shone between my legs boasted an ability that was far better than any underwater gear known to man despite being merely a crystal.

“I'm sure we'll find a use for it. I'll sell it to you if it has some sort of medicinal properties,” I said.

“Wow, really? How much?”

“Expensive. Anyways, I'm going back to sleep.”

I had to prioritize recovering my stigma above anything else. I used up too much to treat Chae Nayun, so I didn't have enough to control the whale.

Four hours of rest should be enough for me to recuperate sufficient stigma. I closed my eyes and leaned back. Chae Nayun's back felt small, but it was better than nothing.

“...Hey,” Chae Nayun suddenly spoke.

“What?”

“Do you want to lie down?” she sounded a bit embarrassed.

I shook my head and asked, “How can I lie down here?”

She suddenly turned and I fell down with her back gone. Instead, my back landed on something soft.

“This will do, right?” Chae Nayun said.

I looked up and saw her face. Her cheeks were flushed red and her trembling eyes looked down at me.

“...”

I blinked a few times and became speechless. My heart started to wildly beat again.

Chae Nayun bit her lips and avoided my gaze. Was she embarrassed or did she regret her action?

Whatever it was, I found myself in quite a peculiar situation. It didn't feel bad as I was slowly being lulled to sleep.

I had no idea why, but it felt cozy for some reason. I had a feeling that Chae Nayun was using her mana to make me feel this way, but I couldn't think any longer as my eyelids grew heavy.

I fell asleep.

* * *

“Gwuoooooh...!”

The whale spat us out.

Fortunately, Chae Nayun covered us with her mana so the whale's vomit didn't get on us.

"We somehow managed to get out," I said.

We ended up on some island and the sky looked clear. The sun also shone down on us. The whale peeked at us before diving back into the water.

"Yeah, I can't believe we made it out already..." Chae Nayun grumbled with a hint of regret in her voice.

"What do you mean already..." I also grumbled back in response.

We were stranded in the whale's stomach for nearly eighteen hours. I poured out all of stigma, but the whale wouldn't listen to me. In the end, I had to recharge stigma again and repeat the whole process two more times.

"It was good..." Chae Nayun pouted and looked at the sky. She suddenly recalled something and asked, "Oh right, what happened to that? You know, there were only ten of us, but suddenly we had eleven?"

"Oh, that?" I smiled.

It was one of the story settings I abandoned, the mystery of the rainy night. Unfortunately, it wasn't a big episode and was designed to be something even less than filler content.

"That was a night stalker."

"*Huh?* Night stalker?"

"Yeah, you can look it up later once we're back. I have a feeling Kim Suho already took care of it though," I said with a shrug.

The night stalker was a ghost that usually moved at night, but I wasn't worried at all. The night stalker was originally going to be taken care of by Kim Suho in my story setting, so he probably took care of it

already even if I was gone.”

“We should focus on going back...” I said while checking our current coordinates on my smartwatch.

[37°50'27.2"N 130°38'35.4"E]

We were on an uninhabited island near Ulleung Island. It was a normal volcanic island and there didn't seem to be anything around us.

Chae Nayun whistled while looking around our surroundings.

“Hey, let's go,” I said.

“*Huh?* How? Shouldn't we wait for rescue?”

“Waiting around for rescue is a waste of time.”

I morphed aether into a boat complete with a pointy bow and an engine. I worked on it for a few minutes when a system message suddenly popped up in front of me.

[Aether and Dazzling Dexterity have formed a synergy!]

[Anything you manifest with aether will receive a suitable ability from now on!]

It was a message informing me that my dexterity would add an effect to aether's forms from now on.

Chae Nayun stared at the boat I made in mere minutes with wide eyes.

“Wow... this looks like a real boat...” she muttered in amazement.

“Yeah, it's a real boat,” I said while pushing the boat to the water.

I hopped on board and extended my hand to her, “Hop on.”

“...*Huh?*” Chae Nayun flinched and stared at my hand. Then she smiled brightly and exclaimed, “SURE!”

“We’re taking off.”

“Okay! Go! Go! Go!”

Chwaaaaaa!

The boat created with aether and Dazzling Dexterity was faster than most speedboats. We thoroughly enjoyed its speed while zipping through the waters underneath the bright sun.

“Hey, Kim Hajin.”

“What...?”

I responded a bit late to her call.

She came close to me and whispered in a small voice, “...I like.”

I couldn’t hear her properly because of the crashing waves, but I thought I heard something...

I stared at her for a moment, but Chae Nayun already looked away at the sea instead of me.

“I like this view! It’s so beautiful!” she exclaimed.

But... I wondered why her ears had turned bright red.

I didn’t say anything and just looked forward. Then I gripped the steering wheel and stepped on the accelerator. The boat sped up and it didn’t take long for us to make landfall.

As expected, Kim Suho had already sealed the night stalker in Misteltein.

The time of the year that Cube cadets loathed was nothing short of a vacation for me. Soon, theory week ended.

I would probably ace the exam without any problems... was what I was thinking as I left the classroom until I saw something strange in the distance, Chae Nayun and Rachel.

Chae Nayun seemed to say something to Rachel, who had a serious look while nodding. I had no idea what they were talking about, but how were those two having a normal conversation?

Did I stare at them too intently while in shock? Both of them spotted me.

“*Ehem...* Anyways, you understand what I’m saying, right?” Chae Nayun cleared her throat.

Rachel nodded again and both of them separated.

I was curious, but they disappeared almost immediately and I didn’t get the chance to ask them anything.

In the end, I walked back to the dorm without satisfying my curiosity.

“Excuse me...”

Someone suddenly called me from within the trees.

I looked around and found Yoo Yeonha leaning against a tree with her arms crossed over her chest. She seemed to be trying to look cool or something...

I shrugged in response.

“Are you aware that there’s a strange rumor circling around these days?” she said in a cold voice.

“What rumor? *Ah*, your meddling in the decision making?” I nonchalantly replied.

Yoo Yeonha flinched and stared at me, “What did you just say? Meddling? How did you know... No, there’s no such thing.”

“Alright, forget about it then,” I said with a shrug.

Was it not the right time yet?

Yoo Yeonha frowned and curtly replied, “Anyways... I think you’re acting quite rash these days. I wanted to tell you to be careful. A lot of people have started paying attention to you recently.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you know about it, right?”

“...”

I simply nodded in response.

She was probably referring to the whale incident that happened last week since my name was mentioned a few times on the Hero Community Forum thanks to that.

“Also... only I know this information, but...” Yoo Yeonha said before she looked around her surroundings just to make sure no one else was around. She hid herself under the tree’s shadow before continuing, “It’ll be best if you don’t get too aggressive just because you find being followed annoying.”

It was quite a strange thing to say as I had no idea what she was talking about.

I raised an eyebrow to show her that I didn’t understand what she meant, but it seemed that she took it the wrong way.

“Well, I’m just advising you. It’s up to you how you interpret that.”

Yoo Yeonha disappeared into the forest after those words.

I was left all alone and stared at her disappearing into the woods. I was certain that kid was going down the know-it-all route...

* * *

The first day of the practical final exam arrived. This was the first day of the week-long practical exam. The first subject was basic survival.

More than one thousand freshman cadets gathered at the Black Mountain. The main goal was quite simply to hunt as many monsters or cadets as possible within forty-eight hours to earn points. Only solo-hunted monsters counted and the cadet that dealt the killing blow would receive the points if they were in a party.

In short, this exam was basically a solo survival event. It was currently twenty-two hours into the exam.

Yoo Yeonha faced one of the most perilous moments in her life.

“Gulp!” she tightly gripped her whip.

The sharpshooter looking down at her from a higher place made her extremely nervous.

“I’ll give it my all!” Yoo Yeonha shouted.

Kim Hajin simply nodded in response.

“Gulp!” Yoo Yeonha nervously gulped again, but suddenly recalled a rumor she heard from the underground world.

She received it from the information guild, Fallen Flower, that Kim Sukho’s agents were dying one by one. One of the dead agents had been the infamous expert known as Jipen.

These kinds of rumors wouldn’t be floating around if Jipen hadn’t died since he was directly scouted by Kim Sukho after displaying stellar results on Violet Banquet.

However, the next information provided by Fallen Flower shocked Yoo Yeonha even more. The summary of the information stated that it was highly likely the person who killed Jipen was a Cube cadet. Yoo Yeonha suspected that Kim Hajin was the most likely culprit.

Jipen was a strong individual that even Yoo Yeonha frequently heard of. Did it really make sense that Kim Hajin killed such a powerful person?

“What are you doing? Are you just going to stand around all day?” Kim Hajin asked.

Yoo Yeonha felt as if there was a crippling dark aura hiding underneath his low indifferent voice. She started breaking out in cold sweat as her hand holding her whip began trembling.

However, she couldn't back down. Her reputation was one thing, but she needed points to secure her ranking no matter what. She couldn't afford to retire from the exam when only twenty-two hours had passed.

“*Hiyap!*” Yoo Yeonha swung her whip with all of her might.

Chwaaaak!

Her whip shot forward like a hungry viper and aimed for Kim Hajin's neck, but he easily took a step back and grabbed the whip.

“*Ha!*” Yoo Yeonha let out a triumphant shout.

Things were going just the way she wanted it to go. Grabbing her whip was the worst mistake he could've made in this fight.

Yoo Yeonha converted her mana into millions of volts and infused it into her whip.

Bzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt!

However, Kim Hajin wasn't affected and still grabbed her whip. In fact, he was simply blinking while staring at her.

“...”

It was then that Yoo Yeonha finally admitted it. Kim Hajin was the worst enemy she could go up against whether it had to do with skills or attributes.

She immediately threw her hands in the air, “I surrender.”

“...?”

“How many points do you want? I have 103 points,” she said in a tone that resembled a negotiating merchant.

However, Kim Hajin shook his head. “No, I don’t want your points. Instead, I have a favor.”

“A favor?” Yoo Yeonha tilted her head in confusion at the unexpected request.

Kim Hajin bitterly smiled and scratched the back of his neck, “Ah... The favor I want to ask is...”

Side Stories 65

Chae Nayun (20)

“...Do you mean to say this will hatch if you incubate it?” Yoo Yeonha asked while inspecting my almond in a cave.

I nodded in response.

Yoo Yeonha raised a brow and asked, “Why are you telling me this? You should tell the owner of the blood you fed it, no?”

“I plan to do so,” I replied.

Evandel would be born soon, but I wouldn’t be able to raise Evandel on my own. I had the Pharmacy Club and also those strange people following me around. I didn’t dare imagine what would happen if they decided to kidnap Evandel all of a sudden.

“Anyways... You want me to help you feed this peanut, right?”

“Yeah, that’s it.”

“*Hmm...* I guess I could if this peanut is really as great as you claim it is...”

I extended a smoked jerky to her. This meat was cooked with smoke instead of fire, so it didn’t have any bad odors.

Yoo Yeonha frowned and her expression seemed to say, *‘I don’t really eat these kinds of food, but I’ll eat it since we don’t have a choice.’* She accepted the smoked jerky.

We finished our meal quite quickly and Yoo Yeonha went *fwah* from satisfaction.

“Oh right, how did you block my electricity?”

“*Hmm?* Oh, that...”

It was all thanks to the synergy between aether and Dazzling Dexterity. I was able to imbue certain characteristics to the formless aether thanks to my dexterity.

I immediately changed aether into a transparent rubber when I noticed Yoo Yeonha was about to use her ability, which made it impossible for her to win because rubber wasn't a conductor.

“...It's a secret,” I said with a smirk.

“*Hmph!* Whatever, I'll be leaving now,” Yoo Yeonha said.

She really meant what she said and got up. Yoo Yeonha dusted her clothes and left the cave.

Barely a minute passed before she came back and pointed at the smoked jerky.

“Can I take some with me? I don't think you'll be able to finish it since there's so much. I'm just helping you out so you don't end up letting them go to waste...”

“Sure thing.”

Yoo Yeonha took a big piece of my smoked jerky and wrapped it in leaves.

“*Hmm...*”

She stole a glance at me before taking another, and another, and another, and another... She took six big pieces in total...

* * *

[*First Practical Exam: Basic Survival*]

[Second Practical Exam: Hostage Rescue]

[Third Practical Exam: One Versus One Duel]

[Fourth Practical Exam: Fight for the Underground Artifact]

The final exams ended on a good note among the cadets. The long-awaited reward after an entire week without taking the weekend off was finally here.

Summer vacation!

“Ah, feels so good!” Chae Nayun exclaimed while walking down the road.

She seemed to be in quite a good mood since vacation started, but it would be a short one...

The rest of the Pharmacy Club members walked behind her.

Yoo Yeonha frowned while looking at her report card. On the other hand, Yi Yeonghan and Kim Suho walked like a pair of zombies. It seemed like they bombed their exams.

“Everyone, did you bring your luggage?” Seo Youngji asked.

“Yes!” Chae Nayun enthusiastically replied.

We placed our luggage in the trunk compartment of the SUV.

“Hey, can I see your theory report card?” Yoo Yeonha tapped my shoulder and asked.

I took out my report card from my pocket.

Whish!

Yoo Yeonha snatched it out of my hand and glared at my results with bloodshot eyes.

[Theory Exam Results – Kim Hajin]

[Mana Theory: 20/20]

[Dungeon Theory: 20/20]

[Hero Theory: 20/20...]

“Ha...” Yoo Yeonha let out a sigh as if her whole world was falling apart.

I wondered just how bad her results were that she reacted in such a way, so I stole a glance at her results.

[Theory Exam Results – Yoo Yeonha]

[Mana Theory: 13.5/20]

[Dungeon Theory: 18.5/20]

[Hero Theory: 20/20...]

“The mana theory was quite difficult. I think you’ll place in the top five with 13.5 points,” I said.

“...!” Yoo Yeonha flinched before crumpling her report card. “H-How dare you look at my results without my permission!” she raged.

“Why did you look at mine then?”

“...You didn’t bomb your test, so it doesn’t matter,” she pouted and complained before giving me my report card back.

However, she seemed to cheer up almost immediately after hearing that she would be in the top five. After all, our ranks were given based on the other cadets’ performances too.

“Oh right... Hey guys, we have someone else joining us today,” Chae Nayun said after putting her luggage in the trunk compartment.

Someone else? Everyone tilted their heads in confusion at the mention of an additional member.

A familiar figure emerged from behind a tree. She wore silver armor with long golden flowing hair. She also seemed to be holding a crumpled paper in her hand that I assumed was her report card.

“...Hello,” Rachel nodded and meekly greeted us.

We were flabbergasted for a while after seeing her fully armed. Forget about the armor, she looked like a warrior going to war with her greaves, bracers, armguards, and even her sword, Galatine.

Yi Yeonghan was the first to break the awkward silence with a joke, “Your outfit... Are you going to war?”

“I dressed accordingly after hearing that we’re going to the outskirts of a neutral city-state,” Rachel replied.

“I see...”

“But why are all of you dressed so comfortably?” she asked.

I felt that it was a rhetorical question, but she asked with absolute confidence that we started to question ourselves why we were underdressed for the trip.

“Ah, forget about that. Just hurry up and get on. We have a long drive ahead of us,” Chae Nayun said as she opened the SUV door and threw Rachel in.

Rachel’s armor got caught on the way into the SUV, but she didn’t seem bothered by it as she comfortably sat in the front passenger seat.

* * *

The drive lasted for eighteen hours.

We headed for the neutral city-state, Trooper, which was where the

mansion that Tomer mentioned was located. We traveled for a whole day without rest before we finally managed to reach the neutral city-state located near the borders of Pandemonium.

“You took your armor off,” Yoo Yeonha said to Rachel after getting out of the SUV.

Rachel only wore her breastplate now. The rest of her armor, such as her greaves, bracers, armguards, etc. remained on the SUV floor like a snake that shed its skin.

“I’m wearing it,” Rachel pointed at her breastplate and defended her honor.

“*Hmm...* Anyways, follow me. My informant is nearby,” Yoo Yeonha said.

First, we unpacked our luggage at the hotel and followed the directions Tomer provided.

The directions she gave led us to a mountain nearby the neutral city-state. The mountain’s forest was quite dark and filled with black leaves and rotting tree stumps. The overall atmosphere of the place was quite eerie. On top of that, the foul stench of organic matter rotting didn’t help at all.

We walked up the mountain for around thirty minutes.

“Hey, hey. Over here.”

Tomer and her group finally appeared. They already finished pitching their tents while they waited for us.

We went over and joined them.

“Over there. Look toward the northeast,” Tomer said as she handed us a pair of binoculars.

Chae Nayun was the first to take a look, but I used my sharp vision to look as well.

I could see it clearly... the dark greenish land was a complete mess as if it was bombed by a nuclear bomb. What remained of the mansion could be seen.

“Ah, I can see it. Is that what you mentioned last time?”

“Yeah, it’s the contamination that occurred after the mansion was destroyed.”

“So that’s the place we’re going to investigate today...”

Chae Nayun passed the binoculars to the others and said, “I’ll divide us into teams first. I already drafted our team composition in the car.”

Team 1: Chae Nayun, Kim Hajin, Rachel

Team 2: Zomer (Tomer), Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan

Team 3: Shin Jonghak, Seo Youngji, Yoo Yeonha

Chae Nayun divided the group into three teams that she thought up. Team 1 would go and investigate the soil around the mansion. Team 2 would go and investigate the mountain. Team 3 would go to the nearby settlements and ask around for any information.

“Got it?”

The club members didn’t respond as all of them were busy looking into the binoculars they found in their tents. After all, the mansion's rubble and the contaminated ground were quite a sight.

“Tsk... Hey, Rachel and Kim Hajin. Both of you, follow me,” Chae Nayun clicked her tongue.

Our team made our way towards the mansion grounds.

Rachel seemed nervous and tightly gripped her sword on alert. Seeing her on the edge bothered me a bit, but what bothered me even more was... How did Chae Nayun convince her to come in the first place?

However, I didn't bother asking her.

Chae Nayun was the first one to speak after we reached our destination, "Alright! Kim Hajin, I choose you! Go investigate!"

"...Am I your pokemon or what?" I grumbled in response before squatting down and touching the ground.

There seemed to be some sort of acid in the dark green soil as I could feel it was still quite hot with faint steam rising out of it.

"What do you think?" Chae Nayun asked.

"Hmm... Give me a while..." I replied.

I covered my hand with aether and grabbed a patch of the soil into my hand. Then, the soil suddenly started to squirm like a living organism.

Squirm... Squirm... Squirm... Squirm...

It looked quite disgusting, to be honest.

"Whoa! W-What's that thing?!"

"What is that?!"

Chae Nayun jumped back while Rachel pulled out her sword. Both of them were extremely shocked after seeing the soil squirm and start to take shape. They intently watched the soil with curiosity in their eyes.

"Beats me... I have no idea, but I'm certain that something happened here," I said before I turned aether into a trowel.

I took a scoop of soil from the area where I felt the concentration of mana was the densest and put it in a plastic bag.

"Let's go back to the hotel with this for now," I said.

"Already?" Chae Nayun asked.

“Yeah, you can somewhat feel it too, right?”

I was talking about the strange sinister feeling I was getting from this place. There was no need to mention that it felt like someone was watching us, but the air itself felt hostile towards us. In fact, it felt like the air in this place was trying to rip a hole in my lungs whenever I tried to breathe.

Chae Nayun nodded and agreed, “It sure does feel that way... Hey, before that. Should we break some of those rubble and take them back too? You know, just in case?”

Rachel looked at the rubble that was the remnants of the mansion, “... Let’s not mess with that.”

“Go ahead.”

On the other hand, I let Chae Nayun do whatever she pleased.

* * *

The atmosphere of the neutral city-state Trooper was quite extravagant, yet desolate. The entire city was lit up by magic, but the dark sky and low-rise buildings in the backdrop painted a gloomy picture.

However, its public security was good and the self-defense forces that were in charge of its security were known to be strong.

“*Sigh...*”

Rachel let out a sigh as she walked into the back alley of this city that seemed far from modern civilization. Despite their good safety record, she could feel her temples throbbing from being on edge the whole time.

“Hey, child. I already told you that you don’t have to be so alert,” Chae Nayun said.

However, Rachel only weakly nodded in response. Her mind was fully

occupied with thoughts like she was a princess, so she couldn't afford to die a dog's death in a place like this. No, it was more like she couldn't afford to get abducted and held for ransom even if it cost her life.

However, a part of her was feeling excited by the fact that this was her first rebellious act in ten years.

"*Huh?* Look, it's Shin Jonghak," Chae Nayun spotted Shin Jonghak and Team 3.

They seemed to have decided to start from the city's outskirts as they had quite a lot of food and souvenirs with them.

Chae Nayun frowned and walked over to them.

"Hey, are you on a picnic? *Ha?! Are you here to play?* I mean, supervisor, you should have stopped them, no? That punk looks like he came here to shop!"

"*Huh...? Ah*, don't worry. We got some good information. We didn't shop much," Seo Youngji replied before she hid the shopping bags she was holding in both hands behind her back.

"Rather, what have you guys been up to? Where's Hajin?" she asked.

"He's doing some research. We're on our way to the magic shop to buy some stuff he asked for," Chae Nayun replied.

"Really? Then let's go together. We wanted to see their magic shop too."

"..."

Chae Nayun glared at Seo Youngji, but she didn't say anything after that as they went to the magic shop together.

Trooper lived up to its reputation as a city of magic. They had things that one would not easily find in Seoul, which were readily available here. Well, technically, it was more of a case of it being illegal rather

than being hard to find in Seoul.

“Here is the blue slime’s tail and witch’s powder you requested. Do you need anything else?” the shopkeeper asked.

“Blood of black frost mountain troll please,” Rachel replied.

She finally relaxed after coming into the magic shop. She looked around the shop in amazement like a little kid.

“That will be three hundred and fifty million won in total,” the shopkeeper said.

“W-What?! Three hundred and fifty million won?!” Rachel exclaimed in shock.

Three hundred and fifty million won was a huge sum for Rachel, but Chae Nayun nonchalantly paid it in full cash.

“*Hmm...* It’s not counterfeit... Alright, take it.”

Chae Nayun collected the materials and left.

Then Shin Jonghak walked up to the counter and asked, “How much are all of these?”

“*Hoo...* How did you pick all of this? You have good eyes,” the shopkeeper praised him.

“I asked you how much are they?” Shin Jonghak frowned and asked with a hint of irritation in his voice.

“*Hoho!* This is a magic tarot card and you won’t find it that easily even in this city. That’s going to easily cost you more than one billion won,” the shopkeeper said with a haughty grin.

“W-What?! One b-b-b-billion won?!” Rachel was shocked once again.

“I’ll pay you 1.2 billion won then,” Shin Jonghak nonchalantly said as

he threw the shopkeeper the amount in full cash.

This was something that Rachel couldn't comprehend, *'One billion and five hundred fifty million won is three years' worth of Cube tuition fees... '*

Cube didn't charge tuition fees to locals, but they charged foreigners. Most people wouldn't be able to afford these exorbitant fees, so Cube would pay their tuition fees first in exchange for a guarantee signed by their country.

"Let's go," Chae Nayun said.

The party left the magic shop.

Ssak... Ssak... Ssak... Ssak...

Something suddenly zipped past them from a nearby alley. Rachel immediately pulled out Gallatine as she prepared to engage in combat.

"Don't worry. Trooper has a lot of delinquents and street urchins. It might have good security, but that's only when compared to other neutral city-states. Just ignore them and keep walking," Seo Youngji said.

"...Yes," Rachel replied.

"Oh, just be careful of pickpockets though," Seo Youngji added.

Rachel finally relaxed only after the high rank hero assured her that it was going to be alright.

The party made their way to the hotel whilst being careful of pickpockets.

They were staying at the penthouse of the most luxurious hotel in Trooper as Chae Nayun rented the entire floor for the Pharmacy Club.

"Hey, we're back!" Chae Nayun opened the door and smiled brightly.

Kim Hajin was supposed to be in the room waiting for her but...

“Hey, what are you planning to do with these... *huh?*”

He wasn't there.

Whoosh...

A cold breeze entered through the open window. The room was empty.

“...?”

Chae Nayun blinked a few times. Shin Jonghak and the other members entered the room while she was staring blankly.

“Hey, Nayun...” Yoo Yeonha called her with some tension in her voice.

Chae Nayun flinched before walking over to her.

“Look at this,” Yoo Yeonha said as she handed her a piece of paper.

A single sentence was written on the white background.

[I'm going to borrow this guy for a while.]

Side Stories 66

Chae Nayun (21)

[The King of the Otherworld, Jin Sahyuk, has taken an interest in you.]

[You have gained 750 SP.]

“I don’t know...”

I looked at my abductor, who had her face covered with a hood.

She looked into my eyes and tried to get into my head.

“No, there’s no way you don’t know,” she said while attempting to infiltrate my consciousness. Then she gritted her teeth and stood after failing to get into my head. She paced around the tiny room while mumbling something under her breath, “If I know you, then you must know me too...”

“...”

I had no idea why Jin Sahyuk was doing this. I wondered if she went insane or if this was yet another story setting that was added without my knowledge.

Whatever it was, it looked like Jin Sahyuk wasn’t in the right state of mind. I didn’t want to trigger her at all costs.

“I only came here to investigate. I heard a rumor that the Tears of Heaven was delivered here after the auction so...” I explained.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk stared down at me. Her gaze underneath the hood was quite ominous.

“I don’t care about things like... *Eugh!*” she suddenly groaned mid-sentence.

It was only then that I noticed her forehead was covered in sweat. She was holding onto her right arm while groaning in pain.

“...Are you hurt somewhere?” I asked her.

Jin Sahyuk glared at me in response, but soon let out a sigh and rolled up her right sleeve.

“What the...” I was rendered speechless.

A massive curse was on her right arm. Some sort of pitch-black liquid that resembled tar was squirming on her arm before it turned into the shape of a rose.

“What’s that...?” I asked.

“A curse cast from a grudge. I got it after killing some annoying bastard... I never imagined that this kind of defense mechanism existed...” she replied.

I inspected the curse’s setting.

[Grudge Curse] [High Rank]

— *A mana curse cast before the caster’s death.*

— *The curse’s strength will depend on how strong of a grudge the caster harbored.*

It was a curse of the highest rank, which was known to be quite tricky to deal with. Its host would have probably died a long time ago if it wasn’t Jin Sahyuk.

“...”

I glanced at her.

She looked at me without saying anything, but it felt like she had some sort of expectations for me.

“Did you... bring me here because of this?” I asked.

“...I didn’t want us to meet like this, but I got this curse because of you,” she replied.

I honestly had no idea what she was talking about and how she got the curse because of me.

“Hmm...”

I started to ponder if I should help her get rid of the curse or just let her be. I already knew that Jin Sahyuk was a monster on par with the final boss of the novel, but she wasn’t as violent or aggressive as I imagined her to be.

As I pondered whether to help or not...

She said, “I’m going to kill you if you refuse to lift this curse.”

That was more than enough to motivate me to help her.

* * *

The situation was quite dire, but Chae Nayun seemed surprisingly calm. It was all thanks to the experience and instincts she accumulated from her previous life that she was able to rationally assess the situation.

First, there were no signs of resistance in the room. She could tell that the abductor had some sort of relationship with Kim Hajin judging from the letter left behind.

Second, the abductor came through the window and shared a conversation with Kim Hajin before abducting him. This meant that whoever abducted him had no plans to harm him.

Lastly...

“Hey, Nayun. He sent a message in our group chat. He says he met someone he knows, so he’ll come back later,” Yoo Yeonha said.

Chae Nayun opened her smartwatch and checked the message.

[I met someone I know, so I’ll come back later.]

What were the chances that Kim Hajin wrote this message? Chae Nayun was a hundred percent sure that it was him. How was she so sure? Well, there was a selfie attached to the message...

“Hmm... Things turned out as I expected...” Chae Nayun nodded and sat on a chair while nodding like a detective who cracked a case.

Her pounding heart slowly started to calm down.

“Ah, what the hell, guys... You surprised me...”

“Yeah, you scared me too.”

Yi Yeonghan and Kim Suho rushed back after hearing that Kim Hajin had been abducted. Meanwhile, Shin Jonghak was playing with cards at the table.

“I had no idea at the time,” Chae Nayun said with a shrug. She walked over to Shin Jonghak and said, “Hey, Shin Jonghak. That’s expensive, right? Do it for me first.”

Shin Jonghak smirked and nodded.

“So? So? Will I be able to create a medicine for oppa?”

“Draw three cards.”

Chae Nayun drew three cards and showed them to him.

Shin Jonghak looked at the cards. He squinted his eyes and said in a

low voice, “You will have to offer someone’s blood as tribute. A Golden Luck is watching over you...”

Ding!

Yoo Yeonha’s smartwatch rang while Shin Jonghak was interpreting the magic cards.

[Yoo Jinhyuk]

Yoo Yeonha left the room after seeing the name of the caller.

“Hello?”

— Is it a good time to talk?

“Yes, it is.”

There was something strange about Yoo Jinhyuk’s voice. It sounded as if he was being chased or panicking and feeling nervous about something. Whatever it was, Yoo Yeonha could definitely tell that he sounded quite different from his usual happy-go-lucky self.

— It’s about that Kim Hajin guy you asked me to investigate last time.

“Yes?”

Yoo Jinhyuk hesitated for quite a while, and Yoo Yeonha could tell that he was hiding something big.

—... It seems that his parents were the heroes that Kim Sukho executed in the past.

Chills spread throughout Yoo Yeonha’s body after hearing those words.

* * *

The club members went outside after Shin Jonghak was done reading

magic tarot cards for them. They planned to take a look around the city since Kim Hajin seemed to be safe.

There were quite a lot of magical things in the City of Magic, Trooper. The streetlights were running on magic, and witches were cackling as they zipped through the sky on brooms.

It was an unimaginable sight in Seoul, where flying was strictly prohibited.

Chae Nayun went to a shop and purchased a bag of magic dust.

“This is magic dust that conveys one’s words. You will be able to convey your words by sprinkling it on your target after telling the dust what you want to convey,” the shopkeeper explained.

“...”

‘I’ll probably need this later,’ Chae Nayun thought while blushing.

“Hmm...?”

She spotted someone in the crowd while looking around the city. It was a small silhouette that she was all too familiar with, but the person seemed to have done their best to disguise themselves with a big hat. However, the person was someone that Chae Nayun missed, so she easily recognized them at a single glance.

“Ai... Oh, right...”

Chae Nayun was about to call out to that person, but immediately stopped herself. She wasn’t acquainted with that person yet and ended up confusing her previous life with her current life.

Chae Nayun faked a cough in embarrassment.

“Hmm?”

Someone made the same sound as Chae Nayun. It seemed that Seo

Youngji also spotted the cute little girl disguised with a large hat, Aileen.

“Hmm...” Seo Youngji found herself in a dilemma.

Anyone could tell that it was Aileen, but she wondered if she should pretend that she didn't see or call out to Aileen.

While Seo Youngji faced a dilemma, Aileen seemed to have felt her gaze and looked at her.

Aileen was holding a hotdog in one hand when both of their gazes met. She definitely recognized Seo Youngji judging from her reaction.

“...Lala... Lalala...”

However, Aileen did her best to pretend that she didn't see Seo Youngji and awkwardly hummed a tune to put up an act.

Seo Youngji took the hint and decided to pretend that she never saw Aileen.

“Hmm?”

It was then that she ran into another unexpected encounter.

“Whoa, are you Hero Seo Youngji?”

“...?”

Seo Youngji looked back after hearing the voice and saw the Head Magician of Seoul Magic Tower and current Cube instructor, Kim Hyojun.

Kim Hyojun tilted his head and looked at the cadets lined up behind Seo Youngji.

“What brings you here, and why are the cadets with you?” he asked.

“Ah, this is a part of their practical training. What about you?”

“Ah, I came together with the Seoul Magic Tower. We have an unofficial meeting here today, you see.”

“By unofficial meeting you mean...?”

“All twenty-three magic towers have gathered here in Trooper.”

“Ah, it must be the magic tower’s Grand Meeting,” Seo Youngji said with a nod.

The Grand Meeting of the magic towers was usually conducted in neutral city-states as frequent quarrels broke out between the magicians whenever they hosted the meeting in any of the known countries.

Kim Hyojun smiled and said, “I ran away since the meeting was almost over.”

“Ran away...?”

“Yes, the finale is usually...”

When the cadets tilted their heads in confusion and Seo Youngji was about to ask why he ran away, a mana explosion occurred from somewhere nearby.

Kkrwaaaaang!

Everyone jumped in surprise and their eyes darted towards the source of the explosion. They saw a magic dome appear from the center of the city. Then, the dome covered all of Trooper.

“...What is going on?” Rachel pulled out her sword and asked.

Both Kim Suho and Chae Nayun also looked quite concerned with what was going on.

However, Kim Hyojun nonchalantly said, “There’s no need to worry about it. That’s a common occurrence.”

“A common occurrence...?”

“Yes. You see, magicians are quite envious people. It’s a given that they’re going to fight if they gather together. *Hmm...* This fight looks like it’s between a Tower Master and a Vice Tower Master... I advise you all to be careful and not get caught up in it. Also, some djinns usually use this opportunity to sow discord. Do be careful of that as well. After all, things could get quite ugly if all of that happens simultaneously.”

Surprisingly, Kim Hyojun was quite calm as he explained the situation. He sounded as if this was an all too common occurrence.

* * *

[Art, Medicinal Wisdom, has been saved!]

[Your luck has triggered! Art, Medicinal Wisdom, has been upgraded!]

I was left with no other options due to the extreme threat. I had to use the SP I obtained from Jin Sahyuk to create an art that could treat her. The name of the art was *[Medicinal Wisdom]*, and it wasn’t that burdensome since I would eventually need it to develop a medicine for Choi Jinyoon later.

[Medicinal Wisdom] [Intermediate Rank] [Growth Type]

— *Will possess promising talent in the field of Magic Medicine. This art will synchronize with [Dazzling Dexterity] and allow the user to measure things with far greater precision compared to machines. It will also allow the user to diagnose a patient through palpation.*

— *The user may enhance their wisdom by utilizing stigma.*

“Give me your arm,” I said.

“...”

Jin Sahyuk extended her arm to me without any complaints.

I touched her cursed arm, and the remedy for this curse instantly popped up in my head when I came into contact with her arm.

“*Keuk...*” Jin Sahyuk groaned in pain.

I immediately took my hand off of her arm and faked a cough.

“It seems that we’ll need quite a few ingredients. Do you think you can collect it in your current state?”

“I’m alright. Just tell me what you need.”

I recited the medicinal ingredients that I would need.

Jin Sahyuk nodded a few times before she immediately left after I recited the full list of ingredients. She came back in fifteen minutes with all of the ingredients I required.

I mixed the ingredients and created an antidote to lift the curse. I was able to create the antidote in less than thirty minutes thanks to cranking up stigma to the max.

“Lie down...”

Jin Sahyuk listened to my instructions and obediently lay on the bed.

I poured the gel-like antidote on her arm.

“*Kieeeeeek! Gwuoooooh! Kyaaaaaahk!*”

The curse started to scream as soon as the antidote came in contact with it.

I momentarily covered my ears and continued to apply the antidote to her arm. The curse screamed even louder the more I applied the antidote.

The curse wasn't the only thing screaming in this tiny room as Jin Sahyuk was also screaming at the top of her lungs.

“...Heuuuuk! Kwaaaaaaaaah!”

The curse was finally purified after a lengthy struggle. The tar-like liquid covering her arm turned to dust and fell to the floor.

“It's over.”

“Haa... Haa...”

Jin Sahyuk was completely drenched in sweat and gasping for air.

“Hey, I'm not expecting anything in return for this, but can I ask something?”

“...”

I showed the contaminated soil in the plastic bag to her and asked, “You said that you're familiar with the Tears of Heaven, right?”

“...”

I spread out aether and placed the contaminated soil on top of it. The contaminated soil started to squirm in a hideous manner like it did last time.

“Look... the soil is moving like it's alive, right? So... does this mean that this can bring the dead back to...”

Hold on. That was wrong. Something was different. No, something was very different.

I opened my eyes as various thoughts rushed into my head. My thought process before and after I obtained *[Medicinal Wisdom]* became quite different. I just thought of a new hypothesis.

If this soil was indeed a remnant of the Tears of Heaven, then the

elixir didn't resurrect the dead, but...

“Yaaawn...”

A sudden yawn interrupted my thoughts. It was Jin Sahyuk. She was looking at me with half-open eyes while dozing off.

She started to mumble something in her drowsy voice, “Alright... go... ahead... up... to... you...”

Jin Sahyuk closed her eyes and fell asleep, but not before mumbling, “Mmm... My... loyal... subject...”

“What the heck... Is this an aftereffect of the curse?”

A system message popped up after I stood.

[Setting Modification – The pain inflicted by the curse on the king has awakened Jin Sahyuk's memories from her previous life.]

[You have obtained Kim Chundong's Diary.]

[The progress of the episode will be sped up from now on.]

“...?” I had no idea what the system was saying.

As I was taken aback by the strange system message, an explosion suddenly erupted outside.

Boooooom!

“...”

I looked at Jin Sahyuk, who was still sound asleep. This probably meant that it was okay for me to run away, right? I wore my outer clothing and was about to leave, but came to a stop.

“Just in case...”

[I'm going. Take care of yourself.]

I decided to leave her a note. I would be running away if I simply left, but I was just leaving if I left a note.

I stepped out of Jin Sahyuk's room.

Side Stories 67

Chae Nayun (22)

Boom! Taaaang! Kaboom!

Magic collided against each other and chaos descended on the city. The bolts of man-made lightning ran wild and spewed mana all over the place.

Chae Nayun sought refuge in an alley with Rachel and Yoo Yeonha while they watched the display of magical might.

“Is that really a fight between magicians?” Chae Nayun grumbled as she sensed a hint of demonic energy in the fight between magicians.

Yoo Yeonha answered her, “This city is close to Pandemonium, so there will definitely be some djinns here.”

“*Hmm...* You think so? That’s quite intriguing...”

Fire, lightning, and explosions flew across the air.

As Chae Nayun was captivated by the powerful magic flying overhead, someone approached her and whispered in her ear.

“Are you having fun?”

“*Kyak!*” Chae Nayun screamed before turning around and slapping the whisperer.

Chwak!

The slap was so loud that it almost rivaled the sound of the magic.

The victim's neck twisted after being struck by the mighty slap. Chae Nayun was shocked once more after seeing the victim's face.

"H-Hey! Hey! Are you alright?!"

"..."

"Aigoo... What should I do? Does it hurt?"

Kim Hajin stared at her in disbelief. She was the one who slapped him, but now she also worried about him.

Chae Nayun glanced at him and carefully muttered, "Why would you sneak up like that... Rather, where have you been all this time?"

"Forget about that for now. Follow me. We're going to end up getting dragged into that if we stay here," Kim Hajin motioned for them to follow him and ran off.

Chae Nayun and Rachel immediately followed him, but Yoo Yeonha wasn't willing to do the same.

However, Yoo Yeonha pondered for a while and realized she didn't have a choice. She ran as fast as she could to catch up to them.

* * *

I went down to the sewers with the three girls. It was quite damp and eerie here, but this was probably the safest place for now.

I didn't know about the rest, but a weakling like me would get instantly killed the moment I got hit by one of those magic.

"What about the rest? Kim Suho and the others?" I asked.

"They went to hunt down the djinns and we came to look for you," Chae Nayun replied.

I nodded, "Really? Okay, walk while you listen to me."

I realized a few things today, but they weren't good news.

"The soil we found at the mansion grounds... If the contaminant was indeed caused by the Tears of Heaven, then the Tears of Heaven is not an elixir that can bring the dead back to life."

"*Huh?* Really?"

"You saw the soil move, right? It moved as if it was alive. The Tears of Heaven would go into living or non-living things and make them move."

The Tears of Heaven wasn't the elixir we thought it was. It was just a mutation that was created by chance.

"In short, it's something closer to a parasite."

The Tears of Heaven wasn't an elixir that could bring the dead to life, but it was closer to a parasite that took over the host body.

"That means..."

"The Tears of Heaven is not the answer we're looking for."

However, we still had hope. The path that the Pharmacy Club walked until now led us to collecting the Hope Plant, the Soul Mana Vermillion, and the Heart of the Amazon. This order was definitely not a coincidence. The episode was definitely guiding us to the end game.

"It's alright. We'll eventually find the answer if we eliminate things one by one. Anyways, let's go back to the mansion for now."

We continued running until we found a ladder leading to above the ground. I climbed the ladder and checked my smartwatch to make sure we were at the right place before running towards the mansion.

"...Wait."

I spotted a hideous creature when the mansion came into view.

“Guoooo...”

The creature’s low and eerie moan rooted me in place.

“What the hell is that...?”

Chae Nayun and Rachel immediately readied their swords.

The hideous creature was squirming among the mansion’s rubble. The rubble clung to the creature’s body, which was made out of mud. It looked like a golem, but I had an idea of the creature’s real identity.

“That’s probably... the Tears of Heaven,” I said.

“What?” Chae Nayun muttered in disbelief.

“Gwuoooooh...”

The hideous creature spotted us, and the ground started to shake shortly afterwards. It felt as if the ground was moving according to the creature’s command.

That was most certainly the case as the creature soon used the ground to attack us.

Dddruuu! Kkkung!

The ground slithered like a snake and opened its jaws at us. We spread out and evaded the attack, but the creature already prepared its next attack.

“...!”

The creature gathered mana in its body before shooting it out in all directions. The black-reddish beams it shot out were extremely powerful. It was hard to get an accurate grasp of how strong it was.

I knew it was quite likely that aether would break if I used it to block the attack, but I didn't hesitate and formed aether into a barrier.

It was then...

A bright light shot out from my pocket and my almond floated into the air. Evandel spread out a barrier while she was still in her almond form.

“...?”

The barrier blocked all of the creature's attacks. The powerful demonic mana could no longer be felt and completely disappeared.

“W-What was that?”

“Hajin? What's that seed?”

Chae Nayun and Rachel looked at me and the seed with wide eyes in surprise.

To be honest, I was stunned too. However, I immediately came back to my senses.

“Ah, this is... I'll explain later!” I shouted as our enemy was still alive and well.

“Gwwuoooooh!”

Also, our enemy was no pushover. There was no other way for us to win aside from combining our strengths.

The barrier that Evandel formed disappeared and the creature used this opening to channel its mana once again. It gathered its mana in its mouth in preparation to shoot while causing massive tremors to make sure that we wouldn't be able to approach it.

“Kwuoooooh!”

“Stop.”

However, the creature wasn't able to fire the mana it gathered as a single word suppressed it.

“Hoho, I came to see what was going on here.”

Clack...! Clack...!

The sound of high heels could be heard before a hero emerged.

Her eyes were quite sharp despite her small stature. She looked around her surroundings with curious, yet commanding eyes.

“Interesting,” Aileen muttered before using Spirit Speech with a skewer still in her hand.

“Hey, this skewer will skewer your heart. Then, you won't be able to move for a long time.”

The ordinary skewer suddenly flashed and pierced through the hideous creature's core. The creature turned into stone after its core was pierced.

“*Hmm...* What an interesting fellow. What is this anyway?”

This was the power of one of the strongest heroes in the world. The user of Spirit Speech affiliated with the Temple of Justice, Aileen.

She inspected the Tears of Heaven with curious eyes before looking at us and smirking, “Oh, right. Now, now... it's time for you kids to go home. You kids should be in bed.”

* * *

The situation was quickly resolved after Aileen appeared.

Kim Suho was busy playing police as he ran around Trooper and started arresting the djinns. Aileen took the djinns he arrested and

brought all of them to the association.

I returned to the hotel with the others, but I still had to explain everything to them.

“So... a child who inherited Rachel’s blood is going to be born from that seed?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“Yes...” I weakly nodded in response.

I already apologized to Rachel a dozen times.

“Then that means... we’ll have to nurture it from now on,” Yoo Yeonha said.

Rachel didn’t show any reaction whatsoever. It seemed she still found it difficult to accept that a magical being who inherited her DNA was going to be born.

“Where do you plan to raise it?” I asked.

“I’ll take care of that. After all, you can’t be trusted,” Yoo Yeonha replied with a scoff.

“What? What’s there not to be trusted about him?” Chae Nayun defended me.

Yoo Yeonha frowned and glared at her before saying, “Anyways, we have to keep this a secret. Oh, by the way, Rachel?”

Rachel flinched and nodded in response.

“Are you alright? Your child will be born if we exaggerate it a bit,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“*Huh? Ah...*” Rachel looked at the snoring seed. She looked at it for quite a while before letting out a sigh, “I’m not sure... but I hope it won’t grow up the same way I did... *Ah...* I really don’t know, but I think I’m alright for now.” She looked at us and smiled brightly.

I went up to the hotel's rooftop late at night. The night sky was filled with stars... and mana thanks to the still ongoing war between the magicians.

They toned it down a bit compared to earlier in the day, but there were still some mana explosions erupting and going, "*Boom! Boom!*" from time to time.

"*Sigh...*"

I was feeling troubled. The entire scenery looked different. Even the milky way looked different from where I came from. This world looked similar to Earth, but it was quite different at the same time.

And I was stranded here in this faraway place. Was I ever going to go back?

I felt the emptiness and depression I was holding back for some time now come crashing down on me. Half a year had already passed, and I was going to have to repeat this at least fifteen more times before I could get a hint on how to go back home. Could I withstand it for that long?

I suddenly sensed someone behind me, so I simply sat there and waited for that person to come closer.

She was a character I created, but now possessed some sort of secret. She was someone who bothered and concerned me every single day without fail...

"What are you doing here?"

Chae Nayun (■■■■) sat beside me.

I looked at her before looking forward again and replied, "Just watching the scenery."

"Really? That's a coincidence. I came up here to do just that."

Chae Nayun looked up at the night sky like I did. I looked at her instead and saw the stars brightly reflecting in her big, beautiful eyes.

“It’s really beautiful... *Ehem...* Hey, Kim Hajin. Take this,” she cleared her throat and gave me something.

It was a pouch the size of my fist.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“Magic dust. I recorded my voice in it. Listen to it later when you get the chance.”

I opened the pouch, but Chae Nayun jumped and stopped me from opening it.

— What I wanted to say is...

The voice was cut short after Chae Nayun closed the pouch.

“No! No! Not now! Listen to it later! Maybe after a year? Think of it as a time capsule, okay?”

I nodded in response and placed the pouch in my pocket. I could just listen to it tomorrow.

“Good boy...”

We silently watched the night sky. The mana and stars intertwined with each other. Mana would flash from behind the clouds from time to time.

However, the rooftop had a solemn atmosphere.

I looked at Chae Nayun once again. She was making a sad face that didn’t suit her. I thought it was highly likely that she was still reeling from the shock of the Tears of Heaven turning out to be nothing more than an abomination.

I let out a sigh and said, “The Tears of Heaven might not have been what we were looking for, but... we’ll be able to make the medicine he needs. No, we still aren’t sure if that monster was indeed the Tears of Heaven or not.

“...?”

Chae Nayun looked at me without saying a word. She looked confused as if asking, *‘What are you talking about?’* Soon, she warmly smiled and nodded.

I continued, “So I’m just saying this, but... can I go see your oppa with you?”

“My oppa... what?!”

Chae Nayun looked shocked at my request.

“W-Why?! What do you plan to do?!”

“What do you mean plan? What else would I do there?”

“Do you plan to kill him?!”

“Hey, are you crazy?”

I lightly hit her shoulder after she started spouting nonsense, but she was still glaring at me with skeptical eyes.

“I just feel that I might figure something out if I take a look at your oppa.”

“Take a look?”

“Yeah. I mean, we need to identify the symptoms to treat him, right? Don’t you want to wake him up?”

We gazed at each other. I had no idea why, but it felt like the stars in her eyes were crossing over to mine.

"I'll save him," I said.

"...Really?"

"Yeah. It might have been a bust this time, but we'll figure it out soon."

"Really? Really?"

"Yeah, really."

"..."

Then, Chae Nayun silently looked at the night sky again and I looked up too.

The stars were littered across the horizon, but my view was blocked when a system message popped up in front of my eyes.

[The identity of ■■■ has been unraveled.]

[Chae Nayun's setting has been updated – Regressor.]

[You have gained 1,000 SP.]

I couldn't make sense of these words, and had no idea what events caused them to appear.

I reread the system message word by word before my eyes shot wide open. My hands trembled and it felt like my heart was about to beat its way out of my chest.

I seemed to be looking at the same thing as Chae Nayun, but our point of view was entirely different.

"Hey," Chae Nayun called me.

She didn't give me time to respond or the chance for me to run away.

“I like you.”

She confessed her feelings with those three words.

I felt my heart drop and the stars in the night sky shook.

Side Stories 68

Chae Nayun (23)

Rejected.

No, it was more appropriate to say that she didn't get a response, but she could tell from Kim Hajin's expression that she had been rejected.

“...”

Chae Nayun blankly stared at the ceiling.

She was caught up in the atmosphere when Kim Hajin mentioned that he would save her brother. The emotions from her previous life welled up at that moment and she failed to prevent her confession from spilling out of her mouth.

The problem was that her emotions and the current timeline didn't match at all.

Kim Hajin had no idea about the Chae Nayun before she regressed, so she was just an idiot that he spent roughly four months with from his perspective.

Even she would be surprised if an idiot like her suddenly confessed out of nowhere.

“Eh... huh...? Aaah... AAAAHHHHH!” Chae Nayun screamed while punching her mattress.

Yoo Yeonha finally managed to fall asleep not too long ago, but she forcefully opened her eyes at the ruckus Chae Nayun was causing. She couldn't fall asleep as she kept thinking about what Yoo Jinhyuk had told her, so she glared at Chae Nayun with bloodshot eyes.

“Nayun...”

“AAAAAH! AAAAAH! AAAAH!”

“Haa...”

Yoo Yeonha used her mana to conjure makeshift earplugs and covered her ears with them.

Chae Nayun finally managed to calm down after kicking up a fuss in the middle of the night, but her entire body felt hot. It was so hot that she couldn't fall asleep because of it, so she got up from her bed.

She walked out to the balcony and stared at the sky.

The sun rising from the west faintly illuminated the sky. It was already sunrise, but she didn't feel refreshed at all.

Chae Nayun leaned on the balcony railing and let out a sigh.

“...I like you.”

‘I really like you. I only like you. I like you the most.’

“I like you, but...”

Chae Nayun was left trembling in embarrassment and shame after failing to suppress the words she desperately wanted to say out loud to the person she loved.

* * *

[The identity of ■■■ has been unraveled.]

[Chae Nayun's setting has been updated – Regressor.]

[You have gained 1,000 SP.]

I stared at the system message with my eyes wide open. It was already dawn, but I failed to sleep even a wink. No, I wasn't sleepy at all.

'Regressor.'

That single word was more than enough to shake my very soul and form countless theories and questions in my head.

Why was regressor suddenly added to Chae Nayun's setting? Then, is her first life the real world or is her second life the real one?

I had a splitting headache after these torrents of thoughts came crashing down on me, but I knew very well that my complicated thoughts simply didn't occur because I saw the word regressor in her setting.

"...I'm having a fever."

My cheeks felt hot and my heart was beating like crazy. Chae Nayun's bold confession kept ringing in my ears.

"Ah..."

I ended up grabbing my hair at the complicated feeling welling up inside of me. It wasn't that I had never dated anyone before or was never confessed to. Of course, I was usually the one confessing and her boldness did take me by surprise. However...

It was strange.

I was supposed to focus on the keyword regressor, but my heart was forcing me to think about something else.

"...This is driving me crazy."

Chae Nayun was a character in my novel. She was a person I created with the settings I wrote with my own two hands...

Yes, that was right. She was a person. She wasn't just a character in a

novel, but technically a living breathing person.

Kim Suho came back at daybreak. “Oh, Hajin. You’re already awake?”

He left around three in the morning and came back drenched in sweat. I guess he went to train or something.

“Yeah... I’m awake now. What did you do outside?”

“Ah, I went to hunt some monsters. There are quite a lot of them in the vicinity,” Kim Suho replied with a sheepish smile before sitting on his bed.

It seemed that he really liked his new weapon judging by how he kept affectionately touching it.

“Oh right, what did you do with Chae Nayun?”

“...”

My heart felt like it was caught off guard and hit by a straight punch at his sudden question.

I simply tilted my head in confusion and Kim Suho brightly smiled.

“Some strange vibes were coming from the two of you,” he said with a sheepish grin.

“What strange vibes are you talking about?” I retorted.

I had no idea why, but I ended up looking at my smartwatch to search for the location of the [*Butterfly Sapling*] that I saved a while back.

“Rather, are you free sometime soon? There’s somewhere I need to go with you,” I changed the subject.

“You need to go with me?”

“Yeah, I found an item.”

“Hmm... I think I’m free next week, but what item is it?”

“I’ll tell you once we’re there.”

“Okay, sounds good to me!” Kim Suho replied before standing up and heading to the bathroom.

Shwaaaa!

I read *[Kim Chundong’s Diary]* while Kim Suho was taking a shower.

“...What the hell is this?”

The content of the diary was that the extra I possessed, Kim Chundong, traveled to another world and lived as Jin Sahyuk’s subordinate named Kindspring. He was her most loyal subject, but he was betrayed in the end.

I could deduce from the content of this diary that Jin Sahyuk recognized me as Kindspring and...

It was then.

“Ack!”

A sharp pain struck my head. It was the familiar feeling of a pair of hot fangs digging themselves into my skull, the feeling of another streak of stigma being added.

I grabbed my arm and plopped down on my bed.

“Ughhh...”

I helplessly trembled and squirmed in pain before I lost consciousness.

* * *

The Pharmacy Club left Trooper and came back to the portal station in Seoul. The club’s mood was quite downcast after realizing that our

main goal, the Tears of Heaven, ended up being a dud.

“...Our car is waiting outside,” Chae Nayun weakly said.

There were a lot of people at the portal station, but I was certain that she was talking to me.

“...Okay,” I replied as nonchalantly as possible.

All of us exited the portal station and a limousine appeared just as Chae Nayun spoke. The driver opened the door for us and everyone hopped in.

“Just drop me and Yi Yeonghan at the bus stop nearby,” Kim Suho said.

“...Alright,” Chae Nayun weakly replied.

The limousine set off and the club members got off one by one as time passed. Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan were the first ones to get off at the bus stop. Shin Jonghak got off at Frost Sanctuary’s headquarters, Seo Youngji at the association, and lastly Yoo Yeonha at Essence of the Straits’ headquarters.

“I’ll be going now. Oh right, I already prepared a place for Evandel. Just let me know once she’s born,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“Ah, okay,” I replied.

Only the two of us remained after Yoo Yeonha got off.

The air in the limousine felt suffocating.

Chae Nayun simply looked out the window without saying anything. Her face and upper body looked relaxed, but I could see her legs trembling.

“...”

I quietly stared out the window as well.

Time passed and various sceneries flew by in front of my eyes before we finally reached the hospital. We were dropped off in front of the VIP ward located deep within the hospital grounds.

“Hey, this is our stop. Let’s go,” Chae Nayun said.

“*Huh? Ah*, alright.”

She walked ahead, but her legs looked quite unnatural for some reason. Anyways, I simply followed her.

We were able to pass through the heavy security simply with her identity until we finally reached Chae Jinyoon’s room.

“This is it. Do you want to go in?”

I nodded in response.

Chae Nayun told the guard to open the door, which instantly opened at her command.

It was a wide and brightly lit room. Chae Jinyoon was on a bed that was so lavishly decorated that it didn’t look like a hospital bed at all.

“Oppa... I’m here... This is... *erm*... my friend. His name is Kim Hajin...” Chae Nayun stole glances at me while introducing me.

I awkwardly smiled and walked over beside her.

“Hello, my name is Kim Hajin. I’m here to diagnose your symptoms,” I said.

“...”

“Can I go ahead?” I asked Chae Nayun.

She hesitated for a moment before nodding in approval.

I placed my hand on Chae Jinyoon's forehead.

"Hmm..."

However, I couldn't figure anything out. I couldn't find anything with my current level, so I was left with no choice but to use my stigma.

Shwaaaaa...

I infused stigma into my hand. It enhanced my gift before entering Chae Jinyoon's body. I continued until I used up all of stigma, but I failed to find a cure for his illness.

However...

"...What?" I asked.

Chae Nayun was suddenly beside me and looked like she was about to burst into tears at any moment while holding onto my arm.

"Hey, what are you doing?" I asked again.

"...You might kill him."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" I said with a laugh.

However, it didn't seem like Chae Nayun was joking. I stared at her mortified expression when a thought suddenly flashed in my head.

What if I did something bad to Chae Jinyoon in her previous life? No, then there was no way Chae Nayun would have feelings for me, right?

"Hey, no, I mean... a joke. Yes, that's right... I was just joking. Rather, did you find out anything?" Chae Nayun asked after immediately composing herself.

"Yeah, a little bit. The main problem is his heart," I said.

I failed to find the root of his illness, but this was probably enough.

“...Heart?”

“Yeah, what did the doctors say?”

Chae Nayun stole a glance at Chae Jinyoon before looking me in the eyes, “They said there’s nothing wrong with him.”

“...That’s what they would’ve probably said.”

Actually, there was nothing wrong with his heart itself. The problem was with how his heart was running right now. In short, his heart functions were all tangled up and in a mess.

I was certain there was a way to bring his heart back to normal. There was definitely a way if I could combine the Heart of Adaptation in me with various other medicinal ingredients... Yes, that would be worth a try.

Knock! Knock!

A vicious-looking bodyguard entered the room and said, “Milady, visiting hours for outsiders are over.”

Chae Nayun tried to shoo the bodyguard away, but I simply nodded and left the room.

“I’ll be going first,” I said.

“*Huh? Ah*, okay. Then I’ll bring you home,” Chae Nayun said.

“*Nah*, you stay here and spend more time with your brother...”

* * *

Chae Nayun was struggling after sending Kim Hajin away like that yesterday. She went online hoping to catch him in the game, but he never came online.

[X Man (Offline)]

“Haa... My heart hurts...” Chae Nayun let out a sigh after coming out of the game capsule.

She thought she would be fine since she lived longer than him, but she felt her heartstrings tugging as if her heart was throwing a tantrum.

She pondered if she should send him a message and say that it was just a joke to mess with him, but... that sounded too cowardly...

Ring! Ring!

Her smartwatch at her desk loudly rang to inform her that a message arrived.

Chae Nayun instantly shot up and ran to check her smartwatch.

[Hey, Chae Nayun.]

It was from Kim Suho.

Chae Nayun felt anger well up from inside of her. She was about to ignore the message and put her smartwatch down when...

[I'm going with Hajin to look for an item. Do you want to tag along?]

“...”

Chae Nayun's eyes shot wide open at the message.

Gulp!

She nervously gulped and thought:

‘It's still not over. There's still a lot of time for us to make memories together. At least six months or even a whole year if we take things slowly. Then I can simply confess again after we develop feelings for each other... ’

‘Well, he might hate me for doing this while being aware of the future. Or he could ask me how I knew about the future if he ever finds out... but

worst of all, he could already be aware that I know the future... ’

‘However... I can’t help but feel selfish... I want to hold him in my arms someday. No, I want to hold him in my arms right now. He was the one that made me take up the sword, he was the one who brought salvation to oppa, and he was the reason that everything happened in my life... ’

‘So I’m not going to give up simply because I got rejected once. The only thing I can do now is to love him even more passionately than before...!’

[I’m going.]

Chae Nayun immediately replied and jumped online to start searching for things in a frenzy. Her fingers typed so fast that they started to become blurry.

[Summer Fashion]

[Female Hero Summer Fashion]

[Perfume Suggestion]

[Summer Dress?]

[Something other than a dress]

[What should I wear?]

[Blouse]

[Luxury Branded Blouse]

* * *

It was now mid-July, which was the peak of summer vacation.

I arrived at the East Sea harbor as promised and stared at Kim Suho in disbelief.

“Oh! You’re already here, Hajin?” Kim Suho said.

That bastard Kim Suho... Why was he smiling so brightly with Chae Nayun beside him?

“Oh, Kim Hajin is here! I was waiting for you,” Chae Nayun said with an awkward smile on her yacht.

“...”

However, something felt off about the entire thing. I wasn’t sure if it was because of the blinding sunlight or the scent of summer, but her squirming silhouette on the yacht deck looked quite... lovely.

“Heave-ho!” Chae Nayun hopped in front of me and smiled brightly.

Her smile was adorable and reminded me of a cartoon character from my previous world.

“I heard that you guys were going to some island, so I prepared a yacht. As for manning the yacht... I’m sure you can do it, right? Well, I just came to lend you the yacht. I don’t mind going home if you tell me that you don’t want me to tag along, but...” Chae Nayun said while squirming in her white blouse and blue shorts.

She looked innocent in her current fashion compared to her usual look.

I sighed and replied, “...Just come with us if you want. I can drive the yacht.”

“What?! Really?! Wait, no... *Ehem*... If you say you want me to tag along then I guess I have no choice...” Chae Nayun cleared her throat and did her best to suppress her smile.

I frowned and pinched Kim Suho on the waist as I found his sheepish smile to be quite annoying.

Kim Suho screamed, “Ack!” before stepping away from us.

“Then, let’s go,” I said.

All of us headed to the yacht. I stood at the helm after being forced to be the helmsman of the yacht.

Chae Nayun came beside me and said, “Wow, Kim Hajin is so good at driving!”

She rested her chin on my shoulder while mumbling nonsense. I mean... We didn’t even set sail yet...

I simply smirked in disbelief, but suddenly turned around. I looked at the forest behind the harbor.

I couldn’t sense anything from it, but... nobody’s going to come chasing after us, right?

“What’s wrong, Hajin?” Kim Suho asked.

I shook my head in response and replied, “No, it’s nothing... We’re setting sail now.”

Krwaaaa!

The yacht pierced through the surface of the water. The sun was shining brightly and made the water around us glimmer like jewels. Water splashed around us as if it was raining.

Kim Suho conjured a fishing rod with his mana and prepared to fish while Chae Nayun pretended to lose her balance and leaned against me.

She looked up at me and smiled brightly.

I tried my best to act indifferent, but... I felt a faint smile forming against my wishes.

Side Stories 69

Chae Nayun (24)

We arrived at the uninhabited, nameless island that was supposed to be used as the main stage for the final exam if things proceeded according to the original story.

We immediately went to search for the *[Butterfly Sapling]* somewhere on this island.

“There are quite a lot of monsters.”

“...Yeah, you’re right.”

However, the island was densely populated with monsters to the point that it was downright absurd. A monster popped up whenever we took a step and they were all at a level that was difficult for me to handle.

“They’ll be quite helpful for my training,” Kim Suho said as he easily disposed of the monsters.

A monster’s head would split in half whenever he smacked them with his stick (Misteltein).

“Yeah,” Chae Nayun agreed.

It was the same for her as she skillfully cut down the monsters with her sword, which flowed like water but struck like lightning. Well, she probably learned those skills from her previous life.

Anyways...

We marched on while facing battle after battle until night fell on us.

“Let’s rest for tonight,” I said after finding a suitable camping site.

However, Chae Nayun and Kim Suho simultaneously tilted their heads.

“Already?”

“I think we can keep going, no?”

“...We should preserve our stamina in preparation for any worst-case scenarios,” I replied.

The butterfly sapling was not an easy opponent, so resting was an absolute must. Yes, I wasn't asking to rest because I was tired or anything like that...

“Go and gather some firewood while I pitch the tent,” I said.

“Okay,” Chae Nayun and Kim Suho replied before venturing into the forest.

I started to pitch the tent I prepared in advance. As I was busy pitching the tent, a monster popped out from the bushes.

“What...”

This monster had a dark body that blended with the darkness and I immediately recognized it as the rank 1 monkey-type monster, darkie.

The sudden ambush was definitely not something I expected, but the monster was split in half before it could even reach me.

Chae Nayun's single strike slashed its body apart.

“No wonder I felt nervous for some reason...” she muttered while swinging the blood off of her sword as she emerged from the bushes. Then she said, “Hey, that bastard has been lurking around us for quite a while now.”

“Really...?”

“Yeah. Anyways, you owe me one,” Chae Nayun said as she gave me a hand.

I fell on my butt at the sudden ambush, so I grabbed her hand and got up.

“Thanks.”

“Good that you know. Here, the firewood,” Chae Nayun said as she placed down an armful of firewood.

“Alright...”

I used the firewood to light a campfire.

Crackle... Crackle... Crackle... Crackle...

The campfire burned brightly in the darkness.

I could see Chae Nayun across the dancing flames. She hugged her knees while staring at the fire.

Her hair was shoulder length and her blouse was stained with monster blood. I was busy staring at her appearance when she suddenly spoke.

“Hey.”

“...YeAh?! *Ehem...* Yeah, what?” I squeaked, but immediately cleared my throat.

Chae Nayun stared at me over the fire and continued, “You know... that thing I said last time...”

“...”

I didn’t respond. My silence seemed to have embarrassed or angered her as she grabbed a piece of firewood and crushed it to pieces.

“I’m not going to give up.”

Her voice sounded quite calm and I simply continued staring at her.

Then, I suddenly noticed something. Her face was flushed and her eyes seemed out of focus. I initially thought it was because of the campfire smoke, but a faint sweet smell was tickling my nose.

“Just you wait... just you wait...” she grumbled.

I recognized the scent of alcohol.

Chae Nayun pointed and looked at me with out-of-focus eyes before saying, “You! You won’t be able to live without me!”

“...”

I wasn’t sure if she was placing a curse on me or confessing again, but her actions just now made me certain.

This girl is drunk.

“Did you drink?”

“What are you talking about... *hiccup!*”

Chae Nayun started to hiccup.

I looked at the pouch hanging on her waist and found a bottleneck peeking out.

“...I drank a bit,” Chae Nayun said while awkwardly scratching the back of her neck.

“I thought cadets didn’t get drunk that easily?”

“I learned how to get drunk.”

“When did you learn something like that? You usually learn that after you graduate and get into a guild, no?”

I feigned ignorance and threw a seemingly harmless question. However, that question was aimed at finding out more about her regression.

Chae Nayun seemed taken aback by my question, but immediately thought of an excuse. "I'm quite talented, so it didn't take me long to learn it."

She muttered some stuff under her breath along the lines of, 'Yes... *that's right... I'm talented...* '

"I'm not a fan of people who drink and smoke... I mean, I barely managed to cut my own habit, but it's a hassle if someone around me keeps reminding me of it," I said.

"I can quit... that's not a problem... not at all..." Chae Nayun muttered with a serious look.

"..."

I simply stared at her.

Chae Nayun seemed to have felt my gaze and looked at me before quickly avoiding eye contact. She scratched her cheek in embarrassment.

"...W-What?"

"..."

"What's your problem?"

"..."

"Ah, why are you staring at me? I said, why are you staring!"

I burst into laughter. I tried my best to suppress it, but it came flooding out. It had been a while since something made me laugh this much.

Chae Nayun stared at me dumbfoundedly before laughing as well.

As our laughter spread into the darkness, Kim Suho finally appeared.

“Oh, what’s going on? What happened? What’s so funny?” he asked like a curious child.

I stopped laughing and shook my head, “Nothing.”

“Ah, fuck...” Chae Nayun grumbled and glared at Kim Suho.

Kim Suho tilted his head in confusion and asked with an innocent look, “What?”

“...You senseless bastard.”

“What did I do? Hey, why were you guys laughing?”

“Forget about it. Let’s just eat something,” I placed a grill over the campfire.

* * *

Kugugugu!

The butterfly sapling spread its dust all over the place before collapsing. Its dust contained powerful chemicals that made anyone who inhaled it fall asleep, but the party had prepared gas masks.

They gathered all of the dust and sat on the floor.

“Phew...”

The fight lasted for three hours. Kim Hajin was exhausted to the point of death while the vanguards of the fight, Kim Suho and Chae Nayun, looked quite tired as well.

They rested for a while.

“Ah... I’m dying... Alright, it’s time to split it between us,” Kim Hajin said as he divided the powder into three.

“I don’t need it. You guys can have it all,” Chae Nayun said.

“Shut up,” Kim Hajin snapped back.

In the end, she was left with her share of the butterfly dust and reluctantly accepted it.

Chae Nayun grumbled inwardly, *‘Ah, you don’t want to be indebted to me. Is that it?’*

Kim Suho inspected the sparkling dust and asked, “What is this for, Hajin?”

“This dust will allow any equipment to reach its full potential. You can use it on that wooden stick of yours.”

“Oh right, I should probably do that,” Kim Suho said with a bright smile.

Meanwhile, Chae Nayun was still pouting and sulking.

“Let’s go back,” Kim Hajin said.

“*Huh?* Already? Why? Why don’t we rest for a day here?” Chae Nayun asked.

“Who knows what could happen if we dilly dally? I mean, it’s likely that treasure hunters will swarm this place in less than a day. The butterfly sapling is quite flashy and its mana waves would’ve probably reached Japan by now.”

“*Tsk...* Always acting so smart...”

“Just hurry up and follow me.”

Kim Hajin completely ignored Chae Nayun’s grumblings and started

walking back. She was still pouting and sulking, but did as he said.

They soon reached the shore where their yacht was exactly as they left it. Kim Hajin used *[Hacking]* just in case to make sure there was nothing wrong with the yacht.

“*Hmm...* It looks good. Let’s hop on board.”

Fortunately, the yacht was alright with no signs of tampering. The three of them hopped onto the yacht.

“Alright, we’re setting sail now,” Kim Hajin said as he grabbed the steering wheel.

Kwaaaaa!

The yacht zipped through the waters.

Kim Suho sat in a corner and applied the butterfly sapling dust to Misteltein while Chae Nayun quietly sat beside Kim Hajin at the helm.

“...?”

A while passed when Chae Nayun suddenly sensed something. A cold sinister feeling made the hair at the back of her neck stand, but she didn’t have time to think about anything else.

She instinctively wrapped her arms around Kim Hajin and pulled him to the ground.

“What...?”

Chae Nayun’s adrenaline kicked in and time slowed for her. She looked towards the direction where her instincts warned her and saw something sharp ferociously flying towards Kim Hajin. She held him close and turned her body, so the danger would hit her instead.

She knew evading it was impossible, so she prepared herself and hoped that her aura would be able to block the incoming threat.

Pak!

...Nothing happened aside from the sound of a bubble popping.

“What the...?” Chae Nayun muttered while looking around her surroundings.

Her arms were still tightly wrapped around Kim Hajin. He tapped on her arms to tell her that he was getting suffocated.

“What was that just now...?” Chae Nayun muttered once again.

She released Kim Hajin and looked around her surroundings, but there was nothing in the water around them for someone to use as a platform and launch such an attack.

“*Keuk! Keuh! Keuh! Ah... Keeeeek!*” Kim Hajin gasped for breath after finally being let go.

Chae Nayun was still inspecting their surroundings for the culprit.

‘Magic.’

She was a hundred percent certain that it was a colorless, odorless, and formless magic that perfectly hid its killing intent. However, the magic disappeared when it came into contact with her as if nothing happened.

Various suspicions popped up in her head.

‘First, it could’ve been a homing-type magic, but that’s highly unlikely as it disappeared the moment it struck me. Besides, there’s no way that I wouldn’t be able to recognize that kind of magic when I’m so sensitive to mana.’

‘Second, maybe they were just trying to scare us? That’s highly unlikely too as they perfectly hid their presence. A magician capable of something like that was just trying to scare us? No way, they would’ve used flashy explosion magic if they were trying to scare us.’

“Then, the most likely explanation would be... The assassin was aiming for Kim Hajin, but they withdrew their mana when I protected him. I have no idea who was behind it, but I’m certain they were after Kim Hajin. They had no plans to harm anyone else aside from Kim Hajin, especially me... but why would such a skilled assassin come after Kim Hajin? For what?”

“Hey, Kim Hajin,” Chae Nayun looked at him.

Her eyes were sharp as a predator and she looked dead serious.

Kim Hajin was still gasping for air, but immediately turned serious when he saw Chae Nayun’s eyes.

Chae Nayun lowered her voice and whispered, “Someone’s after you.”

Exactly three seconds later...

“There was something just now! Be careful, Hajin!” Kim Suho shouted.

Chae Nayun and Kim Suho immediately jumped and surrounded Kim Hajin to protect him.

* * *

We arrived at the East Sea harbor.

Kim Suho went home first in a limousine prepared by Chae Nayun. I was thinking of going back to Cube, but...

“I said you can’t!” Chae Nayun vehemently protested.

I stopped walking and looked back at her.

Her face flushed red as she shouted, “Cube is dangerous during the summer vacations! I can’t accept that!”

“...”

I ignored her and continued walking, but I looked back again after a

while to find Chae Nayun still following me.

“You heard Kim Suho as well, right? There was some kind of magic after you.”

“That’s why I’ll protect you. I must protect you!”

“It’s dangerous!”

Chae Nayun shouted a line every time I looked back.

“Hey...” I let out a sigh.

Of course, I felt the magic they were talking about at the yacht, albeit faintly. However, I couldn’t understand why she was overreacting...

“...!”

Then, my eyes shot wide open as a thought flashed across my mind.

Don’t tell me... What if... What if I died in her previous life? And what if Chae Nayun and I were lovers in that world?

It was highly unlikely, but everything would fall into place if that was the case. Still, it didn’t make sense that Chae Nayun would worry about me harming Chae Jinyoon. Yeah, I found it impossible that she would fall for someone like me...

“I can just inform Cube about what happened, right?” I said.

“No, not at all. Who’s going to believe you? Also, I’ll just wait it out if I was the assassin. You don’t know much about assassination, right? Assassination is not something done at the spur of the moment, but it’s a fight of attrition that lasts for a fucking long time,” Chae Nayun replied.

“You’re talking as if you’ve been an active assassin for a few years.”

“Well, that is...”

Chae Nayun suddenly got tongue-tied and started to mumble, ‘*Err... uhm... uhh...*’

She continued making such sounds with her mouth open. It looked like she was trying to come up with something, but continued to be in that state even after five, ten, fifteen seconds passed.

In the end, I had no choice but to change the subject.

“Let’s say you’re right. Where am I going to stay then?”

Then Chae Nayun finally spoke, “Who knows? First things first... it has to be somewhere I can protect you. You have a house in Seoul, right? I think that’ll be perfect.”

“What about your place? It’s wide and there are a lot of rooms, right?”

“My place is a no-go. It’s off-limits to outsiders.”

“I saw on the news that people frequently visit it...”

“That’s not our house. It’s just an extension of it.”

“So what I’m saying is... I can just stay at that extension, right?”

“...”

Chae Nayun closed her mouth and glared at me.

Grit... Grit...

I could hear her gritting her teeth, but I didn’t back down.

Our battle of wits continued for a while until she finally spoke first, “My dad won’t allow it.”

“...”

That was something I couldn't argue with.

* * *

I had no choice but to bring Chae Nayun to the apartment I stayed in before enrolling at Cube.

"Oh... Such a place exists?" Chae Nayun muttered while looking around in amazement.

The look on her face seemed to say something along the lines of, *'This entire house is smaller than my bathroom,'* or something like that.

She finally sat on the floor and said, "Anyways, I'll protect you until vacation ends... Well, it's not necessarily going to be safe just because classes resume, but I'll still protect you. Don't worry!"

"...Alright," I replied with a nod.

I had no idea why I was a target, but it was true that something happened onboard the yacht. Besides, I could use this opportunity to observe her nearby and see if my theory was correct or not.

"Alright, now you're being a good boy... *Urghhhh!*" Chae Nayun said before stretching her arms. She plopped on the ground before continuing, "Be grateful that a great swordsman like me is protecting you. Do you understand?"

"..."

"*Hohoho!*" Chae Nayun let out a sinister laughter before closing her eyes. Exactly five minutes passed when she suddenly stood up.

"...What's wrong?" I asked.

"*Hmm...*"

Chae Nayun ignored me and continued pressing on the floor with her feet.

“What is it? Tell me.”

“Well... don’t you have... a bed? I can’t sleep without a bed. My body’s quite stiff after camping for two nights... Actually, I didn’t get a wink of sleep because it was quite uncomfortable. I’ve been awake for sixty hours now...”

“...”

Her mannerism was like a construction worker, but her habits were even more refined than a noble lady.

“Follow me,” I led her to my bedroom against my wishes.

My bedroom was quite small. It was barely large enough to fit a bed and a closet.

“Oh, was this the bedroom door? It was so small that I thought it was a storage or something,” Chae Nayun nonchalantly commented.

She walked over to my bed and was about to jump on it when she froze and looked at me.

“Why? Aren’t you sleepy?” I asked.

“No... it’s not that... it’s just... *erm*...”

She slowly laid down on the bed and wrapped herself in the blanket. She squirmed a few times before suddenly standing up.

“Wow... it reeks of cigarettes...” she said.

“Oh... right...”

I completely forgot that I used to smoke packs while in bed. That was just four months ago, so the scent of my depression and devastation was still fresh there.

“Move. I’ll clean it for you,” I said.

It was quite embarrassing, so I activated stigma to immediately clean it up.

Side Stories 70

Chae Nayun (25)

“Hiik... Hiii... Hihi...”

It would’ve been quite a peaceful afternoon without Chae Nayun’s annoying laughter. She was smiling and laughing like an idiot while watching a show on her smartwatch.

“Hahaha! This is so funny! But why is it so funny? It’s so silly! Hahaha!”

Meanwhile, I was looking up information related to the story setting on my laptop to narrow down the identity of the assassin coming after me. However, I couldn’t find anyone who might harbor a grudge even when I factored in Kim Chundong’s life.

“Phew...”

I sighed in frustration when my smartwatch suddenly rang.

[Bbb... aazz... wwqllppp...]

It came from Jin Sahyuk.

I stole a glance at Chae Nayun for some strange reason before quickly replying, *‘How is your wound?’*

It seemed like Jin Sahyuk already lost her seat as the novel’s final boss. Thanks to that, I had no idea who the final boss would be, but it wasn’t that bad. I could possibly ask Jin Sahyuk for help from now on.

“Hey, Kim Hajin. What are you doing?” Chae Nayun asked as she craned her neck towards me while lying on the sofa.

I immediately accessed the Hero Community Forum and replied, "I'm browsing the community forum."

"Ah, okay. By the way, what's your ID there? I have a lot of points. Let me give you some."

"Forget about it."

"Hey, it's really good if you have a lot of points!"

Chae Nayun reached towards me before falling off the sofa. She immediately broke her fall by planting her hand and twisting in mid-air to land on her feet. Then, she rested her chin on my shoulder and peeked at my laptop screen.

"Your ID is Extra... Hey, why is everything extra for you?"

"Aren't you going home?"

I shrugged Chae Nayun's chin off of my shoulder.

She pouted and pressed random keys on my laptop. "I already told you... Do I have to explain again?"

"No, I know. Can't I just ask Kim Suho though?"

"No, the opponent is stronger than you think. You will just be putting Kim Suho in harm's way like that."

"Then what about you?"

"The assassin isn't after me. No, it's more accurate to say that they can't kill me."

It did make sense since Kim Suho wasn't invincible, but Chae Nayun's family was definitely invincible. They were one of the most influential families not only in Korea, but the entire world. Even those in Baekdu Mountain were affiliated with them.

“Then, don’t just laze around doing nothing. Go and use your family’s network of informants to find out who ordered the hit on me or something.”

“Oh, you’re right... Yes... you’re right...”

Chae Nayun’s eyes shot wide open as she rubbed her chin and started to ponder something.

Yes, it would be possible for her to find out the culprit if she used her knowledge from her previous...

“Don’t tell me... I hope it’s not my grandfather...”

“W-What?”

“Ah, it’s probably not. My grandfather isn’t interested in you at all. It’s more likely that...”

Chae Nayun looked at me and seemed to wonder if she could tell me what was on her mind.

“Say it.”

“No... I’ll tell you later...”

In the end, she swallowed what she wanted to say. I didn’t bother pressing her any further as she left to watch TV.

“Wow, I’ve been watching this show for days...” she nonchalantly tried to lean her head on my shoulder again.

I responded by avoiding her and standing.

“Ack!”

Chae Nayun fell head-first to the floor and glared at me. I ignored her glare and waltzed into the kitchen.

“Things didn’t go according to plan?”

Two people stood on the lawn of Kim Hajin’s apartment complex and looked up at a unit on the tenth floor.

“Yeah, it went bad.”

They initially thought it would be an easy mission, but Chae Nayun clung to the guy and cranked up the mission’s difficulty.

“Do we have to kill both of them in the end?” one of the two, a woman, asked.

The other one, a man, glared at her and said, “Are you crazy? We won’t be able to take a single step in this world if we do that.”

“But boss said it too. It’s fine if we kill both of them if we don’t see an opportunity to kill the boy alone.”

“That was a bluff...”

“Are you saying boss was bluffing?”

The man no longer replied.

Both of them were magic specialists. They weren’t at a level where they could raze a city, but they were definitely strong enough to raze a village.

Regardless of how powerful they were, both of them didn’t dare to be at odds with Chae Joochul. Still, they didn’t want to disobey their boss’ command.

All they had to do was quietly kill that boy called Kim Hajin...

“Ah, it seems like someone’s on their way here,” the man said.

The woman nodded in response.

A ferocious presence emerged from the forest behind the apartment lawn. The duo instinctively knew this hooded figure was powerful.

“You guys... don’t seem as hopeless as those rabbles they sent last time...” the hooded figure said.

The hooded figure’s cold voice provoked them. The duo and the hooded figure stood at a safe distance while assessing each other.

“You’re an expert too... What is that guy to you that you’re always protecting him?” the woman asked in disbelief.

The man seemed to share the same sentiments as he nodded in agreement.

Both of them finally understood that there was no way that sly geezer would give a huge reward for such an easy mission like this in the first place.

“I’ll give you a choice. I might spare you since I’m interested in hearing your story,” Jin Sahyuk asked.

She was genuinely curious why they were trying to kill Kim Hajin. It seemed like they couldn’t stand him.

“...”

“But if you refuse.”

The environment around them suddenly changed without warning after a single wave of Jin Sahyuk’s hand. It felt like the sky was crumbling and being replaced by the darkness she conjured.

“I will kill you.”

The man and woman looked at each other before smiling, “What are you gonna do?”

“Well, I guess you leave me no choice...” Jin Sahyuk said as she prepared for combat.

The duo gathered their mana and prepared to fight too.

Kwang!

Both of them simultaneously kicked off the ground, but their target wasn't Jin Sahyuk. They suddenly smashed their heads into the ground like a pair of moles.

“...?”

Jin Sahyuk was completely caught off guard and blinked a few times. She sensed that they were deep underground and made a run for it.

“Hmm...”

Jin Sahyuk remained all alone on the lawn and stared up at the apartment.

“So that's where Kim Hajin is staying...”

She stood in the same spot for a while before looking at her smartwatch.

[How is your wound?]

His message sounded quite polite.

Jin Sahyuk continued staring at the message and muttered, “...You're not my subject.”

‘However, his presence is definitely within you somewhere. I'm sure you're aware of that person in the memories that I recovered.’

Jin Sahyuk sent a reply.

[Ssss eee yyyyyy ttwww oooo wkkksss...]

What she wanted to say was, ‘*See you in two weeks.*’

* * *

A week somehow passed as I lived with Chae Nayun the entire time. She slept only three hours a day and stood watch over me, or so she claimed.

She followed me when I went to buy groceries, went to work out, watched a movie, and even when I went out to eat.

I could sense that this familiarity was slowly starting to get dangerous.

“Ah, that really hit the spot!” Chae Nayun smiled in satisfaction after we finished eating dinner.

I intently stared at her before getting up. She got up too and followed me with the plates and utensils.

“Hey, let’s go watch a movie tomorrow again.”

“...You said there’s an assassin.”

“It’s fine as long as I’m with you.”

“There’s nothing good showing these days.”

Chae Nayun grumbled and ran to the sofa after I flat-out rejected her. Then she started doing breathing exercises.

Hoo... Hoo... Hoo... Hoo...

Her breathing exercise was quite peculiar. It worked in an environment that didn’t have much mana like my house. The air glowed with a faint blue hue and a faint trace of mana circulated around her whenever she breathed.

I observed the mana circulating around her nose and mouth before snickering. A grain of rice clung for its dear life on her cheek. I quietly

reached out to pluck the grain of rice from her cheek, but she suddenly opened her eyes and stared at me.

“...”

Our faces were inches away from each other.

Chae Nayun suddenly let out a hot exhale and closed her eyes, which made the situation even more tense. I had no idea what she was doing, but I could feel my consciousness slowly drifting as if something else was taking over my body.

I... continued staring at her wet lips...

Then, I managed to snap out of it and took a few steps back.

“What the...” Chae Nayun opened her eyes and grumbled in disappointment when nothing happened after a while.

“Ah, prepare your stuff so we can go out for our morning training session tomorrow,” I stood up and tried to sound as nonchalant as possible.

I peeked at her while walking to the room and saw...

Chae Nayun seemed downcast and disappointed with her arms wrapped around her head.

* * *

I trained every morning with Chae Nayun. We started by hiking up a mountain and added more exercises as time passed.

Kududududu!

I pulled the trigger of my silenced machine gun. The bullets ferociously flew towards my target, Chae Nayun.

However, Chae Nayun easily swung her sword and sliced all of the

bullets in half.

“How’s that?!” she triumphantly exclaimed.

The result was... not a single bullet managed to hit Chae Nayun. It was an amazing growth rate judging from how ten out of thirty bullets struck her just four days ago.

“You’re good...”

“Right? I think my skills are slowly coming back!”

“What skills?”

“...”

Chae Nayun seemed to lag a bit as if she was still buffering before unleashing a barrage of words, “*Ah*, once upon a time I studied how to wield a sword at Baekdu Mountain. I trained really hard that time you know, so I learned a thing or two back then. Geez, I wonder if someone like you would know about it?”

“...*Pfft!*”

I couldn’t hold back my laughter.

She was quite amazing and unique in many ways.

“What? Why are you laughing?”

“No, it’s nothing. Let’s start making our way down now.”

My hand reached out for her without me even realizing it. I realized my mistake and was about to withdraw my hand, but she didn’t miss the opportunity and quickly grabbed it.

“Sure!”

She smiled brightly like a child and tightly gripped my hand as if to

say she wouldn't let go.

I mean... she really didn't have to grip so hard since I had no intention of pulling away...

I couldn't help but think that something in me was slowly changing.

* * *

The end was in sight. Chae Nayun could feel cracks forming in the fortress walls that Kim Hajin surrounded himself with.

'You might be smart and clever, but how are you going to reject me?' Chae Nayun thought.

At the same time, she could feel herself getting more immersed in him as the days went by. First, it started with *'I like you,'* but she could feel something stronger as her present emotions and pre-regression emotions mixed.

If she was to put it into words, it felt like she was sinking to the depths of a bottomless ocean whenever she was with him.

Chae Nayun felt worried about being so engrossed with him, but didn't want to stop feeling this way at the same time. She felt happy every day and felt like the day wasn't long enough when night came.

Of course, she wasn't so drunk on her emotions that she lost sight of what was important. She already placed a request to find the assassin's identity. She even personally used her name, Chae Nayun, to send a request to Baekdu Mountain.

However, the most concerning thing right now was...

"Classes will be resuming next week."

Summer vacation would end next week. Not next week Friday, but next week Monday.

Chae Nayun bit her nails while looking at the calendar. She felt extremely anxious about going back to Cube, but Kim Hajin seemed calm about it.

“Hey, Kim Hajin... Why don’t you just drop out and live with me?”

“Nope, I can’t do that.”

He instantly shot down her offer.

Chae Nayun shook her head, *‘Why are vacations from Cube so short? Ah, this is really annoying... Do cadets have no rights at all? Are we a bunch of machines?’*

When she was busy cursing Cube...

Ding... Dong!

The doorbell rang.

Kim Hajin was about to answer the door, but Chae Nayun ran and stopped him.

“*Shh!* I’ll go.”

“...Sure.”

Chae Nayun used the intercom to check who was outside. The visitor looked highly suspicious with their face covered by a hood.

“*Huh?*” Kim Hajin muttered after seeing the hood on the intercom display.

“Why? You know that person?”

“Yeah, I do. I was about to contact her just now,” Kim Hajin said before he went to the door and opened it.

Chae Nayun ran again and stood between Kim Hajin and the hooded

visitor outside the door.

“...Who are you?” Chae Nayun asked first.

However, the hooded visitor ignored her. Instead, the visitor looked over Chae Nayun’s shoulder and asked Kim Hajin, “Your girlfriend?”

“No, it’s not like that...” Kim Hajin replied.

“What the hell...? You’re a girl?” Chae Nayun frowned after hearing the visitor’s bothersome voice.

The hooded female entered the house, closed the door, and waltzed into the living room.

“Who’s that?” Chae Nayun sharply asked.

Kim Hajin was about to respond when he suddenly thought of a test and maintained his silence.

The two of them went to the living room too. They found Jin Sahyuk sitting in the living room as if she owned the place.

Jin Sahyuk looked at Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun before taking her hood off.

“Ah!” Chae Nayun exclaimed as her eyes shot wide open. She shouted the answer to Kim Hajin’s test, “Jin Sahyuk!”

Not only did she shout the name, but it sounded like a growl with a hint of hostility.

Jin Sahyuk tilted her head in confusion, “How do you know my name?”

That simple question sent Chae Nayun into a panic.

“...”

Kim Hajin observed Chae Nayun for a few seconds and decided to change the subject as she descended into the same charade she already pulled a few times.

“Why are you here?”

“I told you I would come and find you, right?”

“...I don’t think anyone in this world would be able to decipher the message you sent.”

Jin Sahyuk stared at Kim Hajin.

He noticed that her eyes looked quite calm today for some reason.

Jin Sahyuk ignored the statue in the room called Chae Nayun and continued, “Kim Hajin. You look like my subject in the past. No, I should probably tell you about my past before we discuss this.”

It was then.

Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!

My smartwatch rang.

“As I was saying, in the past I came from...”

Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!

“So...”

*Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!
Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!
Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!*

The smartwatch continued ringing to the point that it was impossible to continue the conversation.

Jin Sahyuk gritted her teeth and a vein bulged on her temple as Chae

Nayun and I checked our smartwatches that were causing a ruckus.

[Hey, what are you doing?]

[There's a news article about you!]

[Hey, Kim Hajin. Is this true?]

[What the hell are you, Kim Hajin?]

*[Wow! This gossip is the bomb! It's all a mistake, right? How did you...?
;;]*

[Kim Hajin! Is this true?!]

[Kekeke! Hey, look at this! Kekekeke! You and Chae Nayun! Kekekeke!]

He was receiving a flurry of messages from numerous cadets, even from ones he had never met before.

Meanwhile, things were much more serious for Chae Nayun.

Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!

She was not only getting bombarded with messages from cadets, but even her friends and family were sending her messages to the point that her smartwatch rang numerous times every second.

[Hey, look at this news article. I'll send you the link.]

Thankfully, Kim Hajin was able to read the news article everyone was talking about after someone sent him the link. It turned out that there were numerous articles.

[Rising Star Cadet, Chae Nayun is currently living together with another cadet?]

[Cube Star, Chae Nayun's lover is a Rank 934th cadet...?]

[A modern tale of romance! Going against social differences!]

[Shocking! Chae Nayun, a minor, is living with another minor!]

Kim Hajin read the articles with trembling eyes before muttering in a defeated voice, "...Is this how they assassinate people these days?"

In other words, he was getting socially assassinated.

On the other hand, Chae Nayun seemed a bit agitated. However, she showed a completely different reaction.

"*Hmm...* Yes, they must be trying to separate us. Well, it's not a bad plan. I'll give them that..."

No, in fact, she seemed satisfied by the social assassination that Kim Hajin was suffering.

Chae Nayun seemed content while Kim Hajin looked completely dead. Between them was Jin Sahyuk observing their opposite reactions with interest.

Side Stories 71

Chae Nayun (26)

We put aside Jin Sahyuk's story and focused on quelling the situation. After all, we needed to prevent this from blowing out of proportion.

— Breaking News! Rumors say that the precious child of Daehyun, also known as the rising star of Cube, Chae Nayun has been discovered to be living with her partner...

"What should we do?" Chae Nayun asked.

The news already made it to television.

"What do you mean what should we do? You should go home for now."

"What? Why should I go home? Also, what are you going to do if the assassin shows up?"

"I'll be fine if I'm with her," I replied while pointing at the sofa.

Jin Sahyuk was comfortably sleeping on the sofa. She seemed quite tired and was already snoring.

Chae Nayun frowned and retorted, "Ah, are you kidding me? No, I can't agree with this. She could be the assassin for all we know!"

"Then she would have probably killed me as soon as she got here."

"Forget about it. We're the losers if we separate now! I can't do that!" Chae Nayun exclaimed before switching her smartwatch back on.

Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!

We were used to the alarms by now and it no longer bothered us. She checked a few of her messages and suddenly flinched after reading one.

I used [*Hacking*] to see the message.

[Is it true?]

It came from her father.

“First things first... let’s say living together is a misunderstanding and we’re just dating.”

I furrowed my brows at her words, “Do we have to?”

“They have countless pictures of us together. Besides, think about it this way. Dating and living together are two completely different things. Let’s just say that we’re dating for now. Then we can explain that we had no choice after we catch the mastermind behind the assassination. Also... just in case... if you change your mind later... we can continue being a couple...”

“Shut up,” I snapped back and stood up to check the calendar.

Only four days left before our vacation ended. I knew we were short on time, but we were really short on time.

“*Hmm...*” I started to think.

First, I looked at Jin Sahyuk sound asleep and snoring on the sofa.

Chae Nayun followed my gaze and asked, “Right, what do you plan to do with her?”

“Beats me...”

I knew what Jin Sahyuk wanted. There was a high probability that it had something to do with Kim Chundong, but I had no idea if she just wanted to confirm something or if she wanted full closure.

“Let’s just monitor her for now.”

Jin Sahyuk still had value.

Then she suddenly shot up, “*Waaaaah!*”

“*Whoa*, that scared me.”

Jin Sahyuk looked at me and Chae Nayun after waking up with a blast. She haughtily scoffed before saying, “I don’t think it’s the right time, so I’ll be heading back for today. I’ll be waiting for you, so you better show your face later.”

To be honest, I had no idea what she was talking about.

Jin Sahyuk opened the window and jumped out.

Whiiiiik!

Her silhouette flew away like a bird and descended at a great speed before turning into a dot and disappearing from view.

I stood dumbfoundedly with Chae Nayun after seeing Jin Sahyuk’s flashy exit.

* * *

Summer vacation finally ended and it was time to return to Cube. A huge crowd of reporters waited at the portal station, so the place had to be barricaded. We had to take a boat to Cube instead.

It took us two hours from the East Sea to reach Cube. We could tell from afar that Cube was crowded as well. A ton of cadets waited for us at the portal station, which forced us to disembark like a pair of smugglers and clandestinely make our way to the Pharmacy Club.

Ddreuk...

We sneaked through the hallways and safely reached our clubroom.

Then we opened the door and found the rest of the club members waiting for us as promised.

Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yoo Yeonha, Yi Yeonghan, and even Rachel were there. All of them looked at us with eyes demanding an explanation.

“So, you’re finally here,” Yoo Yeonha said with her arms crossed over her chest.

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan looked naive as usual while Shin Jonghak openly expressed his discomfort. Meanwhile, Rachel watched in awe as if she found the entire thing amazing.

“So, what happened is...” Chae Nayun sat on a sofa and began explaining.

I followed suit and sat on the sofa.

“Pfft! Pfft... Huehuehue... Pffaaaaah...!”

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan did their best to suppress their laughter.

“Hey, can you guys shut up? Just listen to me first. It’s not a happy story as you make it out to be. So what happened is... as you might be aware too, Kim Suho,” Chae Nayun started explaining.

Kim Suho’s smile disappeared and a serious expression replaced it as Chae Nayun talked about the incident that happened after we left the island.

“So that’s what happened... Some strong fella is aiming for this guy, but that fella seems to be wary of hurting me. That’s why I had no choice but to stay with this guy.”

“Hmm... I see... Assassination attempt you say...” Yoo Yeonha muttered.

She easily understood the entire situation and rubbed her chin in thought.

I had a strange feeling that she knew something about this situation.

“Ha... What a mess... do you really have to protect that guy even if it tarnishes your reputation?” Shin Jonghak gritted his teeth and asked.

Chae Nayun glared at him and seemed to say, ‘*You got a problem?*’ Then she replied, “I’m doing it because I want to. Why? Is there a problem?”

“I don’t understand why you would do that!” Shin Jonghak retorted.

The atmosphere was starting to get tense, but Yi Yeonghan laughed and stood up to diffuse the situation.

“Hey, hey, shouldn’t you have told us if something like that happened? What did you hope to achieve alone? I mean, what are friends for, right?”

“All of you will be in danger if I didn’t do it. Our opponent is no joke.”

Shin Jonghak seemed to disagree and stormed out of the room. His temper flared for the first time in a long while.

Right after he stormed out, a bright light shone from my chest. A gentle breeze slowly spun faster and faster until it became a whirlwind around me.

Everyone was shocked and I knew very well why.

“Is it magic? Kim Hajin! Kim Hajin!”

“It’s not, so shut up.”

“Ugh...”

Chae Nayun screamed and tried to cling onto me, but I shoved her face back. I took out the small seed in my breast pocket.

The light and wind were coming out from the cracks forming on the

seed.

“Ah, this is...”

“No way...”

It was the long-awaited birth of Evandel. All of the club members stood flabbergasted at what was going on.

The seed fully opened and a life form appeared from it.

“Oh...”

“*Heup!*”

All of us gasped and held our breaths.

It was an adorable child who looked exactly like Rachel. Her mana spread all over the room as she curiously inspected her surroundings. I didn’t dare think anything in this world would be more adorable than this little girl innocently blinking at us.

“...*Fwah!*”

The child breathed out before smiling and turning to us.

“*Kyah!*”

She looked at me with an adorable smile and turned to Rachel.

The little girl smiled even brighter before exclaiming, “It’s me!”

* * *

We renovated the clubroom into Evandel’s temporary residence and she also needed a guardian.

“But can you make sure we won’t get caught? I mean, you’ll have to

be here the entire time, you know?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

She seemed quite concerned. Chae Nayun and Rachel also shared her sentiment.

“It’ll be fine,” I confidently replied.

I looked at Evandel and asked, “Now, Evandel. What should you do when someone suddenly comes in?”

“Like this!” she exclaimed before transforming into a puppy.

She turned into a Pomeranian with flowing golden fur. Everyone in the clubroom froze after she turned into a puppy.

“Cute...”

“Ah...”

Rachel seemed a bit dazed as she approached Evandel and hugged her.

Evandel dug her face into Rachel’s chest and giggled, “*Hehe*, did Evandel do a good job?”

“Yes, you did good, Evandel,” Rachel replied and started spinning in place.

The two of them seemed to be in a world of their own as they spun like a top.

“...Hey, Kim Hajin,” Chae Nayun pulled my sleeve as I watched them spinning.

I looked at her, “What?”

“No... it’s nothing.” She smiled and asked, “Should we go train?”

“Do you think that’s even possible? We’re going to get swarmed by

people in three seconds.”

I looked at Evandel and wondered how someone could be that adorable... but Chae Nayun stood in front of me and blocked my vision. I tried to move so I could look at Evandel, but Chae Nayun kept pestering me.

“Hey, what’s your problem...?” I grumbled.

“Let’s go train. Let’s go.”

She continued pestering me and even started to pull my arm. Of course, our massive difference in strength left me no choice as she dragged me away.

“Hey, wait a minute, Evandel! I... Evandel...”

“Hajin, have fun!”

“See, even Evandel is telling you to go.”

If Chae Nayun was an elephant, then I was a monkey. There was no way that I, the monkey, would be able to break free from the elephant’s grip.

I was helplessly dragged to the shooting range like a ragdoll.

* * *

The first day of classes.

Every pair of eyes in the classroom darted towards me when I entered. I could tell that they were looking at me inquisitively.

Silence descended in the entire room as they watched me walk to my seat. Then they whispered among themselves.

“Wow, it’s really amazing. Did he really land Chae Nayun? How did someone like him get someone like her? But Chae Nayun can be quite the

handful... Yeah, I agree. That Kim Hajin must be good at receiving whatever shit she throws at him. Well, he is smart and composed. Is it because Chae Nayun is dumb?"

The gossip instantly disappeared after Chae Nayun entered the room and sat beside me.

"Phew... It's quite nerve-wracking, right?" Chae Nayun said as she insensitively leaned on my shoulder.

I tried to push her away, but it was already too late as the room erupted in whispering once again.

"Can't you just stay still...?"

"What? I'm staying still, aren't I?"

"..."

I gave up on debating with her and opened my book.

Our first class was the *[Theory of Body and Mana]*, so I browsed through the book in preparation. Professor Kim Soohyuk entered as soon as the clock struck eight.

"It's good to see all of you again. I hope you enjoyed your vacation," Kim Soohyuk greeted the cadets.

I had no idea if he knew about our scandal or not, but there was nothing special about his demeanor. He went on to tell us that it would only get harder from now on. We had to do our best in both theory and practical tests. We would have to achieve a perfect balance to become a good hero, etc.

"Also, I will announce the new rankings."

He acted quite strange in the sense that he placed great emphasis on things none of us cared about before nonchalantly delivering the news that all of us wanted to hear.

“Now... don’t get too caught up in your rankings and continue to do your best,” Kim Soohyuk said before he taped a large piece of paper on the board and left.

All of the cadets shot up and ran towards the paper.

“Wow, Kim Hajin. What’s gotten into you? Rank 401st? Your rank doubled!” Chae Nayun said while tapping my shoulder.

“Yeah, I guess...”

1. *Kim Suho*

2. *Shin Jonghak*

3. *Rachel*

4. *Chae Nayun*

5. *Shen Yuan*

...

...

8. *Yoo Yeonha*

9. *Yi Yeonghan*

...

...

...

401. *Kim Hajin*

“Alright, get back to your seats!”

The theory professor entered and the cadets dispersed. All of them returned to their seats with different looks on their faces.

It seemed that the scandal between me and Chae Nayun had been wiped from their minds.

“So, there was a big incident recently, right? I was surprised after hearing about it.”

However, that imbecile known as a professor just had to bring it up again. Everyone’s eyes darted to me and Chae Nayun.

“*Hahaha!* I think it’s a great synergy if Hajin can use his brains and lead Chae Nayun in her studies, but dating so openly is ill-advised and could lead to penalties. I suggest you pretend to break up for a while. *Haha!*”

Everyone, including Chae Nayun, laughed at the imbecile’s joke except for me. I simply tapped my mechanical pencil on my open book.

“Then... let’s do ten pages today since all of you just got back from vacation.”

“*Booooooo! Booooooo!*”

The cadets jeered, but the professor didn’t seem to care at all.

Thus, our first class began after returning to Cube.

* * *

The mere ten pages the theory professor gave us took nearly one hundred fifty minutes to complete. All of the cadets were in a daze after the mental torture they just underwent.

Our practical class for today was [*Improving Mana Control*]. It was a class where cadets used their mana under the supervision of an instructor and a magician.

“Hello, everyone. It’s been a while. I heard that there was a huge incident over the break...” Kim Hojun said while looking at us.

I had a feeling that this was going to be everyone’s one-liner before classes started for at least a week, and I was barely able to suppress the sigh welling up inside of me.

“I hope that both of you are prepared for the consequences?” Kim Hyojun said.

He and the rest of the cadets broke into laughter.

“Hahaha!”

Then, he went back to looking serious and continued, “Anyways, I will introduce a new instructor today. Magician Lee Jinjun was supposed to be your instructor, but he unfortunately got injured. We have requested another magician in his stead. This person has a stellar track record and career, so please give a round of applause to welcome her!” Kim Hyojun exclaimed.

A magician wearing a hood appeared in the sky and all of the cadets started clapping.

Clap! Clap! Clap! Clap!

She skillfully landed on the ground and pulled down her hood.

“Wow! Whoa! Woot!”

The male cadets cheered after seeing her face.

Her black hair was tied up in a ponytail and her eyes were as fierce as a predator. Our instructor for today was a tremendous beauty who gave off the scent of the wild.

“H-Huh...?” Kim Suho muttered and trembled.

Chae Nayun’s eyes shot wide open too.

“Nice to meet you... My name is Jin Sahyuk.”

I was surprised as well, but soon understood what was going on. Jin Sahyuk certainly did say that we would meet again soon. I just never imagined that we would meet in this way.

“I am your instructor for today,” Jin Sahyuk said as she looked over at me, Chae Nayun, and Kim Suho. She flashed an ominous smile and added, “It won’t be that easy, so you guys better brace yourself.”

Side Stories 72

Chae Nayun (27)

Jin Sahyuk's class could only be described as extreme. It was pretty obvious that the class was *[Improving Mana Control]*, but Jin Sahyuk was sending the cadets flying left and right with her mana.

She would probably justify her actions by saying, *'I'm doing this to improve your resistance'*, but there was no way any of the cadets could withstand her attacks. Of course, that was excluding Kim Suho and Chae Nayun.

In the end, Jin Sahyuk concluded the class after razing the entire field we stood on.

"...She's a crazy bitch," Chae Nayun grumbled in disbelief after returning to the Pharmacy Club room.

Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, and Shin Jonghak were absent due to classes. Even our supervisor, Seo Youngji, was absent for the entire week due to some circumstances.

The Pharmacy Club would have a substitute supervisor come in next week. As of now, they were left to fend for themselves without supervision.

President Chae got up from the sofa and walked to the board, "Then... shall we think about what the club will do from now on?"

She tried to decide on the club's future activities, but there was no way that was possible because of Evandel.

Kim Hajin, Yoo Yeonha, and Rachel were all captivated by Evandel. Truth be told, even Chae Nayun couldn't help but keep stealing glances at her while trying to speak in front. It seemed like she was suppressing her desire to run up to the little girl and start rubbing her

hair.

In the end, she couldn't win against her desires and ran up to pinch Evandel's cheeks.

Kim Hajin stepped in and stopped her, "Don't bully her."

Evandel ran to Kim Hajin's embrace and started smiling.

"Hey... what did I do...? Anyways..." Chae Nayun grumbled before pointing at the empty board.

However, none of them had any idea what their next objective would be. They gathered a lot of precious medicinal plants and even a variety of ingredients from the whale's body, but had no idea how to mix it all together.

They even wondered if a skilled alchemist would be able to create an elixir out of the materials they gathered if they handed everything over...

"You just need to sit still and do nothing," Kim Hajin suddenly said.

Chae Nayun tilted her head in confusion.

"I'll take care of everything else," Kim Hajin added with a smile.

Chae Nayun blushed in response as his overflowing confidence and smile made her feel all warm and fuzzy inside... She stood motionless for quite a while with her cheeks flushed red.

"Did you find a cure or something?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

Kim Hajin hesitated for a second and shook his head, "I'm not certain yet, but I have a feeling I'm on to something."

He already obtained a hint that could help in finding a cure for Chae Jinyoon's condition. What he needed now was time and cooperation. He had plenty of time, but the cooperation part was what irked him.

After all, he needed Jin Sahyuk's help to achieve his goal.

"Alright, I'm sure you have a plan," Yoo Yeonha said.

However, her expression didn't look good. She seemed anxious for some reason despite trying to sound as nonchalant as possible. Still, it didn't take long for her to smile as Evandel wobbled over to her.

The little girl quickly became the club's adorable mascot.

"Hey, Nayun. We're going to start our real-life combat classes soon. What are you going to do about that?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

"Oh, I completely forgot about that!" Chae Nayun exclaimed in response.

On the other hand, Kim Hajin seemed to be at a loss and asked, "Real-life combat classes? How in the world do you guys know about that?"

"Ah, we were informed in advance. We're going to travel on a train and there will be cadets from other countries too."

"A train?"

"Yeah, you heard of those transcontinental trains, right? You know, the ones used by heroes and mercenaries?"

"Ah..."

The transcontinental trains linked Korea to the monster fields in Russia. Those fields were known to be subjected to harsh climates that made it impossible to operate portals there. These trains were the only method of transportation to reach them.

"Hmm... I think it should be alright. I purchased a piece of equipment recently. I'll give it to you, so you better keep it on you at all times," Chae Nayun said.

"That... *erm*..." Yoo Yeonha looked like she wanted to say

something, but bit her lips and didn't say anything.

She had a piece of information that she had to share with Chae Nayun, but felt too afraid. The incident that Yoo Jinhyuk told her about, the tragedy that unfolded in Kim Hajin's past...

She could deduce that it was related to the assassination attempts, but couldn't bring herself to say it...

* * *

A week passed since classes resumed and life at Cube remained difficult for me.

[Chae Nayun is still maintaining her silence...]

[How are the two cadets doing after returning to Cube?]

[Who is Chae Nayun's lover, Kim Hajin?]

The media didn't get tired of me at all and kept bringing up my name.

[You have obtained 17 SP.]

[You have obtained 23 SP.]

[You have obtained 6 SP.]

[You have obtained 7 SP.]

[You have obtained 9 SP.]

[You have obtained 12 SP.]

[You have obtained 3 SP.]

I gained a lot of SP thanks to them, but that didn't change the fact that I found this situation burdensome.

I couldn't help but think that I was being targeted solely because I stood out too much.

"Oh, Kim Hajin is up."

Also, my accommodation was moved to the clubroom.

The clubroom underwent numerous renovations after Chae Nayun's generous donation. It was redesigned to have three rooms. On top of that, a powerful barrier and various safety mechanisms were installed to accommodate me and Evandel.

However, Chae Nayun didn't seem satisfied as she further renovated the clubroom and added another room for herself.

"Good morning."

"...Ah, good morning."

Also, Chae Nayun's roommate was Rachel. Both of them were quite tidy, so they complemented each other. They had been roommates for a week now and no problems had occurred yet.

"Ah, but what are we supposed to do now? He'll definitely be targeted this time..."

Today was the day of our real-life combat class. The day we would board the train. It would be a stretch to say that we were going on a trip, but it still felt like one.

On the other hand, I prepared myself for any ambushes by adding another gift. I added the words, *one-time use*, since I wanted to maximize its power as much as possible.

It didn't matter how good or strong the assassin was. I was confident that this gift would save me at least once.

"It's going to be alright, so get ready. We might run late," I confidently said.

We arrived in Russia for the *[Real-Life Combat Class – Transcontinental Train]*.

Jin Sahyuk and the other instructors were already on the train. She was unexpectedly popular among her peers. It was probably all thanks to her beauty.

“Ah, this is my first time on a train. It’s making me nervous,” Chae Nayun said as she wrapped her arm around mine.

“Yeah, me too,” I replied.

I flinched in surprise when I realized that I didn’t resist her arm wrapping around mine.

“Tsk...” Chae Nayun clicked her tongue.

“Oh, looking good, you two. Should I snap a photo for you guys?” Yi Yeonghan said with a sleazy smile.

We completely ignored him.

“Listen up! Form two rows and line up!” Kim Soohyuk shouted.

Chae Nayun grabbed my arm tight after she heard there would be two rows. It just so happened that everyone else lined up right behind us.

“Good, we will now start boarding...”

I wasn’t sure if it was because of spatial magic, but the train cabin was quite spacious. There were two rooms in each cabin and four of us could fit without a problem.

“Then, I’ll sleep with Hajin. Chae Nayun, you can go and stay with Yoo Yeonha,” Kim Suho said.

I was paired with Kim Suho while Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha were paired together.

We unpacked first before leaving the cabin to take a look around.

“Wow... this is amazing.”

The corridor was wider than we expected. There were seats where two people could sit side by side without feeling cramped.

Kim Suho and I sat at a random spot.

“...Hello?”

Someone suddenly approached us. I flinched in surprise because I kept hearing the word assassin these days and became quite jumpy.

“My name is Cyril. I’m from the General Academy,” the girl introduced herself.

She was definitely a blonde, but she dyed her hair blue. She also wore earrings and necklace artifacts made out of animal bones. On top of that, her t-shirt depicted the image of a sinister skull.

I guess you could say she looked quite hiphop-ish.

“*Huh...*? *Ah*, hello. Nice to meet you,” I awkwardly replied.

It seemed that they were from the American academy that boarded the train too.

She smiled brightly from the seat across from us.

Kim Suho and I ended up exchanging glances and felt that we had to say something to entertain her.

“*Hmm...* Do you know where this train will stop? Are there multiple stops?”

“There are ten stops as far as I know. All of them are monster fields.”

I was already used to seeing Westerners fluently speak Korean.

I awkwardly scratched my cheek and asked again, “Ah... Then, is this train safe? I heard that we’re passing some dangerous places.”

“No, it’s not safe. It gets attacked quite frequently, and it’s our job to fight against those monsters. That’s also the reason why they call it a real-life combat class.”

“Oh... What year are you?”

“I’m in my third year at the academy,” Cyril replied with a smile.

The train finally started to depart.

Tssh... Tssh... Tssh... Tssh...

I could hear the sound of mana chafing against the rails.

“Hey, Cyril. What are you doing over there? Did you seduce them already?”

Another Western girl with red hair suddenly appeared. The ginger brightly smiled and approached us.

“Hello, my name is Loelle.”

“...Loelle?”

The name sounded familiar to me for some odd reason.

Loelle... Loelle... I tried to remember where I heard that name before and decided to open my story settings to look her up.

[Loelle]

— *An American affiliated with the General*

— *Red Hair, Red Eyes*

— *Gift*

— *Potential 8-9*

— *Currently has not blossomed*

— *Currently cursed*

She was a character in the story settings that didn't appear in the original story, but I recall creating her as an American hero.

Who would have known that I would bump into her at a place like this?

“W-Who the hell are you people?!”

Someone kicked up a fuss from a distance behind us. I could confidently say that it was Chae Nayun. She appeared with Yoo Yeonha and stomped her way towards us.

“Ah! Ms. Chae Nayun! It's an honor to meet you. My name is Cyril. I'm a big fan!” Cyril exclaimed.

“...A fan?”

“Yes! You're the idol of every female cadet!”

“Idol...?”

Chae Nayun bit her lips and started to sheepishly smile. She basically lost after a single exchange.

“Ehem... Yes, what business do you have here?” she faked a cough and asked.

“We wanted to get acquainted since we saw a few famous faces,” Cyril replied while looking at me and Kim Suho. Then she looked at Chae Nayun. “But... is it true? You know... that both of you are dating...” she carefully asked.

Chae Nayun glanced at me before clearing her throat. She approached Cyril and whispered, “Yes, we’re passionately in love. That guy can’t get enough of me, so...”

‘I can hear you, you know?’

* * *

It was late at night, but the train tirelessly continued.

Yoo Yeonha sat alone in the empty corridor while looking out the window. A dilemma kept her awake, so she watched the scenery pass by. The passing light and stars made the window look like a canvas with art by Vincent van Gogh.

She admired the scenery until someone suddenly appeared behind her.

“What’s up?” Chae Nayun asked.

Kim Hajin was also with her.

Yoo Yeonha had something she definitely wanted to tell them.

“I think we can get on top of the train. What do you think?” she asked.

It was quite uncharacteristic of her to propose such a risky endeavor. That made Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin tilt their heads in confusion.

In the end, the three of them made their way up to the train’s roof.

“Wow...”

The view was breathtaking.

The train's speed was a cause for concern, but Chae Nayun actually liked it all the more because of how fast it was moving while Kim Hajin clung to her for dear life.

"About the assassin last time..." Yoo Yeonha said.

Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin looked at her.

"You already know about it, right? Nayun?"

Chae Nayun flinched at Yoo Yeonha's question. She nervously gulped and peeked at Kim Hajin. It looked like she knew something as he stared at her.

"What is it?"

"..."

"It's alright. You can say it," Kim Hajin placed his hand on her shoulder as if to console her.

Chae Nayun didn't respond as she continued to stare at the hand on her shoulder.

"Don't tell me... Did you plan this entire assassination attempt thing? Is it something like that?"

"N-No way!"

Kim Hajin's plan to ease the tension worked. He smiled and Chae Nayun also smiled in disbelief.

Then she let out a sigh, "So... I only have my suspicions as to who is the mastermind behind the assassination attempt and why they're after you..."

It was then.

A large veil-like object came flying towards the train. It was so large

that it looked like it would cover the entire train.

“W-What’s that?!”

The trio panicked after being engulfed by darkness, but it didn’t take them long to assess the situation and sense the individuals who suddenly occupied the cabin underneath their feet.

“I think it’s a hijacking,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“...Why?” Kim Hajin innocently asked.

“What do you mean why?”

“No... wait a moment...” Kim Hajin switched on his smartwatch and used *[Hacking]*.

He read the information of the hijackers and overheard a strange conversation.

[The treasure is here somewhere.]

[That’s our main objective, but kill Kim Hajin on sight if you come across him.]

“*Shh!*” Chae Nayun placed her finger between her lips and grabbed Kim Hajin’s hand.

“I think they’re after you, Kim Hajin.”

She looked like she made up her mind and whispered to him, “All of this is probably... Kim Sukho’s doing. The previous president, Kim Sukho. You know him too, right?”

Kim Sukho, there was no way Kim Hajin wouldn’t know that name. Kim Sukho was the previous president of the Republic of Korea and once stood on top of the world.

Why would someone like him come after Kim Hajin?

Kim Hajin frowned and Chae Nayun nodded.

“You might not be aware of what’s going on yet, but I’ll explain everything to you later. Just wait a little longer,” she said.

Kim Hajin had no idea why, but the word yet bothered him.

Did that mean that Chae Nayun knew why he was being targeted because of the world where she came from?

“Sure...”

In the end, Kim Hajin decided to trust Chae Nayun and did as she said.

Side Stories 73

Chae Nayun (28)

[Kill Kim Hajin on sight if you come across him.]

I used *[Hacking]* and found out that I was up against these assailants who covered the entire train in darkness. They were after me. I used a portion of stigma to obtain control of the darkness.

“But do those lunatics really think they can hijack this train? I mean, it’s full of cadets and heroes, right?” Chae Nayun asked.

Yoo Yeonha started to think after hearing what Chae Nayun said. Then she replied, “I think this darkness can eliminate sound and presence.”

“Yeah, that’s right,” I said.

I was able to look at the details of this dark veil thanks to *[Hacking]*.

[Veil of Darkness – A veil that eliminates all sound and presence of the object it covers.]

“Really...? Then, their objective must be to stall the train,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“That’s half-correct. I think I heard there was some jewel or treasure on this train. They must be after that,” I said.

“Jewel or treasure...?” Yoo Yeonha muttered and tilted her head in confusion.

I relayed what I found out after hacking the hijackers’ smartwatches.

“I think there’s a VIP that’s transporting some sort of jewel. The VIP

probably thought they would be safe with all of us onboard... No, this entire test could be the doing of this VIP so they could reach their destination as safely as possible.”

“What are you talking about...?” Chae Nayun asked.

Yoo Yeonha seemed to be at a loss as well, but I had no time to convince them.

I infused mana into my gift, *[Master Sharpshooter]*. I could feel my eyes burning as I looked through the entire train.

“A total of thirty-three... there are four or five of them per cabin...” I recited the number of hijackers I saw.

Not only that, but I also identified the jewel they were looking for in the VIP cabin.

I used stigma once again and placed my hand on the veil.

[You have stolen ownership of the target.]

[Veil of Darkness has been saved in stigma.]

The veil covering the entire train was sucked into my arm and stored in stigma to be more precise.

Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha watched with visible shock on their faces, but I ignored them and continued monitoring the situation in the cabins.

— What’s going on?

— I have no idea. The veil suddenly...

— There’s no need to talk about it. We’ll retreat for now. Gather up.

It looked like they were trying to escape with a magic scroll, but a magic scroll was a very expensive item. All thirty-three of them would

have to huddle together.

They started to huddle around the individual holding the magic scroll, who I assumed was their leader.

I waited until the moment all thirty-three of them gathered into a massive clump.

— We're going.

When the leader was about to rip the magic scroll, I shot out the Veil of Darkness from inside the stigma.

The veil shot out like a net and successfully caught all thirty-three hijackers.

“What the... what's going on?”

Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha were still flabbergasted.

I infused stigma into the veil and replied, “What else? I caught them alive. Just hurry up and go wake the others up. I won't be able to hold them for long...”

The hijackers trapped under the net resisted to the best of their abilities to escape...

* * *

Kim Soohyuk, Jin Sahyuk, and the rest of the faculty appeared a bit later to capture the hijackers. One of the faculty members possessed the ability to capture people alive, so they used that ability and threw the hijackers with the cargo.

The hijacking of the train ended as a minor mishap.

“Hmm...”

Meanwhile, I inspected the Veil of Darkness that had been reduced to

the size of a handkerchief in my palm. On top of that, I was able to awaken a synergy between stigma and *[Hacking]* thanks to the hijackers.

[Gift Saved With Hacking]

[1. Veil of Darkness – A veil that eliminates all sound and presence of the object it covers.]

I was able to take control of an ability using *[Hacking]* and analyze it using stigma. Then I could replicate it completely in a similar manner. I would say it was one of stigma's many variations rather than an outright ability that *[Hacking]* possessed.

Whatever it was, I knew for sure that it was a very useful ability.

"Listen up, everyone!"

Kim Soohyuk suddenly shouted after all of us got off the train and gathered at the train stop.

I stood beside Kim Suho and Chae Nayun stood on the other side of him. It felt like she took a step back from me after the incident last night.

I was sure that I wasn't acting paranoid because whenever our eyes met, she would...

"...!"

...Flinch and lower her head to avoid my eyes.

I was certain that this was because of what Yoo Yeonha wanted to say last night.

"Your mission is to exterminate the monsters in this place. You better get used to the environment here as you will be frequenting Russia after you become a fully-fledged hero. A hero must know how to take care of their own equipment. You will find a lot of useful materials here. Now, take a look at this."

Kim Soohyuk showed the smartwatch on his left wrist and explained how this field worked. There was no need to handle the monster corpses after hunting them down. All we had to do was send the coordinates to these people known as scavengers and they would retrieve everything for us for a thirteen percent fee.

“Wow, that’s very convenient. I think we can earn a lot in no time over here,” Kim Suho said.

That guy started to become materialistic these days for some odd reason. I wasn’t a hundred percent sure why, but I had a hunch that he was trying to bribe Evandel by showering her with gifts.

“This is a real-life situation. You will be graded according to the number of monsters you kill in the next thirty-six hours. It doesn’t matter whether you act alone or form a team as long as you do your best. Now, that’s all. Move out!”

* * *

I killed roughly over a dozen monsters and entered the coordinates in my smartwatch. *[Ten o’clock, northeast.]*

The scavengers would come and retrieve these monster corpses and sell them off for me.

“Sigh...” I let out a sigh after sensing a presence behind me.

Chae Nayun was still here somewhere, but I couldn’t see her. She was probably hiding at a distance where she could run to me at a moment’s notice if something were to happen.

I really couldn’t get used to that girl’s sudden change in attitude...

“I should rest a bit...”

I walked out of the forest and continued walking until the trees around me grew shorter and shorter. I was now on elevated terrain with a vantage point of my surroundings.

It seemed like I was standing on a mound. The mound was elevated and had clear visuals over the surroundings, so I doubted I was in danger of getting ambushed and assassinated here.

“Hey, what are you doing?” I called out to Chae Nayun, who was hiding behind a tree around five hundred meters away from me.

Rustle... Rustle...

The sound of her fidgeting behind the tree was carried over by the wind.

“Come out if you have something to say,” I added.

Only then did Chae Nayun finally show herself. She awkwardly scratched the back of her neck and made her way towards me.

Thud!

She sat on the ground.

“What is it?” I asked.

Chae Nayun didn’t respond. Instead, she chewed her lower lip and hesitated to say something.

“Just say it. It’s fine.”

“...”

She looked at me and tears started welling up in her eyes as if she was about to cry at any moment.

I didn’t know what to do, so I just pinched her nose.

“Gwuah...!”

“Aren’t you going to talk?”

Chae Nayun pouted while her nose was being pinched, but she didn't resist or slap my hands away. It was only after a while that she finally shook my hand off and took a few steps back.

She let out a sigh and opened her mouth, but quickly closed it again.

Then, she composed herself and finally spoke, "That time... the thing Yoo Yeonha said..."

She hesitated once again before looking at me and forced, no, squeezed the words out of her mouth, "I think... Kim Sukho is really the one behind this."

"Kim Sukho?" I muttered in response.

Chae Nayun mumbled something under her breath along the lines of, *'I knew it. He still has no idea,'* before nodding.

"Yeah, Kim Sukho will probably find out who you really are."

"..."

My heart dropped after hearing her say that. Did she already figure out that this world was just a novel...?

Chae Nayun asked, "You... do you know about the Kwang-Oh Incident?"

"..."

That was something I didn't have a single inkling of, so I just remained silent. However, what she said next was something I had never heard of before in my life. I couldn't afford to ignore it though.

After all, it was related to me. No, Kim Chundong to be more precise, the character I was currently possessing.

The Kwang-Oh Incident was a tragedy related to Kim Chundong's past and Chae Nayun was telling me all about it.

She explained that her grandfather, Chae Joochul, was the perpetrator behind it at the behest of Kim Sukho. Their plan had been swiftly carried out without a hitch. In the end, her family was the culprit behind my life being ruined.

“So... my grandfather...” Chae Nayun said as she gritted her teeth.

She was gritting her teeth so hard that it wouldn't be weird if one of her teeth cracked and she was clenching her fist so tightly that her nails dug into her skin.

She wiped the tears welling up in her eyes and said, “He took away everything from you... your life... your family... your future...”

Chae Nayun composed herself and continued in a voice mixed with sadness and fear, “And Kim Sukho probably realized who you are, so he's trying to kill you to cover up that incident. That's the only reason I can think of. If that's the case, then... I'm sorry for telling you only now...”

I stood rooted in my spot and looked up, but I couldn't find the answer among the stars littered across the night sky.

“...”

What should I say? How should I respond? Should I tell her that the incident she mentioned was none of my business? That I'm someone else and didn't have any relation to that incident? Was that the right thing to say?

But why was it... why did it feel so bittersweet after hearing what happened? Did Chae Nayun fall for me only because she was trying to atone for what her family did during that incident? Was that it...?

“I'm not trying to atone for anything or pity you...” Chae Nayun said as if she read my mind.

She wiped away her tears and looked me straight in the eyes, “I didn't fall for you because I felt sorry for you. I...”

She bit her trembling lips while looking at me. I could see from her face just how foolish my thoughts were.

“I just like you. That’s all.”

I laughed in response.

“...Why are you laughing?”

I simply shook my head.

It was quite obvious now that I thought about it. This world wasn’t built with everything calculated or predetermined, so there was no grand prerequisite for someone to like anyone else.

I was only trying to come up with a bunch of excuses and blame the politics of this world that was created out of a novel.

“...”

It was now time for me to respond to her courage.

However, that didn’t mean that I was simply going to introduce myself as a writer or the person who created this world. That was crazy talk.

That was... something I shouldn’t say and something I couldn’t say. Just like how Chae Nayun couldn’t tell me that she was a regressor... there was no need for me to say it.

Most importantly, it was something I should never utter to anyone in this world.

“It’s alright...”

In the end, the only thing I could do was reassure her. I decided to convey my honesty to her and state the facts.

“It wasn’t your fault.”

I let out a sigh and looked at her. Chae Nayun looked at me with teary eyes. I could see the surprise in her eyes as well.

I inched my face closer to hers.

Then, our lips met.

“...”

It happened in an instant without any warning, and it felt like the entire world around us turned silent.

Chae Nayun retreated and plopped on the ground with tears trickling down her cheeks.

“...”

“...”

Neither of us said anything afterwards and an awkward silence surrounded us.

I looked at her a while later and she smiled at me with swollen eyes. Her smile tugged at my heartstrings.

“I like you,” Chae Nayun confessed and slowly crawled towards me.

I could’ve evaded her if I wanted to since she was crawling at a cute pace, but I didn’t.

“...I like you,” she repeated.

I had a lot of burdens, so I couldn’t make the first move. However, if she was the one who came to me... if she continued coming to me... I could probably justify not moving away at least...

I was allowed to do that much, right...?

“...”

In the end, she was so close that our bodies tangled with each other and our noses touched.

Chae Nayun rubbed her nose against mine and whispered, "I like you."

Our lips touched again. We pressed our lips against each other in the silence and refused to part with one another.

I opened my eyes and saw you smiling with your eyes closed as you continued to press your lips against mine.

You looked so happy. So happy that I couldn't help but ask myself...

The small changes that would occur from now on would definitely change me, but am I allowed to like you despite knowing this?

Am I allowed to fall in love with a character I created?

However, you didn't hesitate like I did.

I have no idea what miracles you went through to regress and love me, but I know that you didn't hesitate.

Not only that, you didn't want anything else from me. Maybe that's why you were able to confidently confess your feelings?

Chae Nayun slowly opened her eyes and looked at me after our lips parted. I could feel her arms wrapped around my neck trembling and I could feel her heart wildly beating against my chest.

She looked at me with trembling eyes before burying her face in my chest.

I could feel her hot breath on my chest as she pressed her weight against me. I remained steadfast and supported her entire body. Was she heavy? No, not at all.

However...

Each of us carried a secret that was heavier than anything else in this world. We would probably have to share each other's burdens and secrets in the near future.

I suddenly came to a realization as I was thinking...

Maybe that wouldn't be so bad after all?

Side Stories 74

Chae Nayun (29)

It was already dawn by the time we returned to the train. Chae Nayun scurried to her room while I sat by the window.

I needed time to think. Not only about what happened today with Chae Nayun, but also about the jewel that was being transported in the train. Also, there were a few other minor things in my mind that I had to sort out.

“ ... ”

I placed my hand on the table and rested my chin in my palm. The sun was starting to rise on the horizon and illuminated the surroundings.

I admired the scenery for a bit before turning my eyes to the VIP Cabin. I already knew how many people were inside.

There were quite a lot of Asians and a jewel kept in a safe within the cabin.

[Eye of the Sun] [Ancient Relic]

— A relic found in the ruins of an ancient pyramid. It may be used as a source of light.

The ancient relic possessed immense potential.

I wondered why they were taking risks and going to such great lengths just to transport that jewel to Russia? Was this related to Kim Sukho?

If that was the case, I needed to steal that ancient relic.

“...Who goes there?” I immediately placed my hand on my gun and asked when I felt a presence in the corridor.

“Just a human?” a familiar voice replied.

A girl emerged from the dark. It was the American cadet we met earlier in the day, Loelle.

“I’m on my way back from hunting,” she said.

“...Alright.”

I noticed her right arm was tainted dark red, which bothered me. I was certain she was a good person in my settings, so it would be best if she didn’t stray and remained useful to me later on.

“Your right arm looks strange,” I tested her.

“Ah, this? It’s nothing serious. I was born with it. Oh, what year did you say you were in?” she asked in response.

“First year.”

“Then why are you speaking so casually? You do know that I’m two years older than you, right?”

Loelle crossed her arms over her chest and glared at me.

I simply smirked and shook my head, “Sorry.”

“Be careful from now on,” Loelle growled and wobbled back to her room.

I got up from my seat and went to my room as well. There, I found Jin Sahyuk instead of Kim Suho in our room.

She was sitting on a chair and grinding a sword against another sword.

“You’re here?” she asked while grinding her sword.

Sseuk...! Sseuk...! Sseuk...! Sseuk...!

I instantly froze and gulped before walking towards her.

She raised a brow at my awkward approach.

“Yeah, I’m here. Also, I know why you’re here,” I said.

I decided to come swinging right out of the gates. However, I couldn’t see any signs of surprise, disbelief, or anything else on her face. Instead, she simply smiled in response and unleashed her killing intent.

I refused to back down and added, “And... you’re probably looking for your... servant.”

“...”

Her eyes glimmered while glaring at me. It felt as if everything in the room, including the air, had frozen.

Jin Sahyuk inspected me from head to toe, “As expected. You’re that guy, right?”

She was probably referring to Kim Chundong.

Anyways, I shook my head and replied, “I have that person’s diary.”

“Diary?”

I showed her my smartwatch on my left wrist.

Jin Sahyuk blinked a few times while staring at it. It looked like she was trying to disassemble the watch with her intense gaze.

“How the hell is that a diary?” she grumbled in disbelief.

It was an expected response from someone who came from a civilization where machinery and technological advancements didn't exist.

“*Huh?* Then were you expecting a paperback book? Who uses that these days? Everyone uses a smartwatch in this day and age, you know?”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk seemed to be pondering something before finally nodding.

“I can show you the contents of the diary with this,” I projected a hologram from my smartwatch.

Jin Sahyuk impatiently stretched her hands to grab it, but her hands simply phased through the hologram.

She looked visibly upset and asked, “Hey, what’s going on? Why can’t I touch it?”

“I have to grant you permission to read it. I’ll let you read it in exchange for one condition.”

“One condition?”

“Yeah, I want you to help us.”

Jin Sahyuk frowned and scoffed in disbelief.

“One hundred seven times,” she whispered.

I stared into her eyes, which glared at me like an apex predator.

Then she continued, “That’s the number of times you would’ve been dead if it wasn’t for me. I’ve already helped you countless times. It wouldn’t be enough even if you kowtowed to me for the rest of your life... but what? A condition?”

“Ah, so that was you? Thanks for that.”

“...What?” she looked surprised.

I awkwardly scratched my cheek in response.

To be honest, I was already under the impression that someone was helping me since I came across information last night that all of the assassins sent to kill me had died despite me having done nothing.

“The help I’ll be asking from you this time isn’t something too difficult,” I said.

The ingredients required to wake Chae Jinyoon were probably the *[Heart of Adaptation]* combined with various other ingredients. The final ingredient was probably her, Jin Sahyuk.

I needed her cheat-like ability, which allowed her to form her mana into whatever she wished.

“I’ll tell you everything after you help us. I’ll show you the diary that person left behind, Kindspring or Winterspring, whatever his name was. I’ll even tell you what kind of person he was.”

“...”

Jin Sahyuk silently stared at me, but I didn’t avoid her nerve-wracking gaze.

In the end, she leaned against the chair and crossed her arms over her chest. It was the body language of a king who was commanding her servant to spill the beans.

* * *

Meanwhile, Chae Nayun was lying in bed.

Hehe...

He...

Hehehehe...

Hehehehehehehe...

Hehe...

He...

Hehehehe...

Hehehe...

She started laughing in an eerie manner and couldn't suppress the laughter welling up from inside her. Well, she didn't want to suppress it in the first place.

Thanks to her, the light sleeper Yoo Yeonha woke up and began trembling in horror.

Hehehe...

Hehehehe...

"W-What's going on?" Yoo Yeonha asked with a nervous gulp.

She slowly peeked at the bed below and Chae Nayun's face suddenly popped up in front of her.

"Kyaaaaaahk!"

Yoo Yeonha screamed and crashed to the floor. She fell face first with her legs over her head and saw Chae Nayun crawling towards her.

"What are you doing? Are you alright?" Chae Nayun asked.

'It's you again, Nayun!' Yoo Yeonha gritted her teeth and got up. She

glared at Chae Nayun with killing intent.

“*Hehe...*” Chae Nayun was still smiling like an idiot.

“...You seem to be in a good mood?”

Chae Nayun flinched at her words. Then, she cleared her throat and feigned ignorance, “Not really.”

“*Hmm...* It seems something good happened today... with Kim Hajin.”

“...?!”

Chae Nayun’s eyes shot wide open. She started trembling as if struck by lightning.

“H-How did you know?!” she asked.

Yoo Yeonha smirked and replied, “I didn’t. I was just testing you.”

“*Ah...* That’s cheating...”

“That’s not what’s important. What happened between you two?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

Chae Nayun awkwardly scratched the back of her neck and replied, “Well, nothing. Just... I confessed everything...”

“Confessed?”

“Yeah, that the assassins were sent by Kim Sukho... and the rest is... a secret.”

“Alright.”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t seem that interested while Chae Nayun was itching to tell her what happened.

However, Chae Nayun held her tongue because she knew that Kim Hajin would be in a pinch if she divulged what happened to anyone else.

‘We’re basically going to depend on each other from now on, so... I shouldn’t do anything that would burden him... still... I want to tell someone... It should be fine if I told Yeonha, right? I mean, she’s quite tight-lipped after all... Yeah, I’ll see if I get a chance later on and tell her then. Not now,’ Chae Nayun thought.

“Can you set it aside for tonight and please go to sleep? You do know that we have to hunt tomorrow, right?”

“Oh, you’re right.”

Only then did Chae Nayun finally realize that they were in a class and not a field trip. She needed to hunt as many monsters as possible to increase her points.

How many did she hunt yesterday? Well, she spent the entire day tailing Kim Hajin, so she only got two kills.

“Well, it doesn’t really matter...” she muttered.

She couldn’t care less if she dropped to the 1,000th rank. After all, life was meant to be enjoyed.

Chae Nayun giggled for the last time and plopped onto her bed.

She began to reminisce about everything that happened while squirming with joy. It was only after five in the morning when she finally managed to sleep.

* * *

We were still at the first stop when the second day arrived. The stop had restaurants, accommodations, shops, self-defense forces, etc. so it wasn’t too uncomfortable.

“Hihi...”

Except for the fact that Chae Nayun kept clinging to me like gum.

This was probably the last place anyone would come on a date, but she clung to my arm while pointing here and there.

However, I didn't hate it. No, I should probably say that I liked it even.

"Oh, right... We have to go hunt. We'll end up in last place at this rate," Chae Nayun said after a while passed.

Only then did I remember that we were technically in class right now.

"Yeah, let's go."

I pulled out my gun from its holster and Chae Nayun led the way as I followed from behind. We ventured into the forest and found a troll almost immediately.

"Gwuoooooh!"

It was quite a big one holding a club the size of a baobab tree.

Thud!

The enormous troll swung its club, but Chae Nayun easily blocked it with her sword despite not even being half the troll's size.

I shot the troll in the eyes and the explosive bullets blew up its eyeballs.

Chae Nayun didn't miss this opportunity and cleanly cut off the troll's head from its shoulders.

It took us exactly five seconds to kill the troll.

Chae Nayun giggled and clung to me after mercilessly killing the troll.

"We're quite the pair, right?" she said with a big smile.

“...Yeah, we’re quite compatible,” I replied with a smile.

I didn’t intend to smile, but my mouth wouldn’t listen and smiled on its own.

“See? I told you. We’re invincible together. Anyways, send the coordinates. Let’s go hunt the next one.”

“Okay.”

...We immersed ourselves in hunting after that.

We easily killed trolls, orcs, mountain boars, jungle chimpanzees, man-eating flowers, forest yetis, etc.

By the way, the forest yetis were rank 1 intermediate monsters, but they didn’t stand a chance against our combination.

Not to mention, my SP skyrocketed after we hunted thirty monsters in under three hours.

We sat on the grass and took a break.

“Hey hey hey, look at this!” Chae Nayun said while resting her chin on my shoulder.

She showed me her smartwatch with a funny video playing.

“*Hahaha!* Hey, isn’t this super funny?”

“...Yeah.”

I stared at Chae Nayun reclining back to the point where I could hug her by simply wrapping my arms around.

“*Huh?* What are they doing?” Chae Nayun asked while pointing towards the other end of the dark forest.

I checked with my vision and saw Loelle lying flat on her face. Neither

of us said anything as we rushed over to her.

“Hey, what happened to you?” Chae Nayun asked.

Loelle was covered in cold sweat and writhing in pain. I noticed that she was grabbing her right arm.

“It’s... nothing...” she said.

“I don’t think it’s nothing from the looks of it,” Chae Nayun replied.

She walked over to Loelle and I followed suit after checking our surroundings for any potential threats. Then I inspected her arm, which had fully turned dark red.

“*Kyak!* Don’t touch it!” she screamed when I reached out.

The result of my diagnosis was... a powerful curse.

“How does it look?” Chae Nayun asked.

“I think I can cure it,” I replied.

“Then what are you doing? Hurry up and cure her.”

“...”

“What? Cure? Cure what? Have both of you gone mad?! Don’t you dare! Don’t come near me! I warned you already!” Loelle growled at us.

“Shut up,” I said before enveloping my hand with stigma and grabbing her right arm.

It was possible to lift the curse, but it was quite a powerful one so it would definitely hurt.

“*Kyaaaahk! Arrrrgh! KYAAAAAHK!*” Loelle screamed like a wounded beast.

Well, that wasn't strange since her ability was to turn into a beast in the first place. Ironically, she seemed to have activated her ability as her teeth turned into sharp fangs. She also grew a tail and animal ears on top of her head.

However, she couldn't maintain her ability as her transformation went back and forth.

It took around three minutes to fully lift the curse. It was only after I used up half of stigma that the curse was finally lifted.

“Grrrwaa...”

Loelle was out cold on the ground and foaming at the mouth.

“Heok, what's wrong with her? Is she dead?” Chae Nayun asked.

“No, she survived, but I think I'm going to die...” I replied as I suddenly felt lethargic after using up half of stigma in one go.

My knees gave out and I almost fell, but Chae Nayun instantly ran up and caught me.

She caressed my cheek and asked, “But what do you think she was doing here?”

“Who knows...?”

However, it didn't take long for us to figure out what she was doing in this dark forest all alone.

“Huh? Hey, Hajin! Look at this!” Chae Nayun exclaimed while pointing at a sparkling stone that fell out of Loelle's pocket.

[Eye of the Sun] [Ancient Relic]

— A relic found in the ruins of an ancient pyramid. It may be used as a source of light.

It was the Eye of the Sun.

Side Stories 75

Chae Nayun (30)

“Is she a thief...?” Chae Nayun asked.

Meanwhile, I picked up the jewel.

It was truly strange. Why did she have this jewel? I’m pretty sure I didn’t include kleptomaniac in her settings... Did the settings change by itself again?

“...She isn’t wearing a smartwatch either,” I pointed out.

I was about to hack her smartwatch, but found nothing on her wrist.

“Her ability makes her sensitive to electromagnetic waves, but I wonder why she stole this? I’m pretty sure she’s not that kind of a person...” Chae Nayun said.

“...Have you met her somewhere before?” I asked.

It sounded like she knew Loelle.

Chae Nayun suddenly started to tremble and clunk like an old vehicle before awkwardly grinning, “S-She’s quite famous. She’s famous in the United States... No, she’s famous in the Korean community too.”

“...”

I decided not to pry any further and help Loelle instead.

“Let’s bring her back to the station for now,” I said.

“Y-Yeah, let’s do that...” Chae Nayun replied while still stuttering.

We returned to the train station with Loelle.

Surprisingly, a lot of people gathered at the station and it seemed quite rowdy today. Not only did cadets gather, but even the faculty members all gathered around.

“Do you know who I am...?! *Ha?! Do you know me or not?!*” the man who was the owner of the jewel started to stir up a fuss.

I was pretty sure he acted like that because of the *[Eye of the Sun]*. I decided to ignore him and hacked into his smartwatch to gather more information.

“...Tomb raider?”

I saw the words tomb raiding among the messages he exchanged. I read through the messages and found out that the man obtained the jewel by tomb raiding. His customer was none other than Kim Sukho.

It seemed that Kim Sukho was supposed to smuggle the jewel through Russia, but he didn't want to pay the tomb raider. Instead, he hired those hijackers to steal the jewel.

I couldn't help but scoff in amazement at how dirty and petty that guy was.

“None of you will be able to get on the train until I find what I'm looking for!” the VIP screamed in anger.

Meanwhile, Jin Sahyuk was staring at the VIP from behind. That was more than enough for me to deduce what that man's ending would look like.

“This place is teeming with cadets and heroes, but you failed to catch a thief... *Ah*, what has the world come to? I used to be surrounded by talented individuals like Jin Seyeon and Aileen, but who is this ragtag bunch?” the VIP clicked his tongue and sneered.

“Hey, did he hire us as his security or something? What the hell is that bastard talking about?” Chae Nayun nudged me and said.

Also, she seemed visibly upset.

* * *

As expected, the train was in motion once again. However, we couldn't stop at our second stop because too much time had been wasted after the VIP threw a fit.

In the end, we had to transit to another train heading for Seoul this time.

"Why did you steal this?"

Also, I dragged Loelle to my room after she woke up. Together with me were Kim Suho, Chae Nayun, and Yoo Yeonha.

I took out the *[Eye of the Sun]* and showed it to her.

"I overheard that guy by sheer coincidence on the train. He was bragging that the jewel had the power to cure any illness or curse... So I wanted to borrow it for a while, but..." Loelle replied.

She caressed her right arm, which was no longer dark red and no longer had any traces of the curse.

"I guess I shouldn't have done that. That damned jewel didn't cure me. Instead, it... *ugh*... thinking about it is making my head hurt..."

"Then, it's fine if I take this, right? After all, I lifted your curse," I said.

"What do you plan to do with that? You'll probably end up dead if they find out you're holding that. I don't think it's something worth risking your life over..."

"Who knows."

I infused stigma into the jewel and it started to glow brightly. It glowed an orange hue that resembled sunset. It was extremely bright while also dim at the same time as if it would disappear at any

second.

“This jewel can be used as a light source. It’s not a light that can cure or heal people, but it’s definitely going to be useful. We might be able to craft a very useful artifact from it later on,” I explained.

However, Kim Suho and Yoo Yeonha seemed to be bothered by the fact that it was stolen.

“That guy was also a thief,” I added.

“*Huh?* He was a thief?” Yoo Yeonha asked in response.

“Yeah, he was a tomb raider. He stole this from the ruins of the pyramids,” I replied.

Loelle frowned and asked, “How do you know that?”

“I’m somewhat of a pro hacker, you see.”

“*Huh?* What nonsense are you...”

“Anyways...”

I stood up.

This jewel was still incomplete, but I was certain that I could turn it into something befitting an ancient relic through *[System Intervention]*. I wasn’t so fond of giving something like this to someone else. Knowing it would end up in Kim Sukho’s hands made me loathe the idea even more.

“Let’s exchange contact details for now,” I said and extended my smartwatch to Loelle.

Loelle tilted her head in confusion while Chae Nayun pouted and looked at me with eyes that seemed to say, ‘*Do you really have to do that?*’

We arrived at Cube early Friday morning and immediately went to the club room to see Evandel. Thankfully, Evandel was getting along very well with the old butler from the English Royal Palace.

“...But Evandel, what’s that?”

She was holding a luxurious-looking bone.

“Ah, a mister gave this to me!” Evandel brightly smiled and replied.

“Who?” I asked.

“A scary-looking mister with long hair!”

I immediately thought of Shin Jonghak. Why would he give a bone to a human? Aren’t these for dogs...?

Yoo Yeonha seemed to be wondering the same thing before she suddenly raised a finger and said, “Ah, he must’ve met her when she was in her puppy form.”

“Oh... That sounds about right.”

“He must’ve found Evandel to be quite cute since he gave her this bone and all.”

He didn’t come to the club room after he fought with Chae Nayun last time, but it seemed that he came by when we weren’t around.

After all, Evandel is extremely cute in her puppy form.

“Come and sit here for a second,” I called over all the club members to the sofa.

I stood in front of the board as Chae Nayun looked at me with both hands on her chin.

Sparkle! Sparkle!

Her sparkling eyes were quite burdensome.

“We will be seriously discussing how to wake Chae Jinyoon from now on.”

Kim Suho, Rachel, and everyone else suddenly became serious.

“...But, there’s something we must do before we wake up Chae Jinyoon.”

“*Huh?* What do you mean before we wake him up? Are you saying that you found a cure for him?” Yoo Yeonha asked with her eyes wide open in surprise.

“Yeah, I found a way. I believe it’s highly likely it’ll work.”

“Oh! As expected of our top theory cadet!”

Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan exclaimed and smiled.

I simply nodded and continued, “Before that, we have to understand the cause behind it.”

“...Cause?”

It was Chae Nayun this time.

“Yeah, we have to find out why Chae Jinyoon ended up like that in the first place.”

“...”

It was probably a heavy topic for Chae Nayun, but it was something we had to do.

“Their explanation that he became like that after fighting a djinn is not enough to convince me. It’s imperative that we find what actually

happened before anything else,” I said while looking at Chae Nayun.

Everyone else seemed to be wary of Chae Nayun, but none of them dared to say anything.

Chae Nayun looked downcast compared to her usual self, but soon flashed a bitter smile and nodded.

“Yeah, we should do that,” she said.

* * *

The next afternoon, the Pharmacy Club went to Seoul.

“I’m going to the broadcast station first,” I said.

There were probably quite a lot of unbroadcasted clips that I could make use of with *[Hacking]*.

“Then I’m going with Hajin,” Chae Nayun said and clung to me.

Everyone else squinted at her.

“I guess you lot will have to follow me,” Yoo Yeonha said as she motioned for Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan to follow her.

On a side note, Rachel stayed behind to look after Evandel while Shin Jonghak was out on a date with Seo Youngji again.

“Where are we going?” Yi Yeonghan asked.

“You’ll find out once we get there. It’s somewhat difficult for me to go alone, so...” Yoo Yeonha replied.

Chae Nayun winked at Yoo Yeonha, but I caught her in the act.

“W-What? Something was in my eye. Yes, something was in it... That’s why I winked...”

“I didn’t say anything.”

Anyways, we split up into two teams. Yoo Yeonha led Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan while I was paired with Chae Nayun.

She squirmed in the middle of the street before holding my hand.

“...Hehe,” she giggled when I held her hand and didn’t let go.

“Let’s go.”

We walked together hand in hand, but didn’t attract any attention as both of us wore sunglasses. Chae Nayun was also wearing a beret. We explored a bit here and there. It felt like we were on a date.

“That’s the broadcasting station, SBN,” Chae Nayun said as she pointed at a building.

The SBN building stood tall at the center of the city.

“Let’s go.”

We made our way towards the building and started to see celebrities the closer we got there.

“Wow, that’s Genti,” Chae Nayun said while sticking close to my back.

A man wearing shades with a guitar on his back was walking with another man, who I presumed was his manager. The man’s blonde hair made him stick out like a sore thumb, but I had no idea who he was.

“Who’s that?”

“You don’t know? That’s Genti. The famous singer who sweeps the charts. He’s so handsome in real life.”

“...You can’t even see his face, what handsome are you talking

about?"

"*Huh?* Don't tell me... are you jealous?"

Chae Nayun looked like she was holding her laughter back while wiggling her brows.

"Just hurry up and keep walking," I grumbled.

Actually, she caught me red-handed. I just wanted to get out of that situation as soon as possible.

We entered the building and sat at the cafe on the first floor. We ordered a cup of Americano and a cup of Supreme Basic Luwak Dutch Latte.

I took a sip of my Americano while Chae Nayun just stared at her latte.

"Does it taste different if you pay forty thousand won for it?"

"*Hmm? Ah*, not really. More importantly, are we going to find something by coming here?"

"We need to try at least. Oh, I just remembered. Do you know of any politicians or celebrities being supported by Kim Sukho?"

"*Hmm...*" Chae Nayun frowned.

Now that I thought about it, I wondered what kind of a life this girl lived in her previous life that she didn't even suspect anything regarding that incident. *Ah*, never mind... I was sure she wouldn't have been able to muster the courage to investigate the matter. She was quite the softie inside, so it wouldn't have been easy for her.

"*Ah!* I remembered something from the entertainment industry! Have you heard of EN Entertainment?"

"Yeah."

“I remember hearing some rumors about them. They said that they were able to scout a lot of heroes because Kim Sukho was supporting them or something like that. I think Kim Sukho’s father’s friend’s grandson is the owner of that company.”

I nodded in response. Our next destination was EN Entertainment.

“Oh? It’s Seung-Ah unni,” Chae Nayun said in surprise.

I looked back and saw Yun Seung-Ah coming in through the main door. She was with an old gentleman.

Both Chae Nayun and I flinched.

It was Kim Sukho.

I nonchalantly continued to sip my Americano as I activated *[Hacking]*.

“...what the hell is this?”

[Smartwatch – Kim Sukho]

[Messages – 0]

There was nothing on his smartwatch. This was probably his work smartwatch, so I tried to scan for another watch on him.

Unfortunately, he already got into a sedan and sped away.

“Tsk... Let’s get up and go in,” I said.

“Alright, just give me a minute. I’ll be able to get us a pass if I call my father.”

* * *

We scoured through the broadcasting station stealing information left and right until sunset, but weren’t able to get anything related to Chae

Jinyoon by the time we exited the building.

Oddly enough, Chae Nayun still energetically walked like a child on a night stroll while holding my hand.

However, I could see the sadness behind her smile. The fact that we were currently going through what happened to Chae Jinyoon was already more than enough to make her sad.

“Ah! It’s an arcade!” Chae Nayun exclaimed.

She was huffing and puffing from excitement. I patted her head to calm her down.

She suddenly turned towards me and stared into my eyes.

“What?”

“Hey... don’t touch me there...”

“Why?”

“I’m sensitive there...”

“...”

Was she talking about her erogenous spot right now...?

Anyways, I faked a cough and said, “Let’s go in.”

Chae Nayun simply nodded with her cheeks blushing.

We entered the arcade and various sounds and flashing lights greeted us.

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!

Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!

I wondered if I was just really lucky or if it was because I was in Seoul. We ran into another so-called main character.

“Ha... Really, why isn’t this working, Boss? Should I just destroy it?”

“Don’t, you’re just bad at it.”

“Even you can’t get that doll, Boss.”

“I can get it if I wanted to, but I’m just trying to stick to the rules.”

“How’s that any different from not being able to get it?”

“Shut your mouth.”

The Chameleon Troupe was in the arcade. I was certain that the gigantic man in a robe with his head almost touching the ceiling was Cheok Jungyeong. The small person next to him also in a robe was their boss.

They were currently struggling in front of a [*Difficulty – High*] claw machine.

Also, I could see Aileen from the Temple of Justice further inside the arcade.

It was highly likely that they hadn’t gathered here out of pure coincidence. I could feel that an incident would happen or they received orders to mobilize.

“Shall we try our luck with those dolls?” Chae Nayun asked as she walked towards the Chameleon Troupe.

“No!”

“Gosh, you scared me. Why not?”

I didn't want to bump into them at all costs, but both of them were already looking at me after I shouted.

I quickly turned around and hugged Chae Nayun. I made sure to push her against the wall so both of our faces wouldn't be visible to them.

"Huh...?" Chae Nayun muttered.

I could feel her breath on my neck, but I didn't pay attention to that as I used my vision to look behind me.

"Haa..." I let out a sincere sigh of relief and swept my hair back.

"Kim Hajin..."

On the other hand, Chae Nayun was looking at me with a strange expression. No, it was more accurate to say that she was giving me quite a dangerous look.

Side Stories 76

Chae Nayun (31)

An array of flashy lights lit the Han River underneath the Seoul night sky.

We arrived in front of EN Entertainment's headquarters.

"Is this the right place?" I asked.

The building was so modern yet artistic that I wondered if it was really a building or a piece of art. Its edges were so sharp and intricate as if carved with a sculpting knife and chiseled one by one.

Chae Nayun counted the floors before nodding, "Yeah, I think this is it."

I looked inside with my thousand-mile eyes. There was nobody in the CEO's office as expected, but quite a lot of employees were working overtime.

"You stay here. I'll go and hack the CEO's pc."

"Why? Let's go together."

"It's easier for me to move alone," I said before I took out the Veil of Darkness.

It was the ability the hijackers so kindly gifted me. I changed it to the size of a blanket and used it like a garment.

"Hey, wait a minute. I can squeeze in there too... I think I can..."

However, Chae Nayun forced her way into the veil. She squirmed a bit before looking up at me with a smile.

I looked at her in disbelief, but she seemed adamant about going together.

“It’s dangerous if you go alone,” she said.

“...Alright, let’s go together.”

I moved with Chae Nayun. We were so close that we basically moved as one. Then, we jumped as high as we could and reached the building’s rooftop. I immediately hacked the building’s security system.

[Hacking Target – EN Entertainment Security System]

Control over the security system was soon transferred to my smartwatch. I opened the rooftop door and confidently walked down the stairs.

[CEO’s Office]

The CEO’s office was right below the rooftop.

I took advantage of the administrative control I gained through *[Hacking]* and opened the door.

“Wow, they really went all out decorating this place,” Chae Nayun said as she looked around the office.

The office was decorated in a manner that Chae Nayun liked. It had all sorts of awards and antique furniture. There was even a screen golf system installed.

[Hacking Target – Kim Jiheung]

“The CEO is Kim Jiheung, right?”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

I hacked the CEO’s pc to take all the files, emails, and messages in it. I

even combed through to see if there were any files related to Chae Jinyoon.

“Did you find anything?”

“...No.”

As expected, there weren't any files related to Chae Jinyoon on the PC. Those files were probably stored in Kim Jiheung's private server if any of them did exist.

“Do you think they deleted everything?”

“These kinds of people don't trust their own kind. It's very likely that they didn't delete it and are keeping it somewhere else.”

Most underlings usually kept an insurance even though they knew things would get ugly if they were caught with it.

“Tsk... There's nothing...”

I continued to comb through the files, but didn't find anything useful.

“Let's go.”

“You're done?”

“Yeah, he's probably going to sync his smartwatch to this pc one day. We just have to wait for him to do that.”

I would get access to his smartwatch the moment he synced the two together. Every single file in his smartwatch would be at my disposal.

Thud!

A large sound resounded from outside the window.

Both of us froze on the spot and felt our legs become weak, but we rushed as fast as we could back to the rooftop.

“Ah... What the hell is that thing?” Chae Nayun grumbled while pointing at a monster peeking out from the Han River.

It was a gigantic snake-like monster that let out a ferocious scream at the top of its lungs late at night.

“It’s a djinn’s doing,” I replied.

It was quite common for such ambushes or disturbances to occur in this world. Seoul was the capital of South Korea, which was the strongest country in this world according to my story setting. These kinds of events frequently occurred at least once every two to three months.

However...

The thing that scared me right now was... there were suddenly two people behind us.

“Aren’t these the two brats we saw at the arcade, Boss?”

It was a gigantic man and a small woman from the Chameleon Troupe.

Both of them had their eyes on us and walked towards us.

Chae Nayun immediately pulled out her sword and I infused aether into my Desert Eagle.

“Hey, don’t try anything funny. We just came here to enjoy the view,” Cheok Jungyeong said.

“Fuck off,” Chae Nayun growled as she infused mana into her sword.

Cheok Jungyeong suddenly smiled brightly after seeing the mana infused sword. He exclaimed in delight, “*Hehe!* You’re quite brave. Alright, if you insist. We shall have a go at...”

Boss blocked Cheok Jungyeong.

However, I noticed that her eyes were focused on me.

“You there. Your heart has caught my eye,” she said.

My heart started beating wildly at her words.

Boss didn't say anything after that. It seemed like she was pondering something. I couldn't help but feel extremely nervous as to what she was thinking. To be honest, the suspense was killing me.

“*Hmm... Ah...* So it was you that time,” Boss realized.

The air around us suddenly grew heavy after she had a realization and her shadows started to slither like snakes.

However, a single ray of mana cut all the shadowy snakes down.

It was Chae Nayun.

“Oh? *Hoho!* You're quite skilled!” Cheok Jungyeong exclaimed in delight once again.

He grinned from ear to ear and clenched his fist until his muscles started pulsating.

Boss suddenly said in a cold voice, “I have no interest in you, little girl. I just have something I wish to discuss with the boy.”

“*Huh?* What are you talking about, Boss? That kid is quite strong too. No, I think only that kid is strong,” Cheok Jungyeong said while scratching his head.

“Step aside, little girl,” Boss warned again.

“Little girl your face,” Chae Nayun retorted before she stood in front of me.

I looked at her in surprise, but she seemed adamant about protecting me. In the end, I simply nodded and tried to send an SOS signal to Jin

Sahyuk.

“Hey, what are you doing over there?”

A clear voice suddenly asked. The tense situation was instantly defused by the voice as Boss’ shadows stood down and all of us looked at where the voice came from.

“You’ve got guts crawling out of your cave and coming to Seoul. You bunch of thieves.”

“...Seung-Ah unni?”

It was the vice leader of Creator’s Sacred Grace, Yun Seung-Ah.

She looked at the Chameleon Troupe and shrugged, “I’m not the only one here. You know that Divine Archer, right?”

Creak...!

We suddenly sensed a bowstring being pulled quite a distance away from us. The sound was so crisp and clear that the sound traveled through the air.

“So can’t you just go back to where you came from?” Yun Seung-Ah asked.

She said it in a manner that sounded like she was asking a favor, but was in fact threatening them.

However, Boss showed no reaction to the threat. Instead, her gaze was still fixed on me. Well, on my heart to be precise.

Then, she spoke in a voice mixed with a hint of laughter, “...I guess we’ll run into each other again.”

After that, both of them were suddenly shrouded by a shadow and disappeared from the rooftop.

Tak... Tak... Tak... Tak...

Yun Seung-Ah approached Chae Nayun and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you alright?”

“*Huh? Ah*, yeah. I’m okay. But unni, what was that just now?” Chae Nayun asked.

Yun Seung-Ah bitterly smiled and replied, “We had a meeting today.”

“A meeting?”

“Yeah.”

Yun Seung-Ah stole a glance at a tall skyscraper in the middle of Seoul before shaking her head.

“The association was having a meeting on what to do with some relics they recently obtained... but the association is just a political field these days. They’re completely divided. They were transporting the relics through the sewer network, but the djinns somehow got wind of it. So they ambushed it, what else?”

“...Really?”

It seemed that the association was much more corrupt than I wrote them to be.

“Anyways, you’re fine, right?”

“Yeah, I’m okay.”

“What about you?” Yun Seung-Ah checked up on me as well.

“I’m fine as well,” I replied.

“That’s a relief. Then, follow me. It’s dangerous if you stay in these

kinds of places.”

We followed Yun Seung-Ah to the streets.

Not even five minutes had passed, but the djinn’s ambush seemed to have been resolved already.

Yun Seung-Ah accompanied us to the main street before saying that she had to go back to her guild and disappeared.

“I’m tired...” I grumbled under my breath.

To be honest, my future looked bleak. I mean, the Chameleon Troupe’s boss basically told me that I was marked. Come on, I already changed the heart’s settings. Was it really that obvious?

“Are you tired...?” Chae Nayun asked.

“Yeah,” I said with a nod.

Chae Nayun suddenly grabbed my sleeve and muttered, “Then... we need to talk about what happened a while ago and...”

She looked around us before whispering in my ear, “Shall we... go rest for a bit?”

“...”

I looked around our surroundings and saw numerous signboards with the word ‘HOTEL’ around us. I looked back at Chae Nayun and she lowered her brightly flushed face.

“Haa...” I let out a sigh as cold sweat formed on my forehead.

* * *

A new class started on Monday. It was a rank based class.

We were basically grouped into twelve groups based on our ranks. The

1st to 99th, 100th to 199th, 200th to 299th, and so on.

I arrived where the ones in the four hundredths were having their class at the dueling arena. There were quite a lot of cadets present. All of them were waiting for class to start.

“Hey, isn’t that Chae Nayun’s boyfriend?”

I was going to sit, but some big guy appeared in front of me and blocked my path. I stared at him without saying anything. He grinned and extended his hand to me.

“Nice to meet you. I’m the third son of Yedang, Lee Sanghun.”

It was an unexpected situation, but I simply nodded and shook his hand in response.

“I heard the rumors about you,” he said while shaking my hand.

Then, he came a bit closer and asked, “So... I was thinking... Can you teach me? I’m talking about that skill you used to seduce Chae Nayun. I’m sure you have some amazing skills, right? Can you teach me some of that...?”

* * *

Meanwhile, the atmosphere at the first group’s dueling arena was even more intense than the one with the four hundredth ranked cadets.

Chae Nayun was glaring at Jin Sahyuk, who looked down at her with an arrogant gaze. Chae Nayun gathered her mana and materialized it into a twenty meter long sword. She swung it down with all of her strength.

Kwaaaaaang!

However, the gigantic sword failed to graze the hem of Jin Sahyuk’s clothes. She had summoned a shield that easily blocked the sword and followed up by swinging a whip at the gaps in Chae Nayun’s defense.

“Euk!”

Chae Nayun was flung back after getting smacked in the chest.

This was already her sixth time failing.

Jin Sahyuk looked down at her with the same eyes as if to openly humiliate her.

“You’re weak,” she said.

Chae Nayun gritted her teeth at the comment and got up. She rushed at Jin Sahyuk for the seventh time. This time, she used a combination of feints and consecutive attacks. Dozens of mana swords ferociously charged at Jin Sahyuk.

“Hmm...”

However, Jin Sahyuk simply tapped the ground with her feet and dozens of spears shot up from the ground to destroy Chae Nayun’s swords.

“Ah!” Chae Nayun exclaimed and froze on the spot.

“Pitiful... Do you really think you can protect him from them with pitiful skills like yours?”

Chae Nayun’s eyes widened as she realized the meaning behind those words. Jin Sahyuk was referring to those people they encountered that day, the Chameleon Troupe. After all, Chae Nayun recognized the stupid voice of that gigantic man as well.

However, what surprised her was the fact that this woman was watching them that day.

“You bitch...”

Anger welled up inside of Chae Nayun, but her head became cooler the angrier she got.

She controlled her shattered sword with mana and mended it.

“I suggest that you give up.”

“...You better shut your trap while I’m still being nice.”

“I’m not someone the likes of you can handle.”

“Shut up!” Chae Nayun's voice thundered across the dueling arena.

Someone suddenly interrupted, “Hey, cursing at the instructor is a point deduction!”

However, she didn’t care about that at all. Chae Nayun surrounded her entire body with mana and everyone in the arena gasped in shock.

She was now armed with mana armor. The armor made out of layers of tempered mana wasn’t aura. It was an entirely different type of armor that perfectly protected its wearer.

Jin Sahyuk raised a brow at the unexpected display and started to warm up her mana.

“*Kwuuuuahhh!*” Chae Nayun screamed and swung her sword with all her might to kill that bitch.

* * *

Classes finally ended at five exactly when the sun began to set.

I went to the club room while massaging my aching wrist.

“Hajin!”

I bumped into Kim Suho in the corridor.

“Ah, you surprised me. What do you want?”

Kim Suho bitterly smiled and placed his arm around my shoulder,
“There’s no club activity today.”

“...What?”

I furrowed my brows and looked at the bags in Kim Suho’s hands.
They were probably the toys that Evandel always wanted.

“*Hoo*, are you trying to compete? Evandel is still going to choose me
in the end, you know?” I sneered.

“*Haha*, no. Not that,” Kim Suho shook his head and smiled.

He gave me a piece of paper. It was a visiting ticket.

“Go drop by the infirmary for me.”

“...?”

He said a few other things that instantly convinced me to change my
destination to the infirmary.

I really wanted to see Evandel, but she was my priority right now.

* * *

“*Erm...?*”

Chae Nayun could feel someone’s gentle touch on her forehead.

“...*Ah*.”

She opened her eyes and saw a familiar face sitting in front of her bed.
Perhaps it was because she was dizzy, but everything seemed so hazy
and dream-like.

Was he always this handsome or did he start to get handsome these
days? It would be a problem if he got any more handsome than this...

“Why did you get so worked up?” he asked in a grumbling voice.

However, Chae Nayun felt happy since she could feel that he was sincerely worried about her. She still had a hard time discerning if this was just a dream, so she pinched her cheek.

It hurt, but also felt good.

“Hehehe...”

Kim Hajin furrowed his brows after seeing Chae Nayun laugh like an idiot.

“Answer me,” he said.

“Ah... She provoked me first... I thought I could win, but... it was a stretch...”

Chae Nayun knew very well how much stronger she had grown. In fact, she was confident that she could win against the twenty-two year old Chae Nayun from her previous life if they fought right now.

However, Jin Sahyuk was much stronger than her past self.

“Yawn...!”

Anyways, a loss was a loss. What was important was that Kim Hajin finally came.

Chae Nayun yawned after finally letting go of the tension and Kim Hajin suddenly placed his hand on her forehead.

She could feel warm mana flow from his hand into her body and started to feel warm.

Chae Nayun looked at Kim Hajin dumbfoundedly.

“Don’t overdo it from now on,” he whispered.

She felt like her ear would melt from his warm, gentle voice. She felt all warm and fuzzy inside.

Chae Nayun smiled, but suddenly recalled what Jin Sahyuk said.

Pitiful... Do you really think you can protect him from them with those pitiful skills of yours?

A corner of her heart felt heavy after remembering those words, but she continued to smile.

She steeled her resolve to become stronger and protect Kim Hajin, Chae Jinyoon, her happiness, and all of her friends.

“Alright...” Chae Nayun replied with a smile.

However, a sharp pain suddenly struck her head and forced her to wrap her hands around it.

“*Keuk!*”

Kim Hajin jumped from his seat and asked, “Hey, are you alright...?”

Chae Nayun didn’t miss this opportunity. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him down.

Kim Hajin muttered, “*Eh? Aah?*” before falling on top of her in the bed.

Chae Nayun wrapped her arms around his waist and kissed him. Kim Hajin was severely taken aback by her boldness, but slowly surrendered himself and kissed her back.

A faint gentle warmth blossomed in the closed white space.

Side Stories 77

Chae Nayun (32)

I stayed in the Pharmacy Club's room and checked my smartwatch. The EN Entertainment's CEO just accessed his pc.

I watched the mouse cursor move when I suddenly felt a weight on my shoulder.

“Oh... Where did you learn this skill?”

It was Chae Nayun. She clung to my back with her chin resting on my shoulder. Her entire body weight was on my shoulder.

Suddenly, the CEO synced his personal server to his desktop.

“Ah! He connected it!” I exclaimed and stood up.

“Ack! I bith my thong... ouch...”

“Quiet down and wait.”

“Ah... My tongue hurts... What's going on?”

Click... Clack...

The mouse cursor moved and clicked a few times before he accessed his personal server. I immediately used *[Hacking]* the moment he opened the server.

[Hacking Target – Kim Jiheung's Personal Server]

I instantly copied the entire server database before Kim Jiheung was able to switch his PC off. I started to comb through the files on the

database.

“Hmm...”

There were a lot of files on the server, but none of them were related to Chae Jinyoon. However, there was one recorded conversation that caught my eye.

[How about we stick to Chae Joochul from now on? I think it's a matter of time before things come to light.]

[Let's discuss that matter in person later.]

This couldn't be considered concrete evidence, but was more than enough to tell me that I was going in the right direction. There was definitely some sort of connection between Kim Sukho and Chae Jinyoon.

“This...”

Chae Nayun suddenly frowned while looking at the monitor.

Ddreuk...

The clubroom door opened and the newly formed trio of Yoo Yeonha, Kim Suho, and Yi Yeonghan entered. Yoo Yeonha was carrying a stack of files at her waist.

“Did you find something?” she asked before placing the stack of files on the table.

“Yeah, a bit.”

“That's good. We also found something. Let me brief you on what we found first,” Yoo Yeonha said.

She took out a pen from her pocket and continued, “I asked my uncle... No, someone I know for a favor, but it's going to take time. We did some digging ourselves.”

She underlined the name of a hospital ward in red and said, “Here. We heard a strange rumor from this unexpected place.”

Both Chae Nayun and I took a closer look at the file Yoo Yeonha marked.

“Where’s that?” Chae Nayun asked.

“But... the people that were following us were probably sent by Kim Sukho, right?” Yoo Yeonha changed the subject with a question.

I simply nodded in response.

“I guess so...” Chae Nayun muttered.

“So I was thinking...” Yoo Yeonha muttered while stealing glances at Chae Nayun.

Chae Nayun’s face stiffened before she let out a sigh, “*Haa...*”

Yoo Yeonha focused her gaze on the file on the table and said, “The place Chae Jinyoon went to was... not a den of djinns, but rather... A place where the association and djinns secretly traded the relics they stole from others.”

“...What?” Chae Nayun muttered in shock.

She gritted her teeth so hard that we could clearly hear it and she glared at Yoo Yeonha.

The information Yoo Yeonha shared was so shocking that even Kim Suho and Yi Yeonghan looked at her in disbelief.

“W-Where did you hear that?”

“A patient in a mental hospital.”

“*Huh?* What? Hey, are you asking us to believe that right now or what?” Chae Nayun asked with a frown.

I could feel the heat of her anger radiating on my skin.

“That mental patient was the guild dispatcher in charge of sending Chae Jinyoon the coordinates, but he suddenly became mentally ill and was admitted to an asylum right after that incident. The strange thing is... he was admitted to an asylum in Hamgyong Province, and a very remote one at that,” Yoo Yeonha explained.

“...”

Chae Nayun covered her face and didn't say anything.

I held her hand as she trembled and she looked at me with eyes that had tears welling out of them.

She tightly held my hand and said, “Then... my brother he... in that incident...”

“It's possible that the association pulled some stunt to make sure he was silenced,” Yoo Yeonha continued.

Chae Nayun gritted her teeth and trembled. Her anger had reached a point where she had to clench her fist just to suppress it.

I wrapped my arms around her and hugged her. Her trembling anger resonated all over my body.

“Calm down. It's only a possibility and nothing is certain yet. Also, we're not strong enough even if it was true. We're up against Kim Sukho,” Yoo Yeonha said. She bit her lips and added, “At least three years... We're going to need that much time at least. I will become the guild leader of Essence of the Straits and you should establish yourself as a hero with your own forces, Nayun. It won't be easy, but we will have to endure until then...”

Chae Nayun didn't respond as she was busy suppressing the anger inside of her. It wouldn't have been possible for the original Chae Nayun to suppress her anger in this kind of situation, but the current Chae Nayun was more than capable of controlling her emotions.

I responded on Chae Nayun's behalf, "I think there's a way to shorten that period."

"*Huh...? Ah*, of course. We could do that if Nayun's father, my father, and Jonghak help us. However, we'll need more concrete evidence if we were to get their cooperation."

"No, not that," I shook my head.

We needed something else instead of family connections or power to put Kim Sukho on trial and pay for his crimes.

What we needed to do was...

Something that was clearly illegal and even more cowardly than the tactics he used.

* * *

In a skyscraper in Cheongdam overlooking the Seoul night sky and Han River.

"I see..." Kim Sukho nodded after receiving a report.

The report stated that a few Cube cadets visited the asylum in Hamgyong Province. There wasn't much to it at a glance. However, it was a vital piece of information if matched with the current events that took place recently.

"What do you think is our best course of action?"

Kim Sukho looked down at his subordinate making the report and smiled.

"They're kids that don't know what they're doing," he said.

Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin, both of them had no idea what truth was waiting for them at the end. They were most likely clueless as to what that truth even was.

Chae Nayun was probably after the truth behind what happened to her brother while Kim Hajin was probably out for vengeance for his parents. Ironically, that boy was helping the girl whose family was the main culprit behind the death of his parents. That girl was also in love with the boy that her family ruined.

To think that his lover's family was the one who killed his parents...

How ironic was that? It was hard to believe that such a tragic story could exist in real life in the first place. Perhaps that was the reason so many tragedies existed in this world.

"I guess there's no helping it."

However, both of them and even Kim Sukho would be greatly affected should the truth behind the Kwang-Oh Incident be exposed to the world.

That truth would bring destruction to the current order.

Kim Sukho had no idea if those lovers would be able to continue loving each other after the truth came to light, so he felt that it was his duty as an adult to prevent those two from experiencing such heartbreak.

"First, eliminate that annoying little brat," Kim Sukho ordered.

"Yes, I understand," the subordinate replied before retreating to the balcony and jumping off the skyscraper.

Kim Sukho watched as the man was carried away by the wind and disappeared from his sight.

* * *

The second semester felt much shorter compared to the first semester. It was probably because of the people I hung out with during the second semester.

Anyways...

Thanks to that, our midterm exam was right around the corner. However, I was spending my time using [*Hacking*] to dig up dirt on those in power.

Also, I started training with Chae Nayun. I used stigma to help her perfectly control her mana and she was rapidly growing stronger thanks to her innate talent.

“*Phew...* I’m so tired...”

Chae Nayun was drenched in sweat, but immediately reached for my body and started touching me all over.

“H-Hey, we’re in public right now.”

“*Hehe*, who cares?”

I pointed at a boulder on top of the mountain behind us just to distract her from trying to tickle me.

“Look at that,” I said.

“What? *Huh...*?” Chae Nayun looked at where I was pointing and found Jin Sahyuk. She frowned and grumbled, “Why is she there...?”

“I called her,” I answered.

“*Huh?* Why?!” Chae Nayun shouted before pouting and sulking. She started bashing her forehead on my shoulder.

“To show you how I plan to wake up Chae Jinyoon.”

“...”

She immediately stopped bashing her forehead on my shoulder and nodded before standing up.

I called Jin Sahyuk, “Hey! Come down!”

Jin Sahyuk let out a sigh and shook her head before jumping and landing in front of us. She looked at Chae Nayun with eyes full of pity and sighed.

“...You look hopeless. Aren’t you even ashamed of yourself?” Jin Sahyuk asked.

“What? Are you talking about me? Why? Jealous?” Chae Nayun sneered in response.

“Tsk...” Jin Sahyuk simply clicked her tongue in annoyance.

“Ha... I guess you’re jealous. Just admit that you’re jealous,” Chae Nayun continued sneering.

I immediately put a stop to her childish tirade, “Stop it. Can you show that to Nayun as well?”

Jin Sahyuk frowned at my words and Chae Nayun expressed her discontent on the matter as well.

I looked at Chae Nayun and said, “Don’t act like that to someone willing to help you.”

“Ah... Alright...” Chae Nayun muttered before her expression shifted to that of an innocent angel. She extended her hand towards Jin Sahyuk.

However, Jin Sahyuk completely ignored her outstretched hand and said, “Before that...”

She tapped on her smartwatch and projected a hologram of a notebook. It was Kim Chundong’s diary that I gave her a while back.

“Tell me the password to this damned diary...” Jin Sahyuk grumbled.

“I already told you last time...” I squinted my eyes and replied.

“I forgot... No, I know it but I can’t open it. I think you pulled some

trick or something...”

It seemed that her pride wouldn't allow her to admit that she simply forgot the password...

* * *

I came to Seoul alone this time without Chae Nayun. This was because of the first midterm exam.

[First Midterms Exam: Please go to your designated testing center.]

Under normal circumstances, I would've said this was a new kind of test. However, I found out through *[Hacking]* that it was highly likely that the test was a trap and an assassin was waiting for me.

This was something I wished for as well since I couldn't keep looking behind me all the time.

I braced myself and walked the streets of Seoul. There were numerous hints and riddles about where the testing center was spread across the city. I arrived at a manhole after solving all of the puzzles.

“...Do I have to go down?” I wondered.

Of course, there was no one for me to ask. I opened the manhole cover and made my way down.

Tak! Tak! Tak!

The only sounds in this dark and damp environment were my feet hitting the ladder every time I took a step down. I heightened my senses and remained vigilant for any possible dangers, but I was able to make it down without any problems.

“...What the?”

Initially, I was certain that this would definitely be a trap.

“Oh, Kim Hajin is here too?”

Surprisingly, there were around twenty cadets present including familiar faces from my class such as Yi Jiyoon and Jin Hoseung. There were even other named cadets like Shen Yuan from China as well.

“Oh, it’s Nayun’s boyfriend,” Yi Jiyoon teased as she tapped me on the shoulder.

I looked at her and saw that she was wearing a pair of spectacles.

“What’s that?” I asked.

“Ah, this? It’s glasses that can film videos.”

“Why would you film videos...?”

“My PR video. Most cadets have started filming those in recent days. Our chances of getting into a good guild will increase if we film how we do in these kinds of tests. Ah, you should’ve brought one as well. Who knows? Maybe you’ll need it to force your way into the same guild as Nayun.”

“...Is that so?”

I bitterly smiled at her sneering before taking a look around us.

“*Hmph!*” Yi Jiyoon scoffed at my response.

I saw Yoo Yeonha busily ordering her underlings around like usual.

Around thirty minutes passed before another twenty-nine other cadets arrived. It was exactly at that moment that the fiftieth cadet came down and the ceiling suddenly started rumbling.

— The first midterm exam will now start since the required number of participants has been fulfilled.

A voice signaled the start of the exam.

All of the cadets anxiously waited for the test to start, but nothing happened after that. We couldn't feel any mana or the presence of monsters nearby.

Sseuuu...

The only thing that followed was the sound of flowing water, which sounded a bit strange and distant.

I didn't think much about it, but I decided to check where the sound was coming from just in case. My thousand-mile eyes pierced through the darkness and spotted a huge wave of water rushing towards us.

— Survive and make it out of this place in one piece.

“A wave is coming!” I shouted.

All of the cadets looked at me and tilted their heads, but their confused faces didn't last long as the sound of waves crashing quickly approached us in no time.

Kwaaaaang!

Everything else happened in a split second as the powerful waves swallowed us in the blink of an eye.

I was thrown to the floor and ceiling numerous times as I tumbled underwater. I could feel the water forcing itself into every single hole in my body.

However, the strange thing was that... I wasn't struggling at all.

Strangely enough, I was able to breathe underwater.

I racked my brains for a while before suddenly recalling the jewel I obtained from the whale. I was able to breathe underwater thanks to the Essence of the Sea in stigma.

I freely swam underwater thanks to that and immediately went

towards Yoo Yeonha. I grabbed her wrist.

I swam up with her in tow and pulled her to the surface of the water.

“Bleu... Bleurghh...!”

“Are you alright?”

“Mmpf... bleurgh...! Yeah... Huff... Huff...” Yoo Yeonha replied as she squirted water out of her nose, ears, and mouth.

“M-Me too! Help me too! Please!”

I suddenly heard Yi Jiyeon’s voice and grabbed her.

She composed her breathing and checked her glasses, *“Phew! It didn’t break!”*

“Is that important right now?”

“Me too! Me too! Kim Hajin! We were on the same team that one time!”

It was Jin Hoseung this time.

I used aether to save all three of them. We were currently floating like a buoy on the surface of the water.

It was at that moment...

I sensed a sinister wave of mana quickly making its way towards us. It was aimed at the space between the surface of the water and the ceiling.

I immediately pulled the cadets down with me.

Kwuuuuuung!

A destructive sound resounded above the water. The force was so great that it evaporated more than half of the water in the sewer.

“Phew...”

I shook my drenched body and an unfamiliar sinister voice spoke from a distance.

— Did you really want to take your friends along with you that badly? You should’ve just gotten yourself swept along by the currents.

— Yes, you shouldn’t have dragged them in.

Yoo Yeonha readied her whip while Yi Jiyeon and Jin Hoseung jumped up in fright and clung behind me.

“This... things have taken a bad turn...” Yoo Yeonha said with obvious anxiety in her voice.

However, I simply replied with a smirk, “I already knew.”

I knew a long time ago that there would be assassins waiting for me.

“...You knew?” Yoo Yeonha muttered in disbelief.

That was why I already made full preparation for this day. Today was the day that my one-time use gift I paid 1,000 SP for would make its debut.

I only paid 1,000 SP for this cheat-like combat gift since I placed a hefty penalty of only being able to use it once in battle.

“Yeah,” I replied while taking my cadet coat off.

A dagger suddenly flew towards me without making a sound. It flew at the speed of light aiming for my neck, but I simply stopped it with a single finger. However, that wasn’t the end of it as dozens of daggers rained towards me.

“Kyah! What’s this?!”

Yi Jiyeon and Jin Hoseung were scared for their lives, but I was actually smiling right now.

“Just you wait,” I said with an excited smile.

I saw the assassin smiling as well from within the darkness.

My body was itching to do only one thing right now. To see how long that bastard would keep smiling.

Time to find out.

Side Stories 78

Chae Nayun (33)

[Final Radiance]

— A temporary enlightenment will occur during critical moments and last for seventy seconds.

— This gift will be consumed the moment it is used.

Final radiance would allow me to use all of my stigma. It was a one-time-use gift that only lasted a bit over a minute. I honestly didn't have any idea how to handle the surge of stigma that became available to me.

“Hap...!”

The mark of stigma became extremely prominent on my arm.

Stigma viciously swirled all over my body and heated it up. I could feel it enveloping my entire body, which started unleashing mana sparks.

This was a luxury I wouldn't be able to even imagine in my wildest dreams.

The assailants unleashed their mana and shook the ground, but I immediately responded by forming an earth barrier. Then, the earth barrier immediately disappeared after it blocked the burst of mana that the assailants shot. However, my barrier wasn't the only thing that disappeared because their mana disintegrated as well.

“...?”

They seemed flabbergasted by the unbelievable situation. Their

reaction gave me confidence that this unleashed stigma of mine definitely gave me powers much stronger than theirs.

I conjured a spear in one hand and immediately sprung to action as seventy seconds would be nowhere near enough. I had to make sure not to waste even a sliver of a second.

This spear, rather, the javelin I conjured would be far more destructive than any arrow or bullet I could fire. I could still apply my *[Master Sharpshooter]* gift to it when throwing.

Bzzzt...! Bzzzt...!

The javelin, which was much larger than an arrow, emitted a fearsome mana. I aimed at the assailants that were still flabbergasted.

They flinched and prepared to evade, but I already captured them in my sights.

My thousand-mile eyes were now amplified by the unsealed stigma. A single look was more than enough for me to activate my gift. I was confident that I was now in a realm where I could perfectly hit my targets without fail.

In short, I was now able to hit any moving targets that I laid eyes on.

I threw my spear at my targets.

...!

The blue spear zipped through the air without a sound. It flew silently because its speed surpassed the speed of sound, and it exploded upon reaching its intended targets.

However, it didn't damage the walls of the sewer. Stigma's mana possessed quite the mysterious ability to damage only its intended target and nothing else.

Stigma's ability to differentiate its target was truly amazing.

“Kuheuk...”

I ended up using thirty seconds of my time with that attack and fell to my knee gasping for air.

I could see the mana particles floating in the distance where I threw the mana javelin. The assailants hit by the mana javelin were sprawled on the ground.

They looked like a mess... just like how I was right now.

“Ah... I’m dying...” I muttered before falling on my butt.

I looked around my surroundings and saw three sets of eyes looking at me. Yoo Yeonha seemed to be the one most surprised by what just happened.

The three of them gathered around me not long afterwards.

“Wow! You’re quite the fighter, Hajin. But I guess that was a part of the test, right? They were probably trying to test our cooperation with each other or something, right? Right?” Yi Jiyeon asked and added with a grin, “We should be getting the highest mark, right? I supported you after all, right? Right?”

Did Yi Jiyeon buff me?

It was only after hearing her that I checked my body. I found a clear energy circulating in me. I guess you could expect this much from a cadet born with the innate talent to be a top-class supporter.

“Anyways...” I said before I looked at the male and female assailants.

I tried to see if there was anything on them that I could hack, but unfortunately, they weren’t wearing a smartwatch.

— Kim Hajin, Yi Jiyeon, Yoo Yeonha, and Jin Hoseung. You have passed the test. Proceed forward.

A voice suddenly spoke from somewhere in the ceiling.

I couldn't help but scoff at those words.

Were they planning to pass it off as part of the test? That would probably be it since there was no way Cube could resist any pressure exerted by the association. Cube had already been overrun by Kim Sukho's subordinates a long time ago.

"Are they dead?" Yoo Yeonha whispered.

I could tell that they were still breathing, but I couldn't go and kill them since that would be a violation of the test rules and I would be framed as a murderer.

"No, but too many eyes are watching. We can't kill them," I shook my head and replied.

My hands were tied, but it wasn't that I had no options. I had already prepared for such a scenario.

I approached the assailants and placed my hands on their foreheads. Then I used *[Medicinal Wisdom]* and hoped they wouldn't keep chasing after me.

I used up the ten seconds I had left and successfully planted a curse in them.

"Phew..." I let out a sigh and fell to the ground.

Yoo Yeonha and Jin Hoseung quickly approached me.

"Shall we go now?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

I bitterly smiled and shook my head, "No, you go ahead."

"Huh? Why? Let's go together."

"I think... I'm out."

I couldn't feel my body. It was a one-time-use skill, but my body still had to deal with the repercussions of using so much power.

"What do you mean you're out...?" Yoo Yeonha said before she flung my arm around her shoulders and pulled me up.

Jin Hoseung rushed to help her while Yi Jiyeon simply smiled.

"Look at this," she said in a tone that seemed to hint that what they were doing wasn't necessary.

She used her gift and conjured a pair of assistive devices that latched onto my legs. The assistive devices propped me up and completely took the weight off my body.

Surprisingly, I was able to effortlessly move my legs.

"Wow... this is quite... cool," I muttered while moving my legs.

"Right? This is a secret skill I'm trying to master. *Ah*, don't tell the others about it, okay? It's still incomplete, so I'm embarrassed to show it... Anyways, why don't you try walking?" Yi Jiyeon replied.

Yoo Yeonha and Jin Hoseung let go of me.

I felt weird standing effortlessly on my own, but I soon got used to it and started to walk.

* * *

After the first midterms exam concluded...

Chae Nayun sat in the Pharmacy Club's clubroom and looked out the window. The seriousness on her face seemed to show that she was thinking of something complicated.

She tried to act nonchalant about it, but a torrent of thoughts dizzily rushed into her head every night since she regressed.

'Is grandfather aware of what's going on? What about father? Or are they turning a blind eye to this?'

Chae Nayun was always proud of her family, but the head of her family, her grandfather, had one huge and important flaw. A flaw that didn't make him feel any sadness despite what happened to his grandson.

She didn't blame her grandfather because not being able to feel wasn't his fault, but the price he had to pay for using his abilities. It was the price he had to pay for obtaining such power.

Creak...

The clubroom's door suddenly opened and Kim Hajin came in.

"Ah, were you waiting for me?" he asked.

All of the complicated thoughts in Chae Nayun's head vanished as she brightly smiled and said, "Kim Hajin!"

She stretched out her arms and walked over to him. He didn't avoid her as she wrapped her arms around his waist and buried her face in his chest while he patted her head.

It felt as if she was being reenergized by him. She rubbed her face on his chest for a good five minutes before she, unfortunately, had to sit down.

"Now take a seat," Kim Hajin said. He looked around the numerous plants in the Pharmacy Clubroom's greenhouse, "It's time for us to slowly get started..."

Chae Nayun nervously gulped and asked, "By get started, you mean...?"

"To save your brother," he confidently replied.

A sense of fullness surged from the depths of her heart after hearing his confidence. She tried to cry and hug him again, but he stopped

her.

“Rather, what we’re going to do now is...” Kim Hajin said.

“Oh, right. What about the assassins? Are you alright? I heard what happened from Yeonha,” Chae Nayun suddenly interrupted and asked.

“*Huh?* Oh, yeah. I’m fine. I planted a curse on them, so they’ll piss themselves if they ever see me,” he nonchalantly replied.

The curse Kim Hajin planted in the assassins would trigger the moment they came in contact with him. It wasn’t a fatal curse, but it was more than enough to make them feel intense fear to the point of pissing themselves.

“*Phew...* That’s a relief...”

Bzzt... Clack...!

All of the lights in the clubroom were suddenly snuffed out. Even the lights outside the window went out.

Chae Nayun instantly shot up and stood in front of Kim Hajin. A single light bulb at the door dimly flickered.

“...”

Both of them were surrounded by five robed individuals, and there were no gaps in the encirclement.

It took only a second for Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun to figure out the identity of their enemies.

“Wow, there are quite a lot of good things here,” a robed woman exclaimed while looking around the greenhouse.

Kim Hajin nervously gulped. It was the Chameleon Troupe. He knew very well that they stood no chance of winning if they fought with just the two of them.

“We can take all of these, right Boss?” the woman asked.

However, Boss flat out ignored the woman’s words, who was most likely Jain. Instead, she stared at Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun.

“Give me the heart,” she said.

“...”

Kim Hajin shook his head in response.

The heart was the key to saving Chae Jinyoon.

“Are you refusing?”

He started to rack his brain as tension flared in the air. He had already used his trump card ability. No, he wouldn’t stand a chance against five of the Chameleon Troupe members even if he still had [*Final Radiance*].

Then did he have to give up the heart? But that meant that all hopes of saving Chae Jinyoon would disappear forever without the heart.

Kim Hajin racked his brains and even used Bullet Time to slow everything down. He used that time to go over the settings.

“Then... I’ll have no choice but to destroy your heart,” Boss said.

“Fuck off,” Chae Nayun growled with her sword in hand.

She infused mana into her sword and prepared to fight, but Kim Hajin suddenly grabbed her shoulder and gently pulled her back.

Chae Nayun was taken aback by his sudden actions.

He calmed Chae Nayun down before walking over and standing in front of the Boss.

“Yes, I stole this from you guys, so it’s only right for me to return it,”

Kim Hajin said.

“*Huh?* Stole? When? Are you saying that you stole that from us?” Cheok Jungyeong asked with his eyes wide open in disbelief. He looked at Boss and Kim Hajin before asking, “Is he telling the truth, Boss?”

“...”

Boss didn’t respond. She didn’t even spare a glance at Cheok Jungyeong, but it seemed like her pride was hurt by what Kim Hajin said.

“But we really need this heart,” Kim Hajin said.

He already found a solution to the problem. One that would satisfy the Chameleon Troupe while making sure the heart remained in his possession.

“Instead, we’ll pay you cash,” he added.

“...”

Boss remained silent.

Kim Hajin looked at Chae Nayun and asked, “Hey, Chae Nayun. How much do you have right now?”

“...*Huh?* *Ah,*” Chae Nayun looked lost for a second, but soon nodded after realizing his plan. She replied, “*Hmm...* I have ten billion won in my bank account. It’ll be around fifty billion won if I sell all my stocks and stuff... *Ah,* there was this thing that grandfather gifted me before. It was an artifact from the Shilla period, a golden incense burner.”

Boss flinched at her words.

Fortunately, it was a positive response. The golden incense burner was definitely tempting for her. The golden incense burner from the Shilla period was an artifact that every single wealthy individual in this world desired.

“How much do you think this heart is worth?” Kim Hajin asked while pointing at his chest.

There was no need for them to fight the Chameleon Troupe if negotiation was possible. They could barter for the heart.

“I mean, you guys should be aware of it too, right? You won’t find any treasure much more valuable than the golden incense burner even if you turn the Amazon upside down. I’ll give that to you.”

“...”

Boss maintained her silence.

However, Kim Hajin already read her, “Fifty billion won on top of the golden incense burner.”

Those words were enough to resolve the conflict in her.

It was quite funny that Kim Hajin was currently negotiating with Chae Nayun’s money and possessions, but it was a cheap price to pay in exchange for their lives.

“...”

Boss looked at Jain and Cheok Jungyeong.

Jain signaled ‘OK’ with her fingers.

‘Incense burner... Incense burner... Incense burner... ’

Jain’s head was already filled with the brightly glowing incense burner.

“How do we know that you’ll keep your promise?” Jain asked.

Kim Hajin nonchalantly replied, “You can just kill us if we don’t keep our promise, right?”

“...I guess you’re right,” Jain replied with a smirk. She turned to Boss and asked, “So what are you going to do, Boss?”

“...Picture. Show me a picture of the golden incense burner,” Boss said.

Kim Hajin looked at Chae Nayun. She nodded and projected an image from her smartwatch.

“You guys will recognize this when you see it. It’s an extremely valuable treasure...” she said.

Ziing!

A hologram was projected from her smartwatch. It was an image of a golden incense burner meticulously crafted in the Shilla Dynasty by master craftsmen. This treasure boasted a status that reached the pinnacle of craftsmanship. Its radiance of grandeur could be felt from the projected hologram.

“Yeah... I know that’s precious...” Jain muttered while dazed by the hologram.

“Also,” Kim Hajin suddenly said as he stepped forward and dispersed the hologram. He continued in a deep voice, “I want to make a request.”

“...A request?” Boss pursed her lips and muttered.

“Yeah,” Kim Hajin replied.

He showed no signs of being nervous and even looked at each of the Chameleon Troupe members with confident eyes.

“I want to give you the opportunity to take everything away from Kim Sukho,” he said.

Silence ensued. Not a single sound could be heard in the clubroom and none of the Chameleon Troupe members’ expressions shifted as they stared at the boy.

Then, a burst of mad laughter broke the silence. It was Cheok Jungyeong.

“Bwahahaha! Someone like you will do what to that old fox? Bwahahaha! What an interesting boy you are!”

On the other hand, Boss maintained her silence while seemingly deep in thought and Jain rubbed her chin beside her.

In the midst of this silence with only Cheok Jungyeong’s mad laughter...

Creak...

The clubroom door opened.

“I gave it some thought and...” Yoo Yeonha said as she entered the clubroom with a stack of files in her arms.

She flinched the moment she bumped into a huge robed man. Then she blinked a few times before looking around the room.

“Hmm... I guess we can talk later,” she said after sensing the hostility and tension in the air.

She closed the door shut and ran as fast as she could.

Cheok Jungyeong opened the door three seconds later and came back with Yoo Yeonha exactly two seconds after he left.

“Let me go! Let me go! *Argh! Kyaaaaah!*” Yoo Yeonha screamed after she was thrown by Cheok Jungyeong.

Chae Nayun caught Yoo Yeonha.

“Calm down,” Kim Hajin said.

“W-What’s going on?!” Yoo Yeonha screamed.

He patted her on the shoulder and calmed her down, “We were in the middle of negotiation... Hey, you should join in.”

“What?” Yoo Yeonha frowned.

Kim Hajin pondered for a second and concluded that this situation must’ve been quite a surprise for her, but...

“No... Hey, Yoo Yeonha. You should lead this negotiation.”

“...What?”

“You like being in charge, right?”

Kim Hajin passed the reins to her since she was the most adept at negotiating among the three of them.

“Hey, I need to know what’s going on to negotiate... I mean, he just threw me...” she muttered.

However, her words fell on deaf ears as Kim Hajin started the negotiations with the Chameleon Troupe.

Side Stories 79

Chae Nayun (34)

“I hope you’re not thinking money is the only thing that matters to us?” Jain took off her robe with a frown and asked before Yoo Yeonha could say anything.

However, I was pretty sure that wasn’t her true face.

“Does that mean you’re not accepting the request?” Chae Nayun asked.

Jain brightly smiled and replied, “Isn’t that obvious? I mean, we do accept the trade you proposed earlier though.”

“Then what’s your standard when taking requests?” Chae Nayun slurred a bit. She tried her best not to show it, but couldn’t help feeling nervous.

“It has to be exciting. We don’t accept requests that don’t seem fun. What’s the point of doing something that’s no fun? Taking everything away from Kim Sukho? That sounds good, but it’s not fun. Right, Boss?” Jain said and looked at Boss.

However, Boss was looking dead straight at me without a shift in her expression.

Jain flinched and suddenly said, “*Hmm... Hmm...* Hold on a minute.”

She wrapped her arms around Boss’ shoulders and turned around before whispering.

— Boss, don’t tell me you’re planning to accept their request? It’s not only impossible, but it’s not feasible either.

—... Something is bothering me.

— What? What's bothering you?

— I'm curious why he's trying to go against Kim Sukho.

— *Ah*, I wonder when did our boss start to get so curious about others?

Boss lightly pushed Jain away and asked me, "Kim Sukho will try to kill you just as you're trying to kill him. However, what grudge do you have against him? Why are you going against him?"

Boss looked at me with inquisitive eyes, but Jain immediately yanked her back before I even got the chance to respond.

"Anyways, anyways! Let's decide on the date of the trade. We won't be discussing anything further today," Jain said after throwing Boss to Cheok Jungyeong.

Boss tilted her head in confusion before looking at me again, but Jain already tore a scroll. The magic engraved in the scroll activated and twisted the space around them.

The clubroom suddenly turned silent again.

"What was that...? Hey, Nayun... What's going on?" Yoo Yeonha asked while looking back and forth between us. "Hello? Excuse me? Nayun? Hey... Will you say something...?"

Only Yoo Yeonha's voice could be heard in the silence.

* * *

The next day, I was in the clubroom watching TV with Chae Nayun. We weren't the only ones as the other members were in the clubroom too.

Rachel was playing with Evandel, Kim Suho was texting Yun Seung-

Ah, Yoo Yeonha was busy doing her own stuff, and even Seo Youngji and Shin Jonghak were there.

“Hey...” Chae Nayun whispered.

I glanced at her and was surprised by her face beaming with happiness. It was the first time I saw such an expression on her.

Was she glad that we could spend such a peaceful and normal day with everyone else?

“What are you going to do if oppa wakes up...?” she looked up at me and asked.

I found her round and clear inquisitive eyes quite funny for some reason.

I patted her forehead and replied, “It’s your brother. You’re the one who will have to think about that, not me.”

“...No, that’s not what I meant,” Chae Nayun grumbled and cutely pouted.

I initially thought that it didn’t suit her, but slowly started to find her cute.

I tickled her chin like I would to a puppy and said, “Who knows? I guess graduating is the first thing on my list.”

Chae Nayun looked away and didn’t reply. Then she started kicking the table leg while looking at the floor.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing...”

She sulked a bit longer before asking in a trembling voice, “You won’t suddenly disappear...?”

“...”

I couldn't easily respond to her question. The reason was that this world wasn't my real world. This was not where I was from.

It would've been an easy question to answer if I had no choice but to go back or stay, but I had no idea what my options were at the moment.

I was nothing but a failed author in my world. However, I had my family, friends, and everything else that made me who I was in that world.

I could live happily ever after in this world as long as I gave up everything in that world. I could start a family with someone I wouldn't even dare look at back in the real world. I could even become an influential figure in this world with my abilities.

I... If only I could fully abandon my real world and accept this world as my own...

“...”

Chae Nayun held my hands. She was looking at me with her lovely smile while I was silently pondering over things.

“But... it doesn't matter,” she said while snickering and poking my waist.

I could tell that she was eagerly waiting for my answer behind that smile.

“Because I already told you before, right? I'm going to make it impossible for you to live without me,” she confidently said while staring straight into my eyes.

I could only smile in response as she already achieved a bit more than half of her objective.

However, Chae Nayun muttered in a painful voice this time, “But... I

think I already lost...”

I didn’t ask why.

She buried her face in my shoulder and whispered, “I think... I’m the one who can’t live without you...”

Her hands were warm. I glanced around our surroundings before scratching the back of her ears. She seemed to like it as she closed her eyes and flashed a warm smile.

* * *

The midterm exams were finally finished. I was back at the dorm after a long time. My dorm room for this semester was slightly better than the last one as I ranked 451th for this semester.

I decided to look around my room before the pre-semester dorm cleaning started.

An overwhelming presence was waiting for me at my dorm room window. I was suffocated by her aura alone.

However, I tried to act as nonchalant as possible and asked, “Have you read the diary...?”

Jin Sahyuk simply looked at me without saying anything. Her sharp gaze felt like they were stabbing me in my chest, but she soon let out a sigh and nodded.

“...I read it hundreds of times, but I still can’t believe it,” she said before looking at the night sky out the window.

The moon was letting out a gentle luster.

“But I don’t think it’s impossible since I myself went through something impossible and came to this world,” she added.

She leaned on the window sill and started to fidget with her nails

before continuing in a low voice, “I was foolish back then. I was drunk on my title as the king that... I lost a lot of things that were precious to me...”

Jin Sahyuk looked visibly tired under the moonlight. She was displaying weakness that went against how I designed her to be.

I felt quite nervous that she would stray from her settings because of this event.

“However, that’s not something I can change... I can’t return to those times, and I can’t go back to that place... In the end, it’s all over... I’ve been drifting aimlessly in this world for far too long,” she said with a bitter smile.

She was in a dangerous state. Her hopeless voice, void of even a hint of enthusiasm, made it clear to me that she lost all reason to live. She could even jump out of the window and end her own life.

“...You can just make a new one,” I said in hopes of deterring her from spiraling into depression.

Her gaze landed on me again.

“I heard that Kim Sukho has a few neutral city-states under his command. You can forcibly take one of them from him and rule over it. You can start anew and build your own kingdom,” I added.

The Jin Sahyuk I knew definitely had the capacity to do that, but she simply shook her head.

“I ruled over that world because it was my world. No, that world probably met its demise because I ruled over it... The continent plunged into chaos after my kingdom fell, and every citizen died because of my incompetence. What’s the point of creating another kingdom when I’m clearly incompetent to rule? I don’t have the plan or will to do something like that. *Ah*, but don’t worry. I will heed your request,” Jin Sahyuk said before she tapped her smartwatch and projected a hologram.

It was Kim Chundong’s diary that I gave her. She glossed over the

diary she read hundreds of times with eyes filled with sadness.

“...No,” I disagreed and activated stigma.

“That world most certainly fell. No, it’s most likely in ruins now, but humans don’t die that easily. Humans are tenacious creatures who will always find a way to survive no matter what. You will be able to call those survivors into this world.”

“...?”

The hologram of the diary disappeared and Jin Sahyuk stared at me with eyes filled with curiosity.

However, it didn’t take long for her eyes to shift into hopelessness again as she snickered, “*Hehehe*... Someone like you will save the survivors of a world you don’t even know? Someone like you will do something that even I can’t?” she questioned.

“I’m thinking that it’s possible because it’s me,” I confidently replied while pointing at my heart. I added, “Did you forget? I’m connected with Kim Chundong.”

Jin Sahyuk’s eyes shot open and it seemed that she saw a sliver of possibility in my words.

“I’m confident it’s possible,” I continued.

I was actually quite confident that I could pull it off. Stigma was a power that could make anything possible. Although the amount I possessed was just a drop in a bucket, it wasn’t impossible if I placed a restriction such as only using an ability once in my lifetime.

“So help me first,” I added.

Jin Sahyuk continued to lean on the window sill and looked at me. She seemed disgruntled by what I said, but I knew for a fact that she was smiling underneath her expression.

“You’re overstepping your boundaries. I’m going now,” Jin Sahyuk

said as she sat at the window.

However, I could clearly see that her expression and body language was a stark contrast to her hopeless self a while ago.

“See you tomorrow,” I said with a smile.

She didn’t bother responding as she jumped out the window. The way she descended wasn’t that of someone who gave up on life. She disappeared into the darkness without making a sound.

I strangely felt that she was no longer the final boss of this story.

* * *

The day finally came.

All of us took one ingredient from the clubroom’s greenhouse and headed to Seoul through the Cube portal. A limousine was already waiting for us at the portal station. We hopped in without saying a word to each other.

“We will depart now,” the driver said.

Chae Nayun simply nodded in response.

All of us looked out the window and saw another vehicle right beside ours.

It was the bodyguards, Tomer and Loelle, that Yoo Yeonha hired under Essence of the Straits.

“Phew...”

I felt nervous while looking at the passing scenery of the Han River. I wondered if it would be possible to wake Chae Jinyoon with the help of these various medicinal herbs, this heart, and Jin Sahyuk’s help.

I had been quite confident in my theory, but still felt nervous now that

D-Day arrived. My mind started to race as various anxious thoughts rapidly occupied it.

“...”

Still, I knew that Chae Nayun was the one who was the most anxious among us. I held her hand tightly since it was now my turn to comfort her.

Her eyes shot open in surprise as she looked at me, but I simply smiled in response.

To my surprise, she smiled back.

I was blinded... No, I didn't mean figuratively, but actually blinded.

I frowned and looked back. A bright ray of light headed towards our limousine.

However, this was also within our calculations as we already expected Kim Sukho to try and ambush us... We didn't expect him to do it so blatantly in the middle of the Han River Bridge though...

Kaboom!

A powerful explosion battered the limousine. The limousine withstood the explosion since it was made out of mana alloys, but it wasn't able to withstand the force and flipped upside down.

We were thrown around before floating in a zero-gravity state for a split second. Then we slammed onto the ground.

“Argh... Is everyone alright?!” Kim Suho was the first to check on everyone.

I was able to come out unscathed thanks to aether. It seemed like everyone else reacted in time and protected themselves with mana.

“Yeah, I'm alright! What about you, Yeonha?!” Chae Nayun shouted.

“Me too...” Yoo Yeonha replied.

“Which bastard dares to...” Shin Jonghak growled before kicking the limousine door open.

Bam!

The mana alloy was crushed by a single kick and the door flung open.

We released our seatbelts and came out of the vehicle.

“Are you alright, Hajin?” Chae Nayun asked while checking every inch of my body.

I nodded and said, “Yeah, but rather than that...”

I looked around our surroundings and laughed in disbelief.

“This is quite the sight...”

The scenery around us was indeed a sight.

The bridge was cut front and back, blocking not only us, but anyone else from leaving. We were basically stranded on top of the Han River. Not only that, our surroundings were flooded with the sounds of civilians panicking and the horns of their cars.

“...This is probably Kim Sukho’s doing,” Kim Suho said in a low voice.

I could sense in his voice that anger was welling up inside of him. He would erupt at any moment.

Kim Sukho was in deep shit now that he enraged Kim Suho to this point.

“Take up your arms, everyone,” Yoo Yeonha calmly instructed.

Chae Nayun took out her *[Sword of Highlander]*, Shin Jonghak smiled and took out his green *[Dragon Crescent Blade]*, and I morphed my

Desert Eagle into a machine gun.

“They’re coming,” Yoo Yeonha warned.

Flocks of flying monsters headed toward us and a powerful surge of mana came from underneath the water.

“Are you ready?” I asked Chae Nayun.

She looked back at me and nodded with a smile. Her relaxed smile alone was more than enough to assure me.

There was no need to worry.

Side Stories 80

Chae Nayun (35)

Kim Sukho looked down at the Han River Bridge from a skyscraper in Yeouido.

There was nothing strange about the scenery. The sky was clear, cars and buses went about their way, and sunlight reflected on the water's surface.

Everything was peaceful and serene just like any other day.

"Hoho..." Kim Sukho laughed while biting on a cigar.

Even he couldn't see within the mirror barrier set up over the bridge. Of course, he didn't have to see what was going on inside as those brats would never survive against that person.

"I gave you numerous chances," Kim Sukho said in a low voice.

Those brats were truly foolish.

He wasn't sure if it was because they were young, possessed a strong sense of justice, or just out for revenge. However, their actions could no longer be considered innocent as they reached the verge of utter foolishness.

"I didn't want to go this far..."

Kim Sukho already knew what Kim Hajin was planning. The boy was trying to dig up dirt from his past and use it to threaten him. Of course, thinking it was possible in the first place was a huge miscalculation on the boy's part.

"You only have your own foolishness to blame."

Kim Sukho planned to keep his sturdy stronghold forever. He was going to pressure Essence of the Straight, dismantle Daehyun, and reform the association. He would get rid of his only obstacle, Chae Joochul, and take possession of not only the association, but the entirety of South Korea.

Not to mention, anything dirty or illegal that occurred along the way would be solely blamed on the djinns. Fabricating all sorts of lies would be extremely easy as long as he controlled the association.

“Hoo...”

He belched out a cloud of smoke and smiled. He couldn't stop himself from smiling and it didn't take long for him to start snickering.

“Ke... Kehehe...!”

He let out a sinister laugh and ended up even shedding a tear as he looked out the window again. The shining waters of the Han River, the skyscrapers, and the Hero Association's building were all underneath his feet. South Korea was under his feet.

“All of these...” he muttered.

‘Are mine. My kingdom and my world. No one else in this world will be able to say that these aren't mine. Nobody... ’

* * *

“Hey!”

Tomer, Loelle, and the rest of the protection unit drove over to us. Kim Suho had Misteltein raised as he stood alert while I observed the civilians trembling on the bridge.

“Hey, are you alright? What the hell is going on...” Tomer said, but her voice slowly drifted away from my ears.

A child was crying beside a bleeding man whom I presumed to be the father. An old woman was hugging her grandson and crying out for

help. A man was trying his best to pull out his wife from the wreckage of what was once their car. A man with a severed leg cried out in agony while holding his knee...

“Ah...”

I was thrown into confusion at the sudden turn of events. There were hundreds of civilians trembling and crying in fear right now. All of them would die if the bridge collapsed or monsters appeared.

...All of them.

My body reacted before my head did. I immediately transformed my Desert Eagle into a machine gun and pulled the trigger at the countless flying monsters diving down.

I activated my thousand-mile eyes at the same time to count the number of civilians in my vicinity. There were four hundred fifty-eight of them.

I wanted to save them all. This strange feeling started to well up from the depths of my heart.

...Although I was nothing more than the novel's extra.

I separated aether from the Desert Eagle and formed multiple strands with it to gather all of the civilians into one place. Hundreds of civilians screamed in horror as aether yanked them together.

I formed aether into the shape of a dome after confirming that everyone was gathered in one place. An igloo with no entrance stood tall at the center of the bridge.

Kim Suho and the rest of the heroes instantly jumped into action and surrounded the igloo as if they had already agreed beforehand.

“They’re coming!” Kim Suho shouted.

Then, a man wearing a crumpled mask suddenly jumped out of the water.

I knew who he was from his story settings. He was one of the Nine Evils, Destruction.

“...Greetings,” Destruction said with a snicker.

The way he smiled and snickered was quite repulsive for some reason.

“That’s Destruction. A named djinn,” I said.

Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak immediately reacted by cutting down the monster they were fighting and stood in front of Destruction.

“*Hohoho!* You brats are quite cute...” Destruction nonchalantly said.

However, Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak immediately rushed at him before he managed to finish speaking.

Kim Suho zipped through the air and swung Misteltein with all his weight and mana at the named djinn’s legs. On the other hand, Shin Jonghak rushed forward and swung his Green Dragon Crescent Blade at the named djinn’s upper body. The mana in his spear cut through the air and let out a ripping sound.

That signaled the start of the battle.

The Green Dragon Crescent Blade and Misteltein complemented each other as they faced Destruction. The Green Dragon Crescent Blade made up for Misteltein’s lack of range while Misteltein made up for the Green Dragon Crescent Blade’s weight with its speed.

The two of them had dueled countless times, which in turn, ironically made them aware of how to support each other in combat.

Destruction initially had a smug smirk as he fought against them, but his smirk was soon replaced with a grimace.

“These brats dares to...!”

He was currently getting pushed back by two Cube freshmen. That

was more than enough to make him feel ashamed.

Meanwhile, I shot down all of the flying monsters diving towards us while Chae Nayun and Rachel took care of the squid-looking monsters jumping out from the river.

The tides of battle on the bridge completely shifted in our favor.

“Hey! Activate it!” Destruction suddenly shouted.

A light glowed brightly from underneath the river before a massive amount of evil mana spread throughout the surroundings.

I was certain of that despicable evil mana’s objective. It was none other than to wreak havoc. They were planning to cause an explosion that would swallow not only this bridge, but a portion of the surrounding areas as well.

I was flabbergasted for a moment and fell deep in thought.

“...Kim Hajin!”

A single voice pierced through my confusion and I knew at that moment that the owner of that voice was the key to all of this.

Chae Nayun was walking towards me. She was the key.

I hugged her tightly. She flinched in surprise at my sudden action, but I ignored it and poured all of my remaining stigma into her.

Chae Nayun was stunned at the sudden surge of mana in her body.

“You can do it, right?” I asked.

She immediately understood what I meant and nodded.

What we needed to fight against that evil mana was an equivalent amount of mana or even more mana.

“...Sure,” she said.

Only Chae Nayun was capable of unleashing such huge amounts of mana. Her mana capacity was as vast as the ocean. After all, her gift in the first place was called the Sea of Magic Power.

“Phew...”

She calmed her breathing and gripped her sword. Her mana instantly amplified the moment she tightly gripped it and my stigma amplified her mana as well.

The third main catalyst to amplify her mana was none other than the ancient artifact, Eye of the Sun.

Chae Nayun’s mana was now amplified to an extent that was impossible to measure. Her sword emitted a powerful surge of mana that covered the entire bridge.

Baaaaaaaam!

At that moment, her mana covered the entire bridge as a powerful storm of evil mana shot out from underneath the river.

Chae Nayun swung her sword with all her might and faced the powerful storm of evil mana head-on.

Boooooooooom!

Chae Nayun’s mana and the evil mana slammed against each other. The powerful stream of red and blue energies pushed each other with neither giving more than an inch.

Meanwhile, that was the last thing I saw before I fell unconscious.

* * *

“Then... there’s a chance that the child you saved was Kim Hajin?”

Meanwhile, Jain was scratching her head at the Chameleon Troupe's hideout. Her forehead creased as if she was annoyed or upset.

"I'm not saying there's a chance. I'm telling you that he is, so let me go will you? Please let me go..."

A man bound by ropes squirmed on the ground like a caterpillar. The man was none other than Yoo Yeonha's uncle, Yoo Jinhyuk. He divulged everything he knew about Kim Hajin as soon as the Chameleon Troupe abducted him.

"Haaa..."

Jain let out a sigh before looking at Boss. On the other hand, Boss looked like she was deep in thought.

"So, what are you going to do about it, Boss?" Jain asked.

"..."

Boss didn't respond. Instead, she looked up at the empty ceiling as she reminisced about what happened in the past.

"...Beats me," she finally muttered.

Sympathy was a foreign feeling to her now, but that incident took place when she still had some of it left. She was young at that time, but vividly remembered what happened that day. No, it was more like that specific incident was a very memorable one that shaped who she was today.

"A debt must be repaid," she reiterated the iron rule of the Chameleon Troupe.

Jain pursed her lips before replying, "Sure, do as you like. However, we can't be out in the open. You know that, right? We should never ever be exposed."

Boss' debt was the Chameleon Troupe's debt in the end. That was the reason the Chameleon Troupe was forced to agree to her decision.

I opened my eyes and saw Chae Nayun holding me. Her smile made me come back to my senses.

“Are you awake?” she asked.

I couldn’t move my lips and my ears were ringing. I didn’t respond and silently looked around my surroundings instead.

I was in a place that I had visited a few times, the VIP outhouse’s garden in the hospital where Chae Jinyoon was currently admitted.

“...Yeah,” I muttered.

I caught sight of Jin Sahyuk. She was sitting at the entrance of the VIP outhouse like some kind of hooligan while looking straight at me.

I could feel mana all around me. It seemed like she was protecting this entire hospital.

“What happened...?” I asked.

“Seoul is a mess right now, but there were no civilian casualties thanks to you. Your ability is still protecting them as we speak,” Chae Nayun replied.

“That’s a relief...”

“Right? Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, and the others are wrapping up the situation. I used that opportunity to escape with you. The Chameleon Troupe helped us. That lady, Jain or whatever her name was, is probably disguised as me right now,” Chae Nayun explained with a smile.

I nodded in response and stood up with Chae Nayun’s assistance.

I looked at her and smiled, “Then... shall we go?”

“...Yeah.”

“Hey, Jin Sahyuk,” I called out.

She didn’t respond or anything, but followed right behind us without uttering a single word.

We passed the empty corridor and reached the VIP ward. My heart raced after reading the nameplate on the door, [*Chae Jinyoon*].

I composed myself and opened the door.

Chae Jinyoon was still lying motionless on the bed.

“What about the ingredients?” I asked.

“It’s all here,” Chae Nayun replied.

“It didn’t get contaminated by the teleportation magic or scroll, right?”

“Of course, I had to run all the way here, you know? Do you think I’m stupid or what?”

These ingredients had dense concentrations of pure, raw, and unrefined mana. This made teleportation magic and scrolls fatal to them. The mana within them could be distorted the moment they were exposed to teleportation mana, which could end up altering their entire composition.

“Here,” Chae Nayun took out the Hope Plant and Soul Mana Vermilion.

“Hooo...”

I composed myself again and took out the [*Heart of Adaptation*] from my chest. Then I offered the Hope Plant and Soul Mana Vermilion to the heart.

I looked at Jin Sahyuk and said, “Put Chae Jinyoon’s soul into this heart.”

“...Soul?” Chae Nayun muttered as her eyes shot wide open.

“Yeah, Chae Jinyoon’s soul is probably trapped right now. We’re going to extract his soul, place it into this heart, and put this heart in his body. That should wake him up.”

It was highly likely that Chae Jinyoon’s soul was trapped inside his own heart. The only person I could think of who was capable of extracting his soul was none other than Jin Sahyuk.

“Can you do it?” I asked.

Jin Sahyuk looked a bit unconfident, but soon nodded in response.

I checked how much stigma I had left to support Jin Sahyuk, but I had exhausted most of it at the bridge and it was just starting to replenish.

“Hold on. Let’s wait for an hour or two before beginning...” I said.

I immediately added a new gift, *[Breathing Technique]*. It cost me 1,000 SP to add this gift with the effect of, *‘Will increase recovery of stamina and stigma when breathing.’*

It took three hours for me to finally recover all of my stigma.

Jin Sahyuk glared at me with a frown, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah, let’s start,” I replied.

“...Then, I’m going to start,” she channeled her mana.

Her mana seeped into Chae Jinyoon’s body. The mana started to heat his body and something like steam rose from him soon afterwards.

I immediately used stigma to assist Jin Sahyuk, and the steam grew more visible.

“*Keuk...*” Jin Sahyuk groaned as her mana condensed and spread throughout her body like a powerful surge of electricity.

Extracting a soul was something only she could do thanks to the gift [*Incarnation*], which only she possessed in this entire world.

At that moment, her mana reached its peak and she shouted...

“NOW!”

I immediately stored Chae Jinyoon’s soul in the heart.

Badump!

The heart jumped.

“Is it done...?” Jin Sahyuk asked.

She was drenched in sweat and fell on her butt after her legs gave out.

“All that’s left is to...” I muttered and swallowed the words, ‘*put this in him.*’

I nervously gulped and brought the heart closer to Chae Jinyoon’s chest. I had to squeeze every bit of my willpower to stop my hands from trembling.

The heart seeped into Chae Jinyoon’s chest.

“*Hap...*”

I suddenly heard someone lose their breath. I looked to my side and saw Chae Nayun holding her breath while looking over her brother.

No one said a word after that. A complete silence descended on the entire room. It felt as if the entire room was transported into a silent realm only filled with expectation and anxiety.

“*Hoo...*” Chae Jinyoon exhaled.

It wasn't a silent exhalation, but rather, the breath of someone teeming with life.

A tear dropped from Chae Nayun's eye.

"Nayun..." I wrapped my arms around her.

Chae Nayun looked at me with tears flowing out of her eyes.

"It's time to call your grandfather," I said.

We still had work to do because Chae Jinyoon was in danger. He was still the Achilles' heel of the entire association and Kim Sukho.

The only person in this world capable of protecting Chae Jinyoon until he testified was none other than Chae Joochul.

"Yeah..." Chae Nayun nodded and wiped her tears.

Side Stories 81

Chae Nayun (36)

“...How are we supposed to open this?” Yoo Yeonha grumbled while knocking on the igloo formed from aether at the center of the Han River Bridge.

“Hello? Can you open it from the inside? Hellooo?”

There was no response no matter how much she called out.

The barrier was gone and all of the monsters had been taken care of, but this thing alone hadn't disappeared.

“Do we have to destroy it?”

Tomer and Loelle approached. The pair that was specially recruited by Essence of the Straits played a vital role today.

Yoo Yeonha immediately straightened her back and put on an air of authority befitting that of the guild heir, “Well done, you two. I've realized your worth today.”

“...Huh? Ah, well... sure...”

“Yeah... thanks...”

At that moment, Yoo Yeonha was about to deliver a speech when the aether igloo finally opened.

“Kyaaaak! Uwaaaah!”

The civilians inside the aether igloo screamed and trembled in fright, but all of them soon let out a sigh of relief after seeing the numerous heroes waiting for them outside.

“Ah... So it was as you expected?” Yoo Yeonha said after spotting Kim Hajin walking towards them from a short distance.

He smiled at her and asked, “How are things over here?”

Then, he slipped a piece of paper into her hand.

Yoo Yeonha discreetly glanced at the paper.

[Chae Jinyoon is awake.]

“The situation is under control and there are no casualties,” she replied.

Yoo Yeonha conjured her mana to burn the piece of paper after reading the good news.

Reporters started to flood onto the bridge.

Jain, who was disguised as Chae Nayun, approached the two and asked, “Ah, I’m so tired. Hey, is everyone alright?”

Kim Hajin smirked and replied, “Yeah, we’re fine.”

Flash! Flash! Flash! Flash! Flash!

A continuous burst of camera flashes began.

Yoo Yeonha whispered to Kim Hajin, “Things turned out quite well...”

Kim Hajin nodded in response.

He previously divulged his *[Hacking]* ability and sought advice from Yoo Yeonha. She contemplated for a while before coming up with the idea to purposely leak that they were snooping around and digging dirt on Kim Sukho.

Kim Sukho would either tremble in fright or anger after finding out that fact. He would rush to silence them.

Things went exactly as Yoo Yeonha planned. Kim Sukho immediately caused a ruckus as soon as he heard that the Pharmacy Club was trying to cure Chae Jinyoon.

Of course, she didn't expect him to get Destruction involved at one of the busiest bridges in the country, but he most certainly overlooked the fact that Kim Suho and Shin Jonghak became much stronger in a short period.

"I'll send you the rest of the files," Kim Hajin whispered back.

There was still work to be done. Their final objective was Kim Sukho's complete destruction and the full cleansing of the association.

"Alright..." Yoo Yeonha replied while hiding her thoughts.

Truth be told, she wasn't only aiming to eliminate Kim Sukho, but also to benefit her own family. She devised a grand ambition of absorbing everything Kim Sukho amassed into the coffers of Essence of the Straits.

"I'll be waiting for those files," she added.

However, she saw no benefit in divulging this part of her plan to Kim Hajin.

* * *

"Is this the right place?" a low voice asked Chae Nayun.

Chae Nayun looked around her surroundings before nodding in response.

They were currently behind the hanok^[1] in Mount Baekdu where Chae Joochul resided.

"Yeah, it's correct. By the way, what was your name...?" Chae Nayun asked.

“You can call me Blue.”

The Chameleon Troupe helped her teleport here. The member who helped her was none other than the one capable of opening a portal to anywhere as long as he possessed enough mana. He was known as Blue or also by his real name, Khalifa.

“Yeah, thanks Blue.”

“...”

The man didn't say anything as he disappeared into his portal.

Chae Nayun glanced at Chae Jinyoon. He was soundly asleep on her back.

They crossed a bridge and walked between rows of trees before finally reaching the hut's doorsteps.

Gulp...!

Chae Nayun nervously gulped as she walked inside the hut until she reached the doors of the master bedroom.

She could see Chae Joochul through the small opening in the door. He was sitting on the floor and silently observing the picturesque tranquility offered by the mountain.

“Grandfather...” Chae Nayun called out in a trembling voice.

Chae Joochul turned his head while holding a smoking pipe. He spotted Chae Nayun behind the door and walked over to open it wide.

“Oh, it's Nayun and even Jinyoon is here,” he said with a smile.

Chae Joochul was not surprised by Chae Nayun and Chae Jinyoon's sudden visit. That was the limit of his emotions.

Chae Nayun visiting with Chae Jinyoon was unimaginable, but Chae

Joochul's emotion was not capable of being surprised by such an unimaginable turn of events.

He had no idea if he was supposed to be angry, surprised, or sad.

"Yes..." Chae Nayun bitterly smiled and replied.

"But why did you bring Jinyoon here?" Chae Joochul asked while looking perplexed.

Chae Nayun first went inside the room and laid down her brother. Then she replied, "Oppa will soon wake up."

"Wake up...?" Chae Joochul muttered while stroking his beard.

Chae Nayun slightly blushed before she replied, "Yes, it is a gift the person I love gave me..."

She looked down at Chae Jinyoon, who was currently breathing much livelier than before. Then she put on a serious face and gritted her teeth.

"So... I have a favor, Grandpa," Chae Nayun said.

Chae Joochul identified the resolute look on her face and asked, "Oh, what is it?"

He was still smiling, but Chae Nayun knew that her grandfather's smile did not look favorably on her. However, she couldn't back out now.

"Go on. Say it," Chae Joochul urged her.

Chae Nayun knew that such a thing as love for his granddaughter didn't exist in her grandfather, but she knew that there was a strict scale inside of him that weighed things.

If she could only tilt that scale in her favor, then...

“Please help us,” she pleaded.

“As I said, what is it you need?” Chae Joochul replied.

* * *

Two weeks had passed since then.

None of us expected the operation to convince Chae Joochul would end soon, but I used that time to go over and polish our plans with Yoo Yeonha.

The entire plan was made under the premise that Chae Nayun managed to convince her grandfather, Chae Joochul.

— I miss you. I miss you so much. I miss you so much I cry every night.

On a side note, Chae Nayun was currently stuck in Mount Baekdu. Well, it was more like she would be there until Chae Jinyoon recovered and she managed to convince Chae Joochul rather than being stuck.

Allowing her to stay was the current extent of Chae Joochul’s permission.

“Me too...” I replied.

Talking over a call was probably better than messaging as this was the best way to convey our full emotions to each other.

Then, she replied.

— Really? You too? I’m not the only one?

“Of course.”

— Hey, hold on a minute... Are you sure you’re not cheating on me?

“Have you gone insane?”

— That’s good... *Ah*, I’ll go spar with Grandpa. That’s my daily activity these days.

“Yeah, make sure you win.”

— Yeah, I’ll never win.

Our call ended and I was busy stuffing my earphones into my pocket when Chae Nayun suddenly sat beside me.

“Hey, what are you doing?” she asked.

I knew it was Jain. Wait, it wasn’t Jain as I took a closer look.

“...Is it Boss?” I muttered.

Chae Nayun replied with a frown, “You’re really good at seeing through Jain’s disguise.”

“I have excellent eyes,” I shrugged in response.

“Is that so?”

We quietly sat as the award ceremony commenced. We were being awarded a certificate for our efforts at the bridge two weeks ago.

“...I heard that you already knew about the Kwang-Oh Incident,” Boss suddenly said.

I flinched and looked around my surroundings.

Boss whispered to me for reassurance, “It’s alright. Nobody can hear us.”

“...”

I nodded and said, "You're quite stubborn. Yeah, I already knew about it. Nayun told me."

Boss remained silent as if she was contemplating something while looking up in the air. She finally asked, "...Then, don't you want to find out?"

"Find out what?"

"Who was behind that incident?"

"..."

I looked at her.

I had an idea why she was asking all these questions, but I no longer wanted to pry any further into Kim Chundong's past.

I wasn't Kim Chundong, but Kim Hajin.

"I already knew Kim Sukho was behind it, so what's the point? Well, I'm sure someone else pulled the trigger. However, I'm satisfied knowing who the mastermind was. Besides, the mastermind is worse than the hitman, right?"

"..."

Boss fell silent again. It seemed like she had something she wanted to say, but she didn't say anything as her lips continued squirming.

"Hey, what are you two doing?" Yi Yeonghan suddenly interrupted and leered at us with sleazy eyes.

I was about to shrug off his question when I suddenly felt mischievous.

"What else?" I said as I pinched Boss' cheek.

Boss froze on the spot. Even her heart stopped beating for a second.

Her eyes shot wide open in surprise, but I gave no heed as I continued pinching her cheeks left and right.

“I’m bothering her,” I said.

“Oh, you guys look so sweet together,” Yi Yeonghan replied with a grin.

I had no idea what looked sweet to him.

“Shtap...”

I think I heard Boss saying something, but I ignored her and continued harassing her.

“I told you to shtap...”

I immediately took my hands off after sensing a hint of bloodlust in her voice.

Luckily for me, a voice blasted through the speakers and interrupted her train of thought.

— We are now going to commence the award ceremony for the eight cadets!

The award ceremony commenced and the protagonist of this ceremony was none other than us, the ones who saved the civilians in the Han River Bridge Destruction Incident.

— I will now call the names of the brave cadets who protected the civilians from the djinns.

The events of that day made me realize something about this world. This world wasn’t a novel, but rather another reality with countless precious souls living in it.

— Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Chae Nayun, Yoo Yeonha, Kim Hajin, Yi Yeonghan...

That was also why I learned the joy of saving another person. Being able to save those people was probably the biggest joy I could attain in this world.

— The certificates of commendation will be awarded by the previous president of the Republic of Korea and the current chairman of the non-profit organization, UNGO, Chairman Kim Sukho.

Those words made all of us grimace.

An old man wearing a suit came up to the podium. It was Kim Sukho.

All of us stared at him dumbfounded for a moment, but he leisurely smiled at us.

“*Haha...*” I let out a laugh while looking at Kim Sukho.

Kim Sukho frowned for a split second after locking eyes with me.

— Now, please come up one by one as you are called...

I was curious. *‘I wonder how long you can keep that smug smile on your face?’*

* * *

Time passed and our first year at Cube came to an end. Our winter vacation had started.

Chae Nayun was still at Mount Baekdu with Chae Jinyoon.

“*Haa... Haa...*”

That was the reason we were currently on our way up the mountain since we hadn’t seen her for a long time.

“*Ugh... Ugh... Uwha...*”

I was busy scaling the side of the mountain when I suddenly heard

someone struggling. I looked back and saw Yoo Yeonha hanging by the rope.

“...What are you doing?”

“W-What else? Hurry up and pull me up!”

“...”

I extended aether and pulled her up.

“Phew... Haa... Hoo...”

“Just hurry up and keep climbing.”

“I’m weak against the cold. I think there’s something wrong with this heat vest...” Yoo Yeonha grumbled before she started climbing again.

We finally reached the top of the cliff and landed on flat ground, but a fierce blizzard hindered our vision.

We marched on without the luxury to catch our breaths.

“When will we reach it?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“I have no idea,” I replied.

She closely followed behind while I followed Kim Suho, who was behind Yi Yeonghan and Shin Jonghak.

We walked in a single file line as the blizzard completely hindered our vision.

“Anyways, we’ll be able to obtain a concrete testimony and witness if Nayun managed to convince Sir Chae Joochul,” Yoo Yeonha said while walking. She added, “One cannot rule this world alone. That’s why Kim Sukho has a lot of underlings. However, those underlings will instantly turn on him at the first sight of danger. After all, tentacles with their own will are bound to struggle to save their own

skin if they sensed that the head would get cut off.”

“Yeah...” I muttered.

Shin Jonghak, who was at the front, suddenly stopped. All of us stopped one by one after that and looked into the distance.

Our view was still hindered by the raging blizzard, but there was no way we couldn't spot that hut brightly glowing in this storm.

“That's the place...” Shin Jonghak muttered.

All of us gulped nervously as we felt Chae Nayun's mana from the hut with a vast garden that resembled some kind of a dojo.

“Should we sneak in or should we go through the front?” Yoo Yeonha asked in a mischievous tone.

“What if only Hajin sneaks in?” Kim Suho said with a snicker. He added, “I'm curious... I wonder how Chae Nayun's going to react? I mean, it's been four months since you last saw each other, right? Do you think she'll cry?”

“Ha... Retards...” Shin Jonghak grumbled under his breath.

That guy... He was obviously dating Seo Youngji now, but does he still have some lingering feelings towards Chae Nayun?

Kim Suho pouted and sulked after getting cursed at by Shin Jonghak. Then he retorted, “What? Do you still like Chae Nayun?”

“...Shut up. I'm going first,” Shin Jonghak said before he walked towards the hut and left behind the rest of us.

“We're going to go too. You come later, okay Hajin?” Kim Suho said.

“Hmm... I guess it's something like a surprise gift, right?” Yi Yeonghan added.

Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, and Yoo Yeonha chased after Shin Jonghak.

“...They’re doing whatever they like,” I grumbled.

I couldn’t help but feel that I wanted to see her for even a split second faster, but I was forced to stay behind and watch them grow farther away.

I tried to imagine what Chae Nayun would look like after we met. The sheer thought of seeing her made me smile against my will.

1. Traditional Korean house/hut. 📌

Side Stories 82

Chae Nayun (37)

Chae Nayun was meditating on top of a boulder like always when she came to Mount Baekdu.

“Hoo... Hoo... Hoo...”

She inhaled and exhaled while feeling the energy from the pristine air around her.

Time passed for a while and she lost track.

Chae Nayun finally opened her eyes when the sun started to set. She felt the surge of mana travel throughout her body. Then she looked beside her.

Chae Jinyoon was sprawled on top of the boulder.

“Ah, what the hell, oppa?” Chae Nayun grumbled.

“I’m exhausted...” Chae Jinyoon replied while shaking his head.

Chae Nayun frowned and said, “You’ll never be able to catch up at this rate.”

Chae Jinyoon was currently immersing himself in training these days to recover his strength, but it wasn’t easy as he spent the last five years bedridden in a coma.

However, he simply smiled and replied, “It’s also good for me if my sister becomes really strong.”

Chae Nayun intently stared at him for a while. He still had his calm demeanor that made her feel at ease whenever she was with him.

“Geez... Really...”

Chae Nayun smiled while thinking, *‘We can finally live like this, right? Just like we used to... You’re not going to suddenly disappear again, right?’*

“What are you two doing over there?” a low voice suddenly interrupted them.

Both of them flinched and looked where the voice came from. Yoo Sihyuk was wearing a gi.^[1]

“Follow me. You have guests,” he said.

“*Huh...*? Guests...?” Chae Nayun muttered as her eyes shot wide open in surprise.

They were currently three thousand meters above sea level. This was the middle point of Mount Baekdu after its peak shot up to five thousand meters above sea level because of the mana explosion that occurred fifty years ago.

“Maybe it’s your friends? You talked about them quite often. You did mention that they were going to come to find you soon,” Chae Jinyoon said as he sat up.

Chae Nayun suddenly flinched after a thought flashed through her head, “Hold up... No way... No way...”

She kept mumbling and suddenly ran. She ran as fast as she could. Chae Jinyoon smiled at her disappearing into the distance.

Thud!

Chae Nayun ran through the blizzard and barged through the back door.

“Ah...” she muttered.

Her friends were there as she expected. Everyone was waving at her.

She smiled in response and looked at every one of these precious friends who braved the cold to visit her.

Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Yoo Yeonha, Yi Yeonghan, Rachel, and... and... Chae Nayun's smile slowly started to fade.

"Huh...?"

She tilted her head in confusion and rubbed her eyes, but the scenery in front of her didn't change. Her friends were still there, but the person she longed for wasn't.

"Ah... Hahaha. Y-Yeah, welcome guys. Welcome..." she welcomed her friends while trying her best to suppress her disappointment.

Kim Suho, Yoo Yeonha, and Yi Yeonghan channeled superhuman self-control to suppress their laughter.

"Wow, I never imagined you guys would come all the way here just to see me... Oh, right... Winter vacation has started," Chae Nayun said while constantly looking over their shoulders.

Everyone's cheeks started to puff up whenever she looked over their shoulders.

"Yeah, winter vacation started. We're here to see you."

"Wow, Chae Nayun! It looks like you've gotten stronger in a couple of months?"

Yoo Yeonha and Kim Suho respectively said.

Chae Nayun tried her best to smile, but her smile didn't look genuine at all. In fact, the way she smiled made it look like she was crying instead.

"Yeah... it's vacation so... but why are you guys here?" she asked.

"Why else? We're here to see you."

“Ah, yes... that’s right... *ah*... that should be it...” Chae Nayun mumbled while fidgeting.

Shin Jonghak clicked his tongue as if he couldn’t stand the sight of it. Then he pointed back with his thumb and said, “Kim Hajin is waiting outside.”

“Ah... What the hell, Shin Jonghak...” Yoo Yeonha glared at him after her fun came to an abrupt end thanks to him.

Shin Jonghak simply shrugged in response.

Chae Nayun smacked Kim Suho on his shoulder and exclaimed, “You scared the heck out of me! Why would you do that?! You meanies!”

“*Haha!* Sorry about that. Anyways, you better hurry up and go. Hajin is probably waiting for you,” Kim Suho said as he pointed into the distance.

Chae Nayun ran to where Kim Suho pointed. She bulldozed through the snow with pure brute force.

“Hey! Kim Hajin!” she shouted at the top of her lungs.

Her voice echoed throughout the blizzard.

She was certain that her voice filled with love and longing would reach him through the raging blizzard.

* * *

“*Hmm*... So what you’re saying is... *Hmm*...”

Chae Nayun continued muttering and squirming while lying down with her head on my lap. I wasn’t sure if she wanted to say something or if she was forcing herself to come up with something to talk about.

Regardless, I continued to stroke her hair and fiddle with her earlobe while waiting for her to say something.

“Oh right, what’s Jin Sahyuk up to these days?” she asked in a cute voice after finally thinking of something to talk about.

“She’s... preparing to establish her own city.”

“Her own city?”

“Yeah.”

“Wow...” Chae Nayun muttered in amazement before asking, “What game is she playing?”

“No, not in a game, but in real life.”

“Real life?”

“Yes, she’s trying to get approval to set up a neutral city-state.”

“As expected... She’s quite the personality herself...” Chae Nayun nodded with a serious look.

I simply smiled in response while caressing her bun-like cheeks.

Chae Nayun didn’t push my hand away despite making sounds like, “Ah, stop it. I said stop it. I said shtap.”

As we were busy flirting with each other, a shadow towered over us. Both Chae Nayun and I turned around to see who it was.

Chae Jinyoon was looking down at us and smiling.

“Ah, hello.”

I immediately stood up and greeted him.

“Ah... What are you doing here oppa? Is your training already over?” Chae Nayun pouted and asked.

“Yeah, but more importantly... Your name is Hajin, right? I’ve heard a lot about you. Please have a seat,” Chae Jinyoon said as he sat beside us.

I nodded in response and sat on the grass.

Chae Nayun leaned on my shoulder and Chae Jinyoon looked at her with an astonished look as if he saw an alien.

“I knew you were Nayun’s boyfriend, but... she must listen well to you. This is my first time seeing her like this... wait... did she change after growing up?” Chae Jinyoon said in amazement.

“*Huh? Ah*, she doesn’t really listen to me that well,” I said as I shrugged and bounced her off my shoulder.

Chae Nayun had a protesting look that said, ‘*Why? what? why?*’ She continued clinging to me. However, I looked at her and saw a hint of fear on her face.

I suddenly recalled her actions until now. She was always scared whenever I got near Chae Jinyoon and had the same look as those times.

“It’s alright...” I said.

Chae Nayun looked up at me with tears welling up in her eyes.

She was probably still worried about Chae Jinyoon. I had no idea what happened to him in her life before she regressed, but I tightly held her hand.

“Don’t worry,” I said.

She soon nodded in response and buried her face in my chest.

Chae Jinyoon smiled and asked, “Before I forget, Grandfather wanted to see you. Is now a good time for you?”

“Ah, yes. Of course,” I immediately nodded and replied.

It went without saying that I came here in the first place to meet Chae Joochul.

* * *

“Will you be alright...?”

I was guided to the interior of the hut by Chae Nayun and Chae Jinyoon.

Chae Joochul was most likely behind those lavishly decorated doors.

“Yeah, it’ll be alright. See you later,” I said as I pulled Chae Nayun towards me and planted a kiss on her forehead.

“Huh...?” she muttered in confusion.

Her entire face flushed red before she started sounding lost, “H-Huh...? A-Alright. See you later, but before you go... one more time... can you do it one more time...?”

I planted another kiss on Chae Nayun’s forehead even though Chae Jinyoon was present. Then I walked towards the door.

“Hoo...” I composed myself.

I knocked on the door before opening it.

Chae Joochul sat in front of an intricately designed folding screen and smoked his pipe. He smiled as soon as he saw me as if he was already expecting me.

“Oh, you’re here. So you’re my precious granddaughter’s boyfriend, Ki Majin!” Chae Joochul said.

“...Huh? Ah, my name is Kim Hajin, sir. Not Ki Majin.”

“Ah, is that so? That kid tends to pronounce things wrong from time to time. Anyways, it’s nice to meet you. Come on in and have a seat.”

I sat in front of Chae Joochul and could feel him inspecting every nook and cranny of my body.

He smiled brightly and said, “*Hmm...* I see... In that case, I guess you were quite the influence when Nayun said that she wanted to strike Kim Sukho, right?”

Chae Joochul went straight to the point despite his gentle smile. It seemed that he was still hesitating whether he should attack Kim Sukho or not.

No, there was no such thing as hesitation in his emotion. Rather, he was probably calculating the chances of success.

“Yes, and that is why I have prepared a small bribe for you,” I said to pull Chae Joochul’s scale towards us.

His lips curled as he said, “*Hahaha!* A bribe you say?”

“...Yes,” I replied as I took out a medicine I created after collecting various medicinal plants from various neutral city-states with the Pharmacy Club members.

Chae Joochul tried to feign curiosity, which was another emotion he probably didn’t possess.

“What is that?” he asked.

“It is a medicine that will recover a portion of one’s emotions, sir.”

“...”

Chae Joochul froze for a second and silently stared at me.

“I cannot guarantee its effect as I created it without diagnosing you, but I believe that you will be able to feel more emotions than you

currently do once you ingest this.”

Chae Joochul looked down at the yellow medicine in front of him.

I had no idea what he was thinking right now as there was no way someone with emotions could ever tell what was on the mind of someone without emotions.

Chae Joochul finally said with a smile, “Alright, it seems that Nayun’s boyfriend has brought something healthy.”

I could feel the tension and anxiety in my body reduced a bit at those words.

“Yes, thank you very much. I shall leave the medicine with you. Also, is there anything else you wish to say, sir?”

“No, there’s nothing. You may go now. Go and play with Nayun,” Chae Joochul said in a cold voice.

I immediately bowed and exited the room.

“*Huh?* Why are you out so fast?” Chae Nayun asked as she ran up to me with a worried look. She continued asking, “How was it? How was it? Did grandfather say anything strange after seeing your gift?”

I simply shook my head at her barrage of questions, “Fortunately, he accepted it. The rest is up to you now.”

Chae Nayun let out a sigh of relief and Chae Jinyoon looked relieved as well.

“Then!” Chae Nayun exclaimed before she ran up and kissed me. She confidently said, “It’s my turn to meet Grandfather now!”

I found her confidence quite reassuring.

“Sure, see you later.”

“You’ll be here waiting when I come out, right?”

“I most certainly will.”

“Not only now, but... forever and ever... you’ll be with me, right?”

“Yes.”

“...Promise?”

Chae Nayun extended her pinky.

I stared into her eyes and whispered, “I promise.”

Both of us pinky swore. Chae Nayun brightly smiled and wrapped her arms around my neck. Our lips and tongue intertwined one more time.

* * *

We were guided to our accommodation by Chae Jinyoon.

“Wow, it’s quite cozy.”

All of us expected it to be uncomfortable since the entire place resembled a dojo, but they provided us with every amenity such as beds and even game consoles.

“Yeah, it’s imperative that we get a good night’s sleep and make the most out of our playtime too. Anyways, go on and unpack first,” Chae Jinyoon said.

We unpacked our belongings at his words. Most of my belongings were just a sleeping bag, some magic scrolls, and a few emergency food rations.

“Shall we go eat if you’re done?” Chae Jinyoon asked.

Everyone nodded in response.

“Does anyone know how to cook?” he asked.

Everyone looked at me in unison.

Chae Jinyoon’s eyes shot wide open in surprise as he said, “Wow, my sister’s boyfriend knows how to cook?”

“Yes, Hajin is really good,” Kim Suho proudly replied and placed a hand on my shoulder.

“Alright, then follow me. Let’s go cook. We try to be as independent as possible here,” Chae Jinyoon said.

“Okay,” I replied and followed him to the kitchen.

We walked along the wooden corridor and could hear the cozy sound of wood creaking whenever we took a step.

Chae Jinyoon suddenly said in a soft gentle voice, “Thank you.”

“Pardon me...?”

“I heard from Nayun. You were the one who woke me up, right?”

“Ah... Not really. It wasn’t just me, but everyone worked hard as well.”

“Is that so? Then I should thank everyone then.”

Chae Jinyoon sincerely smiled and I smiled in response.

It was then.

[Episode cleared.....]

A system message popped up in front of my eyes.

However, I didn’t bother reading it and immediately waved it away. I

no longer wanted to treat this world, this time, and whatever would happen in the future as mere episodes of a story.

“This is the kitchen. It’s packed with all sorts of ingredients. There’s meat, vegetables... *ah*, we caught that wild boar yesterday. Do you know how to butcher wild game by any chance?”

The kitchen was quite spacious.

I confidently smiled at his question and rolled up my sleeves.

“Of course, please just stand back and watch,” I said.

Any dish I cooked with the help of *[Dexterity]* and *[Stigma]* was bound to be a delicacy out of this world. I was confident that even Chae Joochul would be moved by my cooking.

I looked at Chae Jinyoon and confidently said, “I am extremely talented at cooking.”

1. A gi is a martial arts uniform. More info: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Karate_gi 📖

Side Stories 83

Chae Nayun (38)

Everyone in the Chae family's dojo marveled at my cooking. My cooking was even served to Chae Joochul and he gave it a rare, "It tastes good."

"Even grandfather said it was good. It's my first time hearing him say that!" Chae Nayun exclaimed.

"He was probably just being nice," I replied.

I was walking along the Mount Baekdu trail with Chae Nayun under the bright blue sky. Mount Baekdu was definitely not the best place to take a leisurely stroll, but a stroll felt different depending on who you were walking with.

"No, I'm serious. It's my first time seeing my grandfather's eyes get so big!" Chae Nayun exclaimed.

She discussed some stuff with Chae Joochul for around four hours. I was quite curious about what they talked about.

"So... did he make a decision?" I asked.

"*Huh? Oh...* That is..." Chae Nayun muttered before she puffed her cheeks and walked ahead.

She walked for a bit before she sat on a boulder at the edge of a cliff.

I hurried after her and sat down as well.

"...That medicine. He said he'll take it when we're together... but I'm scared. I don't know what kind of person Grandfather will be if he gets a portion of his emotions back. I don't know at all..." she said in a low

voice.

Chae Nayun looked at me with troubled eyes, "...Is it because I have something to lose now?"

She smiled and leaned on my shoulder.

We were sitting right in front of the clouds within arm's length and underneath us were the lush overgrown forests of Mount Baekdu.

I caressed her shoulder and replied, "It'll all be alright."

She looked up at me and I couldn't resist not hugging her since she looked so cute. A baseless confidence suddenly welled up inside of me from who knows where and I said, "I'm not someone who will be easily lost."

I felt my fingers and toes cringe at my own line, but she laughed in response.

That was more than enough for me. Her laughter and smile were now the most important thing in my life.

"I believe you. I believe," she said while snickering and holding my hand.

I held her hand with the resolve to never let go.

We both looked at the scenery in front of us. She was enjoying the sight, but I saw the world from a different perspective.

The change that started from her spread throughout the world and changed me. It changed me because this world used to be nothing more than a novel to me, but I learned how to love someone inside it.

That was more than enough to breathe life into this novel and turn it into reality for me.

"I believe. I believe Kim Hajin."

This incredible miracle that I would've never imagined in my wildest dreams just a year ago.

"I'll believe you until the day I die."

All of that started with this fool.

* * *

"I have no idea how long we'll have to stay like this."

Chae Jinyoon was sleeping in the VIP ward. No, a patient disguised as Chae Jinyoon was sleeping.

Chae Nayun, or rather Jain, grumbled while longing for freedom.

"Now's when it really starts," I passed a file to her.

Jain received the file and Yoo Yeonha immediately started to brief her.

"All instructions are in that file. Chae Jinyoon might be the most important witness in the upcoming trial, but your role is crucial as well," Yoo Yeonha said.

Jain looked a bit bored as she browsed through the file.

I decided to get straight to the point, "You just have to become someone Kim Sukho killed in the past."

One specific incident among all of the heinous acts Kim Sukho carried out would prove the most critical. That was the massacre he conducted four years ago to protect his position from the person who possessed the ability to take it from him.

That person definitely died that day, but Jain had met that person before they died. To be precise, it was Jain who killed that person. In turn, it would be extremely easy for her to disguise herself as that person.

“You remember what you promised, right...?” Jain asked.

We promised the Chameleon Troupe Kim Sukho’s riches in return. Although I had no idea where they planned to spend all that money.

“Don’t worry about that. Also, we have never met and will never meet in the future as you requested,” I replied.

Jain nodded in satisfaction and burned the file, “Great. That’s what I wanted to hear.”

Both Yoo Yeonha and I looked at each other. Not a hint of anxiety was in our eyes as we had done our part.

We just had to wait for the finale of this incident to come to a close.

* * *

January 7th.

We announced that Chae Jinyoon woke up even before the people could rejoice or feel sad about the New Year. News of the massive corruption was simultaneously reported as well.

Chae Jinyoon exposed the relationship between the association and the djinns. This led to Kim Sukho being arrested.

This event divided the association into two factions, namely the Kim Sukho Faction and the Chae Joochul Faction. The whole world was plunged into confusion because of this.

Kim Sukho vehemently defended himself that the accusations hurled at him were utter nonsense, but we had no plans to drag things out for long. We provided evidence for every excuse Kim Sukho came up with as we continued to corner him.

Not only that, the plan we came up with was put into motion without a margin of error.

We started by subjugating the djinn organization that Kim Sukho was in cahoots with.

“...Those damned brats deserve to be ground into dust and spread across the depths of hell!” Kim Sukho raged as his saliva flew all over.

He felt the back of his neck starting to get strained from the tension.

One of his lackeys asked, “What should we do?”

Kim Sukho glared at him and trembled in anger before standing up.

“Chae Joochul can’t do this to me,” he said while looking out the window.

Both of them exposed their dirty secrets to one another. This meant that both of them were in cahoots for every misdeed they committed. They justified each other’s crimes and murders for the greater good of the world. Every bit of it was sealed in a vault deep underground.

“You shouldn’t have done this... Chae Joochul...” Kim Sukho growled in anger.

There was nothing he could do from this point onwards.

‘You brought this upon yourself. I’ll bring to light everything you did and I’ll drag you to the pits of the netherworld with me...’ he thought.

Tak...

The sound of something getting cut was heard and the entire mansion became pitch-black.

Kim Sukho flinched and got down. His bodyguards immediately surrounded him.

“Please don’t worry, sir. We’re here to protect you.”

“Yes, I’m not worried at all,” Kim Sukho was at ease after hearing his

henchman's reassurance.

However, things were already in motion at a place away from his eyes...

* * *

"Alright, you can start now."

"Okay."

As expected, all the guards flocked towards Kim Sukho after the power was cut.

Chae Nayun and I used that opportunity to infiltrate the mansion's basement.

"This place... looks like a dungeon..."

It was difficult to tell if the basement was a forest or a cave.

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"Hold on. Give me a second," I replied as I infused stigma into my eyes.

My enhanced thousand-mile eyes spread throughout the entire basement and identified all of the traps. Then I finally spotted the hidden vault deep within the basement.

"I found it."

"Oh! As expected of Kim Hajin!"

All the digital records Kim Sukho possessed were deleted with the help of Kim Hoseup and my [*Hacking*]. That meant those files in that hidden vault were the only copies left in this world.

"Follow me."

“Okay!”

We ran together down the corridor.

There were all sorts of tarps such as lasers and a mutated cerberus, but we easily bypassed them with my *[Hacking]* and Chae Nayun’s strength.

“...”

However, someone blocked our path when the hidden vault was within reach. It was a man covered in a shroud of darkness.

“Move. It’s all over,” Chae Nayun said in a threatening voice as she wielded her sword.

The man read the words inscribed on the sword.

[One Slash To Dye Mountains and Rivers With Blood]

It was the Giant Hwando^[1] of Admiral Lee Sun Shin that Chae Joochul gave to Chae Nayun as a gift.

The inscription alone gave the sword great weight and its owner’s mana allowed it to surpass its limitations. Truth be told, we could’ve barged through the front and brute-forced our way in with Chae Nayun’s strength instead of acting so clandestinely.

“...”

Still, Kim Sukho’s loyal minion didn’t back down. Instead, he muttered, “A dog does not abandon their owner...”

Those words were more than enough to tell us that he was resolved to die.

“Sure...” Chae Nayun replied as she closed her eyes and leaned forward with her sword by her side.

It was the stance that allowed her to channel all of her energy forward and end the fight in a single strike.

Bzzzt!

Chae Nayun channeled incredibly high-density mana, but her opponent didn't retreat a single step.

The mana created threatening sparks that spread throughout the basement as Chae Nayun finally opened her eyes.

Then, the space in front of her was cut in half without a sound. That was the end of it.

"Let's go," she said.

I checked the pulse of the man on the ground. He wasn't dead. No, Chae Nayun spared him on purpose.

I nodded and walked towards the vault.

The vault had six magic seals placed on it. It was a truly impressive security system. In fact, it would have taken weeks or even months to crack if I didn't possess the gift [*Hacking*].

As I was about to use [*Hacking*] on the vault and its seal, a trap was activated.

Shwoooosh!

The magic seal suddenly shot out a net that swallowed both of us.

"Uwa!"

"Kyah!"

We were stuck like fishes in a net and couldn't help but laugh despite being in this situation.

“Hehe...”

“Haha...”

“Come here,” Chae Nayun said as she pursed her lips and approached me.

That wasn’t all. She kept touching me here and there trying to do something, but I immediately formed a blade with stigma to run away from her.

“Come here for your kissy kissy goo goo.”

“...Enough of that.”

I cut the net.

The net seemed to be some kind of ancient artifact, but stigma’s blade cut it like a hot knife through butter.

I resumed hacking the vault.

[500 SP will be consumed to supplement your lacking stigma.]

As expected, the vault’s security was top-notch and required me to use SP to crank up stigma.

Click... Clack...!

The vault opened and revealed an old accounting book slightly damp from humidity.

I carefully took the book out and could feel a hint of mana from its cover. The book turned out to be a high rank magic artifact that not only recorded the events of that day, but even the voices and images of the people present.

Chae Nayun looked over my shoulder and stuttered, “Hey... *Uhm...* Why don’t you keep that for now...?”

“Hmm?”

“I mean... What if grandfather betrays you and... you know, just in case...”

Chae Nayun seemed scared, but I simply smiled and shook my head.

“I want you to go and give it to your grandfather. Let’s leave it to his soon-to-return conscience.”

“...”

I passed the accounting book to her without a hint of hesitation. Chae Nayun seemed troubled by how nonchalant I was, but she soon let out a sigh of resignation and nodded.

“Yeah... Thanks... I love you...”

* * *

— In other news, Aileen from the Temple of Justice has run for the position of the new association chairman. Most of the people in the association seemed to be welcoming of her run as she is known to be upright and just when dealing with...

It was already March and the new school year at Cube began.

We didn’t appear on the surface until the situation was resolved. Fortunately, those named giants such as Yun Seung-Ah, Yoo Jinwoong, Aileen, Jin Seyeon, etc. took up arms instead and continued our fight for us after we ignited the initial spark.

“I heard today is the court date.”

We successfully managed to corner Kim Sukho after a grueling two month campaign, but Chae Nayun seemed a bit bitter about something as she clung to my arm.

“Yeah...”

We had no idea what defense Kim Sukho had prepared for the Association Court, but we knew that his old colleague, whom he killed, would come back to life and appear in court.

I wondered what would go through his mind once he saw his old friend, which was actually Jain in disguise.

“I couldn’t sleep these days because of that. Help me sleep, Kim Hajin.”

“*Ehem...*”

I simply faked a cough and didn’t respond to that. I mean, it was quite awkward for me to respond to something like that when we were in the classroom...

“Hey, Chae Nayun! Dammit... Get out! Class is starting soon. Have you two lost it?!”

The class president, Yoon Jihyun, finally burst into anger after glaring at us for a while.

Chae Nayun simply shrugged her words off as she was ranked thirty-fourth among the sophomores.

“Hey, why are we in different classes? I think someone pulled some strings from behind the scenes... this must be a conspiracy...” Chae Nayun grumbled.

It was exactly as she said. We were in different classes this year.

My luck was quite high, so it was extremely likely for us to be in the same class if it was decided at random. I suspected that the higher-ups got involved after they learned that we were dating.

“Ah... This is so annoying... Anyways, I’ll come running after classes are over,” she said with an expression that made it seem like she lost her motherland overnight.

“Sure,” I replied.

I found her pouting to be extremely cute and had to exercise superhuman self-control to stop myself from patting her head.

Ring!

I suddenly received a message on my smartwatch.

[I hope you didn't forget. I'm currently making preparations.]

It was from Jin Sahyuk. She seemed to be quite skilled with the smartwatch these days.

I immediately replied, *[Of course, I'm also done with my preparations.]*

This was another crucial event. Jin Sahyuk could turn into the final boss if I failed to keep my promise.

“Oh right, Nayun,” I called as she was about to leave for her class to prevent that scary final boss from appearing.

“Why? Why? Why? Why? Whywhywhywhy?” she instantly ran back to me and unleashed a barrage of whys.

“Let's go on a trip after classes today,” I whispered.

Today was Friday. this meant that classes would finish earlier than usual and we had the whole weekend ahead of us.

“Ah...” Chae Nayun muttered as her ears flushed red.

She failed to keep a poker face and started snickering and giggling, “S-Sure... I mean, if you... want to... *hehe*... I'm fine with anywhere... *hehe*... as long as it's with... *hehehe*... you!”

Three hours later...

“Ah! Really! Damn it! This is so annoying! Why the hell are they here?!” Chae Nayun screamed and stomped in anger when the rest of the Pharmacy Club members gathered.

“I thought it would just be the two of us! I thought we were going to be alone!” she continued her tantrum.

“...What’s wrong with her?”

Kim Suho, Yi Yeonghan, Rachel, and Evandel were dumbfounded. They all blinked a few times while watching Chae Nayun throw a temper tantrum.

1. Korean traditional military sword. More info here: <https://www.kocis.go.kr/eng/webzine/201812/sub06.html> 

Side Stories 84

Chae Nayun (39)

“We only managed because Sir Chae Joochul helped us out. It was an extremely close call,” Yoo Yeonha said.

We were on an unknown plain in Central Asia. Things were coming to an end, but I worried after hearing what she said.

Chae Joochul’s emotions had completely dried up when I met him. It had progressed at a much faster rate than I expected, which meant that he was already detached from this world. That was the reason why no one could predict his thoughts or what he would do.

“Yeah, it’s a relief... I guess...? Oh, is that the place?” Chae Nayun said before she brightly smiled and pointed somewhere.

There were buildings erected on the plain. The entire city was empty and resembled an abandoned ghost town. The eerie vibe it was emitting made us huddle together.

“...*Huh?* Who’s that?” Chae Nayun spotted someone standing in front of the fountain at the center of the city square.

All of us raised our guards after spotting the person. That person gave me the creeps as she sculpted something with a strange smile.

“Hey!” I shouted and waved my hand.

Only then did Jin Sahyuk notice us and immediately changed her expression to a cold one.

“You’re here?” she haughtily replied.

The Pharmacy Club’s destination was none other than Jin Sahyuk’s

neutral city-state.

“What is... this place?”

“Beats me. Hey, you said you’re making a city. Is this what you’ve been up to this whole time?”

Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun looked around the place with amazed eyes.

All of the buildings in the city were influenced by Western architecture from the past.

“This is...”

Only Kim Suho was aware of this city’s purpose. He stared at the city with a strange sense of familiarity.

“Anyways, why don’t you guys go and take a look around?” Jin Sahyuk said before she dragged me away from the rest.

“H-Hey! Are you crazy?!” Chae Nayun screamed as she ran up to us and snatched me away.

Jin Sahyuk glared at her, but soon sighed and gave us a tour.

We walked for a while until we reached a small palace, which I assumed was where she resided.

“This is it,” Jin Sahyuk said as she pointed at a mirror installed in the palace garden.

I instantly realized what this mirror that resembled the moon was.

[Otherworldly Mirror] [Mystic]

— *A mirror with the power of another world. It may be possible to peek into the otherworld.*

This was the dimensional conduit Jin Sahyuk created with her mana.

“Will this be enough?” she asked.

“No, give me a second,” I replied.

I inspected the mirror and could immediately tell that it wasn’t enough. I used my SP to add more details to the mirror.

[Otherworldly Mirror] [Mystic]

— *A mirror with the power of another world. It may be possible to peek into the otherworld.*

— *Establish Passage: It will be possible to establish a passage to the otherworld with the help of stigma and a suitable catalyst.*

— *Summon: Consume a significant amount of mana to summon a human from another world.*

It didn’t consume as much SP as I expected. I wasn’t sure if it was because I added stigma and a catalyst as requirements, but I only spent 1,500 SP.

“Huh? What’s this?” Jin Sahyuk asked as she looked at me.

I could tell that she was greatly surprised when the mirror brightly shone after I finished changing its settings.

I didn’t respond to her and took out a dagger to cut my thumb instead. Then, I wiped my blood on the mirror.

My blood would act as the catalyst to connect me to Kim Chundong on the other side.

“If... that world has truly been destroyed, then nothing will happen. Are you fine with that?” I asked.

“No, I’m certain there are survivors out there,” Jin Sahyuk confidently

replied.

I nodded and infused all of stigma into the mirror.

Shwaaaaa!

The mirror shined brightly like the sun before a pillar of light shot up to the sky. Then, the pillar slowly disappeared and only left behind a thick white fog.

“...”

“...”

Nothing happened amid the deafening silence.

As Jin Sahyuk grew distressed, Chae Nayun suddenly grumbled while looking at her feet.

“Who’s this?”

Jin Sahyuk and I immediately turned towards her. There was a child on the ground that I was certain wasn’t there a while ago.

She was wearing tattered clothes and seemed to be four or five years old. She looked severely malnourished and was only skin and bones, but I was certain that she was still alive.

Jin Sahyuk smiled brightly for the first time after seeing the child. She exclaimed joyfully at the top of her lungs, “It’s a success!”

* * *

Murmur...! Murmur...!

The association’s courtroom was quite rowdy. There was a heated exchange between people that eventually led to shouting.

“...What’s going on?”

Thanks to that, Aileen was woken up by the ruckus and let out a yawn.

“...”

However, Jin Seyeon didn't say anything in response. She just continued to observe the trial with a serious face.

Aileen followed suit and observed the trial.

Kim Sukho had his head down in defeat and a woman was standing in front of him.

“...I am certain that Kim Sukho tried to kill me. You should admit it,” the woman said.

Kim Sukho did not refute what the woman said. Instead, he continued to shake his head and muttered under his breath in denial, “This can't be real... There's no way... There's no way this is possible...”

Jin Seyeon explained to Aileen, “That woman was a close colleague of Kim Sukho in the past. Her name is Yoon Yirang.”

“*Huh?* So? What about her?” Aileen tilted her head in confusion.

“It seems the end has come,” Jin Seyeon said with a sigh of resignation before she stood up.

“?”

Aileen still looked lost at the whole turn of events. She regretted falling asleep during the earlier parts of the trial.

“There seems to be no need to stay any longer...” Jin Seyeon said as she dragged Aileen out of the courtroom.

“*Huh?* Why? Hey, wait a minute... Hey...” Aileen protested and flailed her arms like a ragdoll.

However, Jin Seyeon simply picked her up and carried her out.

Then they came face to face with two familiar cadets, Kim Hajin and Chae Nayun.

“*Huh?* You came?” Chae Nayun was surprised, but immediately bowed and greeted them. “My name is Chae Nayun and this is my boyfriend, Kim Hajin.”

“Yes, we know who you are,” Jin Seyeon replied with a gentle smile.

On the other hand, Aileen put on a look full of authority and asked, “What are you guys doing here?”

Kim Hajin was the one who responded to her question, “*Ah*, that is... Nayun said she was going to meet her grandfather, so I was accompanying her.

Chae Nayun clung to Kim Hajin’s back while he spoke.

“Sir Chae Joochul is?”

“Yes.”

Aileen raised a brow and grumbled, “Why the hell are you two going to meet the esteemed Sir Chae Joochul... *Uff! Umph!*”

Jin Seyeon covered her mouth and said with an awkward smile, “*Haha...* I’m sorry about that. We’ll be on our way now, so have a lovely time you two.”

Flash! Flash! Flash! Flash! Flash! Flash!

A barrage of flashes went off the moment Jin Seyeon opened the doors.

“*Ugh!* What the?!”

The entire place from the entrance of the courtroom to the park in

front was teeming with reporters.

“What happened in the trial?!”

“Did Kim Sukho admit to his crimes?!”

“Is Madam Aileen really running for chairman...”

Aileen was dazed by the sudden frenzy unfolding in front of her, but Jin Seyeon calmly slipped her a script she prepared the night before.

“You can just read what’s written there,” she said with a smile.

“...Ah, sure. Okay, listen up you lot!” Aileen enthusiastically shouted before she proceeded to read what was written on the paper.

The content of the script was the common speech one would hear from people running for office such as rooting out corruption, reformation of the association, enacting transparency, and so on. The caveat was that Aileen was using her Spirit Speech to say them.

* * *

The Ancient Castle was a place of records that recorded every single event since the beginning of time.

Chae Joochul could relate to the nameless old castle built by an unknown person who was forced to observe the passing of time.

The reason he was collecting the fragments of this castle was not because of what normal people would call a hobby. No, it was something entirely different from that.

Of course, Chae Joochul was merely an observer watching the movement of time. He was not someone that could enforce his will upon it.

His existence was something even the castle had no recollections of, just as he didn’t know who he was.

“The young lady has arrived.”

A deep respectful voice made him cut off his consciousness from the castle.

He looked at his attaché and said, “Let her in.”

“Yes, sir.”

The doors opened and his granddaughter waltzed in.

He brightly smiled after seeing his granddaughter. His granddaughter did the same as she approached and stood in front of him.

The next thing he had to do was guide her to a more comfortable place.

“*Hmm...* This place is a bit too stuffy. Come, follow me,” he said.

However, the way he said those words was like a ruler speaking to his subject who was a close friend.

They went to a room with a cozy atmosphere.

Chae Joochul sat on a rocking chair and his granddaughter sat near him.

“Grandpa, so what happened today was...”

His granddaughter started to tell him all sorts of stories enthusiastically. He laughed at the right moments while she told her stories.

She seemed to be encouraged by his responsiveness and continued chatting for a long time, but she soon stopped after she saw the clock.

“Ah, this isn’t what’s important right now. Rather than that, so... grandfather... how was... that...?” she asked carefully.

Chae Joochul knew what she meant by that.

“*Hoho!* It was fine. Tell that child that I’m thankful,” he replied.

He smiled as gently and brightly as he could, but his granddaughter’s expression soon darkened before she smiled again.

Of course, Chae Joochul could tell that she was forcing herself to smile. Her smile didn’t last long as she lowered her head.

She bit her lips and muttered, “You didn’t eat it... that medicine...”

Chae Joochul contemplated how to respond. He was definitely in a tough position, but he had no choice as she seemed to know already.

“...Yes. It seems that nothing escapes my granddaughter’s instincts,” he said with a warm smile.

She looked at him with visible anger in her eyes and her ears flushed red.

What he had to do next was appease her anger.

“Grandfather! I just—!”

“Nayun.”

“What?!”

“*Hoho...* Nayun, there is something we call value in this world.”

The words old and scolding went quite well together, but Chae Joochul had never scolded anyone in this life as that required too much emotion.

Of course, he had no idea why it was such a difficult thing for him.

“You might be aware of this, but humans tend to decide the value of things at whim. I’m talking about how they base their decisions on

their emotions and rationale.”

Emotions and rationale were the two main things that made humans who they were.

“But those are too difficult for me. I have no idea if what’s right to me is really what’s right. If what’s right for humans is what’s right for the world. If what’s right for the world is what’s right for me...”

Chae Joochul had committed countless bloodshed until he became numb. He had no choice but to walk a path of blood in the lawless world he lived in. It reached a point where even the emotions that guided him to commit bloodshed back in those days had disappeared from his heart.

“So, is it really right for me to regain my emotions or is it the wrong thing to do? Will it have more value or not? Those are answers I won’t be able to find and this world will not give those answers to me.”

A person could not live in this world with rationale alone. Such was the fate of Chae Joochul, who was now detached from the world. He could no longer place any value on things after he lost his emotions. Everything became equal in the present and he could no longer put a value on things.

If someone were to ask him who he would save between an elderly person and a child drowning, he would question why it was a must to save another human in the first place.

He was now nothing but a robot without guidance or a living breathing plant.

“But I have one belief that I hold onto.”

Truth and lies, cause and effect, justice and injustice, glory and shame, repentance and fall, good and evil.

These things were not important for someone like him who possessed no emotions. However, there was one belief he held onto that was left behind by his old self before he lost his emotions. This allowed him to study what unfairness meant despite not possessing any emotions.

“My granddaughter is right.”

That belief was none other than to treat his own family above others. This belief was Chae Joochul’s only measuring stick to determine something’s value.

He could’ve been an evil person in the past, but he was determined to walk such a path once again if his family deemed it right.

“My motive to move lies in that.”

Knowing what his granddaughter desired, understanding her underlying emotions, and acting on his analysis was the method he came up with to replace his lack of emotions.

“So, I will not hurt you even though I lack emotions... No, I will never be able to hurt you because I don’t have any emotions...”

Chae Joochul was explaining how his thought process worked, but he was soon faced with a sight that he couldn’t understand. He was past eighty years old now and his emotions were frozen solid, which made it even harder for him to understand what was going on.

Sniff... Heuk... Heuk...

His granddaughter was crying.

He could tell that she was not simply crying out of sorrow. There was something much deeper than that. He analyzed the situation to the best of his abilities to find out what emotions his granddaughter was currently showing.

However, he understood her emotions a little bit too late.

That was how long it had been since he last saw this emotion. This emotion was filled with remorse, pity, and sorrow.

Chae Joochul could not understand why his granddaughter was showing such emotion right now. He had already strayed too far away to understand such complex emotions.

The only thing he could do was embrace the young girl calling out to him while crying. He did not push her away or stop her from walking into his embrace.

Ironically, he did all of that without a hint of emotion and acted out of a sense of duty instead.

As he embraced her, he felt something for the first and last time.

He was certain of himself.

“Waaah! Waaaah!”

Her wailing suddenly reminded him of an old memory. The memory of a baby crying and everyone gathering around the child. The baby wrapped in a white blanket cried so loud that it could probably be heard from the other side of the globe.

A long time had passed since then and that child was crying once again.

Chae Joochul could only nod after he connected the dots.

“ ... ”

This strange sensation welling up inside of him was Chae Joochul’s emotions... It was only then that he finally realized.

Side Stories 85

Chae Nayun (40)

Two months passed and Jin Sahyuk came back when the midterms were about to end.

“...It’s already reached that point. We’re planning to start official exchanges in three or five years,” she said.

I sat on a grassy hill overlooking the city. The once ghost-like city was now teeming with life. Children were running on the streets, the scent of grilled meat filled the air, and the chattering floating around was full of hope.

The city’s residents were enjoying their lives and thankful for everything.

“Yeah, don’t rush too much,” I replied.

The number of people successfully evacuated was exactly 7,517. That number was far greater than what I initially expected and the Jin Sahyuk from that world only took one year to grow up to twenty years old.

One year didn’t sound like a lot, but they had to survive an entire year in that desolate and ravaged world.

“What about Kim Chundong...?” I carefully asked after failing to suppress my curiosity.

The smile on Jin Sahyuk’s face disappeared as she looked at me and replied, “...He’s dead.”

“Dead? Who did you hear that from?”

“I met him three months ago through the mirror.”

Jin Sahyuk sighed and looked at the sky with teary eyes.

“I apologized... but he said there was no need... In fact, he even thanked me. He thanked me for giving him a reason to live his meaningless life.”

“...”

A reason to live his meaningless life... Those words struck me even though I had never met Kim Chundong nor was I familiar with who he was...

“Thanks,” Jin Sahyuk said out of the blue.

I doubted my ears for a moment. I never expected to hear those words from her.

I stood flabbergasted for a good minute before I finally muttered, “*Huh...*? Y-Y-Yeah... No, well, I should be the thankful one.”

“Okay, you should go down then. Your friends must be waiting for you.”

“Yeah...”

I stood up, but Jin Sahyuk remained seated as she continued to look at the city.

“I’m going now...”

“Sure.”

I descended the hill and the city appeared in front of me. The new city was glistening under the sun.

The Pharmacy Club members were interacting with the citizens. Yoo Yeonha was teaching the Korean alphabet to the children, Kim Suho

was explaining modern contraptions and technologies to the adults, and Yi Yeonghan and Shin Jonghak were helping a bunch of youth with earthwork construction.

“Kim Hajin!”

I was ambushed from behind, but I easily carried her on my back.

“Hey, where were you? I was looking for you,” Chae Nayun asked while sticking her head over my shoulder.

“I was just taking a look around the city,” I replied.

“Taking a look? Well... I guess this place has quite the views.”

I smiled and nodded. Then I looked at the streets and appreciated this place teeming with life. The atmosphere was filled with warmth and made me feel warm to my deepest core.

“Hey, Hajin...” Chae Nayun said with a smile while looking at the same place I was. She asked, “What should we do from now on?”

Her realistic question dragged me back to earth. However, I didn’t have to think for long.

I gave a short, yet concise response, “What else? We need to graduate first.”

* * *

On top of a dead tree hidden behind overgrown branches.

“Boss, is it all good now?”

Boss didn’t respond to Jain’s question and continued to observe Kim Hajin and the children down in the city.

“Well, do you have anything else you want to say?” Jain asked.

Boss shook her head and finally replied, “No...”

She was currently thinking of the Chameleon Troupe’s unity.

“Don’t tell me you’re still thinking that you’re still indebted? Boss, we’re criminals. We’re not called the Righteous Troupe, right? You shouldn’t think of repaying your debts.”

“I know.”

Boss was resolved to live a life that was no different from hell on earth. That was why she was living such a life.

“Then what?”

“...”

Boss looked down without saying anything.

Jain shot lasers out of her eyes and glared at her.

“Alright... I’m fine now, so let’s go...” Boss shook her head after getting tired of those eyes.

“Yes, that’s how it should be. We still have a lot of stealing to do. Follow me,” Jain said.

Khalifa opened a portal.

“...”

Boss looked back one last time. She looked back at the child who was born among the corpses she piled up.

“If you’re a hero...”

‘I thought you would become someone like me if I spared you... Hell was what greeted you after you were born, so I thought you would become the same type of a person and I was creating another orphan like me.’

Ironically, her expectations were way off the mark.

“...It seems I was wrong,” Boss muttered before she disappeared into the darkness.

* * *

Kwaaachiiiiik!

Chae Nayun swung her mana greatsword, which was much larger than a normal sword. It cut through everything in its path.

That single attack laid waste to everything a few hundred meters in front of her and hundreds of monsters were obliterated.

One was bound to leave their back exposed after delivering such an attack, but Chae Nayun wasn't worried about her back.

A monster that sneaked behind her extended its claws, but it wasn't able to lay a finger on her.

Shwaaa!

Only a splatter could be heard as a bullet shot from afar killed the monster behind Chae Nayun.

“Hey, where are you shooting from?” Chae Nayun asked into her earphone after pulling back her sword.

— Somewhere a bit far from where you are.

“*Hmph...*” she frowned and scoffed before suddenly talking about something entirely unrelated. “Hey, why did you watch a movie without me?”

— Is that important right now...? Also, you can't stand horror movies, right?

“I can if I watch it with you!”

— Do you want to destroy the cinema?

“I won’t destroy it...” Chae Nayun grumbled in response.

Then someone shouted at her, “Nayun! I told you not to lower your guard!”

It was Chae Jinyoon.

“Hold your sword!” he shouted.

Chae Nayun flinched, but simply nodded and replied, “Yes. Yes, I will.”

They were now in their third year and taking their guild internship. Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin applied to Essence of the Straits.

Of course, both of them easily passed.

Chae Nayun had no problems entering as she was one of the top cadets, but Kim Hajin’s acceptance stirred quite a controversy as he wasn’t even in the top one hundred cadets.

There were a lot of rumors flying around that he only made it in because of Chae Nayun or that he was a gigolo etc.

Thanks to that, an Anti Kim Hajin Group was even created.

...Actually, the founder of the group was none other than Kim Hajin himself. He did it out of his stubbornness to earn a sliver bit more SP.

He did all that because he knew that he had to become stronger to stay with Chae Nayun.

“Haa... I’m so tired...”

The battle finally ended. It was an eighteen hour marathon and Chae Nayun was exhausted to the point that she fell on her butt.

“Are you alright?”

A familiar voice instantly washed her fatigue away. The tip of her mouth curled up, but she tried her best to pout and sulk instead.

“Yeah, but you won’t know since you’re just staying still and flicking your finger, right?”

“I can’t do anything about that.”

Kim Hajin sat in front of her and hugged her before she could even say anything. He infused his stigma into her and she was taken by surprise.

She could feel herself recovering dramatically. The recovery wasn’t because of the mana, but Kim Hajin himself.

“Are you better now?” he asked.

“...Yeah,” she covered her blushing face and replied.

She looked around and realized that they were at the foot of the mountain. She never realized where she was as they busily fought. Thanks to that, they were all alone now.

Chae Nayun licked her lips as sensual thoughts flooded her mind.

As she unbuttoned her outerwear, he suddenly pointed somewhere and said, “Look over there. The sun is coming up.”

“...Huh? Oh, you’re right.”

They mobilized in the morning, but it was now morning again.

Chae Nayun looked at the sunrise on the horizon. The morning sun was rising and illuminating their surroundings.

That light filled her heart.

“...Hey, Kim Hajin.”

Happiness welled up like a wave inside of her.

There were many things they could do together. They were happy together. They could dream the same dreams together and they could love each other.

All of this sent shivers throughout her body.

“Yeah...?”

“I love you.”

Her emotions made her blurt out a confession.

Kim Hajin tilted his head in confusion before he smiled and replied, “What an amazing coincidence. I love you too.”

Chae Nayun blushed, but then brazenly took off her outerwear.

“Let’s get up now.”

On the other hand, Kim Hajin pulled her hand and she was forced to her feet.

“Let’s go. They must be waiting for us,” he said.

“*Huh...? Ah... Sure...*” she mumbled in response.

She thought it was a bummer, but she could try again at a later date and decided to brush it off for now. However, she couldn’t help but sulk and pout.

They descended the mountain.

The scenery in front of them was brightly illuminated by the morning sun. They took their time to admire it as they walked slowly.

The world looked wonderful.

Chae Nayun stopped pouting and immediately regained her bright, beautiful smile.

“Ah! There they are! Hey, Chae Nayun! Kim Hajin! What were you guys doing?!”

They could see their friends in the distance waving at them. Both of them smiled as they walked towards them.

All of them enjoyed the scenery together. The sound of nature’s creatures crying in between the trees could be heard.

The world was no longer just a novel and embraced them.

* * *

The sunlight entering through the gap in the curtain woke me up. I squinted and saw Chae Nayun.

She was grinning while staring at me.

“Hehe. Kim Hajin is awake,” she said.

I nodded before I pinched her cheeks and asked, “When did you get up?”

“I sink avout thwo hors aghoo? You look sho acute slleeping, Kim Hajin.”

She couldn’t pronounce her words properly as I was pinching her cheeks. I found that extremely adorable.

I snickered while pinching her cheeks and got up. The blanket covering us flowed down the bed and the sun shining brightly on us made me cough in embarrassment.

“Ah, what was our intern schedule again?” Chae Nayun asked while

rolling on the bed.

I dressed up first and checked my smartwatch.

“We have a theory review.”

“Ah... Theory again... that’s going to drive me crazy one day...” Chae Nayun covered her face.

I covered her with the blanket instead.

“Ah~ Ah~ Ah~”

“Just hurry up and get dressed.”

“You undressed me, so you should dress me up.”

“...”

I ignored her and went to the kitchen. I was preparing a simple breakfast when Chae Nayun walked into the kitchen wearing my dress shirt.

We ate together before preparing to go to work. We washed up, got dressed, and hopped into our car.

“Yawn...! Let’s go!”

It was quite bright outside and the road looked brighter than it usually did.

[Self-driving to Essence of the Straits will now commence.]

The car drove itself, so I removed my hands from the steering wheel and held Chae Nayun’s hand. We locked our fingers together as we enjoyed the scenery passing by us.

This world’s scenery and that world’s scenery started to blend. They had the same name, but they were two completely different Seoul.

I would remember that world from time to time. The world where I could spend time with my mother, father, and friends.

This longing and lingering regret would definitely last forever inside me.

Did I abandon them in the end? But this world was no longer just a novel. This world had become precious to me and this person was the most precious person to me who made it that way.

“Kim Hajin,” Chae Nayun called my name in a stiff voice.

“*Hmm?*” I muttered in response and looked at her. I was quite shocked.

She was looking at me with trembling eyes as I caressed her cheek and asked, “What’s wrong?”

“*Huh?* No... Just that... your expression just now... are you alright?”

It seemed that I was too immersed in my thoughts and it showed in my expression. I simply smiled and started playing with her earlobe.

“I’m alright,” I said.

However, she still looked nervous.

“I’m extremely content,” I added. “You don’t have to worry about it. I’m already content with what I have now. No, if it was possible... I would like to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“*Tsk...* You scared me... Why would you put on such a scary expression?”

“Scary? Who? Me?”

“Yeah, you did. Just now.”

“Oh, my bad.”

Just like you said last time, I can't live without you anymore.

"Ah, forget about it. Hey, Kim Hajin. Help me out a bit with that theory thing later. You know, give me something that anyone can present simply by memorizing it. I don't want to embarrass myself during theory review..."

I started my day with you, and I hope you'll be by my side together, forevermore.

Side Stories 86

What If Story (1)

Yoo Yeonha woke up before sunrise. She stayed still with her eyes open for a while before she yawned and stretched.

“Yawn...”

She checked the time. It was three thirty in the morning. She went to bed around one, so she slept around two hours and thirty minutes.

She got up and opened the curtains. It was raining outside.

“Yaaawn...”

She yawned again. Strangely enough, she felt refreshed even though she only slept for two hours. In fact, it felt as if she slept a good eight hours.

Was this bed really that good or...?

Yoo Yeonha pressed the mattress a few times before she suddenly felt someone's gaze.

“*Kyahk!* You scared me!” she screamed after seeing Kim Hajin peeking at her from between the small gap in the door.

He was holding a mug and sipping what she assumed was either coffee or red tea.

“What are you doing?!” Yoo Yeonha shouted while arranging her messy hair.

However, Kim Hajin looked surprisingly calm. No, he even looked at her in disbelief.

“What...? What’s your problem...?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“This is my room,” Kim Hajin replied.

Yoo Yeonha froze. This was her mansion, but she was currently on the third floor that her special attendants used. Her personal space began from the fourth to sixth floors. This meant the third floor was technically his floor.

“I don’t recall allowing you to peek!” Yoo Yeonha retorted.

“Hey, this is my room. I already told you. You should’ve gone to sleep in your room,” Kim Hajin nonchalantly replied while looking straight at her.

Yoo Yeonha avoided his eyes and grumbled with a pout, “...But this is my house.”

“Fine, I’ll just resign and move out then,” Kim Hajin replied with a shrug.

He was currently working as Yoo Yeonha’s bodyguard. She highly valued his abilities and found it a shame when he dropped out of Cube.

However, she ran into him by pure coincidence two years after he dropped out and managed to hire him after offering an excellent package.

Of course, he didn’t live on the third floor right away. He commuted to work like others for around six months, but he was soon made to stay after his work requirements changed.

“Forget about it. I’ll let it slide just this once.”

“Let what slide...?”

“I said I’ll let you off the hook! Now move.”

Yoo Yeonha shoved Kim Hajin aside and left the room. She sat on the couch in the living room with the mug of coffee that Kim Hajin prepared for her.

She switched her smartwatch on and browsed the news.

[Yoo Yeonha's involvement in the guild... Will it lead to mutiny?]

[Yoo Jinwoong is silent as usual.]

[An anonymous report says that...]

The whole world was gossiping about her and her name was being thrown all over the place.

“Haa...” she let out a sigh.

She was getting head-splitting migraines from this involvement and the mutiny they were talking about.

“You have a press conference today,” Kim Hajin said as he followed her to the living room.

“So what...?” Yoo Yeonha curtly replied.

“Aren’t you going to prepare for it?”

“I already did.”

Yoo Yeonha had been on the edge ever since news of her excessive involvement in the guild was published. No, she was already quite sensitive long before that. However, the news made her even more sensitive and she barely got any sleep for two entire weeks.

By sheer coincidence, she happened to lie on Kim Hajin’s bed. She didn’t have much expectations for it, but the bed turned out to be extremely comfortable.

After that day, she had been stealing Kim Hajin’s bed and sleeping on

it ever since.

It was still a mystery why the bed felt so comfortable and helped her sleep, but she definitely knew that it wasn't because of him...

Kim Hajin sat beside her, but Yoo Yeonha moved away from him.

"Don't worry about me and just focus on your work."

"My work is protecting you."

"It's guarding, not protecting."

"That's that."

Kim Hajin laughed while Yoo Yeonha glared at him with discontent. To be honest, Kim Hajin had been too relaxed around her these days. He did renew his contract and got a huge raise after that incident, but he hadn't been doing anything for the past eighteen months aside from making fun of his employer.

Yoo Yeonha got up and said, "I'm going now. I'll leave arranging the bed to you since I'll be using it again tomorrow."

"Whoa, first it was excessive involvement and now you're power-tripping?"

"Damn you!" Yoo Yeonha growled before she jabbed her elbow at his head and stormed off.

"Kekeke!" Kim Hajin burst into laughter and fell on his back.

Meanwhile, Yoo Yeonha trembled in anger as she heard him cackle. Strangely enough, her body was trembling to the beat of his laughter, which annoyed her even more...

* * *

There was a saying, *'If you can't avoid it, just enjoy it.'*

I used to be immature and said that I would never do something I didn't want to, but I learned how to compromise as time went by.

A human's brain was quite the fascinating thing. It would boost the other half's output if half of it wasn't being used. As if it was forcing us to not even spare a glance at closed doors or waste our time knocking on them.

Thanks to that, I became a part of this world and adapted because I couldn't do anything about it.

This was a world I created, but all of the episodes I created disappeared and I wasn't able to return to my own world.

—... The team leader is entering the conference room.

One of the bodyguards reported through my earpiece. I didn't bother responding and just acted immediately after hearing the report. I enjoyed a certain level of independence compared to Yoo Yeonha's other bodyguards. That was all thanks to the big thing I did around a year ago.

"There she is!"

"Get the camera ready!"

The conference room started to get rowdy and the doors soon opened. I observed Yoo Yeonha walking towards the podium. There wasn't a single part of her that looked disheveled like this morning.

She was walking with a straight and confident posture in formal attire.

Yoo Yeonha walked to the front of the podium and flashed a smile before greeting the reporters on the front line.

"Hello, how have you been?"

"*Huh...? Ah, y-yes. Good. Hahaha...*"

Yoo Yeonha gently nodded in response before she went up to the podium and started her speech without a single paper in hand, “I am here today to refute all of the rumors about me...”

The press conference started and I observed the entire thing. Yoo Yeonha confidently articulated and delivered her speech to quell the rumors, but the reporters barraged her with both legitimate and baseless questions.

However, she replied to their questions and skillfully avoided the ones that were difficult to answer. She was doing quite well, but the main problem was the number of enemies. There were roughly six to seven hundred reporters in the conference room and all of them were out to get her.

Yoo Yeonha did her best to answer as many questions as she could, but the press conference soon came to a close as there wasn’t enough time to respond to everyone’s questions.

“I will show with my actions instead of words from now on,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“What do you mean by that? How will you show it by actions?”

“Is Essence of the Straits a kingdom?! Why the nepotism?!”

The reporters that didn’t get their turn shouted at the top of their lungs when Yoo Yeonha tried to end the press conference, but she flat-out ignored them and left the room.

It was now my turn. I ran up to her and blocked off the cameras and reporters trying to get close to her. I was quite good at it as I had the gift, *[Bodyguard]*.

“Wow, you were quite eloquent,” I praised her.

The team leader, Yoo Yeonha, gritted her teeth while trying her best to not smile after getting praised.

Our way back after the intense press conference was no different from a war.

Yoo Yeonha wiped her eyes with her sleeve and was surprised when there was a droplet of water. She discreetly looked sideways and saw Kim Hajin busily on his smartwatch.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Nothing, just reading the news.”

“What news?”

“Your news,” he replied before projecting a hologram.

[Yoo Yeonha from Essence of the Straits has refuted all allegations of excessive involvement...]

[Yoo Yeonha’s tear-jerking effort to wash her image...]

“They say it was tear-jerking.”

“Hey... I told you to stop that...”

Yoo Yeonha waved her hand over the hologram and cleared it away. Her information guild was already analyzing the media’s reaction to the press conference, so she wanted to avoid seeing these tabloid-like headlines for the sake of her mental health.

“Hey, I’m asking this just in case, but can we proceed with the hunt?” Kim Hajin asked.

Yoo Yeonha had to busily move about starting next week to solidify her position as the team leader. The main reason there were such rumors about her in the first place was due to the prejudice that Yoo Yeonha was not talented enough to be a hero.

“I have to. People are calling me an administrator instead of a hero.”

“Really? Then I’m taking tomorrow off.”

“I know right? Does it make sense for them to say this about someone who graduated ninth from Cube?!”

“...Are you even listening to me?”

“What?”

Kim Hajin smirked in response. Yoo Yeonha found his smirk to be quite annoying.

“*Sigh...*”

In the end, she could only sigh in resignation and looked out the window.

The limousine soon reached the mansion gates and both of them got off at the parking lot.

Clack... Clack...

Kim Hajin suddenly extended his hand towards her, but Yoo Yeonha flinched and distanced herself from him.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“It tried to bite you,” he replied as he opened his hand to show a mosquito.

Yoo Yeonha frowned and grumbled, “...You’re quite the odd one.”

“That’s good to know.”

* * *

The third floor of Yoo Yeonha’s mansion, which was basically my house, was filled with all sorts of furniture I created with *[Dexterity]* and *[Stigma]*. Not only that, all of them possessed a special effect.

For example, anyone who saw a portrait that I randomly scribbled would feel at ease. Anyone who sat on the chair I made would feel their spine and pelvic bone realign and anyone who slept on the bed I made would feel all their fatigue wash away.

These were all extremely practical, yet magical effects.

“I should probably make her a bed...”

That was probably the main reason our esteemed team leader took over my room in the first place. I could see her burying herself in my bed and sleeping with a smile like a kitten.

“*Hmm...* Rather than that...”

I went over the news articles.

Yoo Yeonha’s excessive involvement was a part of the story setting I wrote, but I never expected it to happen as all of the story settings I wrote were removed.

“What should I do...” I rubbed my chin and contemplated.

First off, I wasn’t sure if this episode would play out as I wrote it or if it would branch off in a different direction.

I couldn’t help but hope that this wouldn’t cause significant damage to Yoo Yeonha. I mean, I guess she kind of grew on me these past two years. More importantly, she was the key to my retirement...

Not because she was my employer, but because most of my investments were tied to Essence of the Straits’ stocks.

“*Tsk...*”

I confirmed that she was fast asleep before I went over to the armory on the third floor.

The next morning, Yoo Yeonha didn't pressure her team to perform in this hunt. After all, she was the one who had something to prove and not her team.

She leisurely stepped on the field just as she always did with her six teammates right behind her.

"Alright, we're going to report this dungeon," Yoo Yeonha said with a smile while looking down a small hidden passage.

Finding this hidden dungeon was one of her main accomplishments today.

"Yes, ma'am!"

Yoo Yeonha smiled before she turned around and radioed someone.

The new recruit who was taking pictures of the dungeon entrance raised a brow and looked at Yoo Yeonha.

"Who is team leader talking to?"

"*Hmm? Ah*, that one?" Lee Hojun, a third year hero and warrior, flashed a grin. "That's probably the security team."

"*Huh?* The security team?"

"Yeah, we were ambushed once before. The team leader has made it a habit to frequently stay in touch with them. I mean, you probably heard of that incident a year and a half ago, right?"

"Oh, right... Was team leader there as well?"

"Yep."

The new recruit's face darkened as he recalled the worst catastrophe of this decade that resulted in thousands of civilian casualties.

Something certainly changed in the team leader after that incident.

“Are you there?”

— Yeah, I’m watching over you right now. Why?

“...Don’t respond so late.”

— There are no threats around you.

“Tsk... Alright...”

Yoo Yeonha clicked her tongue and faced her team members with a bright smile.

“So, how does it look?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“We reported our findings. We can go in as soon as we get permission,” one of the team members replied.

“I see. That’s great news,” Yoo Yeonha said with a nod.

Side Stories 87

What If Story (2)

I was watching over the dungeon's interior from the top of a tree on the mountain ridge. My thousand-mile eyes pierced through the thick mana fog and reached the raid team that entered the dungeon just now.

There were a total of seven people in the team including Yoo Yeonha.

I was munching on some snacks while watching over them.

— *Phew...*

Yoo Yeonha wiped her sweat with her sleeve. It seemed that her body stiffened up from the excessive anxiety she was feeling. I suspected that the past incident was still affecting her mental state.

Then, I suddenly saw a silhouette of the catastrophic disaster that day.

— Can you hear me?

The djinns' artillery barrage rained down on civilians and thousands died. Their corpses were littered all over the ground while the ravaged concrete streets were soaked in rivers of blood.

— Hey...?

Thousands of people were minced to pieces. Both the old and young had their bones and organs mashed together into a paste.

— Hey!

I snapped back to reality from the sudden scream.

I replied, “Yeah, yeah. What?”

— Hey! Why?! Why?! Why are you responding so late?!

It felt as if her shrieking voice was digging through my ear canal.

I simply smirked and replied, “Sorry, my bad. You can keep continuing. You’ll find it up front...”

— So it’s funny? What’s so funny? *Ha?! I asked you what’s so funny!*

“The dungeon will get agitated if you keep causing a scene.”

Yoo Yeonh gritted her teeth and grumbled.

— Don’t get distracted.

“I’m not.”

I looked at her. She was surprisingly looking back at me despite our distance.

“I only have eyes for you,” I added.

She flinched at my words and stuck out her tongue while pouting. It was our supreme team leader’s habit that usually came out whenever she was taken aback.

— What are you saying...? Stop saying such nonsense and focus on your work...

Yoo Yeonha grumbled, but her cheeks were flushed red for some reason.

* * *

The hidden dungeon was surprisingly easy. The team itself was quite skilled, but the fact that they didn’t need to concern themselves with scouting played a huge part.

“It really is amazing... How is it possible to see the inside of the dungeon from outside?”

Yoo Yeonha’s fellow Cube alumni, Yi Jiyeon, asked.

She was the same age and graduated the same year as Yoo Yeonha, but always made sure to not cross certain lines when they were working.

“Yeah, I’m surprised myself. I thought he was only good at being a bodyguard,” Lee Hojun said while fiddling with a pot.

The smell of ramyun was teeming from the boiling pot. Yoo Yeonha could feel her mouth salivating at the smell.

She discreetly swallowed her saliva.

“He is quite talented in numerous ways.”

“Oh right, he’s also a Cube alumnus, no?”

“Yes, but he dropped out before the first year even finished and worked as a mercenary for three years before signing a contract with me.”

“As expected, you really have an eye for talent, team leader.”

They were currently cooking inside the dungeon. They cleared the entire dungeon in only twelve hours, but had to replenish the nearly ten thousand calories they lost in the process as they could suffer from exhaustion if they didn’t.

“Ah, the ramyun is finished.”

Their menu for tonight was ramyun, pork belly, and other high-calorie food. In short, it was food that not only commoners enjoyed, but Yoo Yeonha also took delight in.

“Oh right, team leader doesn’t eat ramyun, right?” Yi Jiyeon asked

with a hint of worry in her voice.

“It’s alright. It’s childish to be picky with food in these kinds of situations,” Yoo Yeonha nonchalantly replied.

She sat down in front of the food and picked up a good chunk of the noodles from the pot and transferred it to her plate.

“I’ll give it a try...” she muttered while reminding herself not to slurp the ramyun and eat it as gracefully as possible.

“...”

It was tasty as she expected, but she couldn’t deny that it suddenly reminded her of Kim Hajin. After all, the ramyun he cooked was miles better than this one.

“How is it? I guess it doesn’t live up to your taste buds...”

“No, I’m fine. I can stomach it.”

Pork belly, tenderloin, instant rice, ramyun, bibim noodles, boiled eggs, etc...

Yoo Yeonha could eat all of these to her heart’s content without having to be conscious of other people thanks to the extremely convenient excuse that they were inside a dungeon. Of course, she didn’t forget to pretend that it wasn’t really good, but ate all of her portions anyway.

“Shall we wrap it up?” Yoo Yeonha ate her fill and moved on to check their results for the day.

“Armor... sword... armband... necklace...”

They gained a total of four relics. All of them would definitely be worth billions of won judging by the dense mana that they emitted.

Yi Jiyeon walked towards her with a satisfied smile, “We got quite the

haul. That accessory relic is the jackpot...”

Accessories fetched the highest prices among relics, which was why Yi Jiyeon was fixated on it. However, Yoo Yeonha couldn’t take her eyes off the armband that looked perfectly suited for a marksman.

She continued staring at the armband and thought, *‘It would be perfect for him.’* The thought made her jump in surprise and she slapped her own cheeks.

‘What’s wrong with me? Am I going crazy?’

“Everyone... Let’s get ready to go back. Pack up the relics and let’s go...” Yoo Yeonha said.

* * *

The next day, Yoo Yeonha returned to the guild with her spoils from the dungeon. Even the media came since the relics she gained were worthy of such attention.

“Four relics...? These are really good! The necklace looks like it’ll be at least an ancient tier,” the appraiser of Essence of the Straits marveled at the relics.

Yoo Yeonha smiled and replied, “That’s great news. Please store them in the vault.”

“Yes, ma’am!”

Yoo Yeonha walked to her office as she still had to plan for her business trip next week.

“Aigoo~ Hello, team leader!”

She ran into the vice guild master.

Yoo Yeonha loathed the idea of even calling that sleazy weasel’s name as he approached her with his entourage.

Yoo Yeonha put on a smile and greeted him back, “Hello, how are you, vice guild master? You seem to be in a good mood today.”

“Of course! Our beloved team leader came back with four relics, so isn’t that a cause for celebration? *Hahahaha!*”

The man’s laughter annoyed Yoo Yeonha, but what annoyed her even more was the fact that he placed his hand on her shoulder.

“I hope that you will continue working hard for our guild. Oh right, we don’t care about the rumors about you, not at all. I mean, team leader is just the team leader, right?” the man said with obvious sarcasm.

However, Yoo Yeonha simply smiled in response.

“Also, I heard that you’re going to China on a business trip next week. Please do your best for that as well! But don’t worry, we’ll clean up after you if you fail, so just relax. *Bwahahaha!*” the man said before he walked away with a burst of boisterous laughter.

Yoo Yeonha leaned on a wall and muttered under her breath, “Ah... So annoying...”

That man’s very existence was a source of stress for her. She could feel another migraine pounding on her head.

She closed her eyes and massaged her temples when a low voice asked her out of nowhere, “Are you alright?”

“...?”

She flinched and opened her eyes to find Kim Hajin right in front of her.

“*Huh?* What?”

Why was he here? She wondered while tilting her head in confusion.

He was still in his combat suit and smirked as he placed his hands on her temples. He intended to place his hands on her temples, but ended up covering her entire face because her face was so small.

“W-What are you doing?”

“Just stay still.”

Kim Hajin infused stigma’s mana into her to cure her migraine. Blue light glowed from his hands and made her stop resisting as the soothing feeling spread throughout her entire body.

Not long after Kim Hajin removed his hands, she wobbled and leaned against his chest.

“Haa...”

She let out a moan after noticing that the pain had disappeared and looked up at him with out-of-focus eyes.

“What are you doing here...?” she asked.

“Stalking,” he replied.

“Stalking...?”

“Yeah, you don’t have to know anything other than that.”

Yoo Yeonha was about to ask what he was talking about when they suddenly sensed someone’s presence on the staircase. This made her come back to her senses.

“Get away from me!” she screamed and pushed him away.

“Whoa!”

Kim Hajin was pushed to the end of the corridor. Yoo Yeonha put on her haughty nonchalant expression and greeted her guild members.

A month before...

A mana field appeared in Northern China. Fortunately, there were no civilian casualties as they predicted the field's appearance. However, the field was so large that it couldn't be cleared by the Chinese guilds alone.

In the end, the Chinese government decided to auction the right to raid the field to various prestigious foreign guilds. Essence of the Straits was planning to participate.

The auction was being held at the largest auction house in Shanghai, China: Wigitzen.

Yoo Yeonha steeled her resolve as she arrived at the portal station. She was greeted by the tall skyscrapers of Shanghai along with a wave of reporters.

Her security detail paved the way for her and she barely managed to get into her limousine.

"You here?" I greeted her with a smile inside the limousine.

Yoo Yeonha took off her sunglasses and went straight to business, "My first schedule is the round table meeting, right?"

The auction would take place over five consecutive days and more than one hundred guilds were participating. However, the Chinese government restricted entry to only fifty guilds per day.

The purpose of the round table meeting was to prepare before participating in the auction.

"Did you finish your preparations?" I asked.

She didn't respond, so I peeked at the hologram she was looking at.

“I think Deshwing will be too difficult,” I commented.

Only then did she finally look at me.

The field was auctioned off into twenty-seven fields and Deshwing was regarded as the most difficult one among them.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly asked, “Are you going to participate?”

“Me?” I frowned in response.

She tilted her head and said, “My bad. That came out wrong. You’re going to participate.”

“*Huh*...? Really? When was that decided?” I shrugged.

I didn’t really feel like participating, but that didn’t mean I didn’t want to. I could gain some SP if I joined the raid and I was trying to come up with more ways to earn SP these days.

“This is your reward,” she said as she took something out of her bag.

It was an armguard that covered one’s thumb all the way to the elbow.

“They said it’s an ancient relic. It’ll be quite useful to you.”

“Is this a bribe?”

“I’ll give it to you if you promise to participate.”

“Okay... Well, I want to be with you so I guess it’s fine,” I said with a smile and put on the armguard.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly flinched for no reason and grumbled, “*Ah*. Stop, will you? Don’t joke about things like that.”

“Why?”

“It’s giving me goosebumps,” she said while scratching her arm.

She sounded quite serious for no reason, but it was probably because she was nervous about the upcoming meeting.

“Sure.

“Ehem...”

Yoo Yeonha faked a cough while trying to stop herself from smiling. She seemed to be embarrassed and tried to change the topic.

“I think that’s the place,” she said while pointing at two huge buildings outside.

One of the buildings looked like a gigantic fish while the building next to it looked like a dome or a colosseum with a lid on top.

“The meeting will be in that colosseum and you’ll be coming with me.”

“I have to go...?” I asked while tilting my head in confusion.

“Yes, we’re allowed to bring in one adjutant to the meeting and I chose you as mine.”

“...Why?”

I couldn’t help but find it strange. Yoo Yeonha was always conscious of her image and tried to distance herself from any scandals. That was also the reason why she avoided talking to me in front of others.

The only time we were able to talk was during a dungeon raid, traveling in the limousine during working hours, or at the mansion where paparazzi and spies couldn’t infiltrate.

Of course, the round table meeting was also an official matter. It would be strange and attract a lot of attention if she brought along a mercenary instead of a hero as her adjutant.

“Do you remember Lee Hojun? The one who participated in the last dungeon raid...”

“Yeah.”

“I was thinking of bringing him along as my adjutant, but it turns out that he was the one who sold my information to the press...”

“Oh...” I awkwardly scratched my head.

Yoo Yeonha seemed embarrassed about it and flashed an awkward smile. Then she added, “I thought about bringing Yi Jiyeon since she’s talented, but... she’s too dumb...”

Yi Jiyeon possessed excellent talent and decision-making abilities as a supporter, but she was the worst person to bring in these kinds of situations.

“You’re the only one I can trust right now...”

I finally understood her intentions after listening to her.

Yoo Yeonha let out a sigh and covered her face with her hands.

I watched her for a few seconds and asked, “How long do you want me to massage your head before you sleep?”

“...What did you just say?”

“It’ll feel really good. It felt good last time, right? Your head will clear up.”

“...I don’t really need it,” Yoo Yeonha scoffed and turned her back towards me.

She was probably asking for it right now.

I placed my hands on her temples and it only took exactly three seconds before a moan escaped from her lips.

Side Stories 88

What If Story (3)

The order of entry to the round table meeting was decided based on the guild's world ranking. Both the world's last ranked guild and the top guild, Creator's Sacred Grace, participated.

That was the reason why Essence of the Straits couldn't help but attract attention since they were second in the world ranking.

"Phew..." Yoo Yeonha stood in front of the door leading to the meeting hall and arranged her clothes.

She sharpened her collars and made sure there wasn't a single crease on her clothes.

— The representatives of Essence of the Straits, Yoo Yeonha, and her adjutant, Kim Hajin, are entering.

A voice announced our entrance.

Yoo Yeonha was about to enter when she stopped and scanned me from head to toe. She seemed dissatisfied about something as she extended her hand towards my necktie.

"Can't you put this on properly? It's crooked."

"...I never wore one before."

She nodded in satisfaction after fixing my necktie.

"Alright, let's go now."

The doors opened and a large round table appeared with numerous guild representatives and their adjutants already seated.

Yoo Yeonha held her head up despite the attention she was receiving as she walked to her seat.

Clack... Clack... Clack... Clack...

The sound of her high heels resonated in the room as she walked. I was walking right behind her.

— The representative of Creator's Sacred Grace, Yun Seung-Ah, and her adjutant, Kim Suho, are now entering.

As expected, the last to enter was Creator's Sacred Grace.

I eagerly looked at the door in anticipation of seeing a familiar face. Yun Seung-Ah and Kim Suho entered shortly afterwards.

Both of them looked no different from when I was in Cube.

Kim Suho winked at me the moment he saw me... Gross...

The meeting finally started after everyone took their seats. The moderator of the meeting was an executive of the Hero Association, Kim Jonghyuk.

He raised his glasses and said, "Then, we will now commence the meeting.

The first topic at hand was choosing the auction date. Yoo Yeonha chose the first and fourth days of the auction, which were the dates when most of the difficult fields were allocated. Creator's Sacred Grace made the same choice as her.

Yoo Yeonha was the youngest representative in this meeting, but she led the meeting with charisma. After all, there was no way anyone could speak ill or look down on her simply because of some rumors flying around when she was the representative of the second most powerful guild in the world.

"I am aware that Essence of the Straits is currently raiding a large dungeon and attempting to raid a high-level field at the same time.

That is simply too reckless.”

“We can attempt it at the same time because it is a field. A field has no time limit, unlike a dungeon and...”

The representatives were in a heated exchange when the representative from Frost Sanctuary pointed at me and asked, “But... I heard the adjutant from Essence of the Straits is a mercenary. Am I correct?”

I simply nodded in response.

“Then what’s your main weapon? *Ah*, I’m just asking because I heard some strange rumors that you use a gun.”

Yoo Yeonha replied with a frown, “Yes, he does use a gun.”

“*Hmm...* Then, is he participating in the field as well?”

Yun Seung-Ah and the other representatives watched with intrigued looks.

I looked at the back of Yoo Yeonha’s head, but didn’t see our dear supreme team leader attempting to respond to the question.

In the end, I simply shrugged and replied on my own, “Yes, I will be.”

“Ohh... Will that work? A field is as dangerous as a dungeon, but taking a gunner as your adjutant...?”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t respond, which made the other guild representatives look at me with curious eyes.

I was a bit burdened by the attention I was receiving, but I simply smiled and replied, “I’m the type that gets stronger when protecting someone. I’m confident in my protection abilities.”

This wasn’t a bluff. The gift [*Bodyguard*] that I spent a year’s worth of SP on was more than enough to clear the field.

“Really?”

Some of the people in the room gasped at my words. Even the representative from Frost Sanctuary attacking me just now seemed taken aback, but he soon flashed a smug smile.

Everyone else looked back and forth between me and Yoo Yeonha.

I could see steam rising from Yoo Yeonha’s head. Kim Suho seemed to be trying his best not to burst into laughter.

“*Hahaha!* Then, I look forward to your exploits.”

I wasn’t sure if my response was enough, but the representative from Frost Sanctuary withdrew his blade and stopped attacking me after that.

Wait, should I have said tongue instead of blade...?

* * *

Yoo Yeonha stormed out as soon as the meeting was concluded.

She checked her watch. The time was seven thirty in the evening and the first auction would start exactly an hour later.

She looked back and said, “...I’ll go to the auction alone.”

Strangely enough, she found it difficult to look Kim Hajin in the eyes. Fortunately, there was a fifty person limit for the auction so it was a convenient excuse to avoid him.

“Alright then, I’ll be waiting outside,” he replied with a smile.

“Do what you want,” she curtly replied and walked away.

However, she couldn’t help but keep looking back for some reason. She would involuntarily glance back after every two steps she took. In the end, she let out a sigh and decided to tackle the issue head-on. She

knew that she wouldn't be able to focus on the auction at this rate because her curiosity got the better of her.

"Hey..."

"*Hmm?*"

"What did you mean a while ago?"

"Mean what?"

Yoo Yeonha couldn't respond to the nonchalant response and just stared at him. She never expected that he was this type of a man.

"I mean..." she squirmed while trying to come up with the words, but soon shook her head. "...Never mind."

"Hey, what is it?"

"I said never mind."

They continued walking for a while before both of them came to a halt. Yoo Yeonha looked somewhere and her eyes shot wide open.

Kim Hajin's eyes followed to where she was looking.

"Oh..."

It was Shin Jonghak.

Yoo Yeonha froze in place after seeing him talking to some woman.

Kim Hajin furrowed his brows and nonchalantly said, "...I'll be going first."

Yoo Yeonha couldn't stop him from leaving. She thought of stopping him, but it was too late as Shin Jonghak spotted her.

He looked exactly like how he used to.

“Hey, Yoo Yeonha. You’re here?”

“...Yeah.”

Yoo Yeonha looked beside him at the beautiful woman. She had no idea if that woman was his colleague or lover, but bowed and greeted her.

“You caused quite a scene,” Shin Jonghak said.

He wasn’t the representative for Desolate Moon, but was technically higher ranked than the representative. That was why it wasn’t weird for him to be there and know what happened at the round table meeting.

“Why did you choose a mercenary of all people to be your adjutant?”

Yoo Yeonha shook her head at the criticism and replied, “He has the skills to back it up.”

“Still, you have to think of his background.”

“Anyways...”

Shin Jonghak figured that talking about it any further would just spoil the mood, so he decided to change the subject, “Which dungeon are you guys going for?”

“I’m not sure...” Yoo Yeonha muttered in response.

Shin Jonghak rubbed his chin.

Yoo Yeonha stared at him. He was her first love and she loved him for the longest time. However, that love stopped after eleven years, three months, and thirteen days.

“I can’t tell you that,” she said.

He wouldn't come to her no matter how much she loved him. He wouldn't come no matter how long she waited. That was why she stopped and replaced her feelings with a grand ambition.

"I guess you're right."

"Yeah."

Shin Jonghak patted her on the shoulder and said, "I wish you the best."

It was quite rare for him to touch someone else, but this was his way of showing friendship to another person.

"You too, Jonghak... No, I wish you the best, next vice guild master of Desolate Moon," Yoo Yeonha said.

Shin Jonghak smiled in response. It was the same smile he had ever since he was a child, an innocent yet haughty smile.

* * *

The auction came to an end. Yoo Yeonha managed to get the field one level lower than Deshwing, which was Yijieng. It could be considered a success based on the results alone, but the real problem was choosing the raid members.

"Haa..."

She was looking at the hologram monitor to sort the guild members out, but her faction was lacking in many ways. After all, most of them were new recruits or had been in the guild for two years only.

She couldn't involve her father, Yoo Jinwoong, because that would further complicate things. In the end, she had to choose someone from the vice guild master's faction, but...

Yoo Yeonha closed her smartwatch and the hologram disappeared. The skyscrapers could be seen out the window.

She was currently staying at the most luxurious hotel in Shanghai, The Essential. It went without saying that this hotel chain was a subsidiary of Essence of the Straits judging from its name. She was currently staying alone on the hotel's penthouse floor.

“Let's think about it after we survey the field...” she muttered to herself.

It wasn't a dungeon, but a field. Surveying it in advance was an absolute must. There were things on the field that couldn't be seen through videos or reports. That was why it was imperative for the person in charge to personally visit the field and survey it.

Yoo Yeonha gathered her thoughts and sent a transmission to someone.

“Hey, I'm done with my work so you can come now,” she said.

However, there was no response no matter how long she waited.

She tilted her head in confusion and sent another transmission, “Hello? Are you sleeping?”

All she received in return was silence.

“Hey?”

She thought there was something wrong with her smartwatch, so she shook it a few times.

“Hello?”

Then, she tapped on it a few times as well.

Tak! Tak! Tak!

“HEY!”

— Yeah, what?

Only then did she finally receive a response.

She was about to say something when she heard someone snickering from the other end of the line. It was quite high-pitched and sounded something like, *Kekekeke!* or *Kyakyakya!*

“...What are you doing right now?” she asked with a hint of disgust.

—... I’m watching you.

“I said, what are you doing right now?”

— I told you. I’m watching you. I can see you all the way from here.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha gritted her teeth. She felt dizzy for a second as her entire body started getting hot.

“Come here.”

— *Huh?* Why? I can see you from here.

She couldn’t help but feel annoyed by him right now. She brushed her fingers through her hair and clenched her fist. Her palms were sweaty.

“I said come here.”

— Why?

“Hey...”

Yoo Yeonha felt like her pent-up anger would erupt at him, but she immediately changed her plan.

“Cough! Cough!”

She started coughing and spoke in a faint trembling voice, “...I’m

sick.”

— All of a sudden?

“My head hurts and I can’t sleep...”

She suddenly heard someone ask, *‘Who are you talking to?’*

It was broken Korean, but she was certain that it was a woman. He was currently with a woman right now.

Yoo Yeonha lost her cool and screamed, “COME HERE!... I said.”

—... Wow, there’s absolutely no respect for workers’ rights here. You should let your employee rest when they’re resting, you know.

“I don’t know. Just do what you want if you don’t want to come,” Yoo Yeonha retorted and hung up.

She lay on the sofa as rage started boiling inside her. She gritted her teeth and switched the TV on.

— 在这次会议上.....

There was a news report of what happened during the round table meeting. It was roughly about how the representative from Essence of the Straits brought a mercenary as her adjutant.

Five... ten... twenty... and thirty minutes passed.

Yoo Yeonha was restless while watching the news. She couldn’t help but feel bothered.

Where was he right now and what was he doing? How dare a bodyguard go fool around and not protect his employer! Who was that woman?

‘Ha! Unbelievable! Why am I surrounded by disloyal people...? Yeah, I’m not mad because I’m mad. I just wanted to act like I was mad to make him

nervous. I mean, why is he fooling around instead of doing his job? A bodyguard should dedicate himself to protecting his employer... I'm stuck in this penthouse while he's fooling around with some woman... '

"Ah... I can't take it," Yoo Yeonha grumbled and stood up.

However, she instantly made a detour and went back to the sofa after seeing that the elevator was coming up to the penthouse.

Ding!

The elevator door opened and someone's footsteps could be heard. Yoo Yeonha pretended to be asleep on the sofa.

The stench of perfume lingered in the air.

"Are you asleep?"

Yoo Yeonha didn't respond to the question.

Kim Hajin laughed and looked down at her without saying anything. Then he started playing with her hair.

"...Goodnight."

Those words made Yoo Yeonha act impulsively. She opened her eyes and pretended that she just woke up.

"Where have you been...?" she asked.

Her acting was perfect. She was confident that anyone would be fooled by her acting skills.

"I was making some money in the casino," he replied with a shrug.

"I heard some woman's voice..."

He smirked and replied, "I made quite a lot, so she clung to me. I think she works at the casino or something."

“ ... ”

Yoo Yeonha was speechless and couldn't find the right words. She continued staring at him before suddenly remembering what he said earlier today.

'I'm the type that gets stronger when protecting someone. I'm confident in my protection abilities.'

She was certain the someone he mentioned was her.

In the end, she ended up smiling and spoke in a completely different voice, "...Please don't go to places like that from now on."

Kim Hajin was quiet for quite a while. Was he thinking about how to respond to that?

Yoo Yeonha could feel her heart race while looking at his serious face. She couldn't understand why her heart was beating so fast in the first place.

Then, Kim Hajin finally replied...

"Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?"

Side Stories 89

What If Story (4)

We got up early in the morning the next day to survey the field. We hopped into an SUV and made our way towards the field that we won in the auction, Yijieng.

Yoo Yeonha didn't say a word during the entire trip. No, it would've been a relief if she didn't say anything at all.

"Hmph!"

She would immediately scoff and turn her head away from me whenever our eyes met. I tried to tell her that I was simply joking last night, but she didn't budge an inch.

"Hmph!"

The local agent driving the SUV looked into the rearview mirror and asked, "...But are you really a mercenary?"

"Yes," I replied.

"You use that gun?"

"Yes."

"I see..." the agent muttered in half-disbelief and half-amazement.

The mainstream mindset was that modern guns didn't work on monsters. They weren't technically wrong since guns were basically ineffective against monsters ranked intermediate or above even with mana bullets.

"How do you plan to do the survey, team leader...?" I carefully asked

Yoo Yeonha.

I was forced to mind my words because someone else was in the SUV with us.

Yoo Yeonha narrowed her eyes at me and shrugged, “What would a person like me know? I’ll leave it all to you.”

“...”

“*Hmph!*”

The SUV came to a halt while Yoo Yeonha did her best to sulk.

The driver turned to us and said, “This is the place.”

Clack...!

Yoo Yeonha opened the door and got off. I followed suit.

A fresh breeze greeted us from all four directions. In front of us was a vast plain without any obstacles in sight. It was an extremely vast plain that stretched into the horizon.

“*Hmm...*” Yoo Yeonha inspected the field with a serious look.

I used my thousand-mile eyes to survey the area as well. I was able to see the entirety of the field and even the entrance from where we were standing.

“Then, I’ll be going back now,” the local agent said with a bow before he took out an electric kickboard from the SUV’s trunk.

Well, it was a bit strange to call it a kickboard since it was extremely fast. Anyways...

I spoke casually to her again, “Are you going in?”

A field was similar, yet different to a dungeon. They were both

created from mana, but the field that appeared in China was closer to a barrier.

First of all, an entrance existed in fields. In short, this meant that a field was nothing more than empty land from the outside, but the interior was entirely different from what could be seen. Also, there was no way to tell what the field would look like from the outside.

“I’ll go in alone. I’m nobody after all,” Yoo Yeonha grumbled with a hint of sadness in her voice.

“Sure. Do what you want,” I replied with a shrug and turned around to walk back to the SUV.

However, I stopped in my tracks after feeling a powerful surge of killing intent from behind. I could feel the hair on the back of my neck stand.

“*Ehem...! Ehem...!*” I faked a cough and turned around again.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha’s lips were trembling. Was she holding back tears by any chance or was she trying to push down her anger?

I smiled after getting my answer as she trembled in anger. I should stop playing with her now.

“I’m just joking. Let’s go in together,” I said.

Only then did Yoo Yeonha’s expression finally relax.

“I think that’s the entrance,” I said while pointing at a tree near us.

The tree was around three meters tall. Its branches spread wide apart as if opening its arms. I could see a transparent entrance right underneath its branches.

“Yes, that should be it. Let’s go,” Yoo Yeonha replied.

We walked towards the entrance.

Yoo Yeonha extended her arm in front of the entrance and waved. Her milky white and smooth arm disappeared into the entrance.

“Shall we go in?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“Alright, who goes in first?”

“Up to you.”

“Fine.”

She sounded quite confident with her response, but I could tell that she was obviously hesitating judging from the fact that she was squirming in place. In the end, I had no choice but to play my part as the bodyguard and enter first. Then I grabbed her hand sticking out in mid-air and yanked it towards me.

“*Whoa!* That scared me!”

“How is it?” I asked.

We immediately scanned our surroundings when we entered the field.

“*Hmm...* It looks like nothing special.”

“Yeah, I agree.”

The interior looked like an abandoned house from the slabs of concrete and steel rods littered here and there. Vines and moss were growing on top of the debris.

“There’s a high possibility that it’s a reenactment of the past,” Yoo Yeonha said.

There were some cases where a field would recreate a past scenery, so

we could find out what happened if we looked around.

“What should we do?” I asked.

“You know better than I do. We’ll have to stay here for at least thirty minutes for a proper survey,” Yoo Yeonha replied before taking out various pieces of equipment from her bag.

The first thing she took out was her whip followed by a mana density measurer, a compass, an automatic map drawer, and other items that were mandatory when surveying fields.

I drew my gun and infused aether into it just in case. I turned my Desert Eagle into a shotgun powerful enough to blow away an intermediate rank monster.

“Shall we go?” I asked.

“Yes... please lead the way,” Yoo Yeonha replied while clinging to the hem of my shirt.

* * *

Two hours passed.

“I think we hit the jackpot...”

We did some light hunting while surveying the field. I nodded in agreement after inspecting the few remains of the monsters we defeated.

We defeated some cordyceps and a cyclops. The cordyceps was a fungi parasite monster that took control of other monsters while the cyclops was a distant cousin of ogres, except it only had one eye.

We hit the jackpot because their remains had immense value.

It was needless to explain why cordyceps were so valuable while the cyclops’ eye was a medicine highly sought after by wealthy people.

“It’s an excellent hunting spot,” I said.

“Then...” Yoo Yeonha took out a dagger and personally disassembled the cordyceps and extracted the cyclops’ eye. Her hands didn’t get dirty since she conjured gloves with her mana before working on the monster remains.

“Let’s head back,” Yoo Yeonha said after storing the cleanly cut monster remains in an icebox.

“Sure,” I replied.

We walked to the tree bathing underneath the moonlight with all of our equipment in tow. We marched into the entrance... but nothing happened.

“...?”

Both of us blinked. What was going on?

Yoo Yeonha spun on the spot and walked into the entrance again.

Whoosh... Whoosh...

She tried numerous times, but nothing happened.

“What’s going on...?” she asked while looking at me.

I was confused and decided to inspect the entrance again. Then I found something bizarre.

“*Huh?*” I muttered.

“What’s wrong?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“...The entrance is gone?”

Six more hours passed. I took a few naps while Yoo Yeonha was busy arranging some documents on her smartwatch. We didn't have internet access, but it was still possible to use a smartwatch to work on some documents offline.

"This is taking quite a while..." I grumbled.

"It should be back sooner or later. Don't worry so much. It's not like it's never happened before, right?" Yoo Yeonha nonchalantly replied.

She was as calm as ever.

It was exactly as she said. Instances where the field's entrance suddenly changed to another place had happened during a survey. It was quite rare, but there were precedents of it documented.

"I guess... but are you alright?" I asked.

"Does it matter if I'm alright or not? It's not going to take that long for the entrance to return and I have a mountain of work to do anyways," Yoo Yeonha replied just as I expected she would.

Her response made me feel at ease.

I stretched my arms and lay on the grass. I looked up at the sky when suddenly...

Pat!

A water droplet fell on my face.

"...Huh?"

Pat... Pat... Patpat... Patpatpat... Tututututu!

A downpour occurred even before I could ask, *'Is it raining?'*

Yoo Yeonha looked surprised as well.

“Does it rain inside fields as well?” I asked her.

“I heard it’s possible, but a field is still a mana dimension so... it’s quite dangerous...”

“Let’s take shelter first.”

There were a lot of abandoned buildings in the area that we could use for shelter from the rain.

However, Yoo Yeonha shook her head and said, “What if the entrance appears during that time? We don’t know when it’ll appear again, so we have to keep watch over it.”

“Hmm...”

Her logic was quite convincing, but we couldn’t afford to stay under mana rain known to be more potent than acid rain.

“Then you stay here for a bit. I’ll go and look for things we can build a shelter with. Let me know if the entrance comes back,” I said before standing up.

She suddenly grabbed my hand. I looked back and she was looking at me with wet eyes.

“...What?” I asked.

Yoo Yeonha didn’t say anything, but I noticed her lips were squirming again. She exhaled as a rain droplet flowed down her long eyelashes.

“Let’s go together... I don’t want to be alone...” Yoo Yeonha said as she put her long fingers into my sleeve.

* * *

Patpatpatpatpatpat...!

The rain showed no signs of stopping, but we managed to build quite

a cozy shelter. The old tree in front of the field's entrance underwent a renovation and had a roof now.

Of course, *[Dexterity]* didn't forget to add an artistic touch to it regardless of the situation we were in. Our shelter was more like a mini-mansion if I slightly exaggerated.

"I think I almost died..." I grumbled while checking the bruises on my body.

The entire shelter took four hours to build. This was exactly why every drop of mana rain was so dangerous.

It wasn't an exaggeration to say that it was more like hail, but with steel shots instead of water.

"How are you? Are you alright?" I asked Yoo Yeonha.

She blankly stared at the sky before looking down. She seemed to have lost it for some reason...

"I'm alright, but don't you think it's taking too long...? We can't afford to waste time trapped here like this..." she said.

She tried her best to sound nonchalant like usual, but I could tell she sounded different this time. In fact, she was sitting with her knees curled up to her chest. This posture was something our beloved supreme team leader would never do.

"We're losing too much time... If we fail to leave this place and they find out that something happened to me here..." she muttered repeatedly with her face buried in her knees.

I was slightly taken aback by the dramatic shift in her emotions. No, was she pretending to be alright this entire time?

"Yeah... *Hmm...*"

I guess I had no choice. I took out a thick book from my rucksack. I originally planned to give this to her at a critical time, but this was

probably the most effective thing right now to stop her spiraling depression.

“Hey.”

“...”

“Aren’t you going to respond?”

“What?” Yoo Yeonha retorted and glared at me.

I felt mischievous all of a sudden and thought of teasing her. She had a big droplet at the edge of her eyes. I wasn’t sure if she caught a cold from the air or not, but her nose was bright red as well. Her breathing was labored and she swept her hair back a bit too often.

It seemed like I didn’t pay enough attention to her while I was engrossed in building our shelter.

“It’s nothing much, but... Here, take this,” I said as I gave her the gift.

“What is this...?”

“Just take a look.”

Yoo Yeonha tilted her head in confusion as she received the book.

“An accounting book...?” she muttered.

“Yeah, I was busy tailing everyone from the vice guild master’s faction,” I proudly replied.

I not only tailed them, but also asked Kim Hosup to hack their smartwatches. Anyways, it was the result of my painstaking efforts. I found that accounting book after tailing individual after individual.

The accounting book was created by some hero who was scared of being abandoned. It contained a list of misdeeds the vice guild master asked from the hero.

“Come on... There’s no way...” Yoo Yeonha muttered with a hint of skepticism.

She opened the book without much thought. The teardrop disappeared from the corners of her eyes and she straightened her posture.

She was entirely focused and kept muttering while reading every line in the book.

“I stole that, so it can't be used as evidence in court. You know that too, right?” I said.

I felt proud and embarrassed at the same time. After all, this was probably the best gift anyone could give her.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll find a use for... *Woah!*”

Bam!

However, something smashed into me before I could even finish. Yoo Yeonha had flung herself towards me.

She remained in my embrace without saying anything. No, she did say something, but it was so faint and difficult to understand because of her sniffing.

“Is... Ish thish weel...?” she asked.

I replied that it certainly was, which made her cry.

She turned her head away and covered it with her sleeves. Maybe she didn’t want me to see her crying, but she was doing a bad job at it as she kept shrugging while wiping her face with her sleeves.

It looked like she was dancing...

“Stop crying. You can win against the vice guild master once you get out of here,” I said.

“Haha... Hahaha...” Yoo Yeonha brightly smiled in response.

Her smile seemed to say, ‘*When did I ever cry?*’

I liked the way she smiled just now.

* * *

Four hours before the incident...

I looked at the night sky and looked back down at the table I made. Yoo Yeonha was writing something on her smartwatch. It seemed that our beloved supreme team leader was drafting a press conference speech.

“I’m done!” she gleefully exclaimed like an elementary student who just finished their summer vacation homework.

Yoo Yeonha proudly smiled and triumphantly walked towards me, “Let me show this to... *Kyak!*”

She tripped while walking over to me. This was all because she stubbornly wore high heels even to this place.

Thud!

She ended up in my embrace after I caught her from the fall.

“*Ugh...* my ankle...” she groaned in pain.

She looked quite cute. Her messy look without washing her hair or changing clothes for a day made her look like a street kitten.

“Are you alright?”

“...!”

Yoo Yeonha instantly shot up after realizing what was going on.

“Ah, I have to make some edits...” she muttered and ran to the chair.

Then she glanced at me after moving three meters away.

Our eyes met and her cheeks blushed.

I bitterly smiled and opened the door to our shelter.

“*Huh?* Where are you going?” she asked.

“It’s time to sleep, so I’m going to craft some beds out of wood.”

“We won’t be staying for long, so why bother making a bed...?”

“Who knows, right?”

“Geez... Can you not say unlucky things like that?” Yoo Yeonha grumbled and narrowed her eyes before meekly muttering, “Also... I don’t want to sleep alone. I’ll come with you if you’re going in...”

Side Stories 90

What If Story (5)

Time passed as the sun set and the moon rose. The time we spent here turned from hours to days.

We had been stuck here for four days now according to our smartwatches. The rain stopped after a day, but it was immediately followed by snow afterwards.

I moved about the snow-white fields. I figured it was a waste of time to just sit around and do nothing, so I went out to hunt monsters in the field while Yoo Yeonha studied the accounting book I gave her.

“...You have to get out to use that,” I muttered and threw down the remains of a wild boar in front of the shelter.

Yoo Yeonha was busy typing on her hologram keyboard, but glanced at me and said, “We will get out. Also, I’m already expecting all sorts of scenarios and making preparations for them every day since we got stuck here.”

“That’s amazing, but what about food? Are you going to eat?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha looked at the wild boar I caught. The wild boar’s thick muscles looked quite tasty even before it was butchered.

She gulped and said, “Give me thirty minutes.”

I started to skin the wild boar and butchered it. I cut off a juicy chunk of its belly and grilled it on top of the campfire. Then I ground some herbs I found in the field to season the meat, cut it into a steak, and plated it.

Yoo Yeonha was already at the table licking her lips.

“Let’s eat,” I said.

“Alright,” she immediately replied.

It was snowing outside, but we didn’t mind as we sat across from each other and enjoyed our meal. I grilled the remaining meat after she slurped hers up and started eyeing mine.

Today was quite peaceful just like the blanket of snow outside.

Yoo Yeonha finished her meal and took a shower before she sat on the bed and said, “You know...”

“What?”

“...”

I paused the game I was playing on my smartwatch.

She seemed interested in the game.

“Is it fun?”

“I just play it for a bit before going to sleep. Why?”

“Well, nothing much... just that... my hair’s all tangled up, so...” she said as she brushed her fingers through her wet hair.

I scoffed in disbelief. I offered to do her hair for her three days ago, but she refused.

“You want me to brush it for you?”

“Well... only if you want to...”

Yoo Yeonha pursed her lips while feigning ignorance. I conjured a

brush with stigma and she looked at it with eyes full of anticipation.

Seuk... Seuk...

I brushed her long, flowing hair. I was her personal hair stylist for around ten minutes and finally stopped after her hair dried.

“It’s time to sleep,” I said.

“...Okay, good night,” she replied with a hint of regret in her voice.

She stiffly lay down like Dracula, but it didn’t take long for her to curl up like a shrimp. It seemed that our beloved supreme team leader had a very bad sleeping habit. She slept like a newborn baby and I was worried that her back would be uncomfortable once she woke up.

I used to watch her sleep simply because she amazed me, but I noticed her hands were trembling this time and cold sweat was forming on her forehead.

“Ah... *ughh*... Let go...”

It looked like she was having a nightmare judging from how she kept biting her lips and moaning.

I gently held her trembling hand.

“...”

Then, her cold sweat dried up and her expression also loosened. The moonlight shone down on her.

“*Huff... Huff...*”

I smiled while watching her peacefully sleep. I figured that getting stuck here wasn’t really a waste of time in the end.

I would definitely find a way back, so I didn’t mind spending a bit more time with her alone.

And... the entrance appeared the next morning because of that thought.

* * *

Yoo Yeonha spotted the entrance first while brushing her teeth in the morning. She immediately called me and we hurriedly packed our belongings before heading out.

“See! I told you we would make it out!”

“Yeah, but...”

The first thing we did as soon as we got out after six days was to check our smartwatches.

“This is... amazing...”

Our smartwatches were filled with all sorts of gossip.

[Yoo Yeonha chose to elope instead of facing the mounting pressure?!]

[The team leader of Essence of the Strait eloped with her bodyguard?!]

[Was there an accident during the survey or did they really elope? Essence of the Strait filed a missing person report and is now searching.]

[The vice guild master of Essence of the Strait hopes Yoo Yeonha is safe.]

Yoo Yeonha called her father while I was busy reading the articles. I could hear him from the phone.

— Yeonha! Hey! Where have you been this entire time? Did you really elope?!

“No... what do you mean elope? I’m not dating anyone right now.”

— Are you sure?! Do you know how worried your mom is? Are you together with that mercenary right now?! The entire family is...

I bitterly smiled.

Yoo Yeonha's family was one of the most prestigious families in South Korea. Ironically, it wasn't strange to call them nobles.

Anyways, the issue was that I was just a mercenary compared to them.

— Put that mercenary on the line if he's there! Hurry!

“Ah, I don't want to. I'm going home soon, so hang up!”

— What did you say?!

Yoo Yeonha was actually breaking out in cold sweat while speaking on the phone. Meanwhile, I hopped into the SUV that was still parked. There were quite a lot of footprints around that probably belonged to journalists.

“Sigh...” Yoo Yeonha let out a sigh of resignation as she hopped into the back seat.

I switched on the SUV's ignition and asked, “So what do you plan to do now?”

“We will proceed as planned. I sent the file to my close subordinates and Falling Blossom too.”

As expected of our beloved supreme team leader, she was quite fast with her actions. She looked resolute and her tightly shut lips showed her resolve. Was she Gyebaek^[1] or something?

“I guess things are going alright,” I said and stepped on the accelerator.

“Yes, everything is turning out well thanks to you,” she replied.

Those were the last words she said as she closed her mouth again. I kept stealing glances at her through the rearview mirror, but I already knew what she wanted to say.

The SUV didn't shake even once while we descended the mountain, but that wasn't a good thing at all as the deafening silence was further amplified.

"So... I was thinking..." Yoo Yeonha said in a trembling voice.

I feigned ignorance and replied, "What?"

"Our contract... What do you think if we end it here? There's no truth to the scandal... but... I don't think we should be seen together from now on. I mean, it's going to cause harm to you as well so..."

Yoo Yeonha was Yoo Yeonha as expected. She didn't beat around the bush and went straight to the point.

I nodded in response. I wasn't surprised at all and already expected this even when we were stuck in the field. She mentioned that she was drafting various scenarios for when we managed to leave.

"Don't mind me—"

"I'll definitely reward you handsomely for the accounting book."

I was fine until she said those words. I felt somewhat offended and tightly gripped the steering wheel.

I didn't do that expecting a reward. Of course, I found all sorts of excuses to give her, but I was just doing what I wanted. There was no price tag behind my motive...

"Is that so?" I replied as calmly as possible.

It would just look like I was throwing a tantrum if I raised my voice. More importantly, the fact that she only thought to reward me rubbed me the wrong way.

However, I completely understood. I understood her because she was Yoo Yeonha. After all, repaying her debts was her life motto.

“You should be prepared to give me one of your subsidiaries,” I joked.

Yoo Yeonha laughed at my joke. She seemed to loosen up and leaned forward, “You’re already one of our shareholders, no?”

“You knew?”

“Well... I’ll reward you with ten times what you hold right now. Oh right, what do you think about setting up a premium furniture brand? I’ll support you to the fullest if you do.”

“Will you model for the advertisement?”

“*Hmm...* Only if I like the product.”

Yoo Yeonha placed her hands on her chin and brightly smiled.

We reached an urban area and it was amazing how we were already surrounded by reporters. I had no idea how they found out, but they rushed at us like a horde of zombies.

Yoo Yeonha put on her sunglasses when the cameras came rushing towards us.

“Thanks for your hard work.”

“Yeah, you too.”

“Don’t bother coming out. I’ll handle it myself.”

Yoo Yeonha opened the door and left the SUV. She was instantly swarmed by the cameras. A camera tried to take a picture of me through the SUV’s window, but the tint was simply too dark for them to get a good shot.

I had no idea where this bitter feeling was coming from. I could smile and all, but I only sighed for some reason.

Then, I suddenly felt embarrassed. I had no idea why and couldn’t

even laugh about it. Was I a teenager going through puberty or something? Why was it so hard for me to admit it?

I slapped my cheeks as I looked at Yoo Yeonha disappearing into the sea of reporters.

* * *

[“I will definitely reveal the corruption.” Essence of the Strait, Yoo Yeonha.]

[The vice guild master of Essence of the Strait says the numerous news articles exposing his misdeeds is a cowardly and malicious political slandering campaign.]

Yoo Yeonha went on the offensive this time. It seemed that the time she spent trapped in the field had helped her.

She was known as a ruthless and emotionless person, but the six days she spent trapped in the field labeled her as a lovestruck young woman who eloped with her lover. She denied all the rumors about eloping, but it wasn't all bad as this helped to tone down her cold image.

A week passed since the incident and Yoo Yeonha was now holding a press conference.

She traced the details in the accounting book and already gathered enough evidence. She formed an airtight case against those involved. The only thing left was to expose this to the public.

“I stand here today as a whistleblower. I am prepared to dirty myself for the sake of cleaning our beloved guild...”

Yoo Yeonha stood her ground and exposed the numerous corruption and scandals within the guild in front of the barrage of camera flashes.

Bribery, blackmail, raiding of unreported dungeons, embezzlement, and dozens of other cases were exposed. However, she didn't release all of it and kept some bullets for later. She planned to strike the vice

guild master hard if he ever decided to refute the allegations made against him.

However...

“What happened to the bodyguard in your scandal? I heard the bodyguard named Kim Hajin was terminated last week!”

It was ironic that the reporters were more interested in gossip rather than the truth.

Yoo Yeonha looked at the reporters who asked the question and let out a sigh, “Firstly, that was not a scandal. We were trapped in the field and he upheld his duty to protect me while we were trapped.”

“We heard you gave a lot of privilege to that bodyguard! There are reports that you lived in the same house too!”

“There are more than three hundred staff living in our mansion. He was just another one of our staff.”

The camera flashes continued.

“Secondly, we did not terminate him. His contract ran out. Our terms of contract were until the auction. I will no longer be answering questions related to this matter,” Yoo Yeonha said and went back to the main topic.

The press conference continued for quite a while after that. There was a lot to be said and asked.

Questions about Kim Hajin popped up from time to time. They wanted to know if the adjutant was helpful in the field, why she chose him as her adjutant, did the adjutant confess to her in the field...

— The press conference has concluded.

Yoo Yeonha left the press conference while reiterating the names of the reporters who asked those silly questions. She gritted her teeth in anger while vowing to exact revenge against them as she hopped into

her limousine.

“Welcome, ma’am.”

That person wasn’t in the limousine today. That person always sat beside her in the backseat, but was no longer there. He was replaced by another bodyguard.

“Yes, it is a pleasure to meet you,” Yoo Yeonha replied.

The new bodyguard was a knight called Rain. She was a newly scouted hero by Essence of the Strait who was an expert in wielding the shield and sword. Not to mention, she was a hero personally trained by Yoo Yeonha’s father, Yoo Jinwoong.

“Please rest well,” Rain said.

“Yes, I will,” Yoo Yeonha replied with a smile before she looked out the window.

The moon was shining brightly as the limousine silently sped through the night.

Yoo Yeonha told herself that this was the best outcome. Truth be told, Falling Blossom had suggested keeping Kim Hajin around to improve her image. However, Yoo Yeonha didn’t want to do that. She didn’t want to be so cruel as to keep him by her side when she knew she couldn’t give him any confirmation or assurance.

Not to mention, she wasn’t prepared to face the scandal head-on just yet. There could be short-term benefits in keeping him around, but there were bound to be bigger issues later on once word got out.

She was certain that both of them would end up hurt if that happened.

“Haa...”

But why... why did she feel frustrated? She felt stuffy inside as if a huge rock was pressing down on her stomach.

Yoo Yeonha leaned against the window and calmed herself down.

'I don't know my own heart yet. I don't want to be the one waiting even if I did. I have something more precious even if I have to wait.'

'My life is filled with ambition that I sometimes question if I was born for the sole purpose of being successful.'

'I was filled with a competitive spirit and ambition ever since I was a child without even understanding what those were, and those feelings created the Yoo Yeonha of today.'

'I didn't do anything to satisfy others, not for my family, but for myself and myself alone.'

'That's why I can't abandon my ambition. Giving it up will confuse me and make me lose my path. That's why keeping him far away from me is the right choice... '

Yoo Yeonha steeled her resolve and closed her eyes. She slowly fell asleep, but suddenly saw his face.

She looked at him and realized she was probably dreaming right now.

1. A general in Ancient Korea. More info here: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gyebaek> 📖

Side Stories 91

What If Story (6)

In her Essence of the Strait office, Yoo Yeonha rested her chin on her palm and looked out the window. She looked quite picturesque, but the air around her was sharp like a blade.

“I apologize...”

A woman was kneeling in front of her and trembling in fear. It was Yi Jinah, an intermediate-high rank hero who aligned with the vice guild master's faction to get ahead in her career.

“It might sound like I'm making excuses, but I really had no idea he was doing those things...”

She was telling the truth. Yi Jinah wasn't involved in anything illegal and the only reason she sided with the vice guild master was because she loathed Yoo Yeonha for rising up the ranks as Yoo Jinwoong's daughter.

Yoo Yeonha knew what she was thinking.

“I know and that's why I was thinking of...” Yoo Yeonha tapped on her desk.

Yi Jinah's shoulders flinched at the rhythm of the tapping. She tightly shut her eyes while waiting for the next words.

“...Leaving the field we won at the auction to you.”

However, something was strange. Yi Jinah's head turned blank at those words.

She was probably mistaken, right? Or did she mishear what Yoo

Yeonha said? What did Yoo Yeonha just say?

“...Pardon me?”

“I said, I’ll leave the new field to you.”

“...?”

Yi Jinah had the ability and was worth bringing along. Besides, she could simply leave the guild and join some other foreign guild if she was punished.

More importantly, Yoo Yeonha wasn’t the foolish emotional type who would lose a talented subordinate because of personal grudges.

“P-Please leave it to me! I’ll work hard and dedicate my life to it!” Yi Jinah shot up and exclaimed while repeatedly bowing.

Yoo Yeonha nonchalantly nodded and said, “Then, shall we go out together?”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Yoo Yeonha stood from her seat and Yi Jinah followed closely behind with her head down.

Both of them came out to the corridor. It was Yoo Yeonha’s way of announcing that Yi Jinah had been forgiven for her transgressions.

They went to the elevated parking lot.

“Go ahead and rest for today. You’ll be quite busy from now on,” Yoo Yeonha said.

“T-Thank you! Thank you!” Yi Jinah repeatedly bowed once again and thanked her.

Yoo Yeonha hopped into her limousine. She looked at Yi Jinah profusely bowing to her and scoffed, “*Hmph!*”

Yi Jinah used to ignore Yoo Yeonha in the past, but that all changed the moment she realized that who she believed to be a strong backer turned out to be a bust.

“I shall depart now.”

“Yes, please do.”

Yoo Yeonha checked her social media accounts.

Numerous people posted various messages of support and the media was having a field day with the vice guild master. It seemed like this saga was coming to an end.

“*Hmm...*?” Yoo Yeonha muttered when she came across a picture.

It was a picture she personally uploaded when she was walking in Paris. Ironically, she could see Kim Hajin in the corner of the picture. He was wearing sunglasses and following her from behind.

“*Ah...*”

Then, she realized that he was always there whenever a picture of her was taken. He was eating ice cream on the beach, sitting a few rows behind her in a fashion show, and randomly making a snowman outside her mountain villa. He was like a permanent background decoration that never left her side.

“*Hehe...*” Yoo Yeonha smiled.

Things turned out well for her thanks to him. She wondered if it was possible for them to help each other out from a distance even if he was no longer by her side as her bodyguard.

“We have arrived.”

She reached her mansion while she was lost in her thoughts. Yoo Yeonha walked up the stairs and reached the third floor, which used to be Kim Hajin’s accommodation.

Then, she was shocked by what she saw.

“W-What happened here...?”

The entire third floor was empty. All traces of him staying there for the past six months were wiped clean from the room.

“Who did this?!” Yoo Yeonha screamed in anger.

Her voice reverberated across the mansion and a servant hurriedly rushed to her side.

“P-Pardon me, ma’am...?”

“Why is this place tidied up? It was fine until yesterday...!”

The servant was surprised by this side of her that she never showed before, but he immediately bowed his head and replied, “H-Hajin came yesterday and personally took everything.”

“What did you say just now? He came and left?”

“Y-Yes, that is correct...”

Yoo Yeonha looked dazed for a while before she muttered, “...Is that true?”

“Yes, he mentioned that he left a gift upstairs,” the servant replied.

Yoo Yeonha rushed to the fourth floor and found a huge bed in her living room with a note on it.

[You can have it. I figured you liked this bed. I thought about making you a new one, but it's better to use something you're familiar with, right?]

[P.S. You don't need to repay me for this.]

Yoo Yeonha stood still and read the letter over and over again.

You don't need to repay me for this... That last line sounded off for some reason. An ominous thought flashed across her mind.

She immediately called Falling Blossom, "It's me. About what I said last time..."

Yoo Yeonha was planning to give many benefits to Kim Hajin within the legal boundaries, but...

— Ah, I was about to report...

Yoo Yeonha nervously gulped at the pending words. Soon, the ominous feeling she had turned into reality.

— He disappeared.

"..."

— He sold all of his stocks and even his house and just disappeared. We were quite surprised by it...

Yoo Yeonha stood up without saying anything. She was trembling like a wilting tree swaying in the wind. Whatever Falling Blossom said after that fell on deaf ears.

* * *

— Yes, I'm currently at the headquarters of Essence of the Strait.

Yi Jiyeon filmed with her advanced camera that cost tens of millions of won. The content of her vlog was Essence of the Strait.

Her video already hit three million views thanks to her army of two million subscribers.

— As you can see, there's nothing special about heroes. When we aren't mobilizing we tend to play, study, analyze dungeons... Oh! Vice guild master!

Yoo Yeonha was caught on camera. Yi Jiyoona zoomed in on her and I flinched. I was expecting her cameo after she became the vice guild master, but she appeared too suddenly.

— So, what do you think of our awesome vice guild master Yoo Yeonha? She was promoted to intermediate-high rank hero last week and placed fourth in our batch. You know, the golden batch with Kim Suho, Shin Jonghak, Rachel, Yoo Yeonha, Chae Nayun, Shen Yuan... The golden batch... It's a shame I was in that batch... I could've graduated with a single digit ranking if I was born a year earlier...

It seemed that a lot of things had happened in the past six months. The former vice guild master of Essence of the Strait lost everything and ran away. That once decorated man was reduced to a wanted fugitive.

Yoo Yeonha trained like crazy fearing that the fugitive would retaliate and that training catapulted her into a intermediate-high rank hero.

She became stronger than me in that short period.

— But she doesn't smile. Oh right, she smiled once when our guild became the top guild in the world three weeks ago... Also, there are some rumors about this. Do you guys remember the scandal?

The guild's value shot up after Yoo Yeonha took the reins. They took first place from Creator's Sacred Grace three weeks ago.

— Her romance with that bodyguard... Well, we all know it's not true. Surprisingly though, it was around the time our vice guild master started immersing herself in training. Not only that, she stopped smiling ever since then as well, so some people are saying that...

— Yi Jiyoona?

Yoo Yeonha suddenly appeared from behind Yi Jiyoona's shoulder like a ghost.

Yi Jiyoona's face turned ghastly pale as she put down her camera and Yoo Yeonha glared at her.

Then, she was bombarded with various nagging questions like, *‘Are you crazy? What are you doing right now? We’re going to raid the dungeon soon, but you’re filming a vlog? Can you please grow up?’*

— Edit me out of the video.

The Youtube video ended with those words and a fierce glare from Yoo Yeonha.

“Pfft...!”

She hadn’t changed at all.

I had a good laugh and grabbed my bow. Then I pulled the bowstring and shot an arrow. The arrow flew ten kilometers and struck a monster.

“You’re quite good without even using mana.”

The lady beside me, Jin Seyeon, was thoroughly impressed by my archery.

I simply shrugged and replied, “I still have a long way to go compared to you.”

I was currently in the Amazon in South America on top of a tropical tree and doing something like a competition with Jin Seyeon.

“Long way to go? I hate to admit this, but you’re much better than me if we’re only talking about archery,” Jin Seyeon said as she aimed her bow.

My meeting with this cool and humble archer was a complete coincidence. No, it was more like luck to be honest.

I came to the Amazon hoping to become stronger and it turned out that Jin Seyeon was here for charity work too. We started talking to each other before we found common ground in archery, which helped us become closer.

“Rather than that... Shall we go at it again?” I asked.

“Yes, that sounds good to me. I should be more proactive in our bet this time,” Jin Seyeon put on a serious face and pulled her bowstring.

Taaang!

I watched in amazement as her arrow shot forward like a cannonball. I picked up my bow and pulled the bowstring to erase the lingering face of my beloved supreme team leader from my head.

I shot my arrow towards Jin Seyeon’s arrow.

* * *

Taaaang!

The sound of a gunshot roared.

“...!”

Yoo Yeonha was shaken awake by the loud sound.

“That was scary...”

It was a dream, a nightmare. Kim Hajin was in her dream. He was always her savior even in her dreams.

However, he wasn’t there when she woke up. Everything disappeared like a mirage.

“Haa...” she let out a sigh and arranged her disheveled hair.

A year had already passed since then. She always thought that she could meet him any time she wanted, but that wasn’t the case anymore. So much time had passed that her memories with him were nothing more than a fleeting dream now.

Knock! Knock!

Someone knocked on her door.

“Come in,” Yoo Yeonha said.

The door opened and an old friend walked in.

Yoo Yeonha smiled after seeing her friend.

“Oh, you’re already Vice Guild Master Yoo Yeonha.”

Both a little girl and a lion coexisted within the body of Chae Nayun. She took a look around the room before snickering.

“Yeah, Nayun. Are you ready?”

“Yeah, I’m ready.”

Chae Nayun spent her time training on Mt. Baekdu as soon as she graduated. She finally descended from the mountain after becoming a powerful swordsman.

Chae Nayun sat down and smiled brightly.

“Then, Nayun. You will have to take care of...”

“Oh right, I met him. Kim Hajin.”

“...?”

Yoo Yeonha doubted her ears for a moment.

“Huh?”

“Kim Hajin. You don’t know him? You know that bastard who kept pestering me to use a sword instead? Don’t tell me you already forgot about him?”

Chae Nayun found it odd that Yoo Yeonha was acting strangely all of

a sudden.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly realized that Chae Nayun wasn't aware of the scandal since she was up in the mountains all that time.

She bitterly smiled and replied, "Yeah, I know him... Where did you meet him?"

"I bumped into him at the casino. Hey, you know, he was sucking the place dry!"

"What did you do after you met?"

"I had a few drinks with him."

"..."

Yoo Yeonha suddenly felt something heavy and painful in her stomach. She had to hold her breath and try her best not to show it.

"Had a few drinks...?"

"Yeah, but he was chased out right after having a drink. He earned too much, so they didn't seem to want him there. Hey, he was racking up billions per game, you know? Damn it... I lost three billion after trying to imitate him..."

"I see..." Yoo Yeonha replied with a smile.

Then, she took out an envelope from her drawer.

Chae Nayun frowned after seeing that Yoo Yeonha's hand was trembling.

"Did you develop a tremor?"

"*Huh?* No, what are you talking about? Anyways, take a look at this. This is your mission."

“How important is the mission that you’re trembling?” Chae Nayun grumbled while taking the envelope.

“The specifics are all written there...”

It was then.

Bzzt! Bzzt!

Chae Nayun’s smartwatch vibrated.

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes instinctively went to the smartwatch.

Chae Nayun checked her smartwatch before smirking and said, “Then, I’m going first. My dad and brother are waiting outside.”

“Who’s that?” Yoo Yeonha grabbed her wrist and asked.

“*Huh?* Who what?” Chae Nayun tilted her head in confusion.

“That,” Yoo Yeonha pointed at the watch and continued with a hint of emotion in her voice, “Who was that message from? Was that from your father?”

“No?”

“...Then who was it?” Yoo Yeonha bit her lips and asked.

Chae Nayun flashed a mischievous smile and replied, “*Hehe*, I’m not telling you.”

She immediately left the office while snickering.

‘H-How dare that lowly member do that to the vice guild master!’

Yoo Yeonha didn’t even have the energy to rage. She just stood still like a dazed person and muttered, “*Ah...*”

This went on for around two minutes before she suddenly pressed her temples and muttered, “I feel dizzy...”

She thought of Chae Nayun’s smartwatch while pressing on her temples. She noticed that Chae Nayun’s expression changed the moment she saw her smartwatch.

‘Was it a message? It was a message, right? Then who was it from? Who sent it? Don’t tell me... Was it that person? Did they do more than have a few drinks...?’

“Oh, right...” Yoo Yeonha suddenly remembered a shocking old memory.

The person he liked during his Cube days was none other than Chae Nayun. He kept pestering her to use a sword instead of a bow, which turned out to be significant advice for her.

The person who gave that advice and confessed that he had been watching Chae Nayun for the longest time... was none other than Kim Hajin.

He liked Chae Nayun...

“No...”

Yoo Yeonha felt dizzy again as her surroundings spun, but she shook her head and came back to her senses.

“This isn’t the time for me to be like this...”

She immediately booted up her desktop PC and clicked on her task for the day.

[Dungeon Raid Report – For Government Report]

She still had a lot of work to do.

But what if she didn’t say that to him back then? What if she asked

him to stay by her side?

‘If I did... would he be by my side right now...?’

She didn’t have the luxury for such thoughts. It was none of her business if he dated someone or was trying to win his old love, Chae Nayun’s heart. That was really none of her business.

Yoo Yeonha bit her lips and focused on the document.

The gut-wrenching thoughts only lasted for a minute as she became immersed in her work.

That day, the vice guild master made simple typos in her report, which was something she never did in her life. To be exact, there were thirty-nine typos in the file.

Side Stories 92

What If Story (7)

“The Amazon is a competitive ruin.”

Essence of the Strait was busy meeting while it was heavily snowing outside. Their main focus this time was none other than the Amazon. They were aiming to dig up the artifacts buried deep within its jungles.

“Quite a lot of guilds sent their scouts to survey the Amazon, but most of them didn’t take any actions after that.”

Some guilds showed interest in the Amazon, but it was a place that required great effort, sacrifice, and time. It wasn’t guaranteed that they would find any treasures there, so it was an inefficient use of their time.

“We are certain that it will be an extremely inefficient raid, but it’s worth a shot now thanks to the advancement of modern technology and...”

“Rather than that... our guild possesses the exact gift needed for that place,” Yoo Yeonha continued the guild analyst’s words.

The analyst looked at her and nodded in agreement, “Yes, that is correct. Hero Yi Jiyeon possesses the ability to neutralize the disease in the Amazon. Hero Zellin also possesses the ability to control temperature. Both of them will play a huge part in the Amazon raid.”

The Amazon raid team formed by Essence of the Strait was composed of the golden batch from Cube such as Yoo Yeonha, Yi Jiyeon, Chae Nayun, and other cadets.

The meeting continued after that as they discussed support personnel, division of the loot, analysis of government reports, and other

essential information before they concluded.

“Alright, go back and rest for now. We’ll conclude the meeting here,” Yoo Yeonha said.

She left the meeting room and headed straight for her office. Then she switched on her smartwatch as soon as she sat in her chair.

[Chae Nayun★]

The first thing she did was check Chae Nayun’s official social media account. The account had been inactive for two years, but it recently came back two weeks ago.

“Hmm...” she scanned through the posts without much thought.

There wasn’t much on her account. She posted a few pictures she took with her brother today, a picture of her pet dog, and a picture with Rachel.

“It’s probably not...” Yoo Yeonha muttered.

She was trying to find any clues to what had been bothering her. No, she was curious this entire time about the relationship between Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin. However, that didn’t matter anymore as there didn’t seem to be anything between them.

She wouldn’t have cared if there was something between them. She was just curious in general, so she checked... A person had to be curious to succeed... was the self-justification she came up with.

“...”

She carefully scoured the social media pages and flinched in surprise when the smartwatch on her wrist vibrated.

Bzzt!

“Ah... I thought I liked something by accident...” she grumbled.

She calmed herself down and looked at the screen. It was from one of her organizations, [*Falling Blossom*].

“What is it?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

— We heard some interesting rumors.

“Interesting rumors?”

— Yes, it isn’t that important, but it’s something related to your previous bodyguard.

Yoo Yeonha’s shoulders flinched at those words, but she pretended to be calm and replied, “Is that so? I completely forgot about him.”

— Then, I shall not report the matter.

“No, go on.”

— Yes, he was spotted in the Amazon. There is a rumor that he’s hanging around Jin Seyeon these days.

“...Jin Seyeon?”

Jin Seyeon was a world-renowned archer and a top-tier hero who reached the pinnacle with the bow. Not only that, but she was also revered for her flawless beauty.

“What are they doing together?” she asked as nonchalantly as possible.

— We aren’t sure about that, but there are rumors that Jin Seyeon accepted him as her disciple. Other guilds are keeping a close eye on him right now.

Yoo Yeonha immediately checked Jin Seyeon’s social media account after hearing the report. The latest post was three months ago with no updates after that.

“Alright, you did well... Continue observing them.”

— Thank you.

The call ended and she buried herself in her chair. She stared at the ceiling for a while before reclining in the chair.

Creak!

Her upper body was now lying flat in the chair.

“Ah... Why do I feel so annoyed...?” Yoo Yeonha grumbled.

* * *

A base camp for heroes and mercenaries existed in the South American Amazon. Actually, it was more like an inn and there were at least thirty customers a day in this place called *[Amazon's Rest]*.

“They say Essence of the Strait is coming to the Amazon, Hajin,” Jin Seyeon said while watching the news.

I was watching TV with her.

“Yeah, it seems so.”

I had no idea how we were watching TV in the middle of the dense tropical forest, but that wasn't the most surprising part as we were watching Korean channels right now while eating a pack of potato chips.

— Essence of the Strait is expected to raid the Amazon with the help of the latest mana-tech technologies from Essential Dynamics.

“It's risky to advertise it like that. I know it's essential to do it for the guild's image, but...” Jin Seyeon looked concerned.

I nodded in agreement and said, “...There are a lot of djinns lurking in the Amazon.”

I was surprised at first. There were a lot of tribes residing in these forests. Most of them were actually djinns. I suppose they had no choice but to become djinns as the environment they lived in was quite hostile and rough.

“But aren’t you going to make a comeback?” I asked out of curiosity.

She tapped her chin with a finger before shaking her head, “I’m not sure. I don’t have any plans right now. Besides, the world is fine without me anyways. I’d rather help those who really need my help for now.”

She came to the Amazon to make money and used that money to do more charitable work.

Jin Seyeon smiled and asked, “What about you, Hajin?”

“*Hmm...* I’m not sure as well,” I replied and took a sip of my tea.

The red tea tasted excellent. Oh, and a cup of this tea was worth fifty thousand won.

“Why not? You’d win against me with just archery. I’m sure there will be a lot of guilds willing to take you.”

“...”

I simply smiled in response.

I wanted to go back to Seoul one day... After all, the person I liked was there. I missed her every night, but I didn’t really miss her once the sun came up. I couldn’t sleep at night because I wanted to see her, but then I didn’t really feel like going back once morning came.

I guess they called this bipolar disorder.

“Oh right, I was quite curious, but...” Jin Seyeon looked at me straight in the eyes and asked, “Was the scandal between you and Yoo Yeonha real?”

I could feel curiosity oozing out from her eyes and voice.

I smiled and shrugged, “Well, technically there wasn’t anything, but...”

I suddenly recalled the memories from that event a year ago when we were in the car together.

“If I think about it...”

There was a motive behind Yoo Yeonha’s words at that time and I left on my own accord after not being able to accept her motive.

That was why...

“I guess I was dumped?”

Jin Seyeon’s expression changed as if she was watching a drama...

* * *

It was now February and the rivers were frozen solid.

Essence of the Strait arrived at the portal station in Houston, USA to raid the Amazon.

— Yoo Yeonha! Yoo Yeonha!

— Please give me your autograph!

— It’s Chae Nayun!

They were greeted by a huge crowd as they moved to the hangar. The military plane that would transport them to the Amazon was already waiting in the hangar.

It was a modified ES-3 specially designed to deal with flying monsters. One of these would cost one trillion won and it was the masterpiece of Essential Dynamics.

“Let’s go,” Yoo Yeonha said.

The guild members entered the ES-3 and the plane immediately departed after everyone got on.

“Wow... this is amazing. Wow... We’re already this high up?” Yi Jiyeon exclaimed while filming her vlog.

On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha kept glancing beside her.

Chae Nayun reclined her chair and was fast asleep with her mouth wide open. She mentioned that she had dueled or something last night and that she was tired.

Bzzt!

Chae Nayun’s smartwatch vibrated, but she didn’t show any signs of waking up.

“*Lala~ Lalala~ Lala...*” Yoo Yeonha hummed a tune while discreetly extending her hand towards Chae Nayun’s wrist.

[Please bring your eyes closer or enter your passcode.]

However, she was blocked by the smartwatch’s security system. Yoo Yeonha let out a sigh.

Only two or three hours passed and the ES-3 was already flying over the heart of the Amazon.

The plane landed and Yoo Yeonha gave the command, “Everyone, move out!”

The guild members hopped off the plane at her command.

Their first order of matter was to scout for a suitable spot to erect a base camp. They searched for about ten minutes before they found a flat land surrounded by trees and built their base camp there.

They used a new technology called mana-tech fortress. It was a small twenty-five square meters structure when seen from the outside, but the interior was big enough for fifteen adults to comfortably stay.

Yoo Yeonha divided the guild members into teams, "...I will take care of the most dangerous eastern path. Zellin, Yi Jinah, and Hazuki can handle the northeast path. Yi Jiyeon and Rain will stay behind in the base camp as support or reinforcements."

The first batch sent by Essence of the Strait consisted of seven heroes. Establishing a foothold was imperative when it came to raiding these kinds of dangerous places, so they didn't have the luxury to rest.

"Move out!" Yoo Yeonha gave the command once again.

She trudged through the eastern path to the ruins with Chae Nayun. They were confronted by a bunch of monkey monsters known as darkies as soon as they stepped on the path.

"Kyaruk! Kireuk!"

The darkies were one of the more annoying monsters to deal with in the Amazon because of their long poisonous nails, but they were easy prey for Yoo Yeonha and Chae Nayun who were fully armed with artifacts.

"Wow, there are quite a lot of monsters here. It's crazy," Chae Nayun said while swinging the blood off her blade.

There were at least hundreds of monsters hiding behind the foliage and monitoring them.

"Yeah," Yoo Yeonha nodded and smacked her whip into the ground.

Bzzzaaaat!

An electric shockwave appeared on the ground and spread throughout the area through the humidity.

Bzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt! Bzzt!

The leaves were burnt to a crisp and the area reeked of burning flesh. Almost half of the monsters around them died after Yoo Yeonha used her ability, Lightning Field of Destruction.

“Wow~ What was that just now, Yeonha? That was one hell of an AoE attack. When did you learn that? Have you thought of a name yet?”

“Name...?”

“Yeah! Hey... don’t tell me... you haven’t yet? *Ah*, then I’ll make one for you. *Hmm*... What do you think of... *Ah!* Electric Kablam! What do you think?”

Yoo Yeonha bitterly smiled and shook her head, “Forget about its name. Hey, Nayun...”

“Yeah, what?”

Yoo Yeonha continued walking to ask the question as naturally as possible.

“Are you seeing anyone these days?”

“*Huh?*”

Then, Chae Nayun frowned and grumbled, “We came all the way here and you’re talking about dating...?”

“*Hmm? Ah*, no. Just to ease the tension, you know. We talked about these kinds of things quite often back in Cube, right? We’re only in our mid-twenties, but I felt we were living like a bunch of oldies.”

Chae Nayun smirked after Yoo Yeonha gave all sorts of excuses.

“Well, I guess you’re right. I wasted a lot of time on Mount Baekdu. But well, there’s really no one right now. I haven’t met anyone who piqued my interest.”

“...Really?”

“Yeah, but you’re asking because of Kim Hajin, right?”

Yoo Yeonha froze on her spot at those words.

‘How did this klutz figure that out? Don’t tell me... Did she already talk about that with Kim Hajin?!’ Yoo Yeonha panicked inside, but licked her dry lips and replied, “Kim Hajin... Who was that again...?”

Chae Nayun held her laughter back and looked at Yoo Yeonha with her cheeks inflated like a frog.

“What are you doing?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“...Pfft!”

“Hey, stop that.”

“...Pfft...!”

“I said stop it.”

They bickered for a bit until Yoo Yeonha jumped on Chae Nayun to deflate her cheeks. Chae Nayun turned around to make a run for it when she suddenly spotted something.

“Hey, Yeonha. What’s that...?” she asked while pointing into the distance.

There was smoke rising from their base camp. It was a signal fire requesting for help.

“Let’s go!”

Both of them ran as fast as they could. They used their mana to run faster and arrived at the base camp in no time.

What greeted them was a shocking sight.

“What the hell...?”

The base camp was surrounded by hundreds, no, thousands of monsters. It wasn't only surrounded by land, but it was surrounded by air as well. Strangely enough, there was a monster resembling a pterosaur hovering above the base camp and a man with tattoos all over his body wielding a spear was riding it.

"Vice guild master! It looks like djinns!" Rain shouted while valiantly defending the base camp with her sword.

Chae Nayun immediately infused mana into her blade and Yoo Yeonha tightly gripped her whip.

However, Yoo Yeonha wasn't confident. The combined powers of thousands of monsters and the djinns weren't something to look down on.

But where the hell did they come from...?

"Yeonha, let's fight," Chae Nayun said.

"No, we rescue our guild members and retreat."

"I don't think that's possible right now...?"

Alligators, monkeys, snakes, mosquitoes, and a bunch of dinosaur-like monsters living in the Amazon were gathered here.

Yoo Yeonha gripped her whip and Chae Nayun swung her sword.

Krrzzaaah!

The electric current burned the insect monsters to a crisp while the gigantic blade cut down the alligators and monkeys.

It was then that a spear filled with demonic mana came flying down from the sky.

Yoo Yeonha rolled on the ground and avoided it, but the spear exploded when it made contact with the ground and swept the whole

area with a powerful explosion.

The area was covered in dense fog and crackling fire.

Yoo Yeonha grimaced, but Chae Nayun only snickered.

“These guys aren’t easy. It’s going to be fun.”

“What fun are you talking about?”

“Relax. Take a look at that,” Chae Nayun said as she pointed at the sky.

The sky was covered with flying monsters and djinns mounted on them.

However, what happened next was...

A silent ray of light pierced through the pterosaur and the djinn riding on top of it.

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes shot wide open at the destructive power of that light. She immediately recalled someone and her heart started to race as she thought of that person.

Side Stories 93

What If Story (8)

The battle was intense. Arrows flew from a distance and struck down the djinns, Chae Nayun swung her sword and dominated the ground, and Yoo Yeonha sent out her electric currents to fry the monsters hiding behind the foliage.

Yi Jiyeon and Rain broke through the encirclement and joined the two of them.

“Who’s shooting these arrows, vice guild master?” Yi Jiyeon asked with her back against Rain.

“I have no idea,” Yoo Yeonha replied.

Mana arrows were raining down from the sky. The number of arrows alone seemed like they were coming from a huge army.

In the end, the djinns seemed to have realized that they were at a disadvantage and retreated, but the numerous monsters remained and attacked the guild members.

“*Hap!*”

The battle didn’t last long after that. It was concluded in less than ten minutes thanks to the archer’s support fire coupled with Chae Nayun and Yoo Yeonha’s specialty when it came to facing numerous enemies.

“Hey, are you alright, Yeonha?”

“Yeah, I used up quite a bit of mana, but I’m alright...”

They were on the ground resting when they suddenly noticed someone’s presence from behind the bush.

Everyone looked towards the rustling bush. Yoo Yeonha, especially, gulped in nervousness as she wondered who would pop out from behind the bush... if it was that person.

Then, the person finally appeared. However, it was Jin Seyeon.

“*Huh?! It’s the Divine Archer!*”

“What?! Wow!”

Yi Jiyeon, Rain, and even Chae Nayun rushed up to her.

“...*Huh?*”

On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha continued looking over Jin Seyeon’s shoulders, but nobody came out after that no matter how much she looked.

Jin Seyeon approached and greeted her, “It’s nice to meet you, Vice Guild Master Yoo Yeonha.”

“...*Ah*, yes. It’s nice to meet you too,” Yoo Yeonha replied while shaking her hand, but her eyes were wandering all over the place.

Jin Seyeon smiled after seeing her and asked, “Are you perhaps looking for someone?”

“No... I’m not... I was just...”

At that moment, the ground suddenly crumbled.

Boooooom!

The ground they were standing on caved in and darkness swallowed them before they could react.

Thud!

They were dropping underground, but something broke their fall. It

felt like a rubber-like material was suspending them in mid-air.

It took Yoo Yeonha a moment to realize the situation they were in.

“W-What’s going on?”

She looked around, but all she could see was darkness.

“Is everyone alright?”

“Y-Yeah, I’m alright. That scared me. Why the hell did the ground cave in all of a sudden?” Chae Nayun grumbled.

After that, the other guild members made it known that they were alright.

“Are you alright—?!” Jin Seyeon asked from the surface.

As expected, she seemed to have dodged the moment the ground caved in.

“Yes, but...” Yoo Yeonha replied when she was suddenly interrupted by a loud sound.

Dudududu...!

A sudden sucking force appeared and the Essence of the Strait members were pulled up by something.

Yoo Yeonha had no idea what was pulling them up. First, she looked up to identify what was making that loud noise.

It was coming from the propeller blades of a helicopter.

“Why is a helicopter here...?” she questioned.

However, her question was soon shattered into a million other questions after she got into the helicopter.

“Are you alright?”

A calming voice asked her while pulling her up. She looked up and saw a familiar face smiling at her.

His arm was wrapped around her waist and connected to aether.

* * *

“Wow... Where are we?”

The Essence of the Strait members arrived somewhere in the Amazon on Kim Hajin’s helicopter after losing their fortress.

Yi Jiyoona was the first one to exclaim in awe after arriving.

The entire area was filled with various wooden sculptures and furniture such as beds and sofas. A pristine lake could also be seen behind the sculptures. The place looked like the Amazon version of Disney Land.

“I was just killing time and trying to increase my proficiency and ended up making all of these,” Kim Hajin answered.

“Proficiency?” Yi Jiyoona tilted her head in confusion.

Kim Hajin simply smiled in response.

He created this place to increase the level of his *[Dexterity]* gift. The place turned into this without him realizing it.

“Anyways, you have to be careful in the Amazon. There are a lot of djinns here and countless traps spread across it.”

“The ground caving in earlier was a trap as well?”

“That was probably magic. The djinns here have quite a few tricks up their sleeves.”

“Ah...”

Yoo Yeonha stole glances at Kim Hajin and Yi Jiyeon chatting. She practiced again and again under her breath on how to greet him.

‘How are you? How have you been? Why did you suddenly disappear?’

She had a lot of things she wanted to say, but couldn’t muster the courage to approach him first.

“Hey, aren’t you going?” Chae Nayun nudged and asked her.

Yoo Yeonha feigned ignorance and shrugged, “Go where? I’m a bit tired, so I’m going to go rest.”

“Really? Oh, well suit yourself,” Chae Nayun replied with a smirk and walked towards Kim Hajin.

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes shot wide open as she stared at Chae Nayun walking to him.

“Hey, Kim Hajin! Long time no see!”

“What long time? We just met last time, no?”

“Yeah, that’s why it’s been a long time. Hey, wanna see the swordsmanship I mastered? No, do you want to duel instead?”

“Not really...”

“Keke! Are you scared?”

“Yes.”

Chae Nayun happily chatted with Kim Hajin and Yoo Yeonha felt herself becoming smaller the more they smiled and laughed.

‘I’m not usually like this... I’m quite confident and outgoing, but... why is it only with him that I... ’

“Hey, Yoo Yeonha.”

It was then that Kim Hajin called out to her.

Yoo Yeonha flinched and doubted her ears for a second, but Kim Hajin called out to her again.

“Can’t you hear me?”

She feigned ignorance and nonchalantly looked at him.

He smiled and asked, “If you’re looking for a ruin, then there’s one I found nearby. Do you want to go there?”

* * *

The next day, Yoo Yeonha arrived at a cave with the Essence of the Strait members.

The ruin entrance was decorated with statues and vegetation. The cave entrance itself resembled a snake opening its mouth, which gave it quite an eerie vibe.

“Indeed, it is a ruin,” Yi Jinah said as she grouped up with the main forces.

“Yes,” Yoo Yeonha nodded in response.

Essence of the Strait easily found the ruin in the Amazon thanks to the map that Kim Hajin drew.

“Wow... That Kim Hajin really is something. His map is super accurate. Have you ever thought of scouting him to our guild, vice guild master?” Yi Jiyeon asked.

Yoo Yeonha ignored her. She knew that Yi Jiyeon was aware of that incident and was probably doing this on purpose.

“Shall we go in?” Yi Jinah asked.

Yi Jiyeon replied with a hint of worry in her voice, “Isn’t it better if we go together...?”

“Go together with who?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

“*Huh?* Who else? I’m talking about Kim Hajin and the Divine Archer.”

“Are they our guild members?”

“No, but...”

“We will be burdening them far too much if we keep asking for help. Don’t you know that, Ms. Yi Jiyeon? I asked you a question. What’s wrong with you?”

“...I apologize,” Yi Jiyeon muttered with her head down.

“*Hmph!*” Yoo Yeonha scoffed and gripped her whip. Chae Nayun smirked after seeing her reaction.

“Get ready, everyone. We’re going in.”

* * *

Essence of the Strait successfully raided the ruin. They tried their best not to damage the ruin while excavating the artifacts hidden within it.

They managed to excavate hundreds of artifacts. That was an amazing result even though there were only a handful of ancient artifacts among them.

The results they gained were good enough to put an end to their first excursion.

“...”

However, the vice guild master wasn’t happy about the results. She sat on the ground and watched the flickering campfire.

The people around her were in a festive mood.

“I was really scared to death when that mole monster popped out from the ground!”

“Those are the easier ones to deal with. We’re fortunate there weren’t any riddles. I hate those the most. By the way, it seems that you grew stronger, Jiyeon?”

“Divine Archer! My name is Hazuki. There’s something I wanted to ask you...”

The smell of grilled meat, the scent of alcohol, and lively chattering filled the air. On the other hand, Yoo Yeonha was in a dilemma.

What was she supposed to do now?

“Haa...” she let out a sigh and made her decision.

She stood up and walked over to Kim Hajin. He was sitting on a chair and reading a book.

He lowered the book when a shadow loomed over him and looked up at her.

Her heart started beating wildly after meeting his eyes.

“How have you been...?” Yoo Yeonha asked as nonchalantly as possible.

It was a question that was long overdue.

Kim Hajin smiled and replied, “I’m good. What about you? You seemed to be doing well.”

“Yeah...”

“Come, sit here,” he pointed at a wooden chair beside him.

She sat without much thought, but the chair was extremely comfortable once she sat on it.

'Is this what they call true comfort?'

Yoo Yeonha rubbed her butt on the chair.

"Do you like the bed?" Kim Hajin asked.

"...!"

Yoo Yeonha immediately looked around her surroundings. She was scared that someone might have overheard what he said.

Kim Hajin bitterly smiled at the fact that she was still the same.

"Yeah, I like it..." she replied under her breath.

Kim Hajin nodded before taking a sip of wine as Yoo Yeonha simply stared at him.

"Do you want some?" he asked and offered her a glass.

She took the glass and drank it.

"Ah... That's strong..."

"A hero can't get drunk if it's not strong."

"Yeah, I guess... Hey, you know..." Yoo Yeonha said while looking at Chae Nayun in the distance.

She was busy slicing up a steak. It seemed that she liked the steak as she stuffed her mouth until both of her cheeks were puffed like a squirrel.

"Why did you suddenly disappear without a word that time...?" Yoo Yeonha asked.

Kim Hajin didn't reply to her question. Instead, he just continued staring into her eyes.

Then, he suddenly changed the topic, "Hey, doesn't this remind you of the good old days?"

"Good old days...?" Yoo Yeonha frowned in response.

"Yeah, that time we first met after graduating from Cube."

"..."

"You looked like a loser back then."

"What did you just say...?" Yoo Yeonha's eyebrows became sharp at those words.

'Oh my god, me? A loser? Nobody's ever said something like that to me! No, I wouldn't have let them live another day if they dared say that to me!'

"You had no friends and you worked all the time. It was really bad that time. I suspected there was something wrong with your personality or something," Kim Hajin said while snickering.

Yoo Yeonha could only sigh in disbelief at his words.

"Are you kidding me? I have a lot of friends," she retorted.

"You think of them as your subordinates, not your friends."

"No... I have friends too..."

"You were a loner, so you kept clinging to me. You kept getting mad if I disappeared."

"I don't remember anything like that."

Kim Hajin brightly smiled.

Then, Yoo Yeonha suddenly thought of something after seeing him smile, '*I... I missed this person...* '

"You were cute back then."

"..."

Her heart skipped a beat at those words. That made her involuntarily hold onto the hem of her clothes.

Kim Hajin didn't miss that.

Both of them didn't say much after that.

"Hey, Kim Hajin."

An annoying voice suddenly destroyed the melancholic, yet sweet atmosphere.

Yoo Yeonha glared at where the voice came from. It was Chae Nayun.

"What?" Kim Hajin responded.

"Come here. There's something strange about this."

"What is it?"

Kim Hajin stood up and was about to go to Chae Nayun, but Yoo Yeonha grabbed the hem of his shirt.

"...*Hmm?*"

Kim Hajin tilted his head in confusion, but Yoo Yeonha didn't say anything as she stared into the campfire. However, she soon let go.

She didn't have the courage to want something more than this, not now.

“It’s nothing. Hurry up and go. Nayun is calling you.”

“Alright.”

Kim Hajin went to Chae Nayun.

Yoo Yeonha let out a sigh after seeing them disappear into the forest.

“Should I just go back to Korea...?” she muttered under her breath as she suddenly felt depressed.

‘Why am I such a frustrating person? No, I’m not. Who else is as smart as me? It’s all because of him. Yes, I become strange whenever he’s around me. I can’t stand how I act whenever I’m around him... ’

But that was strange... It was really strange...

‘Am I being like this because I haven’t seen him for a long time? Or... ’

Yoo Yeonha looked at Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin again.

Chae Nayun was holding a sealed artifact and saying something to him. He explained how she could unseal it.

It was then. Chae Nayun glanced at Yoo Yeonha and their eyes met.

Yoo Yeonha flinched and tried to look elsewhere, but she caught Chae Nayun flashing a smirk before looking away. It was a mischievous smile that seemed to openly taunt her.

“Why that little...”

Yoo Yeonha lost it for ten seconds. She realized later that she spent those ten seconds coming up with a plan on how to get Chae Nayun away from him.

Side Stories 94

What If Story (9)

Essence of the Strait sped up their raiding in the Amazon. They were able to progress much faster thanks to their extremely capable pathfinder.

Their pathfinder knew the location, information, inhabiting monsters, etc. of Amazon's dungeon down to the tee. Essence of the Strait was able to raid a lot of dungeons by following his information.

They busily went from dungeon to dungeon without much rest until it was finally time for them to go back.

Yoo Yeonha was fishing on the riverbed when a voice suddenly surprised her.

"I heard it's time for you to go back next week."

It was Jin Seyeon.

"...Yes, our work is coming to an end," Yoo Yeonha replied.

The maximum time she had for this excursion was three weeks. The second team would come and switch places with her soon. Of course, they didn't need to send in the second team judging from the success of Yoo Yeonha's team. It would take them at least six months to dispose of the immense artifacts they gathered.

"I see..." Jin Seyeon nodded before she threw a harpoon into the water.

A fish was skewered by the harpoon.

"..."

Yoo Yeonha pouted and looked at her fishing line floating in the water. She was certain a fish was about to take the bait if not for the disturbance...

Jin Seyeon suddenly asked, "Aren't you talking to Hajin these days?"

Yoo Yeonha frowned and asked in response, "Why are you asking about that?"

"*Hmm...* I'm just curious."

"Why would a top hero like you be curious about something like that?"

Jin Seyeon brightly smiled and replied, "I wonder myself. Maybe I'm getting old."

Yoo Yeonha let out a sigh and changed the subject, "Oh, right... I prepared an artifact to give to you. Would you like to see it? It seems like a very valuable artifact for an archer. Also, please tell me if you need anything else..."

Jin Seyeon was a tremendous help in this Amazon raid. She personally went with them to a few ruins, so Yoo Yeonha felt that it was only natural to give her something in return.

"..."

However, Jin Seyeon looked at her without saying anything. Then she smiled brightly after seemingly thinking of something.

"*Ah*, now I get it."

Yoo Yeonha tilted her head in confusion and asked, "Get what...?"

Jin Seyeon's face became quite serious as she said, "Why Hajin left you. I get it now."

"What did you just say?" Yoo Yeonha retorted with a hint of anger in

her voice.

She rarely displayed her emotions before top heroes, but she failed to suppress it this time. She was more in disbelief than angry after hearing those words.

“Excuse me, what do you mean by that?”

* * *

It was late at night.

Yoo Yeonha sat by the lakeside and thought of what Jin Seyeon told her.

“Not everyone in this world thinks like you, vice guild master. Favor, that’s a good word, but don’t think that everyone is after that simply because most people are after it. I did this for you, so you do this for me has the tendency to diminish a person’s sincerity into a trade.”

Jin Seyeon put it as gently as she could, but was indeed lecturing her.

“The same goes for me and Hajin. We wanted to help you without expecting anything in return. We wanted to help and not make a trade.”

Jin Seyeon extended something to her.

“What is this...?” Yoo Yeonha asked at the time.

It was a brightly shining jewel.

Jin Seyeon replied, *“It’s called the Jewel of Dream. It’s a treasure I obtained in the Amazon. It’ll allow you to dream of an important memory. Why don’t you try using it? It was a big help to me, so I hope it’ll help you too, vice guild master...”*

Yoo Yeonha came back to her senses and took out the jewel that was brightly shining just like the lake.

“What are you doing here?”

Someone suddenly asked from behind, but Yoo Yeonha already sensed the presence and wasn't surprised.

She turned around and said, “Hey.”

“What?”

“Come here...”

Kim Hajin braved through the thistle and sat beside her.

“What are you doing? And why are you asking me to come like a dog?”

“Look at this... It's called the Jewel of Dream... Jin Seyeon gave it to me,” Yoo Yeonha said as she showed off the jewel.

“So...?” Kim Hajin asked in response.

“So I was thinking... Do you want to have a dream together...?” Yoo Yeonha asked with a hint of embarrassment in her voice.

She instantly regretted it after saying those words. What the hell did she mean by, *‘Do you want to have a dream together?’* How stupid did that sound?

“*Hmm? Ah*, you can't use that with someone else,” Kim Hajin replied as he shot down the offer.

Yoo Yeonha's eyes narrowed at his response and asked, “How do you know what this is?”

“*Ah*, I gave that to Jin Seyeon. Just use it alone. I'll stay beside you while you're using it.”

Those last words he said made her melt inside.

“...You don’t really have to.”

“Anyways, do you know how to use it?”

“Of course, I just have to do this...”

She hid her blushing face and gripped the jewel. Then, she infused her mana into it. Her vision slowly started getting hazy as she descended into a dream.

It felt as if her body was floating.

She suddenly shot her eyes open and found herself in a limousine.

‘I think this was three or four years ago...’ She couldn’t exactly remember the date, but she was sure this was when she went on a business trip to China.

She was currently on her way to Shanghai from Beijing and was leisurely looking at her smartwatch.

Dudududu...

The ground started shaking and Yoo Yeonha glanced out the window. It didn’t really disturb her though.

It was then that a dark-reddish tornado appeared and the limousine exploded.

Kaboom!

Her hair was burnt by the flames and her eardrums popped. She sustained burns even though she covered herself with mana and was violently thrown out of the car.

She was down on the ground and could feel herself covered in blood, bone shrapnel, and brain particles. It was what remained of her driver and bodyguard in the limousine.

She couldn't think straight after that. She just sat on the ground dazed as the entire world grew further and further away from her.

"Kyaaaaah!"

"Kyaaaaahk!"

The screaming all around woke her up.

The storm of evil mana was mercilessly slaughtering the civilians. She was forced to watch it unfold right in front of her eyes.

Blood, bones, and organs dyed the streets with rivers of blood.

Yoo Yeonha tried to move, but her body was frozen stiff and the impact from a while ago messed with her head.

The evil mana was spreading all over the place. Her instincts were screaming at her to get out of there.

'I can't win. I can't win against that djinn. That's why I have to run away.'

She forced herself up and was about to run away, but a large assailant was blocking her path. She couldn't tell if it was a human or a monster as the assailant's body was covered in metal.

Yoo Yeonha retreated a few steps, but suddenly felt dizzy from the explosion. The blood and brain matter clinging to her body started to weigh her down.

Then, the djinn gathered its evil mana in both hands.

She was going to die.

'I was going to die here.'

As she was overwhelmed with fear, a bullet that looked more like a missile flew out of nowhere.

It was actually a shotgun shell.

The djinn took the full brunt of the shotgun shell from close range. It was extremely powerful and the djinn's upper and lower body was severed in half.

The djinn turned into dust and scattered in the wind.

"Are you alright?" he approached her and asked.

She had no idea what she was doing on the floor and why she was on the floor in the first place when he asked. Instead, she was crying.

"Huuk! Huuk!"

He extended a hand to her despite how shamefully she was crying.

"Stop crying and follow me. I'll protect you. I'm your bodyguard, right?" he said in a warm gentle voice.

Yoo Yeonha took his hand and stood up. Then she clung to him. She clung to him tightly like a child and didn't show any signs of letting go.

She could feel a strange sense of warmth and comfort after she buried her face into his chest. No, something much more powerful was welling up from inside of her.

Perhaps... that was the start of everything...

'I refused to acknowledge the emotions budding inside of me. I didn't at that time... at least... I... I've liked him since that day... '

Yoo Yeonha slowly opened her eyes and saw Kim Hajin's face. She was lying on his lap.

"What kind of dream did you have?" he smiled and asked.

Yoo Yeonha didn't respond.

He smirked and guessed, “Did you dream of becoming the president? Or was it that the entirety of Gangnam belonged to you?”

Yoo Yeonha shook her head, but didn’t say anything. She suddenly recalled what Jin Seyeon said.

“The same goes for me and Hajin. He wanted to help you without expecting anything in return. He wanted to help and not make a trade.”

“Hey...” she muttered.

“Yeah, what?” he nonchalantly replied.

However, Yoo Yeonha hesitated. She had no idea what she was supposed to say. She wasn’t used to speaking purely out of emotion without any intent to create a network or do a business deal.

She was completely oblivious to this. She never learned about it, did it, or expected that she would be in this position.

“Shall we... fish...?”

In the end, that was the best she came up with.

* * *

The time for them to leave the Amazon had come. Essence of the Straits checked their inventory.

[Total Relics Excavated: 737]

[Total Ruins Raided: 33]

This was more than enough to trump whatever record Creator’s Sacred Grace managed to set. Well, at least for a week...

Yoo Yeonha clenched her fist and smiled in satisfaction.

The ES-3 was on the way to pick them up.

“*Huh...? Ah... Dammit... She’s at it again...*” Yoo Yeonha grumbled after spotting Chae Nayun casually chatting with Kim Hajin.

Yoo Yeonha pouted and butted in between them.

“Oh, hi Yeonha,” Chae Nayun greeted her with a mischievous grin.

Yoo Yeonha looked at her with disdain and said, “Hey, Nayun. We have to go now. Can you help the others pack our things?”

“Oh, really? Sure thing,” Chae Nayun replied while flashing a sleazy smile.

Yoo Yeonha glared at her as Chae Nayun disappeared into the distance. Then she turned her attention to Kim Hajin.

Kim Hajin met her gaze and shrugged, “What?”

“Nothing... just...”

Whiiiiing! Whooooosh!

A powerful gust of wind blew as the ES-3 appeared in the sky. Yoo Yeonha looked at it before she grabbed the hem of Kim Hajin’s clothes and said, “Nothing much, just... when are you coming back to Seoul...?”

Kim Hajin scratched the back of his neck and replied, “*Hmm...* I’m not sure. Probably a few years?”

Yoo Yeonha lowered her eyes at his response. She had something she wanted to say before leaving, but was scared that she wouldn’t be able to say it this time again.

She breathed in and out before mustering the courage, “What do you think of... coming with me?”

Those were extremely difficult words for her to utter. She wasn’t even this nervous when she was being grilled by Congress.

Still, she mustered her courage one more time and said, “I want... I want to hire you as my bodyguard again.”

She realized it in that dream. It might be too late now, but she liked him ever since that moment.

She did her part and it was now his turn to respond.

“No,” Kim Hajin shook his head.

He didn’t even hesitate for a second. He immediately refused the offer as soon as Yoo Yeonha said it.

It was so harsh that her brain automatically translated ‘no’ as ‘*fuck off*.’

“At least, not yet,” he added.

Those words gave her hope, but his single word of refusal before was simply too harsh to make her cling to this hope.

Yoo Yeonha’s legs trembled, but then a vein popped up on her forehead.

Kim Hajin bitterly smiled and said, “Both of us... We’re still used to being alone, right?”

Yoo Yeonha clenched her fists. She wanted to deny it. She wanted to tell him how much she regretted it after letting him go. How much her heart ached without even knowing why it was aching.

That was why... she wanted to be with him no matter what it took. She didn’t care if he thought she was being selfish.

She only felt safe beside him.

“You’re right...”

However, her response was quite the opposite of her thoughts.

She maintained her cool and her brain replied before her heart got the chance to. It was the result of her training that allowed her to maintain her cool in these sorts of situations.

“Then, we’re going now,” Yoo Yeonha said with a slight nod.

Kim Hajin suddenly put a necklace around her neck and said, “Yeah, have a safe trip back. Also, this is a gift.”

“What’s this...?”

“What else? Can’t you tell it’s a necklace? Just throw it away if you don’t need it.”

There was nothing special about the necklace. It was sculpted with wood and covered with silver.

Yoo Yeonha fiddled with the necklace and nodded without batting an eye.

“I’m not going to throw it away, but I won’t use it. Anyways, take care. We’re going now,” she said with a hint of coldness in her voice.

Essence of the Straits boarded the ES-3 and the guild members waved at Jin Seyeon and Kim Hajin.

“Wow, it’s finally time to go home.”

“But it wasn’t that bad, right?”

“We’re going to get three years' worth of paycheck as our bonus this time, right?”

“Just three years? I think we can expect to rank up as well!”

The ES-3 was filled with the merry chattering of the bunch.

Yoo Yeonha quietly sat in her seat and looked out the window. She smirked after seeing Kim Hajin waving at them, but that smile almost

immediately disappeared.

“Ah... My stomach hurts...” she grimaced and went to the toilet.

She turned on the tap, locked the door, and plunged her face into the basin.

“...”

She was trembling. Tears and snot were coming out of her eyes and nose. She suppressed her voice while crying, but then she noticed something strange.

It felt like she wasn't crying tears, but tears of blood instead. Her heart ached and felt like it would kill her any moment now...

‘I barely got to see him after such a long time, but... why did I have to leave again...?’

However, those thoughts didn't last long in her mind.

She continued crying until she found it difficult to hold back. She cried and cried without thinking about anything. The tears she held back gushed out uncontrollably as if the floodgates were opened.

“Ugh... uh... huuf...!”

Then, the sound of Chae Nayun playing a game outside could be heard. She was playing a loud fighting game and intentionally blasted its sound to the max.

Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding! Ding!

Tak! Tak! Tak! Tak! Tak!

The noise coming from the fighting game drowned the sound of Yoo Yeonha's crying.

Side Stories 95

What If Story (10)

Two years passed and winter arrived.

Essence of the Strait's vice guild master appeared in front of the crowd at the Essential Stadium and completely captivated them.

She was wearing a black dress, high heels, a very down-to-earth yet luxurious necklace, and holding a black clutch bag.

She wasn't overdressed or underdressed for the occasion as she sat in the VIP seat to watch the duel in the stadium.

"This is the report on Rookie," her secretary passed her a file and stole a glance at her necklace.

Yoo Yeonha always changed her fashion style, but that necklace always remained. It was a beautiful piece of accessory. However, wearing it all the time seemed strange. There were rumors that it belonged to her lover who passed away. There was no way to confirm that though.

"Okay," Yoo Yeonha replied as she took the file.

She was scanning through it when the whole stadium turned pitch black. She finally placed the file on the table in front of her.

Spotlights shone down on the two heroes on the stage.

Today's match was the title defense match of The Beast Jinhwan against his opponent from Austria, The Giant Bifran.

— And now, what all of you have been waiting for...!

She rested her chin on her palm and watched the show.

The match started once the host was done talking. The heroes in the ring channeled their mana and used their skills.

However, it wasn't that entertaining to her.

— *Ah!* Jinhwan used his signature Fire Strike and struck Bifran in the abdomen!

The champion, Jinhwan, glanced at Yoo Yeonha after making a nice move.

Yoo Yeonha smirked in disbelief after seeing what he did. How dare he act strong when he had never entered a dungeon before?

The CEO of the duel arena, Yun Hojong, asked with a smile, "What do you think? He has the potential to be a star, right?"

"I heard a lot of cadets are joining the duel arena these days. I guess the rumors were true," Yoo Yeonha replied out of courtesy.

Yun Hojong proudly nodded and replied, "*Haha!* It has become another career choice for them! We have worked extremely hard so that a large guild like Essence of the Strait will be interested in us!"

Essence of the Strait recently jumped into the entertainment industry. That was the reason for Yoo Yeonha's visit to the stadium today.

"Is that so?"

"Yes! The collaboration between the arena champion and an active hero would definitely capture the attention of the masses. If vice guild master wants, then..."

Yun Hojong started his sales pitch while earnestly bowing. That was how big Yoo Yeonha became in just two years. In fact, she was one of the top ten most respected individuals among cadets.

—... Bifran is down! K.O.! Jinhwan defeated the Austrian Giant just six minutes into the fifth round! He has defended his title!

The match was over.

Yoo Yeonha politely refused Yun Hojong's repeated offer to introduce her to the champion.

She left the stadium and the entire surroundings were covered in snow. The snowy white scenery somehow made her feel melancholic.

"Your outerwear, vice guild master," Rain said as she passed a white mink coat to her.

The reporters lurking outside the stadium immediately ran up to her and started taking pictures. Yoo Yeonha smiled at their cameras.

"Your furry hat is really cute," Rain whispered from behind.

"..."

Yoo Yeonha glanced back at her and whispered back, "Is it normal for a bodyguard to call their superior cute?"

"I am saying this because it looks like an Inuit's hat."

"...How rude. It's called fashion, okay?"

Their limousine arrived. Yoo Yeonha immediately went over the various reports as soon as she got into the limousine, but a bright-colored parcel that Rain was holding caught her eye.

It was a bag of potato chips.

Yoo Yeonha blinked a few times while thinking, '...*That looks good.*'

She shook her head, switched her smartwatch on, and logged into her social media account to distract herself.

She searched for the username. She found out about his social media handle around six months ago thanks to a comment Chae Nayun left behind. She never knew he used social media and found out that he uploaded at least once a week.

He uploaded three pictures today.

“...He’s still overseas.”

Kim Hajin was going around the world from the Amazon to Mongolia and Austria. He was now in a vast plain in the United States.

“Pfft!” She couldn’t help but smile after seeing his posts.

Kim Hajin grew a lot stronger just like her. He was now a top mercenary and took a lot of pictures with celebrities. She looked at all of the pictures he posted.

Then, she let out a sigh, “...Sigh.”

Two years had already passed, but she still clearly remembered that day. She felt pain in her heart whenever she recalled it.

Because she was embarrassed.

“Tsk...”

Yoo Yeonha switched her smartwatch off and looked out the window.

It was snowing outside.

* * *

“Isn’t it time for you to start thinking about getting married, Yeonha?”

Yoo Yeonha was eating with her family after a long time when her mother, Jin Yeojung, went on the offensive.

Yoo Yeonha was cutting her steak and retorted with a frown, "I'm only in my mid-twenties, Mother. Please come to your senses."

"Yeah, what's this marriage talk about..." Yoo Jinwoong grumbled, but he was forced to pipe down when his wife fiercely glared at him.

"Listen to your mother. You should start dating from now on so you won't feel like you missed out when you get married later. Will you keep working for the rest of your life without even dating someone?" Jin Yeojung asked.

"You threatened to kill me if I got into a relationship... did you not?"

Jin Yeojung vehemently opposed it when the scandal between Yoo Yeonha and Kim Hajin broke out three years ago. She repeatedly told her daughter that it was the wrong choice and she suggested treating him like a plaything and throwing him away later on. Then, she changed her mind and told her daughter not to get involved with a mercenary even if he was merely a plaything.

"He was a mercenary. You can't get romantically involved with a mercenary. How dare that mercenary come after you... You need to be mindful of your public image."

"*Ha?* It depends on what kind of a mercenary he is, no?" Yoo Yeonha shook her head and stood up. Then she said, "I don't feel like eating anymore. I'm going now."

"Nobody asked you to get married now. I said start dating. I'll find some good men for you. *Ah*, you know that handsome American hero, right? That guy is a fan of yours, so..."

"Forget about it."

Yoo Yeonha took her coat and left the mansion. She rushed out the front door as if she was running away and walked towards the cars in the parking lot.

Her schedule was quite full until three in the morning. She still had a lecture to give at Cube...

Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep! Beep!

Suddenly, her smartwatch started blaring sirens.

Not only Yoo Yeonha's smartwatch, but also the mansion gardener's, Yoo Yeonha's secretary, and even the limousine driver's smartwatch started ringing.

Yoo Yeonha immediately checked her smartwatch.

[Emergency Alert: An explosion has occurred in the Southern Region of Korea. The tower that Frost Sanctuary and Creator's Sacred Grace are raiding has exploded.]

[An emergency notice has been issued to the Hero Association and top guilds in the country.]

An emergency draft notice was issued by the association and government.

Then, someone called Yoo Yeonhwa.

— This is the association. They have failed the Tower of Memory raid. We are now in a state of emergency due to the tower's effect. We request your guild to mobilize.

* * *

The news of the raid's failure spread throughout the world in no time. Every government sent their condolences and some countries even sent their heroes as reinforcements.

“Wow! It's Yoo Yeonha!”

“Please tell us what happened, Vice Guild Master Yoo Yeonha!”

“What do you think about Creator's Sacred Grace failing? Please tell us your thoughts!”

The Tower of Memory was located between Hadong City and Mount Jiri. There was already a massive crowd of reporters and heroes gathered there.

Yoo Yeonha nonchalantly passed through the parade of camera flashes.

“...”

It was utter chaos. Mana was littered all over the place and the air was filled with dense mana that made it difficult for even heroes to breathe.

“I knew it...”

Creator’s Sacred Grace was divided into two factions. First was the guild master, Jin Inho’s faction while the second was the vice guild master, Yun Seung-Ah’s faction.

Yun Seung-Ah took Kim Suho with her to America and raided a dungeon there while Jin Inho forced it by raiding the Tower of Memory.

In the end, their growing feud led to this catastrophe.

“The tower is completely cut in half,” Yoo Yeonha said.

Yi Jinah nodded and replied with a serious look, “Yes, this is the worst among everything I have seen so far.”

There was mana flowing out from the tower cut in half and the tower’s mana was seeping into the ground. The result of that was the surrounding area turning into a much rougher environment compared to a tower or a dungeon.

“Hey~ Yeonha~” Chae Nayun called out while waving.

She was accompanied by Yi Jiyeon, Zellin, Hazuki, and other Essence of the Strait members.

Behind them were the vice guild master of The General and Luterin, the handsome American hero Jin Yeojung was talking about. Hoften, the vice guild master of Desolate Moon, Shin Jonghak, Kim Horak, and other renowned heroes were also there.

“What are we going to do about that?” Chae Nayun asked while looking at the tower and its surroundings.

The area was now getting contaminated with mana and a thick mana fog started blocking their vision.

“We will have to find a solution,” Yoo Yeonha replied.

Then, a high-pitched voice suddenly called out to Yoo Yeonha.

“*Huh?* It’s Essence of the Strait’s vice guild master.”

The kid had white hair tied in double ponytails. No, it was actually Aileen.

Yoo Yeonha greeted her with a bow.

Aileen nonchalantly floated in the air and met Yoo Yeonha at eye level.

“Do you know what’s going on?” she asked.

“No, I just arrived here. I do not have the full picture yet,” Yoo Yeonha replied.

“*Ah*, the tower’s mana is fragmenting the space around it.”

“Fragmenting...?”

“Yeah,” Aileen replied before she crossed her arms and explained, “That tower isn’t called the Tower of Memory for nothing. The dimension within the tower was split into dozens of different dimensions when it was destroyed. Every single one of those dimensions is now trying to create its own dimensional space. In

short, it's something like a mixed puzzle now. We will have to clear those dimensions first if we want to stabilize the tower."

The insight of the Human Dragon from the Temple of Justice was truly remarkable.

"I guess we will have to go in..." Yoo Yeonha said.

"Yes. We might have no clue what's inside, but we have no choice but to march on. Besides, it's not something that we can see from the outside. We have no other... Hey! Damn it!"

Aileen suddenly glared somewhere and cursed loudly. A group of people who were either heroes or mercenaries were loitering behind the thick fog.

"Fuck off!" Aileen shouted and kicked them out of the area. She grumbled under her breath, "Ah, I should form a barrier around the tower to keep the flies away..."

She waved her magic staff and shouted, "Barrier! Construct yourself!"

Rumble... Rumble...

The ground shook before an earthen wall shot out from the ground.

"That will do for now. Anyways, I'm thinking of creating an advanced party. What do you think, vice guild master?"

"I have no objections. Time is of the essence in these kinds of situations."

Prioritizing limiting the tower's effect was the textbook reaction to these kinds of situations. The golden time they had was only a mere four days. This entire area would be conquered by the tower if they failed to stabilize it within that time.

In the event that happened, the chances of reclaiming the area were close to zero. The land would be contaminated forever.

Korea was already a small country and losing this entire southern region would be a massive blow to the country.

“Alright, but I’m only going to allow intermediate high rank, tier two heroes or above. The rest will be stationed outside until further orders are given.”

Hazuki was removed from the group as she was an intermediate high rank, tier three hero. Yi Jinah, Yi Jiyeon, Zellin, Chae Nayun, and the rest were qualified for the advanced party.

“But are you sure you’re going to tag along? Isn’t it better for you to stay behind and take command of the situation?” Aileen asked.

Yoo Yeonha smiled and replied, “I am also a high rank hero now. I can’t call myself the vice guild master if I shy away from challenges.”

“Hmm... If you say so,” Aileen replied with a satisfied nod.

She smacked Chae Nayun on the shoulder after she caught Chae Nayun looking at her with a certain set of eyes.

“Hey! Why are you looking at me like that?” Aileen growled.

“Hehehe... I just thought that you never age. That’s all,” Chae Nayun replied with a dumb grin.

“Shut up. Anyways, I’ll leave your guild to you. I’m opening the door now,” Aileen said before she opened a portal with the words, *[Exclusive Portal – Essence of the Strait]*, written on it.

“We’re going immediately right, Yeonha? We already prepared all of our gear and necessities,” Chae Nayun asked while pointing at her rucksack.

“Yes, this counts as a contribution too. Besides, who knows what we might get from the tower?”

“Okay! Then, let’s go! This is going to be fun!” Chae Nayun snickered and exclaimed as she led the way.

Essence of the Strait walked towards the portal.

“Don’t forget to envelope yourself in your aura. We might get separated or our vision could get disturbed. Don’t forget to tighten the rope around your waist.”

“Roger that!”

They made their final preparations and tightened the ropes around their waists before marching into the portal.

They walked for five minutes when Yoo Yeonha suddenly felt an eerie chill crawl up her spine. The entire area was already covered in fog and nothing was visible ahead.

Yoo Yeonha felt an eerie sensation from the thick cold fog, so she called out to the others. However, her voice wouldn’t come out. No, it was more like she was trying to speak, but the air wouldn’t carry the soundwaves she was emitting.

It felt like she was in a vacuum.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly stopped walking amid the eerie silence. She saw a sign in front of her.

The sign was right above an entrance that stretched deep into the darkness like a cave.

[...*Evacu Shelt...*]

The words were smudged so it was difficult to read, but she was certain that this was one of the fragments of the Tower of Memory.

Yoo Yeonha grabbed the rope connecting her to her guild members and bravely marched into the tunnel.

Side Stories 96

What If Story (11)

Evacuation Shelter? Yoo Yeonha read the letters on the sign. Was there an evacuation shelter around here?

She tilted her head in confusion, but decided to enter the tunnel in the end. The fog became even thicker inside and her vision and hearing were completely hindered.

She relied on her remaining senses as she walked. It was truly not a pleasant experience. She felt extremely frustrated from not being able to see or hear anything. Her anxiety grew with every step she took as her back started to break out in cold sweat.

However, she didn't have to worry so much. Her body was tied by a rope with her other comrades, so...

She reached out and fiddled with her lifeline, but felt chills spread throughout her entire body.

The rope was cut. The long rope that should have connected all of them was cut cleanly and less than a meter was left behind her. The rope was sturdy enough to withstand any attempts from most monsters to cut it since it was manufactured with the special fiber created by Essential Dynamics, but...

No, that wasn't what was important right now.

Yoo Yeonha froze on the spot like a statue while holding onto what was left of her rope. Panic slowly set in and she started to be shaken.

Her mental fortitude had strengthened after becoming a hero, but there was one thing she couldn't personally handle.

Alone, no one else but her in this vast space. She couldn't see or hear anything.

Her trauma slowly started to creep in and sapped the strength from her legs. She sat on the ground and covered her face. Then a hallucination started whispering in her ears.

The sound grew louder as it turned into a scream and her fingertips were covered with a hot, thick liquid.

Yoo Yeonha gritted her teeth and screamed at the top of her lungs, but couldn't even hear herself. This, in turn, only caused her to feel more fear and anxiety.

She trembled in horror within the darkness. She had no idea if her eyes were opened or closed. Her vision and hearing were stripped away from her. The only thing that remained with her was her consciousness.

This experience was truly horrifying for her, but it was at that moment...

She heard footsteps in the distance and looked in that direction. A wind was gently blowing away the thick fog and a man's silhouette was walking towards her.

Everything looked like a hallucination.

That man, Kim Hajin, was smiling at her.

Yoo Yeonha was dazed for a moment, but immediately walked towards him. She tried to say something, but couldn't utter a word. In the end, she hugged him and cried in his embrace.

He was flustered at her response, but soon patted her on the shoulder.

Then...

He suddenly crumbled into dust and Yoo Yeonha fell face-first onto the ground.

He was an illusion.

* * *

At a mountain peak with a bird's eye view of the tower cut in half.

“...Do you see it?” this informant called Yoo Sunghwan asked me.

“Yes, I see it,” I replied.

The entire area around the tower was getting contaminated by its mana. I had no choice but to hire an expert around this area.

► *[Master Sharpshooter]*

[High Rank] [Permanent] [Growth-Type – Proficiency Tier 2] [Experience – 15%]

My Master Sharpshooter was quite high-leveled, so I was probably the best out there. I could even see through the disturbances spread across the tower.

I was busy looking into the tower when a kid suddenly popped out of nowhere.

“You can see it? Are you lying right now? I think you’re lying... You’re lying, right?” the kid nagged while waving her magic staff.

I let out a sigh and replied, “I am not lying.”

“How can I believe you? Even I can’t see what’s going on over there,” Aileen retorted while waving her hands to disturb me.

Thankfully, Jin Seyeon appeared beside her and grabbed her shoulder with a smile, “Please stay still, Aileen. He’s an expert that I hardly managed to convince to come.”

“What the? You know this guy?” Aileen narrowed her eyes and asked.

“Yes, Hajin operates under the alias Black Wolf,” Jin Seyeon replied with a gentle smile.

“Oh... Really?” Aileen muttered. Her eyes shot wide open as if she recognized me.

“Do you know me?” I asked.

“There’s no way she doesn’t know you, Hajin. After all, you have quite a stellar record,” Jin Seyeon replied instead.

Well, I guess I did work quite hard to become somebody...

Aileen still seemed dazed before she said, “Yeah, I know you. You do a lot of small jobs in the United States and the Middle East, right?”

“What do you mean by small jobs, Aileen? Hajin stopped a calamity,” Jin Seyeon corrected her.

“What are you? His lawyer?” Aileen snapped back.

I ignored the two and continued analyzing the situation as my thousand-mile eyes helped me get a satellite view of what was going on around the tower.

“...I think there are around forty-eight fragments,” I said after I analyzed the situation.

The entire area was about sixty-six thousand square meters. There were forty-eight fragments in it. Every single one of them was separated into their own independent spaces and we would have to subjugate them one by one to bring this matter to a close.

“Around?” Aileen said as she tried to nitpick at my words.

However, Jin Seyeon placed her hand on her shoulder.

“Damn it!”

I ignored her rambling and continued, “There are forty-eights aboveground, but we can’t exclude the chances of some existing underground as well.”

I looked at Yoo Sunghwan and said, “We will need to create a map first. Please prepare large paper and stationeries.”

“Yes, sir.”

Every fragment had different entrances. One could enter from the north, but they would find themselves in the east while another could enter from the east and find themselves in the south. I didn’t want to exaggerate, but there was no one else who could create a map for this complex structure aside from me in this world.

There could be a hero out there who was as good as me, but drawing a map required quite the dexterity at the same time. I doubted that any hero would possess that.

No, I was certain that nobody else possessed both abilities as I did.

“A map? Is that even possible?” Aileen sneered as she asked.

“Yes, but I think it will take a long time to complete,” I replied.

It was definitely going to take a long time. An A4 paper was nowhere going to be enough to completely draw what was going on over there. The entrances and exits were intertwined, yet independent from each other. People were bound to get lost if I didn’t meticulously draw the map.

“I brought what you requested,” Yoo Sunghwan said as he passed me the paper and stationeries.

It was impossible to draw the map with a computer. I had to manually draw it with the help of my *[Dexterity]* gift.

“Will this be enough?” he asked.

“Yes, it’s more than enough,” I replied as I started to draw the map.

I started to move my hand to draw the flow of mana, the entrances, the form of the fragments, the exits, etc. and people soon gathered behind me.

“Wow... you’re like a computer, Hajin.”

“*Hmm...* I guess he has a trick or two up his sleeves.”

Jin Seyeon was thoroughly impressed by me while Aileen refused to acknowledge my skills.

“There. It’s complete,” I said as I wiped the sweat off of my forehead.

It took me three hours to complete the map.

Yoo Sunghwan looked shocked and was in awe as he stared at the map, but he immediately came back to his senses and called for somebody.

“Scan this map at once and print it out! Disburse it to all of the parties and upload it to all guild databases! We don’t have time to waste. Hurry!”

They moved quickly.

I massaged my tired arms and eyes before I stood up.

“Are you going to enter, Hajin? I heard Yoo Yeonha went with the advance party,” Jin Seyeon asked.

Yoo Yeonha. That name was a bit burdensome to me, but I nodded without any hesitation.

“I will have to go...”

“Yes, did you see where she is?”

“I will start looking now.”

I opened my eyes and infused stigma into them. My eyes started glowing blue as my vision expanded into the thick fog...

* * *

How much time had passed?

Yoo Yeonha didn't have the luxury to wonder about that. She even forgot how many tears she shed.

However, she came back to her senses after crying a river and was slowly adapting to her situation.

She continued walking with the resolve to make it out of the fog. Her body moved out of pure instinct.

“...?”

Then, she spotted a silhouette in the fog and felt her heart drop in fear. The silhouette started approaching her and was getting closer and closer.

Yoo Yeonha's eyes shot wide open when the silhouette emerged from the fog. She recognized this face. He looked younger than she recalled, but she was certain that it was him because of his distinct facial features.

It was her father, Yoo Jinwoong.

He looked exactly like he did when he was younger. He was carrying a blanket in his arms and there was a baby soundly sleeping in the blanket.

Yoo Yeonha ran towards him as if she was possessed. She desperately grabbed his arm and tried to say something. However, she couldn't utter a sound.

Yoo Jinwoong continued to look at the baby in his arms before crumbling into dust.

Yoo Yeonha collapsed on the spot.

Thud...!

Thud...!

Thud...!

She suddenly heard a strange sound in her ears. She covered her ears, but the sound kept ringing in her mind.

A portion of the fog suddenly cleared up and she looked towards that spot.

A dark figure was approaching from the end of the tunnel.

Thud... Thud...

The figure was tall and wearing a long weathered robe. Its face was half-disfigured and the sound of his footsteps sounded sinister for some reason.

The man's hideous appearance was difficult to put into words and he soon looked at her with excited eyes.

“Hello...”

His voice was just as hideous as his appearance.

“It was you... as expected...”

His voice was quite difficult to put into words as well. It sounded like numerous tones were mixed and as if he was purposely manipulating it to sound strange. The voice was a mix of a man, a woman, and a child every time he spoke.

One thing was for certain. He was not a human being.

Yoo Yeonha gripped the whip on her waist.

“So it was you, Yoo Jinwoong’s daughter.”

Those words suddenly lit a light bulb in Yoo Yeonha’s head and she recognized the hideous disfigured face.

It was one of the Nine Evils, Destruction, who was also her father’s old nemesis.

“It’s nice to meet you,” Destruction said.

“*Hap!*” Yoo Yeonha swung her whip.

Destruction easily caught it with his hand, but that was what Yoo Yeonha was hoping for. She infused her mana into her whip and sent electric shockwaves through it.

Bzzzzt!

The electric shockwave zapped and illuminated their surroundings. Destruction crumbled into dust and her surroundings became dark again.

Was Destruction also an illusion?

She couldn’t tell what was real anymore after having her sense of sight and hearing stripped from her. The only thing she could do now was tremble in fear again.

“...!”

Then a hand suddenly grabbed her shoulder.

Yoo Yeonha flinched and turned around to swing her whip, but instantly froze on the spot after seeing a familiar face.

“*Ack!... Kim Hajin?*” her voice flowed out.

He rubbed his arm after getting hit by the whip and bitterly smiled, “*O-Ouch... That really hurts... What are you doing here?*”

His voice. It was real. It was really him without a doubt.

Yoo Yeonha felt a hot sensation well up from the depths of her core. She covered her mouth with both hands.

“Real...?”

“What do you mean by real?”

She shed tears before hugging him.

Kim Hajin was taken aback by her sudden action, but soon patted her back and consoled her. He comforted her while she continued to cry and listened to his warm gentle voice.

However...

She was certain that she was in his embrace, but... her body suddenly tilted in midair before she crashed into the ground.

Thud!

A sharp pain radiated from her hips and shoulder.

She sat on the ground and looked around her surroundings in a daze. She looked like a lost child looking for her mother. It was at that moment that she realized...

“Waaaaaaaah!”

It was another illusion.

* * *

“Ah, all of that was fake? Damn, that’s giving me the creeps...” Chae Nayun said while shuddering.

I lit the flashlight into the tunnel and asked, “Yeah, but more importantly. You got separated in there?”

“Yeah. The rope suddenly got cut, but everyone’s probably in there,” Chae Nayun replied.

I bumped into her around half an hour ago. She was putting on quite a show all alone at the tunnel’s entrance.

She looked like she was going wild swinging her sword and wasting her mana, but she said that she was fighting to the death with a horde of monsters. It was definitely the tower’s doing.

“But it’s amazing how nothing is happening when I’m with you,” she muttered in amazement.

“That’s because I have a gift that makes that happen...”

Things like hallucinations wouldn’t work on *[Master Sharpshooter]* while my other gift, *[Bodyguard]*, also rendered Chae Nayun immune as long as she was under my protection.

“Wow~ Really?”

“Yeah, it’s useful for protecting others.”

“Wow... no wonder Yeonha likes you.”

“Pfft!” I almost spat out the water I was drinking. I cleared my throat and nonchalantly pretended that I was alright.

—... So you are Kim Hajin.

A hideous voice suddenly came from somewhere in the ceiling.

Both of us flinched at the voice and retreated a few steps.

— I have been watching you... paying attention to you...

The voice sounded like a corrupted voice note. ‘Geez... *Would it kill him to speak properly...?*’

Chae Nayun frowned and retorted to the ceiling, “What the fuck do you want? You want a fight? Who the hell are you?!”

— Your past is in my memories too... including the culprit...

“Stop hiding and show your face! Moron!” Chae Nayun continued taunting the voice, but the voice didn’t seem to be affected at all and kept going.

— The name of this place is... the Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter.

“Hey, aren’t you going to come out? I’ll beat you up only a little bit if you come out now or else I’ll beat you to death if you make me come looking for you!” Chae Nayun threatened with her sword drawn out.

I had no idea what she learned on Mount Baekdu, but she became extremely violent for some reason...

—...

However, the voice no longer said anything after that.

Then, the tunnel lit up and a downward slope that led deeper into the tunnel appeared.

Tik... Tik... Tik...

The sound of a light bulb flickering made it seem more eerie.

“Is it asking us to go down? What’s your plan? Do you want to stay here?” Chae Nayun asked.

I went over my gear and calmed myself down. It wasn’t that hard for me to calm down since the world’s most talented swordsman with the most hidden potential was by my side.

I nodded in response and said, “Let’s go. We have to look for Yoo Yeonha.”

“...Wow, what a romantic you are.”

Side Stories 97

What If Story (12)

“Ah... This wind is annoying me...” Chae Nayun muttered while we were walking.

She shuddered in disgust and rubbed her arm whenever the air touched it.

“Endure it,” I said.

“Hey...” Chae Nayun tapped me on my shoulder.

“What?”

“You... since when did you like Yeonha?”

“...”

I continued walking without saying anything. Chae Nayun looked at me before placing both hands behind her head. She walked like a two-legged lizard before her eyes suddenly shot wide open.

“Over there! It’s Yi Jiyeon! That’s Jiyeon, right?”

“Looks like it...”

Yi Jiyeon was dancing not too far from us.

We went over to her while she was busy dancing like a ballerina with her eyes closed. I grabbed her shoulder and she finally opened her eyes.

“Kyaaaak!”

“Pipe down,” Chae Nayun immediately covered Yi Jiyoong’s mouth.

She looked at me and Chae Nayun before letting out a sigh of relief.

“Hey, Yi Jiyoong. Have you seen the others?”

“No... I was at a party when I opened my eyes...? *Huh?* Where the hell am I?” Yi Jiyoong asked while frivolously looking around the tunnel with eyes wide open from shock. Then, she let out a scream before running into Chae Nayun’s embrace.

“Where are we, Nayun? Where the hell is this?!”

“Hey, quit it... Damn it... I have no idea myself. Anyways, we have to keep moving. We might find the answer once we reach the end of this tunnel.”

“Where are WE?!”

“I said shut up and follow us.”

We marched onward with Yi Jiyoong added to our party. We didn’t really walk that deeper into the tunnel when we came across another hideous being.

It wasn’t Destruction. If I had to put it into words, then... a zombie?

However, the zombie looked too full of life to be considered a zombie. Perhaps... it was a hero turned into a zombie...?

“I think we need to fight that thing.”

It was then.

Shwaaaaa!

A gentle breeze blew from behind and pushed away the stench in the tunnel. It was a warm and gentle breeze that was full of vitality.

I immediately knew where this breeze came from.

The one who summoned the breeze proudly smiled while wielding her sword, Galatine. She ran towards us as fast as she could.

It was Rachel.

“*Huh?* It’s Rachel!” Yi Jiyeon was the first to react.

Rachel came up to us.

“What the heck? Why are you here?” Chae Nayun asked.

“I’m the reinforcement. I came after looking at the map Hajin drew,” Rachel replied.

I simply smiled when she looked at me.

“That’s a relief. It’s good to see that you’re alright, Hajin,” she said.

“Well, yeah. Anyways, it’s nice to see you here.”

“What the heck? Have you two met before...?”

“Yeah, a bit.”

I helped Rachel once before so she could awaken as an elemental.

“Anyways, now that you’re here...” I said before I took out my Desert Eagle.

The zombie was already emitting hostility towards us.

“Shall we fight together?”

“Yes, that’s why you’re here in the first place, right? But... where’s the vice guild master?”

For some reason, it felt like Rachel was more worried about Yoo Yeonha than I was.

I guess the little princess had grown up to become a shrewd businesswoman.

* * *

“That was too powerful to be called a zombie... Was it a fragment of the tower?” Rachel said while wiping Galatine and letting out a sigh of relief after the fight.

I was exhausted as well, but I nodded and replied, “Yeah, it probably was.”

“*Huh?* Why? I’m still so energetic!”

On the other hand, Chae Nayun was busy showing off her stamina.

I tried to walk, but one of my ankles gave out and I ended up falling down.

Chae Nayun helped me up and asked, “What’s wrong with you?”

“I have no idea... give me a second,” I grimaced and checked my Achilles tendon.

There were no cuts, but it felt like my Achilles tendon gave up on me as I couldn’t exert any force into my feet.

“Did something strange hit me...? Hey, help me up first,” I said.

“Alright, leave it to me,” Chae Nayun grabbed my arm and flung it over her neck.

She suddenly flashed a mischievous smile and said, “*Hehe...* I’ll tease the hell out of Yeonha if we meet her.”

“Tease? Does she even get teased?”

“Huh? Hey, do you want to bet on it?”

“Bet on what?”

Chae Nayun kept smirking like a mischievous little kid as she said, “I wonder what kind of expression Yoo Yeonha will make...”

“Oh right, Hajin. I heard about your scandal with the vice guild master!” Rachel suddenly exclaimed after eavesdropping on our conversation.

I bitterly smiled and shook my head, but her eyes were already twinkling with curiosity.

She calmed her breathing down before she asked in a serious tone, “Hajin... if everything goes well this time... Can you be the mediator for the English Royal Court guild and Essence of the Strait...? I mean... I know this isn’t the right time, but... never mind. We should hurry and save the vice guild master!”

* * *

Yoo Yeonha conjured a large orb with her mana and locked herself in it. This was the best she could come up with to protect herself from the darkness.

She resisted the hallucinations and just breathed like a plant. Time would pass and she would soon be able to leave this hellhole.

She was able to find hope in this hopeless situation after thinking of one specific person.

Yoo Yeonha thought about his face. She always regretted it and was always thankful to him.

She missed him. She missed him like crazy. Imagining him was no longer enough for her. He was the only thing in this world that could stand on equal footing with her ambition. Her feelings for him grew stronger the farther apart they were. Her memories of him now only tormented her day and night. Those memories stabbed her heart like a

dagger.

That made her all the more certain now. No, she was certain since a long time ago.

She liked him, and she loved him.

Knock... Knock...

Someone knocked on the orb, but Yoo Yeonha didn't react to it. It was probably another hallucination.

Knock... Knock...

Yoo Yeonha shuddered when it knocked again.

Then, a warm gentle mana brightly illuminated her surroundings.

“...?”

Yoo Yeonha looked up at the light descending on her like it was granting her salvation from this hell.

Kim Hajin was looking down at her.

Yoo Yeonha rubbed her eyes a few times. His arm was around Chae Nayun's shoulder and he was leaning on her.

...This was probably another hallucination.

Yoo Yeonha looked at Chae Nayun, who had a stupid smirk.

That smirk looked all too familiar.

...Still, it was probably another hallucination.

“Why? What?”

Chae Nayun kept smirking while raising her eyebrows. Her sleazy smile looked exactly like what she would do whenever she was being mischievous.

“Are you jealous?” Chae Nayun asked while fiddling with Kim Hajin’s fingers.

Yoo Yeonha’s eyes turned cold as she sharply glared at her. Chae Nayun was nothing but a hallucination. Yoo Yeonha was certain of it, and that was why...

She immediately stood up and swung her hand with all her strength the moment Chae Nayun locked fingers with Kim Hajin.

Paaaaak!

The destructive sound reverberated across the tunnel.

* * *

Destruction was observing them from behind his mask. He smiled while hiding behind the thick dense fog covering the tunnel.

How long would they be able to keep smiling?

This thought alone sent chills down his spine and made him feel ecstatic. In the end, he ended up jizzing himself when the ecstasy overwhelmed him.

He became interested in Kim Hajin three years ago. The boy was a nobody that he wouldn’t have given a second look normally, but it was a different story if he was related to the Yoo family.

Destruction first found out about him when the scandal about Yoo Yeonha broke out. At the time, Destruction was also busy digging up dirt on Yoo Jinwoong in Pandemonium.

The truth that he found out by sheer coincidence was the Kwang-Oh Incident. The sole survivor of that incident was none other than that boy, Kim Hajin.

In the end, Destruction no longer felt the need to endlessly toil just to bring down the Yoo family. That incident alone was a ticking time bomb.

There was no way Kim Hajin would be able to forgive the family that destroyed his life and killed his parents. He was a human after all, and humans were very bad at forgiving others.

‘I want to see it... I want to see your face as your daughter gets betrayed by the man she loves. I want to see your face as your family starts crumbling. I want to see it as you start killing each other. I desperately want to see it.

I, Evil Destruction, will definitely make it happen.

Yoo Jinwoong, your daughter is going to die here today.’

* * *

Yoo Yeonha awkwardly scratched the back of her neck while looking at Chae Nayun’s swollen cheek.

“I’m sorry, Nayun...”

“No problem. I won the bet thanks to you, but...” Chae Nayun replied before she narrowed her eyes and grumbled, “You guys look fucking annoying to look at right now. I mean, you don’t have to cling to each other like that, you know?”

Yoo Yeonha was hugging Kim Hajin as close as she could under the premise that she was helping him walk. They were so close that they were probably going to jump under the sheets if a bed magically appeared along the way.

“Come on. What’s wrong with you, Nayun? Just let them enjoy themselves,” Yi Jiyeon said with a smile.

She already took dozens of photos of them. The internet didn’t work here so she couldn’t upload them, but she made sure to take as many pictures as she could with her smartwatch.

“What do you mean by enjoy? I am helping him walk, Yi Jiyeon,” Yoo Yeonha said as she started to berate Yi Jiyeon.

Then, Yoo Yeonha looked at Kim Hajin and smiled happily, “Hehe...”

However, she was scared deep inside. What if this was just another hallucination...?

“It’s not a hallucination. Don’t worry,” Kim Hajin assured her as if he could read her mind.

“Y-Yes... Okay...” Yoo Yeonha couldn’t look him in the eye, so she replied after lowering her gaze with her cheeks puffed up.

“I am glad you are safe, vice guild master,” Rachel said in a gentle voice.

Yoo Yeonha smiled and replied, “Thank you. It is all thanks to you, Guild Master Rachel. I hope we can sit down and chat later on.”

Rachel looked overjoyed at those words.

“Hey, Yeonha. So Destruction is here?”

“Yeah, he has something with my father. They used to be comrades before, but...”

“Ah, so that Destruction was your father’s lackey~~~!” Chae Nayun shouted as loud as she could.

Yoo Yeonha couldn’t understand what she was doing, but the tunnel showed a reaction to those words and started to lightly tremble.

“It’s working. *Kekeke!* That stupid moron,” Chae Nayun snickered with an evil smile.

“Destruction was Yoo Jinwoong’s lackey~~~! I guess it’s true~! Look at him hiding~ You’re a lackey if you keep hiding~~~” Chae Nayun continued shouting a bunch of childish insults.

Yoo Yeonha didn't bother stopping her as the tunnel shook whenever she roasted Destruction.

However, the taunts weren't as effective later on.

* * *

Twelve hours later...

"Wow... this is crazy... Can we take a break first?" Yi Jiyeon asked while drenched in sweat.

Twelve hours. We walked for twelve straight hours. This tunnel seemed to have the ability to tire us out. Yi Jiyeon was the first casualty of the march.

"No... not yet..." Yoo Yeonha said.

As she was about to say something, she was interrupted when someone exclaimed.

"Oh!"

Someone appeared from within the tunnel and everyone prepared for battle.

However, the person who appeared was a little girl.

Everyone lowered their weapons after seeing that it was a little girl. The little girl walked towards them with a blanket in her arms. Then she stopped at a distance not too far away from us.

We walked over to the girl and talked to her, but she didn't respond to anything we said.

We suspected this was another hallucination, but my eyes were telling me it wasn't. I looked inside the blanket and what I found made me grimace.

“Why? Is it someone you know?” Yoo Yeonha asked.

I shook my head and checked the baby’s arm, “No.”

However, that tattoo engraved on the baby’s arm was the same four streaks of stigma that I had. At that moment, I was extremely confused by what was going on.

Chae Nayun muttered without a thought, “The baby has a tattoo...?”

“A tattoo...?” Yoo Yeonha muttered as she checked the baby’s arm. Then she immediately looked at me.

She tilted her head in confusion. She knew that I had a tattoo and saw it when we were trapped in the field in China, in the Amazon, and when we spent a long time together.

However, why did this baby have the same tattoo...? I was sure this tattoo was my stigma, but why...?

Was it possible that the past and present were starting to overlap and it was causing some strange phenomenon?

Yoo Yeonha suddenly grabbed my arm and rolled up my sleeve. She saw that my stigma looked exactly the same as the baby’s tattoo.

“This is...” Yoo Yeonha muttered before she looked at me with a serious look.

I shook my head and pulled back my arm before I said, “It’s a hallucination.”

Side Stories 98

What If Story (13)

I was deep in thought.

Why did this child in the tower's fragment possess the exact tattoo as mine?

I couldn't come up with any theories. The only thing I could come up with was the small price this world had to pay after I was transported here — Kim Chundong.

It was likely that the child was Chundong in the past.

The Tower of Memory's hallucination tended to show the past in the present. This baby had the stigma's tattoo on its body since it was Chundong when he was young.

However, I still couldn't understand why this memory was being played right now in the present.

“...”

We walked without saying a word. Chae Nayun whispered while walking since she wasn't used to staying quiet while I and Yoo Yeonha looked quite haggard for some reason.

“I wonder what happened... Have you entered this place before, Hajin?” Rachel carefully asked while stealing glances at Yoo Yeonha.

“I'm not sure,” I replied.

“Are you related in some way to Destruction?” she asked.

“I ran into him in the United States.”

I did run into Destruction in the United States now that I thought about it. I didn't personally meet him, but the terrorist organization I thwarted was under Destruction's command.

"Hey, put this one on," Chae Nayun said as she threw me a gas mask.

The evil mana in the air was getting thick, so I guess we were getting closer to Destruction.

"*Hmm...* Does that mean you were born somewhere around here? You're an orphan, right?" Yi Jiyoona asked.

Chae Nayun flinched and whacked Yi Jiyoona for being too straightforward, but I didn't really mind it.

"Who knows?" I shrugged.

However, it was the hideous voice that replied instead.

— That is correct.

We stopped and looked around our surroundings.

It was Destruction. He was definitely hiding in the thick dense fog ahead. We could see his face covered by his hideous mask.

— This is where your past is.

I almost let out a sigh as I sensed that something quite troublesome was about to start.

— This is where your memories are at.

Yoo Yeonha grabbed the hem of my shirt and I pulled her shoulder closer to me.

Then, a sinister smile formed on Destruction's face.

Seeuuuu...!

The fog grew thicker in the silence before it showed us a scene from the past. A part of the fog turned into humans while another part turned into sounds.

[Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter]

The safe refuge was built at the end of the long tunnel.

There were numerous people in the evacuation shelter called the *Kwang-Oh Evacuation Shelter*. All of them were civilians who gathered there for their own survival.

We flinched and looked around our surroundings.

— Are you alright?!

— Y-Yeah... but not yet...

Two people caught our eyes. One was a pregnant lady holding her husband's hand. She already started giving birth and the people around them were helping her give birth.

— B-Breath! Breath!

Thud!

It was then that the evacuation shelter's steel doors opened and everyone looked towards the door.

Two people were standing there. One was an adult male while the other was a small girl.

The people in the evacuation shelter continued looking at them.

— Have a good look, Byul.

The man said before he started the massacre. A person's head went flying whenever he swung his hand.

The heroes that were guarding the evacuation shelter tried to stop him, but it was futile. They were either blown to smithereens or had their heads cut off in a single swoop.

“*Blurgh...!*” Yi Jiyeon puked at the sight of the carnage.

On the other hand, Chae Nayun rushed at the man and swung her sword. However, this was only an illusion.

Chae Nayun’s sword cut through the air and she failed to stop the massacre that occurred in the past.

“What the fuck is this...?” she muttered under her breath.

All of a sudden, the pregnant woman’s heart was pierced with mana and her husband lay motionlessly as he was forced to watch his wife’s demise and shed tears of blood.

— Can you do it?

The man asked the little girl.

The girl looked at the massacre with lifeless eyes. Then she slowly approached the pregnant woman.

—...

She looked down at the baby that was just born and extended her shadow to snuff out whatever life remained in the room. However, the baby was still alive.

The little girl stared at the baby for quite a while.

Then, the scenery changed to something else. They were now outdoors with a river flowing beside them.

The little girl was holding the baby wrapped in a blanket and a large man stood next to her.

—... Is this the child?

Yoo Yeonha flinched after hearing the familiar voice. She watched in horror as the man's face became visible.

It was Yoo Jinwoong.

The girl nodded in response.

— I see...

Yoo Jinwoong looked at the baby and returned it to the little girl.

—... I'm sorry

Yoo Jinwoong bit his lips and said.

That was all Yoo Yeonha had to hear to understand what was going on.

— Disappear where nobody can see you. Don't ever appear in front of me or Chae Joochul. That is the best I can do for you...

—...

A breeze blew and the little girl turned into a shadow before disappearing.

Then, the baby was abandoned at an orphanage where he grew up as an orphan.

“...”

The scenery disappeared and they were back at the tunnel where nobody said a single word.

I looked at Yoo Yeonha.

— Do you get it now?

Yoo Yeonha looked downcast. She was trembling and despair was written all over her face. Tears were welling up in her eyes.

I was flustered and had never seen her this shaken before.

— This is the past that you have been searching for. You roamed the world to find your past, didn't you?

“...?”

I wondered what nonsense he was spouting. Don't tell me Destruction thought that I was roaming the world in search of the past that had nothing to do with me...? He was absolutely wrong, but that didn't stop Yoo Yeonha from trembling.

— The Tower of Memory recreates a portion of someone's memories. I'm sure you realized by now that the tower only speaks the truth.

I didn't know what to say, so I remained quiet.

Chae Nayun grabbed my shoulder and said, “Hey...”

She looked quite serious as well.

It was probably because the name Chae Joochul was mentioned in the memory.

On the other hand, Rachel and Yi Jiyeon had the same reaction as Chae Nayun.

“Hajin...”

“Did I understand things correctly just now...? So I was correct that you were born here...?”

I felt my head stop for a second.

Destruction was smiling triumphantly. However, I didn't feel anything to be honest. I was sorry to Chundong, but... No, I didn't even know who Chundong was in the first place.

Still, I had no idea what I was supposed to say.

However, it didn't take me long after seeing Yoo Yeonha's face. All I could think about right now was saving her.

“...”

I glared at Destruction and wanted nothing more than to crush that smug face smiling so triumphantly.

To do that, I had to lie.

“I already knew about it.”

I could hear gasps after what I said. Not only was Yoo Yeonha shocked, but everyone else was as well.

I combed my hair back with my hand and continued, “I knew about it. Everything.”

—... Utter nonsense.

The voice behind the hideous mask started to shake.

However, I replied after pulling Yoo Yeonha closer to me, “So it's alright.”

Yoo Yeonha looked like she was about to cry any second now.

— Stop bullshitting!

Destruction exploded in anger. His entire body was radiating evil mana as his tentacles shot out from his back. His evil mana and heat were slowly starting to fill the tunnel.

“Let’s talk about the specifics later.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha still looked lost, but dealing with Destruction was our priority right now.

“Everyone,” I looked at Chae Nayun and Rachel.

Thankfully, both of them were ready for battle.

“Yeah... We can talk about it later, Kim Hajin,” Chae Nayun replied as she gathered mana into her sword.

Rachel summoned her spirits.

Destruction continued to gather his mana until he slowly started to change form. He was no longer a human at this point and looked too hideous to even be called a djinn.

He was now nothing but a monster surrounded by tentacles.

I took out my Desert Eagle and aimed at him.

* * *

We got into formation immediately.

Rachel and Chae Nayun were up front while Yi Jiyeon and I were at the backlines. Yoo Yeonha was supposed to be at the center as an attacking supporter, but she was still not in the condition to fight.

“Haaap!”

Chae Nayun swung her sword and pushed Destruction back.

Destruction had grown to the size of a golem, so he easily blocked the giant sword with his hand and shot out tentacles from his back.

I changed my Desert Eagle into an assault rifle and focused on all of Destruction's tentacles. My main role was to shoot down his tentacles while Chae Nayun and Rachel dealt with him.

Chae Nayun was the tanker and damage dealer while Rachel watched her back. Both of them were already powerful enough to stand toe-to-toe against Destruction.

"Get a grip! Yoo Yeonha!" I shouted at her while supporting the other two.

Yoo Yeonha gripped her whip while crying. She wrapped it around a tentacle before channeling her mana.

"You son of a bitch!" Chae Nayun cried out as her sword grew bigger.

Yi Jiyeon cast her buff on the sword that was now the size of a pillar.

Kwaaaaang!

The blue greatsword slashed Destruction.

He tried to block the sword with his hands, but Rachel swung Galatine and cut his wrists off.

"...!"

Destruction was no longer a human at this point. He let out a hideous cry befitting a monster and gathered mana into his mouth.

I was waiting for this moment. I changed the assault rifle into a rifle. It was a rifle that could only hold five bullets in its magazine, a lever-action rifle. This rifle was far stronger at close range compared to a sniper rifle, and it was designed to maximize the damage a bullet could deal.

I activated *[Bullet Time]*.

[Setting Saved – Exorcist Bullet]

[You have consumed 100 SP to change the bullets' settings.]

I added a setting to my bullets by adding *[Exorcism]* to it. On top of that, I infused stigma into the bullets.

Click! Clack!

I unleashed the five bullets that were strong enough to eliminate Destruction.

Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang! Bang!

The bullets went straight for the monster's mouth.

“...!”

The bullets struck the evil mana the monster was gathering, and the sound of shattering glass reverberated in the tunnel.

The shock was visible in the monster's eyes as the shattered evil mana went wild.

Chae Nayun seized the opening to swing her greatsword and cut the monster's body.

Kwaaaaaaaaang!

A red light started coming out from where Chae Nayun cut.

“Oh SHIT!” Chae Nayun screamed.

Destruction self-destructed.

* * *

I opened my eyes. The sun was shining down on me, and a gentle breeze enveloped me.

I felt someone gently caressing my hair. I looked up and saw that it was Yoo Yeonha.

“...”

I didn't say anything since it felt like a dream. On second thought, I hoped we didn't die together after getting swept up when Destruction self-destructed...

However, Yoo Yeonha didn't say anything as she smiled sadly.

I couldn't hold it in any longer and asked, “What happened?”

“We obtained one fragment, but Destruction managed to escape...” she replied and took out a fragment from her pocket.

It was a golden shard.

“Then where are we?”

“We're still stuck in the tower's fragment. It's such a hassle, right?”

“What about the others?”

“They already went to raid the other fragments. They wanted to give us some time alone.”

That was all Yoo Yeonha said. It seemed like she wanted to say something else, but she continued hesitating.

“Hey... about that...” she muttered as tears started forming in her eyes.

I could hear just how hard it was for her to squeeze her voice out.

“I have something to say...” she said.

I let out a sigh and scratched the back of my neck, “What is it?”

“Umm...”

The sound of the tree branches gently swaying gave us a sense of tranquility. Yoo Yeonha hurriedly avoided my eyes and looked at the tree branches.

“This is a secret...” she muttered.

I started racking my brain thinking of a way to deal with this situation. I lied at the spur of the moment, but now I had to clean up after the mess I caused...

“This is something I really wanted to tell you before it’s too late... for the last time,” she continued.

The final words, ‘for the last time,’ stabbed my heart like a dagger.

The sun was no longer shining down on us. A shadow in the shape of leaves covered Yoo Yeonha’s face.

She smiled sadly.

I had no idea how much she had contemplated and how difficult it must’ve been for her in that short period.

“I love you.”

I clenched my fists after hearing those words.

My heart was screaming at me right now, and I knew that I had to tell her the truth...

...Before it was too late.

Side Stories 99

What If Story (14)

“I love you.”

I grabbed Yoo Yeonha’s arm as soon as she said those words and pulled her into my embrace. I could smell the scent of roses from her.

She froze and her breathing stopped. She didn’t move even a bit, so I had to check just to make sure she was still alive.

I poked her waist and she flinched.

“*Euk...!* Let go...! I...”

“I also have a secret.”

I didn’t give her the chance to speak. I wrapped my arms around her waist and gritted my teeth. My heart was beating wildly, but I couldn’t tell if it was my heart or hers that was beating right now.

I could feel her breath on my shoulder, and tension gripped my neck.

I was worried. What if she thought that what I was about to say was just a bunch of lies? Or what if she thought that I had gone insane?

However, I really had to tell her this. I wanted to tell her this at least.

I breathed in and placed my hand on the back of her head before saying, “I... I’m not from this world.”

“...?”

I couldn’t see her reaction properly, but I could hear her uneven

breathing.

She was probably in disbelief right now and doubting what she just heard. I mean, even I never imagined that I would end up saying something straight out of a sci-fi movie.

I swore to keep it a secret and not tell anyone in this life, but I guess...

"I might sound insane, but I'm not lying. I'm from another world."

"..."

Yoo Yeonha still didn't respond.

I started to tell her numerous things. I told her about the other earth in a parallel world where neither monsters nor heroes existed. I told her how I was just an ordinary person in that world...

However, I didn't tell her that I was a writer in that world. I also kept the fact that she was just a character I wrote a secret as well.

Aside from that, I told her everything else.

"So that's me in a nutshell. Do you believe me?" I asked as I slowly let go of her.

Yoo Yeonha held onto my shoulder and stood up.

She looked at me and said something strange in response, "I heard that these kinds of things happen from time to time..."

"Huh?"

I was surprised when she said that. Did Kim Suho tell her the truth as well?

"Yes, the brain tends to fabricate a memory to justify their own strength and cover their weaknesses."

“...”

“I’m not saying there’s something wrong with you, but... I suspect that the condition for using your ability is the distortion of your memories. I’m used to stories like this since it’s quite common,” Yoo Yeonha calmly replied.

I intently stared at her for a moment before flicking her forehead.

Tak!

The sound of a walnut cracking could be heard.

“*Kyak!* What are you doing?!”

“*Ha...* I mustered the courage to tell you, but you’re treating me like a mental patient...”

To be honest, her theory was quite convincing. However, I didn’t doubt my memories one bit. The one absolute proof I had for that was the stigma on my body.

“Hey... T-That hurt...” Yoo Yeonha complained while rubbing her forehead. Then she asked, “So you’re really telling the truth...?”

“Yes, so I wasn’t born here. That’s why the past that Destruction showed us doesn’t apply to me since that wasn’t me in the first place.”

“Then whose past was that...?”

“I have no idea... I’m guessing the me from this parallel world who switched with me. Both are probably me, but we’re different at the same time.”

I made up a convincing answer on the spot, but it seemed that Yoo Yeonha was still suspicious of me. Well, I didn’t blame her since she was probably used to suspecting others as she was the vice guild master of Essence of the Strait.

She would probably be just a corpse if she stopped suspecting people...

“Are you sure you’re not making this up...? *Ack!*”

I flicked her forehead again and it was swollen after I hit the same spot.

I let out a sigh and muttered, “*Ah~* It feels so liberating after telling this to someone~”

“Still, why don’t you go and get tested... *Kyak!*”

I didn’t hit her three times in a row. I simply pretended that I was going to and she immediately raised her arms to block her forehead.

I used the opening to place my hands under her armpits and tickle her.

“*Hiyak!* W-Wait... S-Stop it...!!”

She fell to the ground at my ambush and she laughed while crying in agony. We rolled on the grass until we were face to face with me on top of her.

The green grass as the backdrop made her eyes look especially lovely.

“You told me that you love me, right?” I asked.

She blushed and avoided my eyes.

I caressed her cheek and made her look into my eyes again.

“I too, will try to become a person fitting for you.”

These were my honest feelings. I wasn’t particularly handsome or well off. My height was slightly above average at most. The only thing I had was *[Setting Intervention]* and stigma, which was nothing compared to Kim Suho’s gifts.

However, I wanted to become a person suitable for her. A person she wouldn't feel embarrassed having beside her...

Rather than change her as a person... I wanted to be the one to improve.

'You can stay the same as you are. I will be the one to change. After all, I'm the visitor here that has to adapt to his surroundings.'

"A-Alright... I got it, so can you..." Yoo Yeonha tried to push me away.

I pushed her hands away and pressed myself closer to her.

Yoo Yeonha tried to free herself from me, but I held the back of her neck to prevent her from escaping.

I stared right into her moist eyes that were forming waves like a calm lake.

"H-Hey...!"

I kissed her.

Yoo Yeonha tightly closed her eyes and closed her mouth, but soon let out a moan and opened her mouth. I gently tickled her lips with my tongue.

Our lips started to naturally intertwine with one another, and our bodies pressed against each other.

We could feel each other's body heat as we got closer and closer...

* * *

"H-Hey, we're here. Was everyone waiting for us?"

We went back to the others while making awkward faces. They looked at us with suspicion in their eyes and closely inspected our faces.

“What were you guys doing?” Chae Nayun asked with her arms crossed over her chest.

I glanced at Yoo Yeonha before replying, “It took some time for me to wake up.”

“Is he telling the truth, Yeonha?”

“Yeah, he slept for quite a long time.”

Fortunately, our vice guild master’s acting skills were impeccable. Yoo Yeonha calmly brushed her hair and approached the others.

“Rather than that, what happened to Destruction?”

“We’re chasing him down. They say he’s at the center of the fragments. I think he’s the one who interfered with the tower raid in the first place.”

“Really? Is there anything happening in particular to the tower aside from that?”

“No... but more importantly... Tell us in detail. You know, what we saw at that evacuation shelter. Were you really aware of it all?” Chae Nayun asked.

Ding! Ding!

Our smartwatches rang at the best time after reconnecting to the internet. All of us immediately checked our smartwatches. This was how scary smartwatch addiction could be...

— Can you hear me, Hajin?

Jin Seyeon was the first to call me.

“Yes, I can hear you. What’s the matter?”

— Nothing much. We are proceeding smoothly with the fragment

subjugation thanks to your map. Only two or three fragments remain.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly stretched out her hand and grabbed my smartwatch. She tried to yank it from my wrist, but failed to do so.

‘I mean... these are locked with fingerprint biometrics... you know?’

“Argh... Why won’t this thing come off...” she grumbled while wrestling with my smartwatch.

I let out a sigh and took it off for her.

— Hello? Hajin? Hello?

“Yes, this is the vice guild master of Essence of the Strait, Yoo Yeonha speaking. Please speak to me instead.”

— Ah, okay. The largest fragment is at the center, and we are going to gather at the center to subjugate it. There will be a limit of one hundred participants, so I advise that you come as fast as you can. I will send you the coordinates of the map.”

“Alright, then I will be hanging up now.”

Yoo Yeonha ended the call and put my smartwatch in her pocket.

“Hey, why are you keeping that?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t say anything. Instead, she blinked at me a few times. I tried to put my hand in her pocket, but she slapped my hand before retreating a few steps.

“I have something to check,” she said.

“But that’s my smartwatch...”

“So? Who gave you permission to speak to her?”

Yoo Yeonha walked out after that.

Chae Nayun, Rachel, and the rest looked at me with intrigued eyes thanks to Yoo Yeonha's unnatural behavior.

* * *

Eighteen guilds and one hundred heroes gathered to subjugate the tower. There were even heroes from the Temple of Justice, magicians from the magic tower, and three of the top heroes as well.

All of them used the map I drew and quickly subjugated the fragments. We were now at the last fragment after a while.

"This is quite the army," Yoo Yeonha muttered while looking outside our tent.

I nodded in response.

Chae Nayun, Yi Jiyeon, and Rachel already joined up with the rest of the army.

"Yeah, they're all people I've heard of."

"I agree, but..."

Yoo Yeonha started squirming once again. I wondered why she had been acting like a worm since a while ago...?

"What is it?"

"This..."

She pointed at my hand on her shoulder. I was using her as a crutch by making excuses that Destruction injured me.

"Aren't you better now? Can you let go...? Until when do you plan to keep holding onto me...?"

“I am, but... you can make me let go then.”

It was embarrassing for me to admit it, but Yoo Yeonha was stronger than me in terms of strength. I was an irregular who excelled in certain fields, but my stats were hopeless.

“I mean... that’s not what I meant...”

“Then what?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha blushed and didn’t say anything after that. I buried my face in her shoulder and laughed. I guess I tickled her judging by how her body shook whenever I laughed.

“Haa... you really... please don’t do that...”

Anyway, this was probably enough. I pulled back my arm and gently pushed her forward.

“It’s time for you to go and rack up some achievements. I’ll be protecting you from afar.”

“Ah... sure... okay...” she grumbled once I let go of her.

I stared at her.

I, no, we confessed to each other in the fragment. The vice guild master sincerely accepted my feelings, but I had no idea what she was going to do about it from now on.

I cupped her chin and kissed her.

“...!” Yoo Yeonha gasped in surprise.

It was a short kiss, but it was more than enough to sap the strength out of her body and make her fall into my embrace.

We stayed like that for quite a while until she suddenly moved her hands and touched my clothes. Unfortunately, she was arranging the creases on my clothes. She straightened my collar and patted the dirt off my shirt.

“Don’t run away this time...” she muttered.

I smiled and nodded in response.

“You’re one to talk. Are you sure you’re not going to pretend I’m a stranger when tomorrow comes?”

“...I’m not like that.”

“Really? Dang... I liked that part of you...”

Yoo Yeonha narrowed her eyes and glared at me. I pinched her small cute nose in response.

She flinched when I pinched her nose.

“Ah, really! Can you stop teasing me?!”

“I think you’re enjoying it.”

“W-When did I? Are you crazy? I think you’re crazy...”

Yoo Yeonha blushed before she let out a sigh. The clouds receded and the sun shined brightly. Her smile was still brighter than the sun in my eyes.

“Then, I’ll be going now.”

“Okay.”

“I hope you’ll learn how to differentiate business and personal matters from now on.”

“Like I said, you’re one to talk.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about? I’m very good at it. Anyways, I’ll be going now. Watch my back. You’re back to being my bodyguard, remember that.”

“Sure, sure~”

Yoo Yeonha patted my shoulder and turned around. I watched her back just like she asked me to before climbing up a tree.

— Wow~ That’s Yoo Yeonha.

She finally reached the main tent and various people came up to shake hands with her. I leaned against the tree and involuntarily smiled.

I was feeling a sense of happiness that I had never felt after coming to this world. I felt content with life... Of course, I could no longer return to my real world.

I would no longer be able to see my family, friends, and everything else I left behind. There were times this thought came crashing down on me and made me spiral into depression, but this world taught me one thing.

If you couldn’t avoid it, then just enjoy it.

Some people might think I was just brainwashing myself and self-justifying my predicament, but it didn’t matter if I was self-justifying it to run away from the truth. I was now able to sincerely enjoy life thanks to my vice guild master.

Then a voice in my earpiece disturbed my train of thought.

— Are you watching? Are you watching over me?

Her playful voice tickled my ears.

“Yeah,” I replied with a smile. “I’m only looking at you.”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t respond and continued nonchalantly talking to the

other heroes. However, I could clearly see with my own eyes that her ears were flushing red.

I suddenly felt teasing her, so I whispered.

— !

Yoo Yeonha flinched after hearing my voice.

— Vice Guild Master? Are you alright?

— I-It's nothing... I'm okay.

The heroes around her were concerned, but she was busy looking around trying to find me.

“Hey, aren't you going to respond?” I playfully teased her.

— I mean... I told you not to do that all of a sudden... I told you to differentiate between business and personal matters... *Ah?* No, it's nothing. I received a report, that's all. Yes.

She tried her best to continue her conversation with the heroes.

I laughed and teased her one more time, “Aren't you going to answer me? I'm going to run away again if you don't~”

Yoo Yeonha puffed her cheeks and frowned. Then she whispered in a tiny voice.

—... Me too.

Side Stories 100

What If Story (15)

[Breaking News. The tower's effects have been successfully neutralized. The heroes used the map drawn by the professional mercenary Black Wolf and...]

It only took 52 hours, 30 minutes, and 15 seconds to neutralize the tower's effects and subjugate it. Unfortunately, they failed to catch Destruction, but there were other massive benefits to this event. One example would be that the tower fragments we collected held the potential to be an extremely valuable source of energy.

"You want me to use it?" I asked.

Yoo Yeonha took out a vial containing a tower fragment and gave it to me. The fragment was giving off a luster like moonlight.

"Yes, we obtained four and decided to give you one. I'm sure you'll use it well. Besides, you're quite good at making furniture, right?"

"What does that have to do with this...?"

"I'm sure you can make some weapon out of it, right?"

I was in the limousine with Yoo Yeonha, who was completely leaning on my shoulder. I reached around with my free hand and played with her earlobe while we chatted.

"*Hang~* Hey, why do you keep playing with my ears? Do you have an ear fetish or something? Are you a pervert?"

I responded by putting my finger in her ear. She trembled before slamming her head into my chin.

“Hey, that hurts...”

“Please... don’t touch my ears...” she said with moist eyes.

I rubbed my chin and switched on my smartwatch.

[The specialist Black Wolf is Yoo Yeonha’s ex-bodyguard?]

[Black Wolf and Yoo Yeonha reunite with a strange vibe between them...]

“But what do we do? There seems to already be a scandal about us,” I said and projected a hologram of the article.

Yoo Yeonha read the article and replied, “It’s fine. We don’t have to concern ourselves with gossip like this.”

Bzzt!

Yoo Yeonha was confidently smiling when she suddenly received a message. She switched her smartwatch on and checked it.

Then, she froze after reading the contents of the message.

I peeked over her shoulder and read it too.

[Vice guild master, the paparazzi took a picture of you and Black Wolf getting into the limousine. They are asking what your relationship with him is.]

It seemed like a major news outlet this time judging from how they contacted Essence of the Strait before publishing the news.

“Huh? What’s with your face? Are you going to brush it off again?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha didn’t say anything in response to my sneering. She looked like she wanted to say something, but both of her cheeks puffed up.

I tapped her puffed cheeks with my finger.

“Pwuuuuu!” she spat out the air in her mouth.

“I’m alright, so you can do whatever you want. I don’t mind even if you keep it a secret forever.”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha let out a sigh and buried her face in my chest. She wrapped her arms around my waist and said, “...I’ll tell them.”

I patted her back in response.

Then, she added, “...Not now, but someday. Now’s not the time.”

I knew she would say that and flicked her forehead.

“Ack!”

* * *

Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep...

It was four-thirty in the morning. My alarm was ringing earlier than usual to start the day.

However, I was already long awake even before my alarm rang. I just couldn’t move because Yoo Yeonha was clinging to me. Both of her arms wrapped around my body and her leg was on top of my stomach.

I felt like a body pillow for some reason...

Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep... Beep...

The alarm kept ringing.

I pressed Yoo Yeonha’s nose, cheeks, and lips. However, there was no

response. I pinched her nose and she grimaced while making sounds that showed she was annoyed.

Still, she didn't wake up.

"What beautiful lips you have..." I said as I traced my finger on her lips.

Tap... Tap... Tap... Tap...

I tapped my finger on her lips when they suddenly spread open and devoured my finger.

I flinched and pulled my finger out. Then, I instinctively smelled my finger. It surprisingly smelled good like the scent of roses... How was that possible...?

I placed my finger on her lips again, and she devoured it just like before.

She sucked my finger for a while and opened her eyes when I slowly pulled my finger out.

"..."

She stared at me for five seconds without saying anything.

Then she said in a sleepy voice, "...Food."

I smiled and got out of bed.

"What do you want to eat? Ramyun?" I asked her.

"I don't like ramyun," she brazenly lied through her teeth.

I massaged her shoulders before heading to the kitchen. Kimchi stew was probably the best for breakfast. I quickly whipped up breakfast for my hard-working vice guild master.

She was already on the table with her spoon and chopsticks in hand.

“Here,” I placed the food in front of her.

Yoo Yeonha suddenly grabbed my shoulder and kissed me.

I patted her on the head and said, “You didn’t brush your teeth.”

“I can forgo washing every day and it won’t matter. It’s one of my gifts.”

“Really...? That’s interesting...”

Did she possess such a gift...? Anyways, I just nodded and sat opposite of her.

“Please send me the schedule for today,” she said while scooping the stew into her bowl.

Ziing...

Her smartwatch projected a hologram image.

“How does it look today?”

“Who knows?”

Yoo Yeonha smirked and stretched her legs towards me. She placed her feet on my chair.

“What do you think it will look like~?” she asked before flashing a sensual and playful smile.

No, she was trying to look sensual, but to me, she looked more like a king and I was her servant...

I stared at her for a while before grabbing her ankle and running my fingers between her toes.

“What are you doing?! *Hiik!* W-Wait... *Ah...* No... Stop... S-Stop... I’m sorry... *Haaang...* ~”

This was not my intended use when I created [*Dexterity*], but it sure did come in handy in situations like this.

* * *

I wore a coat and left the mansion. It was currently six in the morning, but the sky was still dark since it was winter.

“What happened to the shard I gave you last time?”

“Oh, that one?”

Yoo Yeonha asked me as soon as we got into the limousine. I opened my hand and showed her aether.

“I stuck it in here.”

“Oh~ Good job~” Yoo Yeonha nodded in satisfaction.

She was looking at me with a smile, but I couldn’t help but feel that she was scanning my face right now.

“You know...” she said in a serious voice.

“*Hmm?*”

“I’ve been thinking about this since last time, but... you’ve gotten more handsome, you know that?”

“*Pfft!*” I failed to suppress my laughter.

Just on a side note, I did enchant aether with [*Killer Smile*] using my [*Jar of Greed*].

The effect of that was...

— *The user's charm stat will increase by 0.002 every twenty-four hours and will increase by a maximum of one. (However, it will not be able to exceed nine under any circumstances.)*

I added this three years ago, so I already increased my charm by one and the Fragment of Memory further enhanced aether's effect.

— *Aether's effect +40%*

I gained an extra 0.4 charm, which brought my total to 5.8.

The limit for a human being was nine and most people averaged four. Now I could say that I was within the top ten to twenty percent of the population based on looks alone.

"I think you're just blinded by love," I replied.

After all, I saw no reason to come clean.

Yoo Yeonha retorted with a frown, "Blinded by what? Don't you know that I'm a very objective person?"

"But I'm really good, right? Maybe it's because of that?"

I wasn't really bragging, but I performed very well thanks to *[Dexterity]*. Also, I could use my SP and add a suitable gift if my performance started to slow down later on.

Yoo Yeonha flinched and pushed me away, "W-What are you talking about? I... I have no idea what you mean...!"

We arrived at the portal station. I got out of the limousine before she did. Yoo Yeonha muttered something along the lines of, *'It's nothing like that, so don't misunderstand me...'* while getting out.

Our destination today was London. We were passing through the VIP lane at the portal station.

"Wow..."

My eyes widened as soon as we arrived in London. There was a huge crowd waiting for us. Everyone was there to greet the vice guild master of Essence of the Strait and the CEO of Essential Dynamics.

The crowd screamed and followed the limousine that Yoo Yeonha's double was in.

"Is it our turn to go now?" she asked.

We were hiding at the corner of the portal station in disguises. Her hair was golden because of the wig.

"Sure," I replied.

This was my first time going on a date like this, but it wasn't bad at all.

I wrapped my arm around her shoulder as we walked. We stopped by here and there without being conscious of the people around us.

"Hey, do you want to eat ice cream?" Yoo Yeonha asked while pointing at an ice cream stand on the street.

"Sounds good."

We went to buy two ice creams. I ordered chocolate vanilla while she ordered mint chocolate.

"Is that even good...? Doesn't it taste like toothpaste...?"

"It's alright, but why did you order chocolate vanilla? Are you a kid or what?"

I looked at her while she busily slurped her ice cream. Then I stole her cone away and shoved it in her face.

"Ack!"

The ice cream cone was clinging to her forehead and made her look

like a messy unicorn.

“Look, it’s a mint chocolate unicorn.”

“You... really...” she muttered while glaring at me.

I shrugged and retorted, “Who told you to order mint chocolate? Why are you eating toothpaste?”

“...”

Yoo Yeonha wiped the ice cream off her face with mana. Then, her hand shot out towards my ice cream.

I immediately reacted by showing immaculate weaving.

“Ha, amateur.”

“Dammit... Hand it over. I’ll turn you into a chocolate vanilla unicorn...”

A scuffle for the ice cream broke out between us, but it soon came to an end when my hand touched her armpit.

Yoo Yeonha went, “*Hihhi... hehehe...*” before falling to the ground. “*Hang~* Don’t... Don’t do that... that’s cheating...”

In the end, she pouted and ran into my embrace after losing. I wrapped my arms around her waist and embraced her.

London's cool, gentle breeze blew and the sun was shining down on us. Quite a lot of people were glaring at us because of our public display of affection, but we didn’t care. We didn’t even stop to think, “*What if we get caught?*”

Whatever happened would happen. What was important to me was that I was with the person I loved.

We finished our three hour date and reached the meeting place, Clancy Islet.

“We were waiting for you, vice guild master,” Rachel greeted us.

She was waiting for us at the Royal Tower located on the island of extravagance.

Yoo Yeonha smiled and replied, “Yes, it is nice to meet you, Guild Master Rachel.”

“Have you enjoyed your tour around the city?”

“Yes, the scenery was quite nice. It is indeed London.”

Both of them chatted on the way to the meeting room.

“This is the place,” Rachel guided us to a room with a round table.

Various guild executives and government officials were waiting for us at the table.

“Please, have a seat,” an old butler guided Yoo Yeonha to her seat.

I stood right behind her.

“Now, we shall commence discussion on the alliance between Essence of the Strait and the English Royal Court guild...”

An English official started the presentation followed by a speech from Yoo Yeonha and Rachel. The meeting itself was quite casual. The participants even threw around light banter here and there.

“...”

Everyone was laughing except for me. There was a place I had to visit on this island and it wasn't this meeting room.

I suppressed a yawn that nearly escaped my lips. Thankfully, I was

saved by an announcement that they would take a break.

Yoo Yeonha glanced at me before saying, “You can go out and have fun if you’re bored.”

“Really? Alright then.”

“...*Huh?*”

I immediately went out and started walking to the casino like a diligent employee. I ran into Rain, who was interestingly my successor and predecessor.

‘Hmm... I guess I can trust her.’

I approached her and said, “Hello, Knight Rain. I have to go somewhere for a bit. May I request that you keep watch of Vice Guild Master Yoo Yeonha?”

“Ah, certainly. I will go to her at once.”

The knight easily agreed and I merrily ran to the casino.

* * *

I returned to our Clancy Islet penthouse with a huge bag of cash, but I flinched the moment I stepped through the doors.

Yoo Yeonha was sitting on the sofa and glaring at me. I could feel a drop of sweat travel down the back of my neck after sensing my impending doom.

She motioned with her chin for me to sit down.

“Where have you been?”

“Oh... I was making money. Look at this.”

I showed her the bag full of cash and gold bars. She peeked into the

bag and scoffed in disbelief.

“I made one billion won with one hundred million won. I was hoping to contribute to our expenses...”

“Boring.”

“...I was trying to be funny.”

“*Hmph!*” Yoo Yeonha scoffed and turned her head.

I wobbled and sat beside her. Then I stared at her face.

“You told me to go. I just did what you told me to.”

“...It’s not because of that, you know?”

“Then what? Was there a problem in the meeting?”

Yoo Yeonha frowned and glared at me. However, she couldn’t say anything since she really did tell me to go. She knew very well that I wasn’t the type who would bother trying to understand what she really meant.

In the end, she let out a sigh of resignation and said, “You know...”

“Yes?”

Yoo Yeonha changed the subject.

“I was thinking about it for a while now... Is it true? I mean, is it really true?” she muttered while looking at my collarbone.

“*Hmm?* What’s true?” I tilted my head in confusion.

I found it challenging to understand what she was talking about. I wondered what she was considering to be fake this time...?

I kneaded her cheeks and asked, “What do you mean by that?”

Only then did she look up at me before immediately looking down at the floor. She replied, “...What you told me last time. The thing I said about your brain making things up... you know... that thing where you’re from another world...”

“Oh, that’s all true,” I replied without an ounce of hesitation.

I looked her straight in the eyes and said, “There’s no lie in it. It’s all true. I can’t return to my world anymore. I’ve lost everything already.”

“...”

“So you’re my everything now.”

Yoo Yeonha was dumbfounded for a moment before her face turned bright red like a tomato.

I noticed that her eyes suddenly became lively again as if she had something to look forward to in life now.

Her eyes shot open when I pushed her down and gently bit her neck.

“Eup... W-Wait...” she moaned while trying to push me back.

However, I didn’t stop. I ran my fingers up her waist before pulling her into my embrace.

I licked her lips and she let out a sensual moan while digging her fingers into my back.

We could feel our hearts beating against each other. Our skin, lips, bodies, and hearts became one for the remainder of the day.

...We spent the entire night together until we fell asleep in each other’s arms.

Morning came, and shockingly...

News articles about our romantic relationship spread all over the world.

Side Stories 101

What If Story (END)

The news articles popped up almost simultaneously around the world.

I could see steam coming out of Yoo Yeonha's ears.

“...”

“Let me take a look,” I said as I pushed my face towards her smartwatch.

[The vice guild master of Essence of the Strait was found on a date with her bodyguard in Paris. Both were wearing disguises.]

[Vice guild master Yoo Yeonha left for London at two-thirty in the afternoon to meet with the English Royal Court guild and...]

“What the? Isn't that today?”

It was indeed a picture of us in Paris. It would be difficult to refute it since we were together the entire time.

Yoo Yeonha let out a sigh, “Haa...”

“How did they find out? Was it someone on the inside?”

“Phew...”

“But this news outlet has balls. I have to give them that.”

The vice guild master of Essence of the Strait, Yoo Yeonha, was powerful enough to shake a country's very core. Digging up the personal life of someone like her indeed required guts.

I couldn't help but be in awe of their bravery while wondering if they were actually just stupid.

"No," Yoo Yeonha shook her head. She pointed to the end of the article and added, "It's my mom."

"*Huh...*? Your mom? I mean, your mother?"

Yeohwa News was a well-known news outlet that was acquired and run by Jin Yeojung's family.

"*Tsk...*" Yoo Yeonha clicked her tongue.

I didn't know what to say, so I just ended up scratching the back of my neck.

I knew that Yoo Yeonha's mother, Jin Yeojung, tended to act rashly. I never imagined it would be this bad...

"I think I know what her intention is, but..."

Yoo Yeonha gritted her teeth and switched off her smartwatch.

I started to massage her head to reduce her stress and tension.

"*Ah, ah... Hang... ~*"

Those kinds of sounds escaped from her lips.

"It's not bad... *Ah*, yes... right there... *Hiik!*"

"What's not bad?"

"That is... *ah...* so I was saying... *hang~...* *Yeohwa News* is currently planning to establish a cable channel, but those opposed to it are preventing it by mentioning *Yeohwa News'* ties to Essence of the Strait. After all, my mom owns the news outlet... *Hiik! Hang... ~* but this will prove that there's no relation between the two and..."

I was amazed at how she was able to think about this situation objectively from a business point of view.

“Haa... That’s enough. My head has cleared up now.”

I stopped massaging her head and hugged her from the back.

She leaned against my chest and continued, “But I’m glad the news broke out while we were on Clancy Islet. Normal reporters can’t come here.”

“I think all hell will break loose once we step out though...”

“Oh, right... You have a helicopter, right? I remember you using it,” she turned around and said.

“Yeah, I have one.”

I recently started using a helicopter that I modified with [*Settings Intervention*]. It was connected to my smartwatch, so it could come wherever I called it and would go back if I told it to. It wasn’t a living breathing creature, but more like it was programmed to understand my commands.

“I can call it as long as the English government allows it, but this islet is off-limits to flying vehicles, no?”

“Hehe... Do you really think they’ll refuse?” Yoo Yeonha said with a haughty smile.

* * *

— That’s why I told you not to get too close with a mercenary. Anyways, I guess there’s no helping it. How can I sit by and watch my daughter go down the wrong path?

The next day, Yoo Yeonha was forced to grab the back of her neck because of her mother’s brazenness.

She was currently in a limousine parked in Gangnam.

“Mother...”

— Enough. I’m going to hold a press conference soon. It’s up to you to decide what is best for all of us.

“...”

Yoo Yeonha gritted her teeth while thinking, *‘I see... So this is how you want to play it... but how can someone be so petty towards their own daughter...?’*

“Alright. I’ll do as you say. It’s up to me to decide,” Yoo Yeonha said before ending the call.

“...Shall we go?” Yi Jinah asked from the front seat.

Yoo Yeonha nodded and replied, “Yes, let’s go.”

“Alright,” Yi Jinah said before she got out of the limousine and opened the door for Yoo Yeonha.

Yoo Yeonha stepped out of the limousine and a horde of cameras and microphones ran up to her.

“Vice guild master! Please look here!”

“Picture! Please take one picture for us!”

She walked through this chaotic stretch while being reminded of a childhood memory. She was teased by others for coming from a family of slaves solely because her grandfather used to be one of Chae Joochul’s servants.

She was young back then and the teasing completely shattered her self-esteem. She didn’t know how to stand up for herself.

However, that child started to harbor a grand ambition.

She swore to bring all of them under her feet one day and made sure they would regret every word they said to her. She would show them that she was much better than them by becoming someone they would never dare to even dream of.

That resolve probably created who she was today.

The question now was... what would that ambitious side of Yoo Yeonha do about this situation?

This issue wasn't related to her success or ambition. It was quite cruel to put it this way, but Kim Hajin wouldn't be that helpful in achieving her goals.

He wasn't a hero and was only a somewhat famous mercenary.

She wondered what the repercussions would be the moment she admitted to their relationship, but she knew in her head that this relationship would cause more losses than profit.

More importantly, it was too early.

The public never looked favorably at the romantic relationship of a young celebrity. Their reaction would be obvious if the other party was a lowly mercenary. Some would try to defend him by saying he was her bodyguard, but that didn't change the fact that he was a mercenary in the end.

The problem with being a mercenary was that they were no different from treasure hunters or scavengers who did anything and everything for their own profit.

She knew very well that her one million young followers would turn their backs on her the moment she admitted to the relationship.

...She suddenly realized that thinking about all of this after calling for a press conference only gave credence to the fact that her mother, Jin Yeojung, knew her very well.

Her mother knew what she would think, what choices she would

make, and what she would do. Basically, she was dancing in her mother's palm.

Yoo Yeonha found herself standing in the press conference hall after arranging her thoughts.

“Haa...”

She was trying to compose herself before starting the press conference, but her attempts were continuously disturbed by the cameras flashing in her face.

Yoo Yeonha looked at the cameras before proceeding to read her script, “Hello, I am here today to make a statement regarding the numerous issues around me these days...”

She stopped and looked around the press conference hall. Chae Nayun was in the third row with Kim Hajin beside her.

Chae Nayun smirked after they locked eyes.

“I am the vice guild master of Essence of the Straits as well as an intermediate high rank hero. I understand that the public and media are curious about my personal life, but these kinds of excessive...”

Yoo Yeonha stopped mid-sentence, which was uncharacteristic of her.

Her eyes were looking at Chae Nayun again while she was busy chatting with Kim Hajin. She was nonchalantly touching his shoulder, pushing her face towards his, and even touching his thigh.

Yoo Yeonha crumpled the script she was holding and threw it to the floor.

“I, Yoo Yeonha, am not dating the Black Wolf Kim Hajin,” she said.

The cameras went wild with their flashes again as the reporters nodded. They said stuff along the lines of, *‘I knew it’* or *‘Why would she?’* They were ready to put this scandal to rest.

Everyone was one hundred percent certain that Yoo Yeonha would deny it even if it was true.

However, her next words were so shocking that even the cameras stopped taking pictures of her.

“We are getting married.”

Chae Nayun and Kim Hajin’s jaws dropped. The reporters also dropped everything they were doing and looked at her.

“We are not dating. We are getting married.”

Silence ensued in the hall for exactly three seconds before all hell broke loose.

* * *

We were on our way back to the mansion after the press conference.

“...Will you be okay after doing that?” I asked while patting Yoo Yeonha on her back.

She had her head buried in my thighs while trembling. I had no idea if she was embarrassed or regretting what she said, but she stayed like that for quite a while until she suddenly turned towards me.

“It’s all because of Chae Nayun... No, never mind...”

She tried to sound as nonchalant as possible, but I could see her cheeks and ears still flushed red from embarrassment.

She wiped her tears away and told me while fidgeting restlessly, “I’m content with you. No, I’ve decided to think like that from now on.

“*Hmm...* You knew I would agree to marry you?”

“What? Is that what’s important right now? *Argh!*” Yoo Yeonha drew her claws and charged at me.

I avoided her attack and hugged her, “I’m just joking. I’m okay with it, but what about your mother?”

“I have no idea... but it doesn’t matter if I manage to convince her or not. I’ve decided to be a disobedient daughter from now on,” she grumbled.

I simply smiled and tapped her pouting lips.

“...You know,” she muttered and held my hand.

“What?”

“Then... are we really going to get married?”

I frowned at her sudden question. Did she suddenly develop dementia or something? *‘Hey, you’re the one who said that without consulting me...’*

“Well...”

However, I couldn’t stop myself from smiling. I decided to let her hear what she wanted to for a change.

“I will marry you ten times over if you want to.”

* * *

[Yoo Yeonha’s shocking announcement...]

[Who is the mercenary, Kim Hajin?]

[Essence of the Strait is shaken by Yoo Yeonha’s sudden announcement. Their subsidiaries’ market values are taking a beating.]

[The truth behind the rushed announcement...]

[Are they truly in love?]

[Yoo Yeonha and Kim Hajin have made their first official outing as a couple.]

[Yeohwa News has finally obtained the rights to start a cable channel after one year...]

Time flew by quickly thanks to the endless stream of news about us.

Quite a lot of things happened over the year. I raided a dungeon with Yoo Yeonha, accompanied her to a field, and resumed my mercenary work.

The number of terrorist plots I stopped numbered twelve and I was awarded the title of ‘*Top Mercenary*’ in South Korea. It was an award equivalent to being an intermediate high rank hero.

[Essence of the Strait’s partnership with the mercenary Black Wolf.]

Today, I would become an official member of Essence of the Strait. This was the reason why I poured everything I had into working as a mercenary.

“Here you go. It’s your name card,” Yoo Yeonha said as she passed a stack of cards to me.

I scratched the back of my neck in embarrassment and said, “Then is it over?”

“Yes, you’re now the top mercenary and are more than qualified to be our partner,” Yoo Yeonha replied while fidgeting with my name card.

“*Hmm...* Then that means...” I muttered before ambushing her lips with mine.

Yoo Yeonha flinched at the sudden kiss, but didn’t bother pushing me back or anything.

“Geez... Do you like me that much?” she grumbled.

“Yeah, I can’t hold myself back.”

“*Hoho~* How are you going to survive without me?” Yoo Yeonha asked with a triumphant smile.

— A year has passed since the vice guild master of Essence of the Strait, Yoo Yeonha, announced her marriage...

The news was playing on TV in the mansion’s living room.

Yoo Yeonha placed a finger between her lips and innocently said, “They’re talking about us.”

“Yeah.”

— However, there has been no further news despite a year having passed. There has been a lot of speculation that they broke up, but Kim Hajin joined Essence of the Strait as an official partner today and...]

Poke... Poke... Poke... Poke...

Yoo Yeonha poked my shoulder.

I tilted my head in confusion and looked at her.

She smiled and asked, “But when are we going to get married?”

“...I think I should be the one asking that question, no?”

“What about next month? I already picked a wedding dress.”

“...*Huh?*”

I frowned at her words. Didn’t the bride and groom usually pick out the wedding dress together?

“Why did you pick one alone? I saw on TV that couples tend to do that together.”

“You were busy. Besides, I can just change it if you don’t like it. I’ll wear whatever you want.”

“I’m sure you look beautiful in it. Can you show me?”

To be honest, I didn’t really want to go dress shopping. I heard it was both tiring and stressful...

Yoo Yeonha flashed a mischievous smile before going into her walk-in wardrobe as I stood outside the door blinking like an idiot.

Around fifteen minutes passed and she finally came out.

The smell of roses filled the air as she appeared wearing a dress that would certainly steal every eye that ever saw it.

“...”

I felt my heart skip a beat.

“What do you think...?” she asked while feeling a bit embarrassed.

Her bare back was slightly exposed, her hair was held up by a pin, and her facial features looked sharp even without any makeup... Every inch of her looked perfect like an immaculate picture.

Did it make sense for someone to be this beautiful...? Could a person really be this beautiful...? Wait... was this what people called being blinded by love?

I nervously gulped and said, “Let’s do it today.”

“Today?”

“Yeah, let’s have a mini-wedding right away. No, let’s do it right now while you’re wearing it.”

“...Do it while I’m wearing it? That sounds a bit weird...?”

“Not at all.”

I lost control over myself as I pounced on her. Every man probably wondered at least once in their life if it was possible to do anything while their bride was wearing a wedding dress.

“Wait! You’re going to rip it! *Haaaang~*” Yoo Yeonha tried to resist and pushed me away, but I restrained her by licking her ear.

All of her strength left her body along with her desire to resist me. I used this opening to dig in here and there in her wedding dress.

Ring! Ring! Ring! Ring!

That damn alarm...

Both of us looked at our wrists while intertwined with each other in the wedding dress.

“...It’s a mobilization order.”

“Yeah...”

I wanted to ignore it, but that would defeat the purpose of joining a guild in the first place.

Then, I suddenly recalled a resolution I recently made. I wasn’t content with being happy alone in this world since I couldn’t go back to my own world, so I decided to live a meaningful life instead of just surviving in this one. I wanted to sacrifice a part of myself to improve the lives of others living in this world with me.

Yoo Yeonha placed her hand on my shoulder and said, “Let’s go together.”

“Sure, and let’s continue where we left off once we’re back.”

“...I don’t know about that.”

Yoo Yeonha ran into the walk-in wardrobe, slammed the door, and changed her clothes.

I waited until she changed into her suit, and we set the coordinates on my smartwatch.

“Done?”

“Yeah, it’s ready.”

“Okay~”

Both of them shouted ‘*Hwaiting!*’ before setting out on their mission.

The bed was still warm from their body heat in the empty mansion that they left behind. The plates they didn’t wash after eating, the hologram TV with a doll that looked like Kim Hajin sitting on top, the picture frames on the wall, pictures of them laughing together, the neatly folded wedding dress on top of the sofa, and a place where the husband and wife would live happily ever after.

This place was no longer just another part of a novel.

It was now a place where they would make new memories and achieve their dreams together.

Maybe, perhaps, forever.

< FIN >



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